1 Introduction

This book, *Kurdish Politics in Iran: Crossborder Interactions and Mobilisation since 1947*, is a political and historical study of different stages of the Iranian Kurdish movement from 1947 to 2017. It deals with two main elements of the Iranian Kurdish movement: firstly, the formation and politicisation of Kurdish national sentiment, and the reasons for the emergence and continuation of the Kurdish question in Iran; and secondly, the crossborder dimension of the interaction between Iranian and Iraqi Kurdish political parties, and the impact of this interaction on the capability and direction of the Iranian Kurdish movement. This book pays particular attention to movement mobilisation and different aspects of the collective actions and mobilisation deployed by the actors, civil society organisations and political parties of Iranian Kurds during different phases of the movement. The collective political movement led by the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (*Hîzbî Dêmukratî Kurdistanî Êran*, KDPI) and the Society of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan (*Komeley Şorrgêrrî Zêhmetkêşanî Kurdistanî Êran*, Komala), the two mainstream political organisations of the Iranian Kurdish movement, is the main focus of this study. Nevertheless, there have been periods in the Kurdish movement when the actions of Iranian Kurdish civil society were not limited to the activity of the KDPI and Komala. In this regard, several historical events and actions, for instance of Kurdish peasants, students, intellectuals and others, which have great importance for the direction of the Iranian Kurdish movement, have been included in this book. Emphasising the importance of these two elements, I argue that the century-long national movement of the Iranian Kurds is a product of the discriminatory policy pursued by changing Iranian ruling regimes (the Pahlavis and the Islamic Republic) towards non-Persian and non-Shiite ethnonational and ethnoreligious communities in the country. The analysis of the Kurdish–state relationship in Iran reflects on macro- and micro-historical events, inside and outside Iranian Kurdistan,
which have had an impact on the direction and content of the Iranian Kurdish movement.

Reflecting on seven decades of Kurdish crossborder interactions since the collapse of the Republic of Kurdistan (1946), I argue that the relationship between Iraqi and Iranian Kurdish political parties has been complex, sometimes resulting in fraternal violence and fragmentation within the Kurdish movement. The geopolitical situation of the Kurdish homeland, split between four nation-states with hostile relations with the Kurds, has had a profound impact on the variety of different forms of mobilisation in different parts of Kurdistan. The evolution of Kurdish nationalism in the twentieth century was also to a certain degree subject to these geographic circumstances. As a result of the establishment of nation-state borders and boundaries, different understandings of national interest among the Kurds of different parts of Kurdistan can be identified.

The periodical scope of this study spans 1947 to 2017. Three distinct periods of the Iranian Kurdish movement have been identified, which include the aftermath of the collapse of the Republic and the emergence and growth of the KDPI and Komala. Owing to the characteristics of the Iranian Kurdish movement in the 1960s, in 1979 and the 1980s, and from the early 1990s to 2017, these periods constitute the three major phases of the Kurdish national movement in Iran. Chiefly, the approaches of the KDPI and Komala to mobilisation during the phases of the Iranian Kurdish movement will be the focus of this study, employing a critical approach: how and why have these parties failed in conducting a sustainable struggle against different Iranian regimes, and how has misconducted crossborder interaction between Iranian and Iraqi Kurdish movements challenged the integrity of the Iranian Kurdish movement?

This book highlights two critically interwoven aspects of the Kurdish struggle: crossborder interaction and movement mobilisation. I, the author of this book, am also an insider, having a link to this movement. From the initial stages of my research, I have been warned about my position, by colleagues. Bearing this in mind, I have conducted this research with awareness of the importance of academic integrity and the threat of subjectivity. The study of crossborder interaction has resulted in some critical assumptions, yet all claims and assertions have been underlined through referring to evidence and historical records related to this aspect of the Kurdish movement.
Furthermore, it is important to clarify that the critical claims about Kurdish crossborder interaction do not include Kurdish civil society of Iraqi Kurdistan. Iraqi Kurdistan has, since the collapse of the Republic of Kurdistan (with some intermittency), become the home of the exiled Iranian Kurdish movement. The Kurdish people in Iraqi Kurdistan have largely acted with hospitality. With reference to my personal experience of living in Iraqi Kurdistan, together with the narratives of people from my generation and of the previous generation of Iranian Kurds engaged in the Iranian Kurdish movement, it is worth noting that during these different periods of crossborder interaction between the Iranian Kurdish movement and Iraqi Kurds, the majority of the Iraqi Kurdish people showed solidarity with the Iranian Kurdish movement. This hospitality has been practised while the Iraqi Kurdish villages suffered immensely at different times from the Iranian regime’s arbitrary shelling and bombardment, justified by Iran by claims that the areas were hosting the KDPI and Komala. It should also be noted that beyond this intra-Kurdish rivalry, the Kurds of different parts of Kurdistan have demonstrated strong crossborder connections and networks, especially through periods of hardship. An observable positive example of crossborder Kurdish interaction is that since the 1990s, following the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq in 1992, economic, cultural and political connections across national frontiers have multiplied. The cultural, political and economic lives of many Iranian Kurds are heavily influenced by recent developments in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI); many Iranian Kurds now live, work, study or frequently travel to the KRI. Despite many Kurds’ awareness of the misconduct of crossborder political organisations, recent interactions have contributed to the growing politicisation of Kurdish identity and aspirations in Iran, as well as accelerating similar trends among Kurds in Turkey and Syria.

This book is the first systematic attempt to study the past seven decades of the Kurdish movement in Iran through the lens of its crossborder aspects. The previous absence of such a study is evident not only in English and European languages, but also in Middle Eastern languages, Kurdish and Persian included. It thus addresses a significant gap in the existing scholarship, shedding light on the implications of mobilisation on the conduct of the socio-political movement of a nation whose land is divided between four different nation-states. My interest in writing on this topic, and more broadly on aspects of
intra-Kurdish rivalry, developed throughout the years of writing my PhD thesis, in 2016–19. My dedication to researching various aspects of the contemporary Iranian Kurdish movement has meant that I have been able to publish several peer-reviewed articles in internationally recognised journals (Hassaniyan 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020a, 2020b).

This book draws on a wide range of primary and secondary sources, aimed at developing a comprehensive analysis of the most recent seven decades of Kurdish politics in Iran. Materials including political documents, historical records, audiovisual material, including photographs and video recordings, newspaper clippings and archives, including the CIA’s Historical Review Office Collections (CIA), the collection of the Nashriyah newspaper at the University of Manchester and private individuals’ collections such as Mansoor Hekmat’s archive,¹ are the major primary sources of information for the empirical foundations of this book.

I recognise that elements from ideologically constructed archives, such as Hekmat’s, require additional reliability checks. Hekmat was a leading figure of the Communist Party of Iran (CPI) and founder of the Worker-Communist Party of Iran. His archive comprises a variety of documents, political statements, minutes and letters exchanged between leading Komala officials. These materials are useful for a range of purposes, for instance to discern Komala’s views on the Kurdish question and its fratricidal war with the KDPI during the 1980s.

Autobiographies and biographies of political leaders and veteran Peshmerga² of the Kurdish movement have also been essential sources of primary data. Together, these materials provide a rich historical account and a heterogeneous (sometimes contradictory) articulation of


² The term peshmerga literally means ‘those who face death’; in the context of modern Kurdish history, the Peshmerga are Kurdish guerrilla fighters opposing state authority in Iran and Iraq. The exact moment the word emerged is disputed, though there are indications that the term was adopted in 1946 during the brief existence of the Kurdish Republic centred in Mahabad. However, it is indisputable that the Peshmerga have become a pillar of the Kurdish movement and Kurdish society and political culture in recent decades (Lortz 2005; Aziz 2017).
crossborder Kurdish interactions. Furthermore, I have drawn on many secondary published sources in Persian and English, in particular socio-political, historical and economic studies of the past two centuries of Iranian and Kurdish history, to draw a picture of the wider environment in which the emergence and evolution of the Iranian Kurdish movement occurred. English translations from Kurdish and Persian originals are all mine, unless otherwise indicated.

This book includes an account of the relationship between the (Iraqi) Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the KDPI which some may find controversial. In this narrative, for instance, the KDP under the leadership of Mostafa Barzani in the 1960s played the role of oppressor and betrayer, while the KDPI was the victim. As shown over the following chapters of this book, I propose three main explanations for this state of affairs. Firstly, the KDP leaders’ self-image of the KDP as a superior political organisation has meant that the KDP, particularly Mostafa Barzani, never treated the KDPI as an equal partner with its own valid interests. From the first moment of its arrival on the soil of Iraqi Kurdistan, the KDPI was treated as a subordinate organisation. When Barzani in the late 1950s encouraged and promised his support to the KDPI leadership to re-establish the movement in Iranian Kurdistan, he had the ambition of leadership of a greater Kurdish movement, reaching beyond the borders of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Secondly, for the Barzanis (the sons as well as the father), the survival of the KDP under the leadership of the Barzani clan has always been the first priority; at critical moments, national interest has been sacrificed for organisational, or personal, ends. The history of the Kurdish movement is rife with examples whereby the KDP (and subsequently the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) as well) has placed narrow organisational interests before wider Kurdish national interest. Yet the same problematic is also recognisable in the relations between Iranian Kurdish political parties. For instance, the failure to find a peaceful solution to the differences between Komala and the KDPI resulted in half a decade of fratricidal war in the 1980s, resulting in many still unhealed wounds for the Kurdish movement and Kurdish society. Critiques of the KDPI–Komala conflict are still quite evident within Kurdish society in Iran (Manbari 2017).

The third reason may be found in the geographical specifics in which the Kurds and their movements are caught. Surrounded by geopolitical challenges, the Kurdish movement of each part of Kurdistan, in order
to access a safe haven from which to carry out its struggle against its oppressor, has had to compromise some degree of its independence, and at times challenge conceptions of the collective goals of the Kurdish national movement.

Conceptual Framework

In order to explore the Iranian Kurdish movement’s different stages through the lenses of crossborder interaction and movement mobilisation, this book draws upon the concepts and terminologies of ethno-politics and social movement theory. The approaches of Milton Esman (1994) and Sinisa Malesevic (2006) to ethnonational politics contribute concepts and understandings related to the causes of the emergence of the Kurdish question as an ethnonationalistic movement and the complexity of Kurdish crossborder interaction; and the theoretical approaches of Charles Tilly (1978) and McAdam et al. (1996) to movement mobilisation contribute theoretical explanations applicable to the analysis of the patterns of mobilisation of the Iranian Kurdish movement during different phases.

Ethnicity and nationalism as products of modernity have had a massive impact on shaping a new era of complex and competitive relations between different communities. Nationhood is a modern ideological construct that has been homogenised and enforced by institutions (e.g. education systems, mass media and culture) of the modern nation-state, civil society and kinship networks. Esman’s focus on multifaceted aspects of ethnic conflicts and the process of politicisation of ethnicity, and his conceptualisation of ethnic politics, makes him an obvious choice for this study. Important throughout the study of the Kurdish question is the conceptual identification and definition of Kurds (as either a nation or ethnonational group). The Kurdish people are among the largest nations not possessing a nation-state. Kurds are a nation when nationhood is defined by criteria such as possessing a distinct language, flag and geographical location (homeland). Yet, since the Kurdish people have no independent institutions of a modern nation-state with the task of systematically propagating nationalism, they can be considered as an ethnonational group. However, while theoretically Kurds are classified as an ethnonational group, the Kurdish people consider themselves as a nation, culturally, linguistically and geographically distinguished from the other nations.
(i.e. Persian, Arab, Turks) that surround them. This self-understanding of Kurdishness has laid the foundation for the Kurdish movement through past centuries and in the present.

Despite the existence of a variety of competing actors within the Kurdish movement, promoting the socio-political, economic and cultural rights of the Kurds in Iran has been the main discourse of their movement. I use the term ‘the Iranian Kurdish national movement’ in articulating the Kurdish struggle in Iran. This choice has been made owing to the fact that this movement ‘consists of organizations and other actors who view themselves as working on the behalf of – and for the reconstruction of – a Kurdish nation’ (Watts 2010, p. 21). The Kurdish movement reflects the collective consciousness and aspirations of an entire community established in the form of politicised national mobilisation. This process has resulted in the recruitment of individuals into the movement, aimed at promoting and defending the community’s collective interests.

The crossborder cooperation between the Iranian and Iraqi Kurdish movements has been a factor having a huge impact on the direction of this movement. Esman views ethnic crossborder solidarity as a strong source of mobilisation aimed at challenging state policies towards certain ethnic communities. From his perspective, crossborder ethnic interaction is equivalent to ethnic solidarity (Esman 1994, p. 30). The concept of ethnic solidarity includes a combination of obligations and responsibilities of individuals to their community. The main purpose of solidarity is defending the interests and maintaining boundaries in relation to the others. As a consequence, the greater the solidarity, the more likely the emergence of ethnic political movements. Reflecting on the Iranian Kurdish movement reveals the existence of a strong sense of solidarity between the movements of the Iranian and Iraqi Kurds. During the KDPI’s attempt in the 1960s to reorganise the movement, crossborder solidarity was viewed as a powerful source of movement mobilisation. In this regard it is even more interesting to investigate the critical aspect of this relation, for instance how malpractice in crossborder relations has affected the ability and outcomes of the Kurdish movement.

Malesevic’s (2006) theory on ethnonationalism and identity can explain the role of Kurdayetî (Kurdishness)3 as the core element

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3 Gourlay (2018, p. 26) identifies Kurdayetî as ‘a form of shared political identity that extends across borders and that does not necessarily prefigure territorial claims but may be a form of political capital with which to protect Kurdish interests and buttress political claims in the troubled strategic environment of the
through the evolution of the Iranian Kurdish movement. Malesevic deals with ethnicity and nationalism as sources of ideology. He defines nationalism as an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining the identity, unity and autonomy of a social group some of whose members deem it to constitute an actual or potential nation (Malesevic 2006, pp. 19–20). Kurdayeti has been a strong source of motivation for Kurdish people to participate in or support the Kurdish movement and collective class struggle. In this regard, at least until 1979 Kurdish nationalism was the chief ideology of the Iranian Kurdish movement, with a massive effect on the formation and facilitation of this movement. Kurdayeti defined the collective identity, a desired image of the movement and its demands and criteria for membership. The ideology of the Kurdish movement defines its community as a subordinated and oppressed people, all members of the community being victims owing to their ascribed ethnic/national status. Therefore, everyone is obliged to mobilise, resist and overcome the injustices that afflict them.

The theories of social and political movements are in many regards applicable in explaining the Iranian Kurdish movement. A movement is a process structured around a ‘two-component’ interaction, consisting of, firstly, networks of groups and organisations prepared to mobilise collective action, and secondly, individuals who attend these activities or contribute with resources to collective actions. According to Gamson and Meyer (cited in McAdam et al. 1996, p. 283), a social or political movement is a process in which actors and agents through their ‘sustained and self-conscious’ actions challenge authorities or cultural codes. Through this process, groups of individuals or/and organisations, in order to realise their ideals, employ extra-institutional means of influence. Movements – like the states they challenge – are not coherent or unitary, but composed of actors with competitive power and sometimes tensions in relation to internal and external environmental dynamics. The web of relations has been characterised as a ‘flexible lattice of tension’ (Watts 2010, p. 27). The Kurdish movement has not been an exception to this theoretical...
generalisation, since several examples of conflictual relations inside and surrounding the movement are identifiable.

The analysis of mobilisation concerns the process of gaining resources and transforming these resources into collective action. The term ‘mobilisation’ is associated with the process by which a group moves from being a passive collection of individuals to a (politically) active participant in public life. The most important elements of the analysis of socio-political movements are governments and the populations over which they exercise or claim control. Tilly stresses that within this political analysis, nation-states are the common points of reference (1978, pp. 9–10). Political opportunities, mobilising structures and framing processes are the most significant concepts in analysing movements and revolutions (McAdam et al. 1996). In the Kurdish movement, threats and opportunities have been the chief motivations for mobilising and conducting collective actions. While the fear of subjugation and annihilation has pushed the Kurds to carry out political collective actions, the existence of crossborder solidarity, as well as domestic and regional changes, have been among the windows of opportunity that have encouraged the political elites of the Kurds to mobilise and intensify their movement.

Nation-State-Building and Kurdish Politics in Iran

The Kurdish question in Iran – likewise the Kurdish question in Turkey, Iraq and Syria – is an ongoing conflict, with its historical emergence back in the early twentieth century. There is an obvious nexus between the emergence of the Iranian Kurdish question and the establishment of the modern Iranian nation-state in 1925. Since the establishment of the modern Iranian nation-state, changing Iranian regimes have continuously had a complex and complicated relationship with the country’s ethn national communities. Fundamental issues, such as conflict arising from the non-Persian communities’ claims for access to full and equal citizenship and socio-political self-determination, have determined this relationship (Atabaki 1993; Ansari 2012). Reza Shah’s nation-state-building policy and his denial of the diverse nature of the multiethnic Iranian society, and continuation of the same policy by his son, Mohammad Reza Shah, resulted in the emergence of grievance among the non-Persian ethnonational communities of Iran (Saleh 2013, p. 62).

The Iranian Kurdish struggle has, from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, entered a new stage, with the politicisation of
Kurdish nationalism. Ever since, Iranian Kurds have pursued a fluctuating nationalist movement aimed at achieving the right of self-determination. Through this book, I argue that the Iranian Kurdish movement is a product of two interlinked and simultaneously parallel socio-political and cultural phenomena: firstly, a reaction to the exclusionary and suppressive state policies during and after the nation-state-building process in Iran, referred to as ‘Persianisation’, and secondly, the Iranian Kurdish elite’s ambition of creating an autonomous Kurdish unit, aimed at promoting the political and cultural rights of the Kurdish population, during an era overcast by the nation-state’s exclusionary policy of identity reconstruction. On the one hand, the Kurdish opposition to the centralisation of power in Iran and their dream of achieving Kurdish national self-determination, and on the other hand, the central government’s aggressive reactions to this Kurdish endeavour, are among the permanent elements characterising Kurdish–state relations in Iran (Stansfield 2014, pp. 64–6). Consequently, it can be claimed that the Kurdish ambition of self-rule and the demarcation of Kurdish identity defined by the Kurdish people, hand-in-hand with the politicisation of Kurdish grievances, have been among the common factors behind intensification of the Kurdish movement during the past century. The existence of such motivations partly behind the emergence of the Kurdish movement in Iran justifies identifying this struggle as a ‘nationalistic movement’. Nevertheless, historical records of the evolution of the Iranian Kurdish movement reveal that this movement has accommodated a variety of socio-political, economic and ideological motivations. Even though Kurdayeti and Kurdish nationalism have been powerful drivers for the emergence and conduct of this movement, the occurrence or establishment of several revolts (such as peasant movements challenging socio-economic relations within Kurdish society) and political parties and ideological trends (e.g. Komala with its focus on the class system within Kurdish society) are among phenomena that give reason to question the idea of the presence of an entirely nationalistic movement in Iranian Kurdistan. While recognising nationalism as the dominating factor, it will be argued that the Iranian Kurdish movement is a collage of a variety of elements.

The modern history of the Iranian Kurdish movement provides a variety of examples of unrest and uprisings initiated by the Kurds during the first half of the twentieth century. These uprisings