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1 • CONTENTS

2 • Foreword ................................................................................................................................. 4
3 • Conference Programme ........................................................................................................... 5
4 • Speaker Biographies ............................................................................................................... 6
5 • Conference Poster .................................................................................................................. 9
6 • Opening Remarks .................................................................................................................. 8
   Speech by Mr Keywan Faramarzi, Int’l Network of Iranian Kurdistan Human Rights .......... 9
   Speech by Ms Johanna Green, Program Manager ..................................................................... 10
7 • Panel I: Iran’s Forgotten Scandal ......................................................................................... 12
   Speech by Prof Martin van Bruinessen, University of Utrecht .................................................. 12
   Speech by Mr Loghman Ahmedi, Head of Foreign Relations of PDKI........................................ 25
8 • Panel II: Future Prospects for Iran’s Kurds ......................................................................... 34
   Speech by Mr Abdullah Mohtadi, Leader of the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan ........... 34
   Speech by Mr Frank van Dalen, Chairman of the Iran Committee (The Netherlands) ........ 38
2 • FOREWORD

In 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini declared that the concept of an ‘ethnic minority’ was contrary to Islam, and, on these grounds, he declared a jihad against the Kurdish people, which brought to the death of tens of thousands. Today there are approximately 9 million Kurds in Iran, mostly residing the north-west of the country. Despite traditionally receiving less international attention than their compatriots in Iraq and Turkey, this neglect has more to do with a lack of information than with less severe conditions.

On the contrary, Iranian Kurds continue to face extreme repression. The best-known example of this is the government’s education policy, which forbids indigenous languages, and makes teaching in Persian compulsory. However, beyond this, Kurds in Iran face a range of other injustices. They are subject to systematic economic disadvantage, as their region was denied proper funding and investment, leaving the citizens heavily dependent on agricultural work and with a very high level of unemployment. Religious discrimination is common: the vast majority of Kurds in Iran are Sunni Muslims, and they face routine injustices from the Shi’a majority. The policy of ‘Gozinesh’ requires that in order to take up certain government posts, as well as some private sector jobs and university places, candidates must take an ideological test demonstrating allegiance to Shi’a Islam and to the Islamic Republic of Iran itself.

Kurds in Iran are also completely excluded from political power: in a country where minorities’ desire for proper representation is always viewed as separatist or even terrorist rhetoric, the Kurds have been omitted from the Constitution and do not have adequate or safeguarded parliamentary representation.

Moreover, Kurdish participation in wider political structures has been made very difficult by the degree of serious violence faced by Kurdish political organizations. The Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI), a UNPO Member since 2007, has seen two of its Secretary-Generals assassinated, in 1989 and 1992 respectively. Many other Kurdish activists face similarly brutal treatment and summary executions even to this day; the most infamous example of this is that of Shivan Qaderi, who was shot in the head by security services in Mahabad in 2005, and whose body was dragged through the streets tied to the back of a car. Thousands of Iranian Kurds have been detained for lengthy sentences, in the absence of fair trials, under charges of ‘subversion’, ‘membership to illegal organizations’ or even ‘enmity against God’.

In view of this deeply troubling situation, UNPO, alongside the International Network of Iranian Kurdistan Human Rights’ (INIKHR), decided to organise this conference, entitled ‘Justice for Iran’s Kurds’. It took place in Nieuwspoort in The Hague, on 29 September 2014 and brought together the expertise of Kurdish activists from different parties and European specialists in the area. The conference consisted of two panels, the first discussing ‘Iran’s Forgotten Scandal’, and the second exploring ‘Future Prospects’.

In several hours of productive discussion, the conference enabled the sharing of ideas among supporters of Kurdish rights. There was much discussion of the growing unity amongst Iranian Kurds today, despite difference of approach in some areas. The conference also highlighted the importance of Iran’s relationship with foreign powers: discussions focusing exclusively on nuclear negotiations rather than human rights are a missed opportunity.

UNPO believes that Iranian Kurds deserve a more substantial role in deciding their own future. Federalism may be the way forward, as it would redistribute the power of central government, allowing the extremely diverse communities that live in Iran to participate effectively in governing their own people. We hope that, through continuing discussion in international forums, Iran’s minorities will get the justice they deserve.

Marino Busdachin
UNPO General-Secretary
3 • CONFEREENCE PROGRAMME

29 September 2014
Nieuwsport, The Hague, the Netherlands

Moderator
Mr Jonathan Lis
UNPO Program Coordinator

Opening Remarks
Mr Keywan Faramarzi, International Network of Iranian Kurdistan Human Rights (INIKHR)
Ms Johanna Green, UNPO Program Manager

Panel I: Iran’s Forgotten Scandal

From Qarna to Rouhani: 35 Years in Iranian Kurdistan
Prof Martin van Bruinessen, Utrecht University

A Catalogue of Tyranny: The Case against Tehran
Mr Loghman Ahmed, Representative of Iranian Kurdistan to the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO)

Questions & Answers

BREAK

Panel II: Future Prospects for Iran’s Kurds

The Situation in Iranian Kurdistan – A Plan for a Democratic Iran
Mr Abdollah Mohtadi, Leader of the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan

How to Mobilise and Organise Western Support
Mr Frank van Dalen, Chairman of the Iran Committee (The Netherlands)

Questions & Answers
4 • SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES

Professor Martin van Bruinessen
Professor, Utrecht University

Martin van Bruinessen is Professor of the Comparative Study of Contemporary Muslim Societies. He conducted many years of field research in Kurdistan, Afghanistan and Indonesia. His published work is informed by a strong interest in history and politics. He carried out his first fieldwork among the Kurds of Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria in the mid-1970s. He joined Utrecht University’s Faculty of Arts in 1994 as Assistant Professor of Turkish and Kurdish Studies, and became a full professor in 1998, with a shift of emphasis to Islamic Studies. He was involved in the establishment of the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) and occupied the ISIM chair at Utrecht University (1999-2008). He is a member of the scientific committees of the Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin, the Institut d’Études de l’Islam et des Sociétés du Monde Musulman (IISMM-EHESP, Paris), and the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (KITLV), Leiden.

Mr Loghman Hazhar Ahmedi
Representative of Iranian Kurdistan to UNPO

Mr. Loghman was born in the town of Divandereh, Iranian Kurdistan. He has studied International Relations and Political Science at the University of Stockholm. Ahmedi has written extensively on Kurdish and Iranian politics, Iranian foreign policy, Iran’s nuclear program, Iran’s role in the region, and national and religious diversity in Iran. He has also written research papers on Iran’s relationship with the European Union and the United States. In 2008 Ahmedi was elected into the leadership of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI). He was re-elected into PDKI leadership in 2012 and currently heads the party’s foreign relations. Ahmedi has addressed and briefed the United Nations, the European Union and numerous governments and international organisations on the Kurdish political situation in Iran.

Mr Abdullah Mohtadi
Leader of the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan

Abdullah Mohtadi, leader of the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan, a major political force for about four decades, was born in 1949 in Iranian Kurdistan. His father was a minister in the short-lived Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in 1946. He received his BA in business administration in Tehran. With some of his fellow Kurdish students in Tehran, he co-founded the Komala organization in 1969 as an independant leftist party. Komala proved to be a coherent and resilient organization with a broad network of political activists which survived Shah’s persecutions and harsh treatment of the opposition in the seventies and later flourished as a non-traditionalist urban based political party all over Iranian Kurdistan. Mohtadi himself was arrested three times under the Shah (and later once under Khomeini) and has spent over three years in jail as a political prisoner.

When eventually Ayatollah Khomeini ordered a massive onslaught against Iranian Kurds in August 1979, Abdullah Mohtadi emerged as a leader of the Kurdish resistance movement. Some months later, when the Islamic Regime of Iran, under pressure by the Kurdish resistance, decided to negotiate with the
Kurds, Mohtadi was appointed head of Komala team in the United Kurdish Delegation and actively took part in the negotiations.
Mohtadi stands for a democratic, pluralist and non-centralist Iran that lives in peace with its diverse cultural, linguistic, religious and ethnic population, its neighbours and the world.
A well-known figure among Iranian opposition, Abdullah Mohtadi in now the leader of the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan.

Mr Frank van Dalen
Chairman of the Iran Committee (The Netherlands)

Mr. Frank van Dalen is the Chairman of the Iran Committee. His involvement with Iran started in 2005 with the hanging of Mahhoud Asgari and Ayaz Marhoni in the Iranian town of Mashad. After an intense lobbying process towards the Dutch government, it was decided that Iranian LGBTI-asylumseekers would get refugee status even only based on their sexual orientation. In 2009 the Iran Committee launched a campaign to cancel Shell's investments in the Soroosh/Nowrooz oilfields in Iran. The campaign drew the attention of the Senate of the United States and eventually Shell decided to withdraw from Iran. In the following years, the Iran Committee organised several events and addressed members of parliament to draw attention on the severe human rights violations in Iran and on its nuclear program. Mr. Frank van Dalen is also chair of the LGBTI working group of the Human Rights Committee of Liberal International. In his daily life he is an entrepreneur and chair of the Political Academy foundation in the Netherlands. In recent years he has been traveling to places where a struggle for freedom and human rights is part of daily life. He was in Egypt at Tharir square during the revolution and he attended the LGBTI pride in Uganda, challenging the anti-gay laws. For the liberal party (VVD) Mr van Dalen was member of the Amsterdam City Council and he is now member of the committee for Foreign Affairs, International Trade and International Aid Development.
Justice for Iran's Kurds
6 • OPENING REMARKS

Speech by Mr Keywan Faramarzi, Representative of the International Network of Iranian Kurdistan Human Rights (INIKHR)*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We would like to welcome everyone on behalf of our organisation, the International Network of Iranian Kurdistan Human Rights. Before we start the conference, I would like to ask you to join me in a moment of silence in memory of all the victims of violence in Kurdistan.

Dear guests,

The incidents of the last four decades in Iranian Kurdistan, amongst others the Jihad called for by Khomeini, the bombardment of several cities, the chemical attacks in cities such as Sardasht, Noodsha and Zardeh, and a provincial village in Kermanshan, the forced emigration of Kurds, the forced assimilation of different ethnic groups, the mass executions and various other crimes, have been consistently on our minds, but have been neither recognised nor recorded by international organisations.

The Kurds in Iran have never stopped fighting for their freedom, for peace and for democracy, but we are still witness to the oppression and violence directed towards them. Although there is a vast network of governments and organisations experienced in democracy who could do much to help the cause, in practice, the Kurds receive very little help.

I truly hope that this conference will give Kurds in Iran the opportunity to raise international awareness of their problems and improve their situation.

Thank you for your attention.

*These opening remarks were delivered in Dutch
Speech by Ms Johanna Green, UNPO Program Manager

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear guests,

First of all, thank you for joining us today here in The Hague – the city of peace. I am pleased to see that so many of you could make it. I am Johanna Green, from the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO). We are an international, democratic and nonviolent membership organization, founded in the Hague in 1991, and our members represent minorities, indigenous peoples and unrecognized or occupied territories worldwide, who have joined together to find non-violent resolutions to the conflicts which affect them. Since we will have the opportunity to listen to four expert speakers over the next few hours, I will keep my introductory remarks very short, and just say a few words about the context in which we have gathered here today.

The situation for the Iranian Kurds has deteriorated consistently since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and the current situation marks an all-time low. In order to shed light on the difficulties faced by Kurds living in Iran, and to explore ways forward to tackle the institutional discrimination against them, UNPO, together with the International Network of Iranian Kurdistan Human Rights, has decided to convene today’s conference, Justice for Iran's Kurds. But what does justice mean in this context?

During his election campaign, President Hassan Rouhani notably said: “Justice means that anyone who wants to speak in a society should be able to come out, speak their mind, criticize and critique without hesitation and stammering.”

But still today, serious human rights violations continue mostly unabated, including a staggering rise in executions, and the curtailing of press freedoms. Amongst those targeted are political activists, human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists, film-makers, bloggers, and members of religious and ethnic minorities – most notably Kurds, Ahwazi Arabs, and Balochi.

In fact, in terms of overall figures, Iran remains the second biggest executioner in the world, after China, and it has the highest number of executions per capita. The Iranian authorities have officially acknowledged that so far this year, 236 executions have been carried out, including 23 in September alone. However, the actual number is believed to be much higher.

In other words, despite basing his election campaign on a human rights message, Rouhani’s actions in this area have been limited and have failed to alter the disappointing status quo. One
example is that the United Nations’ special rapporteur on human rights in Iran, Ahmed Shaheed, has still not been allowed into the country.

Despite this, as their November 24 deadline is rapidly approaching, the international community continues to be more concerned with the ongoing nuclear talks, than with the human rights situation. As former UN Human Rights Chief Navi Pillay noted in July this year, these talks, aimed at finding an agreement on Iran’s contested nuclear programme, should include human rights concerns, as this would at least prevent Iran from completely avoiding the issue in its international engagement. At the same time, the current crisis in Iraq and Syria and the horrendous human rights violations, committed by the so-called Islamic State, have also turned attention away from what is going on inside Iran. On this note, I will give the floor to my colleague Jonathan Lis, who will be moderating today’s discussions.

Thank you.
I have in the past 30-40 years very often given a talk about the Kurds and Kurdistan, and usually at the end of the talk someone will stand up and say ‘well, you spoke enough about the Kurds of Turkey, the Kurds of Iraq, and even the Kurds of Syria but you didn’t talk about Eastern Kurdistan. Why don’t you talk about the Kurds of Iran? And my answer to this would usually be, ‘I would like to know more about the Kurds of Iran, but it is very, very difficult to get reliable information about what is happening in Iran. There is silence. It is, from the outside, as if nothing is happening, especially when we need to get news out of the country. Even when people travel, when people who live in Iran, in Kurdistan or Tehran come to Europe, they are afraid to talk. There is a fear that has resulted in a silence, and you can manage to have a little bit of information, but not an overall picture of the situation.

Again, when I was asked to give a talk here on the Kurds of Iran my first response was ‘what can I say? I know nothing about the Kurds of Iran’. Therefore, I apologize that the few things that I am going to say may be well known to everybody here, and I see so many Kurdish faces that I am afraid I will not be able to say anything really new, but perhaps I might be able to give you a general frame.

I would like to start with a map. Iranian Kurdistan is a part of Kurdistan, and it has a long frontier with the Turkish and Iraqi parts of Kurdistan. You cannot understand the history of Iran’s Kurds if you don’t also know the history of the Kurds in the Ottoman Empire and its successor states. The border separating Iran from Turkey and Iraq is a very old border. It is much older than the borders between Turkey and Iraq and Syria. Those are new; they were made by the French and the British after the First World War. But this is an old border, and it has separated the Kurds of Iran considerably from the other Kurds. The Kurds of Iran are more oriented towards Iran than towards the West. But in history there has always been movement across this border. From the first uprising, the Simko uprising, which had a somewhat national character, you could see people from as far as Syria and Turkey who had travelled all the way overland to join, because they sought asylum and they felt that Simko’s uprising was an uprising of all the Kurds, of their own people. Some Kurds
of Iran took part in political events and political uprisings taking place in Iraq in the 20th century. There have been many waves of refugees: Iraqi Kurds have fled to the rest of Iraq, Iranian Kurds have fled to Iraq and Turkey. Turkish Kurds, after the coup d’état in 1980, fled to Iran en masse, which at that time, just after the Iranian revolution, was still mostly controlled by the Kurds themselves. So the history of Iranian Kurdistan is connected with these other histories. The central governments of Iran, Iraq, and Turkey very often had relations with insurgent movements in one of the neighbouring countries, and supported them against the regimes they didn't like. When the Shah of Iran did not like the Baath regime, he supported Barzani’s uprising. Many Kurdish political leaders in the 1970s found refuge in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, because Saddam Hussein wanted to keep them “in the fridge”, in order to use them against his enemy when opportune, the Shah. Turkey has done the same. States have attempted to play on each other first.
This is another way in which the histories of the Kurds in these different countries are connected. Similarly, the Kurds of Iran in the 1960s and 70s, when political actions were oppressed, were conducting very limited political action in Iran itself, but the Democratic Party of Kurdistan organized humanitarian support for their neighbours in Iraq. So there was an involvement of individuals, of civilians, in the struggle of the Kurds in neighbouring countries. Iranian Kurdistan is therefore definitely a part of Kurdistan, but at the same time, it is very much part of Iran, and it is part of a very complex pattern of many different peoples living in Iran.

“There must be at least 8 million Kurds in Iran”

The Kurds are, bearing in mind that there are disagreements about the exact numbers, about 10% of the population, perhaps a bit more, which means that there must be at least 8 million Kurds in Iran. The Kurds are, in Iran, the largest of the Sunni peoples. You know that the majority of the regime in Iran is a Shi’a, Islamic regime. The Kurds, as the Baloch and the Turkmen [van Bruinessen shows where they are on the map] are the main Sunni groups, who suffer discrimination on the basis of their religious identity. The Kurds have always wanted recognition of their national or ethnic identity, but in Islamic regimes, ethnicity is not a legitimate category. They do not want to judge people based on the language they speak, the only thing that is relevant for the regime is religion. And the Kurds, being not Shia but Sunni, which is considered hostile to Shi’ism, have suffered because they did not belong to this other religion. Before the Islamic Republic, in the 19th century, Iran was an empire in which many different peoples lived together with relatively little discrimination. There was an integration of all the different peoples. So the elite, elite families, tribal chieftains or emirs’ families, from the different ethnic and national groups of Iran were taken to the capital and stayed around the Shah as hostages, to make sure that their population would stay in line, but there was no ethnic discrimination. This changed later in time. They have had two modernizing regimes: the Pahlavi regime, which started with Reza Shah Pahlavi and then with his son Mohammed Reza. The Pahlavi regime wanted to modernize the State by making it a homogenous nation-state in which every citizen was part of the same nation and the nation was defined as Iranian and Persian.

More or less like Turkey tried to do. Turkey tried to turn everyone into a Turk. In Turkey, the Kurds had to say that they were Turks and someone invented a different version of their history, according to which they had also come as nomads from Central Asia and then, only because they had passed through Iran, they had lost their language and spoke
a strange combination of dialects of Turkish influenced by Persian. The Kurds of Turkey have never really been fooled: they never believed they were really Turks. However, in Iran it’s a bit different; Kurdish and Persian are closely-related languages and in fact, if you look at this boundary here [points at the map], it looks very clear, but it is not so at all, because it is very hard to say where Kurdish ends and another language begins. Kurdish shades gradually into a number of Laki and Lur dialects, and also shades gradually into Persian dialects. There is no clear boundary. So for the Iranian regime which tried to integrate all its peoples on the basis of a common Iranian identity, it was perhaps a little bit easier and many Kurds could be persuaded that they were closely related to the other Persians. The Islamic republic is also a modernizing regime. We may think that they are in many aspects old fashioned or backwards, but it’s a modernizing regime. They want to create a new identity, but their new identity is based on religion. It has had the effects of the Kurds being more discriminated, more set apart than they were under the Pahlavi regime. It has also made the Sunni religion perhaps more important to the Kurds than it had been before. Because as Sunnis in Iran, religion was an oppressed part of their identity, and it became one factor through which Kurds could be mobilized. Now I called the Kurds the largest Sunni ethnic group in Turkey, but there I was in fact inaccurate, as many Kurds are not Sunni but Shi’i. The whole region here (showing the map) is Shi’i. Now, in the history of Kurdish nationalism, the Shi’i come very, very late. Most of the time they were not involved. They identified themselves much more closely with the Persian Shi’i majority than with the Kurdish nation. It is only in the past few decades that we see that those Shi’i have also come to consider themselves primarily as Kurds and secondarily as Shi’i. There is another interesting group of Kurds living far away from Kurdistan, in Khorasan. They were brought there more than 400 years ago. But they have maintained the language, although most of them have become Shi’i. In the 1970s, when I visited those groups, and they were very much aware that they were speaking Kurdish, but there was no identification with the Kurdish nation. They were interested in where they came from, which is somewhere in Turkey close to Dirzin, but they did not feel closely connected to the Kurdish political movement. Now, in the course of the past few decades this has changed; both the Shi’is of Kermanshah and the Shi’is of Khorasan have come to consider themselves much more as Kurds and there are individuals at least who publicly support the Kurdish struggle. This is perhaps also because there has been a lot of migration and urbanization. Kurds
from all these different provinces, in order to find work or education, travelled to the major cities, and there are a lot which now have a huge Kurdish population. Now the Kurds from different regions interact, which perhaps strengthens a wider Kurdish identity.

In the course of the 20th century, the Kurds who, in the early 20th century, were still a very diverse group with not very much internal solidarity, grew to become a more integrated ethnic group, a nation or a people. There are still at least four different cultural regions; they have different histories, and they are associated with different stages in the Kurdish national struggle. In the North, we have along the Turkish border a population which is tribal, mostly composed of people from very large and powerful tribes, who speak the northern Kurdish or Kurmanji dialect. And it was this region that was the centre of the first uprising I have mentioned earlier: Simko’s tribal uprising. After WWI, a part of that region started governing itself; they simply didn’t listen to the government anymore, they expelled government representatives and it looked like a movement for independent. Further South, where people speak of Mahabad, Sandandaj, Mukriani and other Southern dialects, it is a more urbanized region; you have tribes, but you also have a large urban population, and it is in this region that the first ‘mujwa’-style political awareness or political movements emerge. There are tribal and feudal relations in that area, and you see that in the time of the second Shah, Mohammed Reza, many of the big tribal chieftains were exiled to other parts of the country, and a land reform was carried out. After the Iranian revolution, some of these tribal chieftains tried to come back and bring their land under control again. So at this time, there were struggles between old land-owners, who tried to regain control of their land, and peasant movements, some of which were organized by students. Mahabad was the centre of the first Kurdish Republic that ever existed, after WWII. And the Republic of Mahabad, which lasted less than a year, in 1946, became of principle value not only for the Iranian Kurds, but for all the Kurds of Turkey, Iraq and Syria. For the first time, Kurds had proven that they could have a state. In fact, many Kurds from Turkey and Iraq travelled to that state. The famous Mullah Mustafa Barzani and his tribesmen became part of the army of that state for a while. There were lots of conflicts that emerged between them, but there were Iraqi and Kurdish military officers from the Iraqi army who joined the state in Mahabad. So it was not just a local state, it was a state that appealed to people from a
wider region, although the geographical area that it controlled was relatively limited. Nonetheless, it was extremely important, as it is the place where the democratic party of Kurdistan was born, established for the first time - and it is from there that it traces its history and its sense of identity. Further to the south, you have the city of Sandandaj, which was the capital of the Kurdish Province of Iran, emirate Ardalan.

Its culture was more strongly Persianized, more influenced by Persian Kurd culture than by other parts of Kurdistan. It was at the same time the centre of orthodox religious learning. Many very brilliant Ulama, (religious elites) inhabited Sandandaj and the mountains behind it, in Halama. Sandandaj became a very important centre of activism at the time of the Iranian revolution. It became politically active much
later than the north. It is also interesting that in the Sandandaj area, in Marivan close the Iranian border, the first important peasant rebellion took place. The movement in the Sandandaj region is more based on peasant mobilizations and much less, on the middle class, unlike in Mahabad. The element of class contestation seems to be stronger in this particular area. At the time of the Iranian revolution, many Kurds of Kermanshah hesitated between supporting the revolution or supporting those who struggled for a Kurdish autonomy. There was a large mobilization of people called at that time ‘Muslim peshmergas’, who were fighting for the Iranian revolution against the Kurdish national movement. Now it is interesting to see that, in recent decades, that area too seems to have moved to a stronger emphasis on its Kurdish identity. Many Kurds from Gamlasha now emphasize that also in the past they used to live ‘the Kurdish way’. They underemphasize their differences with the Sunni Kurds living in the north.

It is perhaps important to say that the Kurds are not only confronted with a Shi’i regime which imposes a hegemonic Persian Shi’i culture on them, but there is especially for the Kurds from the northern part of Kurdistan, another ethnic group that has perhaps been more important in shaping the Kurdish sense of themselves; that is the Azerbaijani Kurds. They are the largest of Iran's ethnic groups, apart from the Persian. The city of Tabriz, which is the most important city of that part, is a fairly developed city, and then there are also Kurdish cities. The country there is richer because of its quite developed agriculture. Socially, the Azerbaijani are more advanced than the Kurds, and in the early 20th century, they were the vanguards of political movements in which we would like to see the Kurds also participating. They were very active in the constitutional revolution against the old Shah Raj Aznar Regime.

At the time of the WWII, there was an attempt to create a democratic republic of Azerbaijan. During WWII, the north of Iran was occupied by the Soviet Union, while the south was occupied by the Greece, and the Kurds in the southern Kermanshah region were under British control. Azerbaijan was under Soviet control and Kurdistan was in the neutral zone. Immediately after the war, the Azerbaijani established their democratic republic and soon after, the Kurds established a similar democratic republic, which we might say was following the example of the Azerbaijani. Now things are a bit different: the Azerbaijani are still a relatively privileged group in Iran. Many members of Iran are in fact not Persian but Azerbaijani. Azerbaijani are not Persian. And I think the Azerbaijani have remained,
what you might call, another relevant ethnic group. In the time of the Iranian Revolution, the Kurds defined themselves as not Azerbaijani. In the 1970s, when I did my first research, I was a very naïve young anthropologist. I was sitting in a tea-house and I said to the man I was talking with, ‘I heard you speak Turkish, and I heard you speak Kurdish and Persian’. I asked him, ‘What are you? Are you a Persian or a Turk or a Kurd?’, and he said ‘I’m a Persian and a Turk and a Kurd’. So I said, ‘I didn’t ask which language you speak, I asked what you are.’ But he couldn’t understand my question. ‘I think that you are something specific; I think that you are either a Kurd or a Turk’, I said. But he did not see things that way. At that time it was very easy; I think there were many marriages of people who were of both groups: inter-marriages where one of the partners was Sunni and the other Shi’a. However, at the time of the Iranian revolution, suddenly it became important because on one hand there were Shi’as, including Azerbaijans, who were participating in the revolution. And on the other hand, there were those who were not participating in the revolution, and they were Sunnis, including Kurds. So I suppose that this young man who had been a Turk and a Persian and a Kurd, had in those days to make a choice. Many Kurds, many people at that time had to decide what they were. In that sense I think the Azerbaijans were very important as a relevant other. When I look at the most important political events in the history of the Kurds of Iran, I think there are three moments when they attempted to establish self-rule. The first moment is at the end of WWI. The old regime of Sahabija had been destroyed and there was not yet a new regime. The central government was relatively weak. In 1920, Reza Shah Pahlavi took the power, and he made himself Shah until 1925. But there are reports that the region was not under strong control. Then the Kurds started organizing themselves. In northern Kurdistan, as well as the main peoples’ organizations, there was a movement which, in the view of the contemporary, nationalist historical narrative, was not a modern one, but there was a clear awareness of Kurdish ethnic identity, and there was the idea that the Kurds could rule themselves, that they did not need a government from outside. Very soon after Reza went to power, he managed to bring the area under control again and then silence reigned for a while. But only until 1942, because Shah Reza was very sympathetic to the Nazis. The Russians and the British invaded and occupied this country, and they disposed him, appointing
his son Reza Mohamed as Shah, and the *de facto* region of Kurdistan had hardly any central government control. Then, in 1946, the Kurds organized themselves again and they established a government. It remained very unclear whether they thought that they were an independent government or whether they were a government within Iran. They never said they wanted to leave Iran. They maintained relations with the centre. As soon as late 1946, the centre became more organized, and the republic was attacked and its military defeated. Some of the Iraqi Kurdish supporters left for Iraq, and again the country was ruled by a strong centralising regime, which did not allow any political movements. However, in Puka, in 1952 or 1953, there was a peasant uprising. Nevertheless, it was a long time until the Iranian revolution. Once again, the central governmental region was weakened, the new government had not yet consolidated itself; the Kurds saw this as the time to take their faith into their own hands, and started organizing themselves. In Mahabad, it was the democratic party of Kurdistan, Iran, that controlled and conquered the military base and set up a well-functioning local government. In Sandandaj and other cities, local leftist groups started organizing themselves and trying to negotiate with the central government for autonomy. They soon discovered that the Islamic central government did not recognize the concept of Kurdistan. In Islamic political thought, there is no place for autonomy on the basis of ethnicity. So they had to face negotiations. Negotiations continued from time to time but the regime was not serious and it wanted to destroy all attempts of local self-rule. Until 1983, an important part of Iranian Kurdistan was still under the control of the values, political parties and movements of Iranian Kurds, when then they were pushed back across the borders. This was at the same time as Saddam Hussein’s 1980 invasion of Southern Iran, which later also affected parts of Kurdistan, while the Iranian armed forces coordinated their attacks on the Iraqi army and on the Kurds. The Kurds were thus pushed back across the borders. Many Kurdish leaders were killed or had to flee abroad, and most of those who were politically educated and who had run the local administration, had to disappear. They fled either to Iraq or, later, to Sweden, Germany and Holland. Since then, silence has once again descended on Kurdistan.

Let me briefly contrast the difficulties the Kurds in Iraq have faced with those faced by Kurdish communities in Turkey and in Iran. They have lived under different regimes. In many aspects, Turkey has had the most oppressive regime, especially in the high period of Kemalism. Turkey was determined to become a very modern state.
and it allowed only one identity, the Turkish one, while all others had to be assimilated, by force if necessary. Minority languages were not allowed, minority cultures had to be destroyed, people were moved from one place to the other en masse, and genocide was committed against a region, Dersim, which the State considered as beyond repair. 20% of the population was killed and the survivors were deported. Again, in 1990, when the PKK movement was gaining support in the countryside, the response of the central state was to move people. There had to be a fishing pond and the pond was the people. The Turks understood this point and they wanted to try to fight up the pond by removing all the people. Huge areas were completely depopulated, and many villages destroyed, all in order to fight the guerrilla supporters among the population. This has been the pattern of the history of the Kurds in Turkey; the state frequently trying to prevent or undermine Kurdish identity movements by destroying physical infrastructure.
Something very similar was seen in Iraq. Iraq on the one hand recognized, unlike all these other countries, Kurdish cultural rights. Kurdish education was allowed, Kurdish publications were permitted and, after 1970, there was even autonomy. Iraq is the only country that has ever given the Kurds autonomy. But it was, nevertheless, precisely in this autonomous region that Iraq carried out genocide, in order to destroy support for the Kurdish movements once more. People were killed en masse. Following the use of chemical arms against villages, 80% of the villages were razed to the ground and still haven’t been restored. The traditional Kurdish culture has been completely destroyed. Now, compared to this, Iran is a relatively benign country. Its policies have not entailed massive destruction of the physical infrastructures of a people, as Turkey and Iraq have done in the past. Iran has had, instead, a policy of targeted assassinations. Movements tend to be led by an elite, and Iran’s tactic was to destroy that elite, rather than the infrastructure of the wider community. The most famous example of this was Ghassemloou, in 1989, and a few years later, Sharafkandi. In the 1990s, when many Kurdish leaders were living in Iraqi Kurdistan, 200 or 300 people were assassinated by killers sent from Iran. Iran has assassinated people all over the planet. They target people, identify them, find them and kill them. It is a very effective policy because it has silenced people; those who could speak are either killed, or kept quiet through other means. With many people who have come from Iran, it is very difficult to discover their political views. They will speak about Kurdish culture and we are told that Kurdish culture is flourishing, with Kurdish culture publications and so on, but this is all in the context of political silence and fear. Iran has effectively created an atmosphere of fear, worse than that I found in Turkey or Iraq.

Despite all this, there are political movements; though they are perhaps not very visible on the ground in Iranian Kurdistan. There is, in the first place, the old classical national movements, secular ones, such as the democratic party of Kurdistan, which finds its roots in the republic of Mahabad, and which held government for a period in the 1980s. Another one is Komalah. Both these older movements have had their splits and reconciliations, but they are still relevant among the older population, their traditional sympathizers, and they might also have cells underground. Perhaps we will hear something about that later today. Nonetheless, what I understand from younger people is that these

“In the 1990s, when many Kurdish leaders were living in Iraqi Kurdistan, 200 or 300 people were assassinated by killers sent from Iran.”
movements do not really have great youth support, or any real potential to mobilize them.

There is another type of movement, which people rarely speak about, but which I think is nevertheless rather important: the Sunni Islamic movement, who became more significant after the Iranian revolution. In Mahabad, the Imam, Jalal Husayni suddenly became a political leader, embraced by the left, though not so much by the democratically party. He had a brother in Bane, Shaykh Jalal, who established his own Islamic political movement. This person was close to the Shah, who had also established a Sunni army, Rizgari, against the Iranian revolution. Most significantly, there is also a movement of modernist Sunni Muslims led by a university educated man, Ahmad Muftizadeh, called Maktab Qur’an, called “The School of The Coran”, which has really deep roots in the Sanandaj, Sacres area even now. Something entirely new, that I would have found unimaginable in the past, is that besides the Sunnis, there is also a Sahafri movement. Sahafri like Saudis. You know of course that the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria has among its earliest members people from the Iranian part of Haraman. There were Sahafri at that side of the border, and there appear to be Sahafri on the other side of the border as well. And there is no organized political influence among particular segments of the population. Finally, there is a new type of political party, which we heard about for the first time in 2004. Its members claim that they have come out of a student movement which was demonstrated for HR. However, in its present form, the PJAK, or Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê, is closely affiliated with the PKK. The news items speak about violent incidents occurring in Iranian Kurdistan, usually involving PJAK. The PKK and KDP-I have formally renounced the armed struggle for the time being, I suppose. PJAK has, from time to time, let the PKK announce a ceasefire, but they have never pronounced themselves on its continuity. They have been involved in armed events from Marku in the north to Kenmasha, and in the region between the two cities. They appear to be able to find support in the different cultural regions, four of which are divided Kurdistan; this is both a sign of the success of the party, and

“They are very eager to show that they are not Persian, they are not Azerbaijani, they are Kurds and they are very proud to be so.”

a symptom of a changing awareness among the Kurds. The Kurds have, because of cultural oppression under this regime, become gradually more aware of their Kurdish identity. For example, among the Kurds living in Tehran, there is little engagement with any political movements.
They are afraid to talk about politics. But they are very eager to show that they are not Persian, they are not Azerbaijani, they are Kurds and they are very proud to be so. This pride in their difference and partial integration into a single group has developed in the past few decades. It is one of the few hopeful developments that I can mention.

Thank you for your attention.
A Catalogue of Tyranny: The Case against Tehran

Speech by Mr Loghman Ahmedi, Head of Foreign Relations of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI)

Thank you so much. I will begin by thanking the UNPO for organizing this event, and I think that it's important to shed light on the situation in the Iranian Kurdistan. As Professor van Bruinessen mentioned, unfortunately there is often a lack of knowledge, lack of interest and lack of information on that part of Kurdistan, and this is, to a great degree, related to the continuation of methods that the current regime uses to oppress the Kurdish nation in south Arabian Kurdistan. My discussion here today will focus on three issues. It will first analyse the current situation in Iranian Kurdistan, with a brief historical background on why the situation has developed as it has today. It will then move to Iran's role in the region and the implications that this has on the Kurdish movement inside Iran, but also on neighbouring countries. The third issue it will focus on is our party's vision for the future of Iran and of Iranian Kurdistan, how we see the Kurdish developments in Iran and in the region and how this can affect the future developments in Iran.

Professor van Bruinessen discussed some of the historical background, although in fact the history is much more complex than the way he described it. But I won't go into all the details. I agree with some of the points he raised, and I don't agree with others. But in general there is a continuing framework that most non-Kurds use to discuss and analyse the situation of Iranian Kurdistan, which is unfortunately not connected to reality, to our history or to the current situation either. It is all connected to the lack of information that comes out of Iranian Kurdistan. One point on which I agree with Professor van Bruinessen is that there is an important link between the Kurdish movement before the Islamic republic, and the Kurdish movement during the Islamic republic. Both the regime of the Shah and, later, the Islamic republic, used similar tactics, such as assassinations, but also more sophisticated methods of denying Kurdish rights. For example, during the Shah's era there was a notion of ‘one nation, one language’, and the approach to the Kurdish movement was to say, ‘You may be Kurdish, but you are also Iranian. You are free to speak your dialect or version of Kurdish, but you are still part of this nation. You shouldn't ask for more than everybody else does.’ Later on, after the revolution, the same tactics or methods were used, but instead of Iranian
nationalism or Persian nationalism, the overarching ideal was changed to Islamic identity. Instead of denying Kurds’ rights based on the idea that ‘everybody is the same and we share the same history’, the

“Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran, they all have the same objective: to deny the Kurdish people their rights to self-government.”

oppression was justified by the assertion that, ‘everybody is a Muslim, so why should you as Kurds, ask for something else when we are in the same Ummah?’ So Professor van Bruinissen is right on the tactics of Iran, which historically have been different compared to the neighbouring countries that also occupied a part of Kurdistan. But what we see is that the central government, under different shapes and forms, has used similar tactics and methods to deny the Kurdish people its rights. So, even though there is a difference between in the tactics of Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran, they all have the same objective: to deny the Kurdish people their rights to self-government, to decide for their selves where and how they want to live.

Our party is the oldest Kurdish political party. It was established in 1945, and before that it was a secret organization. But it has also gone through periods of ups and downs. After the fall of the republic of Kurdistan, several members of the leadership left Iranian Kurdistan, while Azid Hamla, the president of the Republic, was hanged. They withdrew into Iraqi Kurdistan. But later on, in the mid and late 1950s, hundreds of PDKI members were arrested there as well. In 1967-68, following an armed uprising from the PDKI, Peshmerga forces fought against the Shah. Later on in the republic, as Professor van Bruinissen mentioned, a series of new political organizations were established, and there was coordination and cooperation between them to try to reach a peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue inside Iran. However, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to power in February 1979, and already by August 1979 he had declared a holy war, a Jihad against the Kurdish people. There was brutal war inside Syria against the Kurdish people, in which the different political parties, including Komalah, PDKI and other organizations, were forced to fight against the regime. That armed struggle continued until the middle of the 1990s. In 1996, armed operations against the Iranian forces ended. This was related to the situation in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurdish political parties of Iranian Kurdistan, including PDKI and Komalah, did not want to be a pretext for the Iranian government to interfere in the newly developed autonomy that Iraqi Kurds had reached after the Gulf war or when the non-fly zone was established. Therefore, our decision to end military action was partly related to us preserving Kurdish rights.
inside Iraq. Additionally, since a historical opportunity had been given to the Kurdish people in one part of Kurdistan, just as Professor van Bruinessen mentioned, and since Iraqi Kurds had come and helped Iranian Kurds in the past, Iranian Kurdish political parties felt the need to help them preserve the opportunity that was given to them. However, none of the Kurdish political parties, including ours, has officially said that we have rejected armed struggle. That is not the case. What we have said is that armed struggle is one of the methods that can be used to reach our nation’s goals inside of Iranian Kurdistan. But armed struggle in itself should not be seen as a tool to use just, for example, to be noticed in the media or talked about and so on. Armed struggle has consequences that many people do not think about. For example, something that is missing in Professor van Bruinessen’s description of the history of Iranian Kurdistan between Ayatollah Khomeini’s declaration of Jihad in 1979 and 1996, is that we had more than 50,000 civilian deaths in Iranian Kurdistan. Additionally, over 5,000 peshmerga from our party, and hundreds, if not thousands, of political activists were executed in prisons, and several thousands of Kurdish activists, women activists and labour rights activists affiliated to the different political parties were arrested and put in prison, sentenced to long prison sentences during which they were often killed. Just because information can’t get of Iranian Kurdistan, or because it is not on CNN or the BBC, it doesn’t mean that nothing is happening. These things are happening daily.

In Kurdistan, the Iranian regime has a systematic policy of oppression and institutionalized discrimination against the Kurdish people. It uses military methods and targets the Kurdish movement, but it also uses the legal and religious framework to deny individuals of Kurdish origin everything from positions as state employees, to the possibility to be elected for specific offices or even the opportunity to study at universities or to get specific jobs. Oppression and discrimination against Kurdish people in Iranian Kurdistan is systematic and institutionalized. This oppression has actually led to something which was not what the regime intended. Kurdish nationalism has taken root in a much more significant way than it had in previous decades. Regions of Iranian Kurdistan, even Khorasan, are more interested in Kurdish nationalism. Also, a much higher degree of willingness to take part in the Kurdish political movement can be seen. Something that our party has learned and that we hope that other political organizations in Iranian Kurdistan will also understand, is that a Kurdish political party or a political party in general cannot represent the whole population. It is
not natural. In any part of Kurdistan, in any part of the world, it is not possible that one single organization can dictate what the population of that country or region does or does not do. Therefore, we have also seen that Kurdish political organizations have significant differences and differing ideologies and policies. However, when we work together, there is also a much greater degree of willingness amongst the population to do as the Kurdish political movements want. We have seen this in a variety of instances, for example when we have called strikes. Our party has called strikes in Iranian Kurdistan, such as on the anniversary of the assassination of Abdul Ghassemliou. A large proportion of the population has taken part in strikes like those. We have come to realize that a large part of the population might do as we or another political party says when we are all together, and we can therefore call strikes or specific actions on behalf of the population. The people are more willing to listen and behave in the way that the different Kurdish political organizations want, when these organizations have a joint statement. We saw this when Iran executed four Kurdish political prisoners that were not affiliated to our party and were not affiliated to Komalah. After a joint statement with another political group, the vast majority of people in Iranian Kurdistan listened and went on strikes. This is a lesson both to political organizations in the country that are in opposition to the current regime, but also guideline for what we should do for the future about Iranian Kurdistan. Because we might be able to do specific things that will be beneficial for our cause, whether it’s our party or Komalah or another political party. We might be noticed in the media, people might start to talk about us, they might even be willing to help us financially or with weapons if that’s necessary, but this doesn’t translate into real change inside Iranian Kurdistan. If we want real change inside Iranian Kurdistan, "People are more willing to listen and behave in the way that the different Kurdish political organizations want, when these organizations have a joint statement.”

we are forced to work together. We should want to work together, because all of the Kurdish political parties in Iranian Kurdistan seek democracy. We might seek different forms of self-rule in Iranian Kurdistan, but we all seek democracy. If we really have a goal of democracy, we also have to accept that in a democratic election, we might form a government, but on the other hand, an election can also mean that we lose and we have to accept whoever wins. Democracy needs to start right now. We should make sure that we do not repeat the mistakes that we've seen in other parts of Kurdistan and in other parts of the world.
I also want to shed some light on what is currently going with regards to Kurdish parties. Kurdish political parties have faced different obstacles to varying degrees: splits within the organizations, a lack of coordination on different levels, but also attempts to change this. For example, there was a split in our party; but our party and the organization that split from it have started to negotiate. We understand the need to reunite our party, but we have also seen similar occurrences in the case of Komalah. Moreover, we have also seen cross-party cooperation between PDKI and Komalah, and other political organizations, but it is more urgent now than ever before to do this effectively. As to how our party perceives this policy of trying to bring all the political parties, with all their differences, together, we understand that there are differences in ideology and policy. Nonetheless, those ideological and policy differences do not mean anything if we are not able to liberate Kurdistan. We can fight amongst ourselves as much as we want, once we are within Iranian Kurdistan. And then elections and the rule of law will decide who forms a government, who is the biggest, and who has the most support.

Under these circumstances we perceive a future in which our party might form a government once or twice, but might also lose, once or twice. We will accept that, because it is the framework of democracy that we envision for the future of Iranian Kurdistan. I will also talk about our perception of how Iran needs to change for that to be possible. However, I will leave that to the last part of my talk.

One thing that we feel is really necessary to discuss right now is Iran’s role in the region. This is directly related to the nature of the regime inside of Iran, and how the current theocratic regime seeks to increase its power both internally and worldwide. We see that Iran, through direct interference in neighbouring countries like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Afghanistan, creates instability and conflicts in those countries using a duplicitous tactic: it goes into these countries and supports one group against the other. It mostly focuses on Shi’a groups, but it doesn’t discriminate against fundamentalist Sunni groups. For example, the Taliban regime was one of Iran’s and the Kurds’ mortal enemies, before the invasion of Afghanistan. But later on, they started to support insurgents in Afghanistan, in order to create instability and to push out the United States, preventing Afghanistan from developing into a democratic country. You can see the same phenomenon in Iraq. It doesn’t only support Shi’a groups; it doesn’t
even see Shi’a groups or the Shi’a sect inside of Iran as a unitary group that it supports. It actually even turns different Shi’a groups against each other. Whenever a Shi’a group has some kind of criticism against Iran, the government puts its support behind another Shi’a group to weaken it. It also uses the same tactics in Iraqi Kurdistan. To put it bluntly, in Iraqi Kurdistan, Iranian influence is directly dependent on how Iraqi Kurdish political parties relate to and get help from Iran; we have said this very openly to our Iraqi Kurdish friends. For example, an organization like ISIS sweeps through Iraq and in effect, Iran puts its support behind one Kurdish political party and against another one. So, the support it gives to either Iraqi Kurds or Shi’a groups inside of Iraq is directly dependent on whether those organizations or groups are willing to do as Iran says. And this creates enormous levels of instability. For the first time in a very long period, there has been a rise in tension even among the Iraqi Kurdish political parties. That rise in tension is directly related to Iran’s meddling inside of their affairs. Also, in the Shia parts of Iraq, people like Muqtada al-Sadr are being pushed aside by Iran, and organizations like the Dawa party of al-Maliki are getting support. In Syria and in Lebanon the same phenomenon can be observed. Lebanon is very different because Iran sees Hezbollah as its own branch. It doesn’t have competitive organizations there that can support Iran or pit themselves against each other, because Hezbollah always does what Iran wants. You can see that in the Palestinian territories, which are Sunni, they use the same tactics there. Related to this strategy and this tactic by Iran to increase its influence by creating instability, is the fact that when conflicts erupt in a region and nobody else comes to the aid of the different actors that are in conflict with each other, Iran always steps in. They provide money, weapons and so on. For example, when ISIL swept through Iraq and finally started to attack Iraqi Kurds, you could see different political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan very publicly thanking Iran for their weapons and so on. But what had they done? Had they given weapons and support to the Kurdish government? No, they hadn’t. Iran gave weapons to specific political organizations, dependent on what those political organizations wanted to do. The same thing one observes in Iraq. Officially, Iran says that we want an Iraqi government that respects Sunnis, Shi’a and so on… but what have they done with the military of Iraq? In the Sunni regions, the military of Iraq fell completely apart. However, in the Shia regions there is no Shi’a army, there are 10-12 different Shi’a militias that Iran gives weapons and money and training to, to varying degrees, and there are even
commanders of the revolutionary guards that can resolve operations on their behalf or guide their organization.

This policy of Iran has had a consequence, which at the end of the day is ISIL. Some people tend to speak of ISIL as a fundamentalist, terrorist organization that kills and butchers and so on. That is what it is, but one question we need to ask ourselves is how does ISIL get support among the Sunni population of Syria and Iraq? Because ISIL does have support. It has support and we cannot deny that it does. How is it that regional countries like Qatar, Saudi Arabia and even Turkey, if they do not support ISIL, at least look the other way when ISIL carries out these actions? The reason is that they fear Iran. Iran's interference and growing influence in the region has led regional countries to want to reduce Iranian influence by any means possible. This has created even more instability, even more conflict - and it will only get worse. The current instability and conflict in the region, from our perspective, is something that won't disappear even if, for example, ISIL is destroyed or disappears. There is genuine fear and worry among the Sunni population of Iraq and Syria, that neighbouring countries like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf State and so on, that even if ISIL disappears will create or support other organizations or movements that push back the Iranian influence. And this will not end, as Iran will continue to do what it does and these countries will also try to push back Iran. What is the alternative here? What is left to try? In Iraq the Kurdish government, the Kurdish peshmerga forces and the Kurdish population are moderates; they are the nation that takes in all Sunni, Christians, Arabs, Turkmens, Ashousi, Assyrians and so on, without a difference. Unfortunately, the notion has started to build that Iran should become more involved in these countries to create stability. Even the Obama administration, as well as David Cameron, in the United Kingdom and at the European level, think that involving Iran more will stabilize the region. Our message to Western nations is that is that this would in fact have exactly the opposite effect. Because there is, as I have previously mentioned, genuine fear and worry amongst populations in the region about Iran's war.

Now I want to briefly talk about my last point, about our party and many of the political parties that we cooperate with, along with our vision for the future of Iran. We believe that the only way that we can stop Iranian interference and the spread of conflict and destruction in the region is through a change of regime. Changing the regime might be easier said than done, but that should be the goal. This would not mean simply replacing it with another crazy regime as we did in 1979, but rather
replacing it with a democratic and federal system of governance in Iran. Why federalism? Federalism is important because Iran is a multinational country. But added to this, Iran can only be governed if there are checks and balances. There cannot be a single section of the population of Iran, be they Persian, Shi’a or another group, that is able to control the central power of Iran. We have thousands of years of history that prove that a central government in Iran will seek to create hegemony. To block that ambition means to decentralize, and decentralization in Iran would not only be beneficial for Kurds, who want self-rule within the framework of a federal state, but it would also be beneficial for neighbouring countries. Because we as Kurds, for example, have no interests in Kabbala, we have no interests in Jerusalem, we don’t have anything against nearby countries. We seek to create a situation where we can live in peace, both internally in our community, and alongside our neighbours. A regime like the current one in Tehran, or a theocracy in Tehran, will not allow that. A lot of people might ask if that is even possible. The current Iranian regime is powerful; it has military power and lots of support. In response, we can list the Kurdish national movement and its willingness to have an armed struggle; the growing sense of national awareness amongst the Azerbaijani population, amongst the Arabs, amongst the Baloch and so on. But one thing that speaks most strongly against a centralized system of governance in Iran is the numbers. Numbers are very interesting. A lot of people think that the population of Iran has a Persian majority. We believe that that is not the case. But we also have indicators that prove that this is not the case. Professor van Bruinessen said that it is very hard to get information outside of Iran about the ethnic composition of the different regions and so on, but what we do have is official Iranian statements. For example, in 2010 in 2011, Iran’s education minister went on TV and in front of the Iranian Mejlis and warned the nation of a huge crisis that Iran faces. Around 70% of all the children that start school in Iran do not have Persian as their mother language. So what does that mean? That means that the majority of the population is not Persian. Additionally, Professor van Bruinessen referred to another factor; that there has been a rise of national identity among, not only Kurds, whose collective identity has been prevalent since 1945-43, or even earlier in the 1920s, but also in the Azerbaijani population, which, as he rightly mentions, is really important for how the situation in Iran changes or does not change. This can also be seen amongst the Shi’a population more broadly. For example, in the Arab population, which is majority Shi’a, many are converting to Sunni Islam as
a response to state policies. That is a sign of them wanting to reject the current system of governance in Iran. So our political party definitely foresees change in the future of Iran. It is just a question of when and how it will change, and what role can we play in that development. We think, as I mentioned earlier, that it is not up to one single political organization, it is not related to what one particular leader wants. It is coordination and cooperation, not only amongst the Kurds but also amongst the different nations of Iran that will determine the changes in our country. And we have seen positive steps, such as the creation of the Congress of Nationality for a Federal Iran (CNFI), where all the different nations of Iran, except unfortunately the Persians, came together to seek federalism. So even though there is lack of information, a lack of news and so on, we feel that it’s necessary to be hopeful - nobody should see the future of Iran in a dark light. It will change, and hopefully we will make it change for a better.

Thank you.
8 • PANEL II: FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR IRAN’S KURDS

The Situation in Iranian Kurdistan – A Plan for a Democratic Iran

Speech by Mr Abdullah Mohtadi, Leader of the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan

I must say that my speech is going to be very brief. I am not going to go into details about party politics, or whether the Sunni or the Shi’a are the most popular group. I must thank the previous speakers for their very useful speeches. They made very good points.

Let me begin by expressing my thanks to the UNPO and also to the International Network of Iranian Kurdistan Human Rights (INIKHR) for organizing this exceptional conference on Iranian Kurdistan.

We hear a lot in today’s media about Kurds and Kurdistan, arguably more than ever before. Kurdish Peshmerga have always been a great source of pride for their nation, serving as protectors of their people and land over years of oppression and brutality. However, the term has recently become familiar in the West and has come to represent the legitimate Kurdish freedom fighters on the forefront of war against terrorism. They have been recognized as the force helping to protect not just their own, but other threatened ethnic and religious groups and peoples. This struggle process; they have been denied access to high positions in government for the last has by no means been easy, as the war and suffering is ongoing and Kurds continue to pay dearly.

The Kurdish issue has long been one of the major unresolved political questions in the Middle East. However, of the four parts of Kurdistan spread across the heart of the region, Iranian Kurdistan is often overlooked. While Iran does not shy away from news headlines around the world, this is usually in regards to its nuclear program and its hostility with the West. Seldom does its appalling human rights record make news, much less the specific persecution of its Kurdish minority.

With a population of roughly ten million people, spreading across at least four provinces in Northern and North-western Iran, Iranian Kurds are still deprived of their basic human rights. They do not have the slightest resemblance of a self-rule; they are denied education in their mother tongue; investment in development projects is very rare; Kurdish students are constantly and disproportionately rejected from higher education by the notorious ‘selection’ three decades of Islamic regime, and they are subject to the harshest violations of
human rights and the most brutal state violence.

“Hassan Rouhani has just proven himself to be a friendlier face of the same brutal regime.”

Despite some initial optimism at his election as president, Hassan Rouhani has just proven himself to be a friendlier face of the same brutal regime.

A report by the Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran issued last month confirms that the human rights situation in the country remains of concern. Various laws, policies and institutional practices continue to undermine the conditions needed for the realization of the fundamental rights guaranteed by international and even national law.

A United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran held last month, concluded that there are many concerns still facing ethnic and religious groups. Despite significant progress being achieved in reducing extreme poverty, certain underdeveloped regions, including Kurdistan, continue to show high levels of poverty. Poor living conditions continue in regions traditionally inhabited by ethnic minorities; in some cases these places were completely lacking in basic services like electricity, plumbing, sewage systems, public transport, medical facilities or schools.

As well as this, ethnic minorities face severe restrictions of their behaviour, with regard to education in their mother tongue, including Azerbaijani, Kurdish, and Arabic, despite some laws protecting the limited use of non-Persian languages. Closures of publications and newspapers in minority languages also prevent those groups from claiming their right to take part in cultural life.

There are about 400 Kurdish political prisoners and prisoners of conscience in prisons across Iran. 60 of them are on death row and 15 have been given life sentences. In the last three months alone, over 12 border traders, known as ‘Kolbars’ in Kurdish, have been shot and killed by the Iranian armed forces and 23 have been injured.

“Human rights activists in Iran claim that 40% of the country’s political prisoners in Iran are Kurds.”

In his annual report about human rights in Iran, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr Ban Ki Moon, stated that the Iranian president’s consideration of human rights in Iran remains symbolic, with serious efforts for improvement, yet to be seen. According to him, different ethnic and religious minorities continue to face persecution.
Human rights activists in Iran claim that 40% of the country’s political prisoners in Iran are Kurds. They also state that in the past two months, 140 people in Kurdish cities have been arrested, 111 of whom were arrested by security forces. Crucially, despite all this, the Kurdish movement in Iran has remained democratic, secular, and pluralist and has not succumbed to extremism, fundamentalism, terrorism and blind violence. In fact, the Kurdish movement has been a vital component of any democratic movement in the country and in the region.

Kurds have been at the forefront of fighting for democracy in Iran for the last 35 years. Kurds have a special place among Iran’s other nationalities, and can play an indispensable role in the struggle to achieve democratic rights. It is only natural that the Kurdish parties have been one of the founders of the Congress of Nationalities for a Federal Iran and a significant partner of this umbrella organization of Iran’s nationalities.

The international community should back Iranian Kurds in their fight for their legitimate rights. Kurds and Kurdish political parties constitute a key component of any democratic movement in Iran and are a vital element for progress in the future. Kurdistan can be the gateway to political
and democratic change in Iran. While the concerns of the international community regarding Iran’s nuclear program are legitimate, it is vital that the discrimination and the widespread violations of human rights are not neglected. As an unrepresented people, the Kurds of Iran should be given a voice at congressional and parliamentary hearings all over the world. Kurds can contribute significantly to a new democratic, multicultural, federal and secular Iran, which is the only way forward for Iran, if it wants to be at peace with its own people as well as with the wider world.

Thank you.
Thank you to UNPO and the International Network of Iranian Kurdistan Human Rights for inviting us here to talk with you about Western support for the Kurds in Iran. I am going to shorten my speech a little bit because we are really running out of time, but maybe we will have some extra time for questions.

I will touch upon the subject of how to mobilize, organize western support for your cause. However, I am sorry to say, it is not all good news that I am going to share with you, so just to get the atmosphere right. I won’t talk about the oppression which Kurds have been facing for years, because this has been touched upon already. I think that’s really important to understand this, but when talk about oppression, there is a lot of competition in the world. Let’s look at North Korea, things happening in China, in the Middle East in general, in South Arabia, things happening in Egypt, in Ukraine, the Crimea where people are now living under Russian laws and where they have a lot of existing laws in place that are oppressive as well. We can include the whole world when we talk about human rights violations and oppression of people. You’re not the only one, and there is a competitive arena where you have to compete for attention and action for your cause. This makes your case very difficult. Obviously, the rest of the world has been very interested in Iran over the last decades, both in terms of human rights, and the nuclear program. Both elements, human rights violations and nuclear problems, have been fuelling the confrontation between the West and Iran. At the same time, from our Western perspective, things have started to shift. There are changes going on; you may not like it but, as we see it, things are moving, and maybe we just want to hold on to that dream that things are moving towards the right direction, because the alternative is such a dark page in history. Consequently, we want to grasp every positive signal being sent out by the Iran regime. Negotiations are going on between the P5+1, United States and Iran, about the nuclear program. However, this also puts us in a very difficult situation. Where do human rights violations come in? Well, looking at the region where ISIL is, it is easy to see how discussion of that group now dominates the subject of human rights violations in Western minds, rather than examining the things that are happening in Iran or elsewhere. The problem is that we live in society driven by pageantry. What we lack, as has been said before, is information. We lack photographs and
footage. In 2005, when those young men were hung in Iran, the worldwide uproar to these executions was because of the age of the persons involved and the footage that was available. It is all due to the crackdown on information by the Iran regime: they know that what gets out of the country, what gets spread around the world, is very important in fuelling anger in Western society. Anger motivates people and in the end, it will start moving, pressuring our government. Without this movement, without this pressure on our government, nothing is going to happen. At the end of August, Hassan Rouhani gave them what many Iranians call a yellow card, saying that the government must not antagonize hard-line Iranian groups with proposals to ease up on cultural, social and political restrictions. We also know of the political game going on within Iran, and this is important, because the outcome of this negotiation was apparent for Rouhani. On 3 August, he gave a speech, avoiding any reference to longstanding promises to create an open Iranian society, to open up
on cultural spheres, let alone the thoughts he had expressed the summer before, that he would seek freedom for political prisoners. It has been noted that the President has stopped talking about these subjects. Well-informed sources say that Rouhani has struck a deal with the supreme leader to protect the government against hard-line criticism on the nuclear deal. This is where western interests come into play; what is more important: the nuclear deal or recurrent human rights violations? From our own western perspective, we would rather see an Iranian government without nuclear ambitions, because we perceive it as a threat to our own position and interests in the world, despite the fact that human rights violations are frequently expounded in Europe as a moral theme. Morality is a different theme, but from my perspective extremely important; this is why I am chair of the Iran Committee. But in political reality, on the world stage, it is all about power and influence and getting results that will safeguard your personal interest, even where those personal interests counter those of the world as a whole. So this power battle within Iran itself, between the President and the Supreme Leader, has an impact on how we perceive what we can actually achieve. Rouhani is picking his battles because he knows that if he keeps pushing on political prisoners and cultural freedom, he might lose both. Do we know where those nuclear negotiations will end? We don’t. But we also understand that we need to find a solution. Is this going to help the cause of the Kurds? No, it’s not. Because the cause of the Kurds is not about the nuclear ambition, it’s really about the freedoms of society. It’s about human rights. So we have a big problem. What can be done? This is really important to think about. We get messages from

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Kurdish areas; there are basically four different areas and four different countries. Do we really know about Kurdistan, in the western world, from what we read in the newspaper? Not really. I mean it is one big area with a lot of alarm bells going off, and everyone is fighting with everyone. There is not a clear picture for the consumers in the West. Our politicians are serving the consumers in the West, they’re not serving people in Egypt and/or South Arabia, etc. They’re serving the people in the West. We have to fully understand that. If we hear of human rights violations by Kurdish groups themselves, we think, ‘here we go again’. This is really in conflict with the ambition of having an independent Kurdish State, or even a federal State. We wonder, ‘Should we really try to help the people in Kurdistan?’, however you define the area. If
we know of human rights violations by marginalized groups in those areas, we don’t know a great deal of detail. But there are too many examples of groups that we have failed to help, though perhaps the strategy has always been very intelligent, after which people have said, ‘every time when the West intervenes something bad comes out of it’. This makes us very reluctant to move forward, especially when those examples are presented. We are concerned that things are not as simple as they look from the surface. To be honest, from the speeches we heard today, what is the real position of Kurdish groups on democratic values? From a western point of view, we talk about women’s rights, we talk about a majority making decisions, taking in consideration what a minority thinks. Democracy is not about a majority making the decisions; it’s about making decisions taking into consideration of the needs of the minority. This is about economic freedoms, this is about religious freedoms, this is about cultural freedoms, freedom of sexual orientation, you name it, and it’s all in the bucket. What is the position of the Kurds, and where is the evidence? Where is the evidence that it will be the way it’s being presented? We don’t know. Is it the common goal to work together towards this shared ambition, with the risk that once this shared ambition is achieved, we’ll end up with another war, or factions starting to fight one another? Whether it’s a tribal system or not? Because when the common goal is gone, what will be next? There is no answer to this very important question, and that makes the West reluctant in moving forward, especially from a political point of view. What’s the risk you’re willing to take? So this is really about making human rights decisions based on clear evidence and judgement of what can be expected to happen next. Then obviously, there are a lot of conflicts in the region and a gigantic coalition is building up internationally to fight ISIL. Why do we want to fight ISIL? Well, we don’t like those people to get into planes and fly into buildings or blow up our buildings in the western world. I put it a little bit bluntly, but that is why, in the end, a political decision is being made - it is again about the interest of the western society. Obviously it helps that ISIL is putting footage on the internet with all those people being beheaded; these make people, for example in the Netherlands, very angry. There is now massive support for the policy of sending six fighting jets towards the Iraq area. So it all comes together. But at the same time, where is this going to end? To be honest, I don’t know. There are specialists debating this on a global level, and hopefully they will find an answer. What we hope is that the end result shakes up the power balance in the region so that we can
create a stable, democratic environment. And this is indeed where the Kurds come in. If we look at how Turkey is reacting to the Kurds, there is a shift going on. What the Kurds are capable of has already proven in Iraq. There is a sentiment in the West that the Kurds in Iraq demonstrates a group which, at last, is a little bit more moderate, they take care of their own area, they’re trying to build some kind of a decent functioning society. So this is very positive. It’s that kind of emotion that can be used from a more strategic point of view by the Kurdish movement, in order to start influencing the West. I am going to close up so that we have some space for questions and debate. I am taking shortcuts here and there, but in the end when you take all layers off, this is where you end. I am talking about the power balance and what we are looking for when we intervene and when we provide support. From a western point of view, like what was said in the first panel by Mr. Ahmedi, we expect a democratic political party asking for support and maybe even some weapons. However, in newspapers in the western world, people won’t understand. It’s like saying to the parliamentarians here, ‘Please buy a bunch of guns so you can do your job in your country’. This is such a faraway world from us, and you’ll have to make significant efforts to bridge this gap. If you’re not capable of bridging this gap, I think the West will just think ‘this is just too complicated, we don’t get it, we don’t understand, let’s back out of it’. I’m not sure

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where Iran could be in maybe four or six years. When I became chair, we talked with a lot of groups, opposition groups in Iran, here in the Netherlands. One of the things I really noticed at one point behind the scenes was that every time I talked to someone from the Iranian movement, from one political party or another, from one faction, or to one political individual. There is no collaboration, there is no joined strategy, and there is no joined plan towards the future. It is changing a little bit, but it is not good enough yet. We cannot talk or negotiate with 20 organizations. We need a platform, we need a strong voice. We need a joint mission and strategy for the future. Once that one has been delivered, then we can start working with it. The world is just too big; there are too many conflicts in interest. If you want our attention and by ‘our’, I mean the attention of the western world, you have to work hard for it - because it is not about the Kurds, it is, in the end, about the whole world.

Thank you.