

## OPINION

# In the reflective gaze of foreign eyes, our pain unfolds

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### Abstract

The narrative recounts a harrowing encounter with a Revolutionary Guardsman, highlighting the vulnerability of Kurdish children to armed aggression and state oppression. Additionally, Soleimani reflects on the paradoxical role of state forces, tasked with ensuring safety but act in defiance of Kurdish existence. The narrative captures a sense of communal despair and helplessness, underscoring the broader struggle of oppressed communities. Through Soleimani's account, the study sheds light on the enduring impact of trauma and the resilience required to navigate perpetual states of emergency in conflict-ridden regions like Kurdistan.

**Keywords:** Islamic Republic of Iran, Kurd, Kurdistan, War

Often, in the midst of an experience, its true peril eludes us, concealed in the heat of the moment. Yet, upon contemplation or when another articulates the gravity of the danger, a profound, icy fear pervades one's being.

When I tell outsiders about my life as a Kurd, I often see them succumb to an overwhelming fear — a palpable unease that echoes in their gaze. It is as if a shimmering trepidation appears in their eyes, quietly asking: "How can you stand to breathe in the midst of such adversities?"

One day, in a friendly gathering, we found ourselves exchanging tales of our Kurdish lives. On that occasion, I witnessed once more the familiar reaction of astonishment. My narrative unfolded against the backdrop of a childhood lived amidst the tumult of the Iran-Iraq war.

During these turbulent times, our family had sought refuge in a village near our town in East Kurdistan. But even in this seemingly safe place, the relentless threat of Iraqi bombing cast a shadow over our existence and made our lives seemingly unbearable. I remembered clearly how our house in Piranshahr fell victim to the merciless strike of a warplane, leaving only the remains of ash and dust. In that shared moment, our Kurdish family, closely intertwined with the historical fabric of the nation's perpetual state of exception, grappled with the profound effects of trauma.

At the time, like so many others, we did not fully comprehend the meaning of the term "trauma" Yet, as I reflect upon it now, I realize the truth: —our collective experience, rooted in constant

fear for survival, had left an indelible mark of trauma on every member of our resilient family. In one such instance, in the village near the city where our fear-ridden lives had become unbearable, my father sent me to my uncle's house in a village far from the city. I hit the road to ask my uncle to bring his tractor and move our house to their village. I walked alone towards the main road between Sardasht and Peranshahr. When I reached the main road, I tractor stopped and and got on it for a few kilometers. There were very few cars. Because anything that moved could be hit by warplanes.

After a few kilometers, I got off the tractor. I left the main road and turned off in the direction of my uncle's village. It was the end of spring. Although I was tall as a child, much of my height was lost in the tall grass in many places. I was about a hundred meters down the path when a loud bang came; about a meter in front of me mud fell and sand stuck out in my face. When I turned around, a Revolutionary Guardsman with an ugly beard was standing in a distance, looking at me. He was the one who had just shot at me. Obviously with no intention of killing me. But for what purpose? ... I was a lonely and helpless child. Our family had recently fled the city because of an Iraqi bombardment... Our family was waiting for help and for me to return... I was alone on my way to my uncle's house to get help... I was confused and disoriented and did not know what to do. The Revolutionary Guards were deployed against the will of my people and supposedly to secure the roads in my homeland. But as a Kurdish child, I had nothing and no one to fear except this violence of the Iranian state. I was not even afraid of the snakes in my homeland. There was no threat to me or other Kurds on that road except the state forces who were there against our will to secure our land.

When I regained my senses shortly after the harrowing incident, my voice trembled with fear and the tears flowed. "Brother, why are you doing this?" I said to the assailant, the arch-enemy of the Kurdish children. In response, he, the enemy, remained largely silent and gave no answer. I lingered there, caught in a tense limbo, neither urged to leave nor forbidden. His gaze, tinged with hostility, bored into me, causing my body to shudder and contract under his malevolent gaze. The oppressive silence persisted, and I didn't dare say another word because I was afraid. I didn't have the words and I didn't know what words might suffice.

Time seemed to stretch into infinity. A helpless victim, a child at the mercy of an armed enemy in the desolate wilderness. A child lost in a state of exception, unsure of the existential and fateful consequences of every step. I stood there, burdened with the weight of deciding my next move, under the menacing gaze of an armed foreign hand in the barren farmland. Finally, I gathered all the courage I could muster and decided to move forward. But the road ahead was full of uncertainties. I took a cautious step, not knowing how he would react. The enemy remained silent and gave no indication of his intentions. Afraid of provoking a deadly reaction if I turned my back on him, I decided to walk sideways and maintain eye contact. It was a delicate dance, watching the road with one eye and facing him with the other until I was far enough away and confident he would not pull the trigger.

I walked a little further until I came across an elderly couple who were busily tending their land and came from my uncle's village. As I approached them, I took a deep breath and told them the disturbing story. They then offered me water and tried to comfort me. Their gestures conveyed a sincere but helpless compassion. What else could they have done? The gravity of the situation weighed so heavily on them. Reporting such incident couldn't be even imagined by the Kurds. We didn't know where the shooter, a member of the Revolutionary Guard, had come from or what he was up to. All we knew he was not a Kurd and he was part of the state

force. It was not their place to report such an incident and, like me, they were aware of the possible consequences of daring to question authorities.

Even as Kurdish children, we were acutely aware that any investigation into the incident could have unpleasant consequences. The couple expressed their gratitude to a higher power, saying, "God saved your soul, otherwise you would have gone like a torrential water," a poignant Kurdish expression conveying helplessness and despair. Just as a flood sweeps away a loved one, leaving only the agony of disappearance, I, too, sensed the profound helplessness searing through my young mind and body.

As a Kurdish child, I was no stranger to communal despair. In the same year, a child my age had met a tragic end in a neighboring village. He, the only child in his family, had recently entered the town's middle school. The family was proud of his achievements. I held back from telling my family my own story. I knew the pain it would inflict on my father, who had sent me alone on this fateful journey to seek my uncle's assistance. The prospect of witnessing the agony that would follow prevented me from recounting the painful episode.

In my frequent revisiting of the story, the most poignant aspect that never fails to evoke revulsion is the indoctrination by the Iranian state, compelling us to refer to our attackers as "brothers." These so-called "brothers" were tasked with ensuring the safety of our roads and lands, yet paradoxically they acted against us and in defiance of our very existence.

After recounting my harrowing experience, my friends were left astounded, their expressions illuminated by a mixture of shock and disbelief. One of them repeated the prophetic words of Walter Benjamin: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception, but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight"

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