

We are publishing here the texts from two speeches delivered at a fringe meeting from the 2021 Labour Party conference entitled “The Future of Iranian Kurdistan.” The event was held on Sunday, 26 September 2021, in the Gloucester Room at the Hilton Brighton Metropole. It was co-hosted by SME 4 Labour, The Centre for Kurdish Progress, and Kurds for Labour.

The panel discussed the future of Iranian Kurdistan where they considered the future of the Kurdish national movement in Iran, ongoing tensions across the region and current economic and social conditions for Kurds in Iran. In this context, the panel discussed the continuing movement for self-determination and the ongoing fight against discrimination and prejudice for Iranian Kurds, and what the future holds for Kurds in Iran.

The two speeches re-published here were delivered by Mehri Rezai, a representative of the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK), and Sonia Karimi, a representative of the Community of the Free Women of Eastern Kurdistan (KJAR).

### **Mehri Rezai**

Firstly, I would like to thank the Labour Party for inviting me and my two colleagues here today. The Kurdish population often find themselves without a platform to speak on. As such, their struggle and the continuous threat of genocide, do not gain attention to a situation that must be heard.

In the UK and across the globe, Kurds inhabit and participate in the biosphere. A small area of the ecosystem in the Middle East, will certainly impact the ecosystem here and elsewhere in the world.

We cannot afford to ignore an entire continent because it is too much of a challenge.

One of the greatest environmental disasters happening in the Middle East right now is water shortage. While it plays a huge role in hostile relations and conflict in the Middle East, it hardly features in Western analyses of the region’s geo-political difficulties. Instead, the region’s conflicts are only considered through the lens of religion and energy resources.

Of course, these two subjects are of great interest to the West, primarily due to the links to global terrorism and to the West’s energy security.

However, the water shortage is a ticking time bomb; many studies have shown that ecocide can be a method of genocide. If for example, environmental destruction results in conditions of life that fundamentally threaten a social group's cultural and/or physical existence. Water shortages and the resulting conflicts could produce a wave of refugees. This will lead to human suffering on an unimaginable scale, potentially leading to regional war, state collapse, and destabilising regions further afield, such as Europe and South Asia. Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria, have all openly committed to campaigns of forced population transfers, where densely Kurdish populated areas are replaced with Arabs/ Turks and or Iranians. Significantly, in 1963 the Ba'ath Party in Iraq organised a campaign to build an 'Arab Belt' between Iraq and Syria.

The aim was twofold, one part was to destroy land which the party considered a strategic liability. The second part was to suppress the potential rebellion, by forcing the agriculturally dependent Kurdish communities out, through environmental change, which gradually degraded the environment causing it to become arid.

This involved redirecting water from the Euphrates River via strategically placed dams. Later, Turkey and Syria began to participate in similar campaigns of ecocide.

However, Iran's campaign does not rely on the Euphrates River, instead, it depends on an estimated 1 million deep and shallow wells; many of which are illegal with no regulations. The water then graduates downwards from the mountains, through vertical shafts and delivers it to the surface via gravity; the water is then distributed through a series of deliberately placed dams.

The impact of these dams in Iran has been significant and negative; they have produced extensive shrinkage in water bodies and reductions in downstream access to water. Only a few decades ago Iran had one of the greenest lands in the Middle East. Now, the largest natural lake in the Middle East and the third largest in the world, Lake Urmia, has shrunk by 70% in only 5 years.

Dr. Mansoor Sohrabi's most recent research showed that, the natural wetlands of Zarebar are being damaged by excessive use of Pesticides, which increases the volume of toxic algae blooms that cause eutrophication in the water. This in turn releases excessive amounts of carbon dioxide. This changes the P-h level of the water increasing its acidity, causing the marine life to perish and the lake to dry out.

As the environment degrades and the water crisis escalates, people have begun to Protest against the government. In the Khuzestan Region there have been daily protests, described as the 'Uprising of the Thirsty'. The protests started on 15 July in Khuzestan in response to the water crisis, but they quickly spread to other provinces and turned political.

Protesters in many cities are calling for the end of the current regime. It appears to have become a uniting factor for groups who normally sit on opposite sides.

In Khuzestan, Hamedan, Khorramshahr the majority of the water is redirected from Kurdish majority regions towards Basra, Iraq. The Iranian Regime hopes that providing Iraq with water, will help them make political advances in Iraq. Ali Farsani, an official at the governor's office of Khorramshahr, declared 105,000 litres of water is redirected daily.

The rest of the water harvested from those regions is allocated to Central Iran, through a priority permit system. Commercial users are given priority to water access, followed by

industry, then Urban areas such as Tehran. Final consideration is given to agriculture and rural residential areas, leaving little water for downstream irrigators and food producers in times of drought.

Throughout 2008 and 2009, Iran experienced severe drought, which led to the evacuation of 50 villages in Kerman province due to water shortages.

DR. Ismail Kahrom has highlighted that 80% of Kurdish civilians, including those in Sistan, Baluchistan, Khuzestan have been driven out of their villages. Soil erosion caused by explosives and chemicals used in mineral and energy excavation has eroded the soil and made the villages uninhabitable. Internal displacement will rise in the coming decades, as prolonged drought conditions, increased water shortages and climate change devastate the environment.

The displaced are numbered in the region of 22 million, without their livelihood, these agricultural workers find themselves without employment and many turn to Kolbari to survive.

This involves transporting incredibly heavy imports on their back, between the mountain ranges bordering Iran, Turkey, and Iraq; often weighing 80 kilos.

The Kurdish Human Rights Organisation has data which suggests that the IRGC killed 52 and 147 were injured in 2020.

Worsening the environmental disaster facing the Kurds, the Iranian government has begun a campaign to destroy the vast hectares of forests in the mountains.

Between May and June 2019, the forests in the Zagros mountains faced raging fires, but the government did not attempt to put them out and it was left to local Kurdish civilians, with

very limited resources to put them out. The volunteers have been seen putting out fires using fabric, leaf blowers, and pouring ash into tree trunks to prevent the spread.

The head of the Department of Environment in Iran's parliament, Issa Kalantari, claimed that only 990 hectares of forest in the Zagros region were affected by wildfires last month. Declaring "We should not exaggerate, as though the whole country were burning".

However, Nasa Satellite images showed that 9,500 hectares of forest had been burned.

On the 27th of August 2021, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards shelled the protected Shaho Mountains and prevented volunteers from attending to the fires, this caused the villages of Deyvaznav and Palangan in Kamyaran to burn for days.

A government official admitted this was an act committed to "prevent the Kurdish opposition parties from using vegetation cover to attack."

This year, In Marivan, there have been 258 forest fires with an estimated 2000 hectares of damage, the Zaribar wetlands burned for two weeks with only civilian volunteers trying to put them out. On the other hand, they sent a firefighting plane and two helicopters to aid Turkey's forest fires.

Information on the true extent of damage to the environment is rare, partly because the government alters the figures. However, it is also because over the last 10 years the government has been pursuing environmental activists and detaining them without any legal explanation, and often holds them in prisons for months at a time without trial. In the last few months, the number of environmental activists who have been detained has increased to - As of March 2021, 79 environmental activists have been detained.

Considering Ebrahim Raisi's record of Crimes Against Humanity, that number is set to rise under his presidency.

Appointing hardliner Ebrahim Raisi to the position of presidency has indicated that Iran is considering its options for the succession to supreme leader. Throughout his political career, Raisi has been linked to mass executions and other Crimes Against Humanity.

In his previous role as a member of the 'Death Committee' in 1988, he oversaw the disappearance and murders of between 5,000 to 30,000 thousand political dissidents. The Forced Disappearances acts as a punishment for the families who live with the torment of not knowing what has happened to their loved ones.

During the period which he was Head of the Judiciary and Chief of Justice in 2014-2020, he oversaw thousands of arbitrary detentions, including political dissidents, journalists, peaceful protesters, human rights defenders, and members of ethnic and religious minorities and has systematically conducted unfair trials.

According to multiple reports by the UN Human Rights Council, under his tenure there have been approximately 3,400 executions. These do not include the thousands who Forcibly Disappear, or those killed during demonstrations, such as the demonstrations in 2019 where 1,500 people were killed in one weekend.

The Iranian Government's reach extends abroad, the Abdorrahman Boroumand Centre for Human Rights (ABC), has identified more than 540 Iranians, of which 350 were Kurds, who have been assassinated or kidnaped by Iran. Most recently, Iran's third Diplomat Asadullah

Asadi, was sentenced by a Belgian Court to twenty years, for his part in a plot to detonate explosives at a rally against the Regime.

Although, this should be applauded as a step in the right direction, the reality is that Asadi is a drop in the ocean. A more realistic solution would be supporting the Kurdish opposition in a legal and political setting.

The sanctions on Iran are not sufficient in themselves, particularly given the contradictory and weak political backing. For example, in April this year Iran was elected to the UN Commission on the Status of Women's Rights.

As it stands without concrete political backing, the sanctions on their own have a significant proxy effect on the Kurds, who represent the most avid opposition and the only real democratic opposition to the many autocrats.

Yet the Kurds face limited political leverage, in contrast to the Iranian Regime, the Kurds have never been linked to acts of terror, and only use military aggression as a defence when the Kurdish population are faced with genocide.

The support is minimal and often weak, international communities label our parties as terrorists, in a bid to appease when they make negotiations with Dictators. This must be stopped, so real change can occur. One such party is the PKK, with progressive democratic views and a reliable opposition, which can truly challenge the autocracy. Although this makes them a viable ally, they must be removed from the list of Foreign Terrorists Organisations in order to truly participate in advancing political dialogue.

The Kurdish Struggle for self determination and democracy cannot continue with one arm behind its back, Kurdish parties must be allowed to present a united face, to define and

articulate itself. Especially if they are to continue being solution for democracy and a formidable force against the Iranian Regime.

Thank you.

“My Name is Mehri Rezai, I am a representative for the Kurdish National Congress which is the congress of all parties and groups and representatives in Kurdistan, my speech was based on the current ecological crisis in Eastern Kurdistan, the many Human Rights violations which Iran is imposing on the citizens and how this will plan out under Ibrahim Raisi’s regime. These events are extremely helpful to all organisation, as it gives them a space to network and debate and discuss the current affairs. For Kurdish people who often do not have a platform to speak, events such as these are extremely important. The Labour Party in the UK have managed to bring together a multitude of diverse charities and organisations. This reflects the Labour Parties understanding of society and current affairs, it also demonstrates their ability to recognise the role a government should have in connecting with representatives of external charities and groups to better represent them. There should be more events like this, it is important for charities and groups to regularly and actively have space where they can be heard and network amongst each other.”

### **About the author**

Mehri Rezai is a representative of the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK).

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**DR. Ismail Kahrom**

**Payam Solhtalab** *Khuzestan Water Crisis*

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**Abdorrahman Boroumand Centre for Human Rights (ABC)**

**Kurdish Human Rights Organisation**

## **Sonia Karimi**

Good morning, I would like to start by thanking you for inviting me here today, it gives me great joy to see Women actively participating in politics and working in government.

I am a representative of KJAR, which is the East Kurdistan Women's association at KJAR we believe that a truly free and democratic society is impossible without the emancipation of women. Women must have, the autonomy and equal opportunities to participate and be represented in society, politics, and the law. Eastern Kurdistan is ruled and oppressed by Islamic Republic of Iran and crucially, we do not believe that we should wait for Iran's dictatorship to fall, in order to protect women and secure their rights. Consequently, networking with women's rights organisations in the Middle East and the wider international community, forms a significant part of our work. There are also various campaigns to raise awareness and encourage change, on a national and international scale. Current campaigns focus on social issues such as child brides, forced marriages and domestic abuse. At the same time, we campaign in political areas such as activists who have been detained by the government and have had their human rights violated.

Exploring the archaic laws imposed on females in The Islamic Republic of Iran's society, highlights the deep injustices and extreme acts of cruelty women face. According to Section 1014 of the Iranian Civil Code, which is based on sharia Law. The Legal age at which a female can marry under the Islamic Regime is 13. She can also be younger provided

parental consent is obtained and a Judge authorises it. In addition, Government Supported banks are offering financial incentives to marry, in a nation suffering extreme economic hardship, these marriage loans can be linked to the large spike in marriages with the loans often covering \$23,000. The Centre for Human Rights in Iran, recently published data which shows the impact of these loans. In 2018 prior to the mass roll out of these loans, the number of girls between the ages of 13 and 15 who received marriage loans was 51. Yet, a year later in 2019, parallel with the increase in these loans, with the increased availability of these loans, the number of loan recipients rose to 3,432 girls under the age of 15. The year 2020, concluded with 19,500 10–14-year-olds applying for these loans.

The civil law also dictates that non-Islamic marriages cannot be recognised, which is discriminatory predominantly against the Kurdish population who follow a diverse variety of religions and beliefs. Strict social codes, in the name of tradition and religion, are used to deny women and to a greater extent, Kurdish women their rights. Women who report rape face being locked up and accused of having committed crimes of Zena, the equivalent of soliciting sexual services and/ or committing adultery. In the rare cases in which alleged perpetrators of rape are prosecuted, they are often acquitted or given disproportionately lenient sentences that fail to reflect the gravity of the crime. This is in contrast, to how women are subjected to the law, in June 2006, Shamamah Ghorbani was accused of adultery and sentenced to death by stoning later reduced to 100 lashes. Hengaw Organisation reports that between March 2020 and March 2021, 29 women have been killed in instances of honour-based murder or family disputes.

In response to these acts of violence and discrimination against women, KJAR launched its “Child Marriage is Femicide” campaign. This campaign will focus on networking

with various women's rights organisations, raise awareness internationally. We will also endeavour to increase the pressure on the Iranian Regime to change, through a cohesive and practical strategy.

Although Kurdish political activists and women's rights activists, face many challenges and barriers in their work. the Eastern Kurdish population is frequently subject to institutionalised racism within the regime, in 1979 the ayatollah Khomeini declared Jihad and issued a Fatwa religious edict against the Kurds. Reflecting this, the Regime's Constitution states that the official language and script of the Regime is Persian, and that official documents and textbooks must be in this language, although it does not explicitly ban Kurdish. Yet, a number of teachers have been detained or faced the death penalty for promoting Kurdish Language and Culture. Most recently Zara Mohammadi was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment as the Regime, perceived her classes to be a 'National Security Offence'. Compounding this, over the years many thousands of Kurdish Activists have been detained, tortured, forcibly disappeared, and sentenced to death. Analysing the data from Hengaw Organisation, this year, approximately 414 Kurdish political activists have been detained of those at least 43 are female activists, facing an uncertain and terrifying future.

In spring 2008, Shirin Alam Hooli was detained and taken to the head quarters of the IRGC, there she was subject to physical and psychological torture for 25 days, while the guards shouted commands and demanded answers all in Farsi. Shirin could not understand nor speak Farsi.

She spent 21 months in the notorious Evin prison, in one letter home she describes the confusion she felt as she was interrogated, tried, and convicted without once understanding the proceedings. In another letter she explained how one interrogator kicked her so hard in

the stomach, she immediately threw up blood. Shirin Alam Hooli, was sentenced to death and executed on May the 9<sup>th</sup> 2010, without her family or lawyers being informed. Her body was not returned to her family, and the UN recognised it as a case of enforced disappearance.

In another case human rights activist, Zaynab Jalalian highlights the inhuman conditions and various Human Rights Violations committed by the Regime. Ms Jalalian was arrested in February 2008 and subjected to three months of intense psychological torture and severe beatings. In December she was sentenced to death for “Taking up arms against the Islamic Republic of Iran”, in 2010 this was reduced to life imprisonment after a series of appeals and campaigns. She has since been denied vital medicine and medical care and is gradually losing her eyesight, the poor hygiene in the prisons has led to her contracting Corona Virus alongside various gastrointestinal diseases. Furthermore, her lawyer, Amir Salar Davoodi, has also been detained and sentenced to 111 lashes and 30 years in prison.

With thousands of cases like this, it is understandable that despite having an engaged, well informed and educated number of women who fervently want to participate and be heard, these women are weary and rightly so. The environment that we are campaigning in, is increasingly precarious, our activists are neither safe in Iran nor are they safe abroad, we face a hostile and increasingly powerful dictatorship with many likeminded allies in the region. Meanwhile, internationally we find that inter-governmental organisations and politicians, fall short of their promise to uphold human rights and promote international security and often the language and discourse is contradicted by their actions.

The issue of the Taliban and their invasion of Kabul has rightly, led to many nations refusing to recognise Taliban rule...so far. On the other hand, the international position on Iran is contradictory to that stance against Nations who pose a threat to international security and have committed war crimes. Iran poses a volatile security threat to the International Community, which has been recognised in the form of a range of Embargos and Sanction: relating to their Uranium Enrichment Programme. Yet, the United Nations made the remarkable decision, during a plenary meeting in April, to elect Iran to the Commission for The Status of Women. In this role, Iran has a legitimised seat in an institution that is supposed to promote gender equality and empowerment of women. It is an egregious affront, to all women and particularly, to all those who have sacrificed their lives and the security of their families lives, fighting for their rights in Iran.

On a far greater scale, during the early days of the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in Rojava. Having proven themselves to be reliable allies to the west and sacrificed over 20,000 of their own military in the fight to defeat ISIS. After this they immediately created a small but significant space in the Middle East, where women and men shared roles in a social, political, and legal setting. However, a small group of American personnel remained, their presence alone deterred the Turkish invasion. Small Contingent of Americans abandoned the post and crucially, all the women who had built Afrin, a small village bordering with Turkey.

This gave Turkey the confidence to invade labelling the Women's military unit a terrorist organisation and proceeding to brutally kill hundreds of women in the military, desecrating and mutilating their bodies in the process. A short while later the military and political support then pulled out of another village, Sari Kani. Again, Turkey felt emboldened and invaded, this time they took a female civilian hostage, Cicek Kobani, they then proceeded to

capture, brutalise, and kill the Female Secretary General for the administration Hevrin Khalaf.

These events are significant for women of East Kurdistan and Iran, on the one hand, the United Nations calls for women to fight for their rights. It encourages women to believe that: should they take the enormous risk and expose themselves as committing sedition against a dictatorship, the international community is there to support them. On the other hand, it shows how quickly they are willing to abandon women and undermine their efforts, by offering Iran an influential seat at the Commission For the Status of Women.

“My name is Sonia Karimi, and I am a representative for KJAR (Community of Free Women in Rojhelat) we represent all the women in Eastern Kurdistan and work towards improving their Human Rights, on Sunday I gave a speech at The Labour Party’s annual Brighton Conference. For KJAR, it is one of a few extremely helpful events which we attend. Of course, the speech is important as we can highlight what our current campaigns are, and the current issues and affairs in Eastern Kurdistan. However, networking with other charities, groups and organisations at these events is equally important. For women’s organisations and particularly for KJAR, it is crucial to always remain active and maintain networking. It means that people will continuously remember who we are and what we represent, we will remain at the forefront of discussion for as long as we maintain a “seen and heard” presence. Therefore, it is extremely important for more events like these, and more parties should aim to emulate the diversity seen at the Labour Conference.”

### **About the author**

Sonia Karimi is a representative of the Community of the Free Women of Eastern Kurdistan (KJAR).

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