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ARTICLE

War, Statelessness and Kurdish precarious lives

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Abstract

This article addresses different political currents in Iran in a moment of war. While its critique is directed primarily at segments of the so-called progressive left, it also extends, to some degree, to anti-imperialist positions and supporters of axis of resistance that identify the United States and Israel as the only imperial powers and overlook other forms of regional domination.
Drawing on the positionality of Kurds as a stateless nation, and informed by the work of Judith Butler, this paper argues that a simple "no to war" stance is insufficient to capture the lived realities of populations that have experienced decades of continuous violence without comparable recognition or protection. Rather than prescribing a singular political position for Kurds, the paper seeks to illuminate the complexity of living under prolonged and normalized forms of violence. It asks: what does war mean for Kurds when it is not an exceptional event but an enduring condition? And what does it mean to be Kurdish in a moment when war is newly recognized by some, but has long been an everyday reality for others?
By foregrounding questions of precariousness, recognition, and affect, this article seeks to show how moral responses to war are unevenly produced, how certain lives are rendered visible and grievable while others are not, and why Kurdish experiences remain marginal within dominant anti-war narratives.

Keywords: War, Grievability, Recognizability, Framing, Statelessness, Precarious lives.

Introduction

Since the consolidation of the Iranian nation-state in 1925 under a Persian-dominated conception of national identity, Kurdish political demands have been framed as threats to territorial integrity and state sovereignty. Within this framework, Rojhelat (eastern Kurdistan) has been subjected to sustained militarization and securitization. This condition is structural rather than episodic, manifested in ongoing armed confrontations with Kurdish opposition and dissent, regardless of form, the dense concentration of military infrastructure, the systematic suppression

of Kurdish political expression, the targeted assassination of political figures, and recurrent cross-border bombardments of Kurdish party bases. These practices reflect an enduring reliance on coercive state power to regulate Kurdish regions and delimit the boundaries of legitimate political participation (Hassaniyan 2024).

Yet securitization in Rojhelat should not be reduced to direct military intervention and surveillance alone; it permeates everyday life through vast and interlocking networks of surveillance, punishment, and reward exercised across multiple state apparatuses, including but not limited to the military. High rates of executions (particularly of political prisoners) widespread imprisonment of Kurdish activists, lengthy sentences, and the emergence of kolbari as a survival economy point to deeply embedded structural violence, in which the economy itself functions as a mechanism of punishment and reward and as an instrument of intensified securitization (Kurdistan Human Rights Network 2021; Soleimani and Mohammadpour 2020). This dynamic is compounded by chronic underdevelopment driven by ecological degradation, persistent unemployment, extensive militarization, and economic marginalization. Together, these conditions constitute a normalized regime of violence embedded in the everyday lives of Kurdish communities (Soleimani and Mohammadpour 2020).

Within this broader regime of securitization, war and occupation have been virtually continuous features of Kurdistan's modern/colonial history. The persistence of such conditions has compelled Kurdish opposition groups to adopt armed struggle, not as a matter of choice, but as a form of self-defense and a means of pursuing liberation (Hassaniyan 2024). Thus, concerns over Iran's territorial integrity have gone beyond denying Kurdish sovereignty; they have produced a sustained state of emergency in Rojhelat, where populations are exposed to multiple, overlapping forms of violence. This has entrenched poverty, deepened marginalization, and widened the gap between the periphery (Kurdistan) and the center (the ruling establishment and its discourse of a unified Iranian nation), geopolitically, socioeconomically, and discursively.

Statelessness, violence and precarious lives

Within such historically sedimented condition of violence, vulnerability must be analytically reconsidered. Drawing on Judith Butler's concepts of precarious life, grievability, and recognizability, life can be understood at an ontological level as inherently precarious—always exposed to loss, injury, and destruction (Butler 2004). Yet Butler distinguishes this shared condition of precariousness from precarity, a politically produced condition in which specific populations are systematically exposed to heightened vulnerability through the erosion or absence

of social and economic protections. Such populations face disproportionate risks of poverty, displacement, illness, and violence, often without meaningful institutional support (Butler 2004). In its most extreme form, precarity describes situations in which populations are subjected to normalized or arbitrary state violence while remaining dependent on the very structures that fail to secure their protection (Butler 2004).

At an epistemological level, Judith Butler develops the concept of framing to explain how lives become intelligible and recognizable. A frame is a discursive, visual, or narrative structure of power that determines which lives are recognized as "human" and which are rendered invisible, excluded, or deemed ungrievable (Butler, 2009). In this sense, all perceptions of life and death are mediated through such frames. Even when events occur outside or at the margins of dominant frames, they are still interpreted through them, although in ways that may expose the limits and instability of these framing mechanisms (Butler, 2009).

The Kurdish case exemplifies this differential production of precarity at the level of recognition. Decades of sustained violence against Kurds have been largely marginalized within dominant narratives of suffering, rendering Kurdish lives less visible and less politically legible (Hassaniyan 2024; Kurdistan Human Rights Network 2021). In Butlerian terms, this produces a condition in which Kurdish lives are frequently rendered ungrievable, insofar as they do not consistently register within the dominant frames that determine whose suffering counts (Butler 2009). Consequently, Kurdish experiences remain partially excluded from the interpretive frameworks through which violence is apprehended and politicized, limiting their recognition within global discourse.

This differential regime of recognizability becomes further intensified under conditions of statelessness. Drawing on Judith Butler (2004) and Hannah Arendt (1951), statelessness can be understood as a condition that amplifies precarity by placing populations outside the institutional and juridical structures through which life is rendered recognizable and protected. It produces forms of violence that often do not register as war, while positioning stateless subjects beyond the limits of dominant political intelligibility. In this sense, statelessness does not simply denote the absence of citizenship; it constitutes a condition in which subjects are systematically rendered unintelligible within prevailing regimes of recognition, where their existence is not fully apprehended as politically meaningful life.

Judith Butler argues that "precarity also characterizes that politically induced condition of maximized precariousness for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence who often have no other option than to appeal to the very state from which they need protection" (Butler 2004).

Building on this, I argue that statelessness intensifies precarity precisely because stateless populations are structurally denied access to the political authority from which protection could be sought. As a result, they are exposed to forms of violence without institutional recourse, producing a situation in which vulnerability is both generated and left unprotected by state structures.

Building on this, I ask: what counts as war, and under what conditions is violence recognized as war? I argue that statelessness places subjects outside dominant norms of recognizability, such that even when violence is clearly apprehended, it is not necessarily recognized as war. Statelessness thus operates as an ontological and political barrier that complicates, and in some cases forecloses, the recognition of certain beings as fully legible lives within dominant frameworks. As a result, even severe and sustained violence (such as that experienced by Kurds) may not be framed as war, but rather as "internal conflict," "security issues," or the "Kurdish problem" . Because stateless populations fall outside the framing mechanisms of the nation-state, the violence they experience often fails to meet the normative criteria through which "war" is recognized and named, remaining instead partially visible or misnamed within dominant discourse.

Kurdish Representation in media

Media representations of Kurdish life, whether in Western or Middle Eastern contexts, either subsume the Kurdish nation within broader state and geopolitical narratives or render it effectively invisible, such that it appears only under strategically defined conditions. Visibility is thus not given but produced within regimes of framing that organize both appearance and intelligibility. As Judith Butler suggests, frames do not merely present subjects; they delimit in advance the terms under which they can appear, shaping not only what becomes visible but how it is rendered intelligible and judged (Butler 2009). In this sense, representation is never neutral: it is a site where recognition is conditioned, constrained, and often foreclosed.

In the first weeks of the war, Kurdish representation in Western media was frequently instrumentalized within these framing regimes. Kurds appeared in ways that aligned with dominant political narratives (particularly those centered on state security and regional alliances) rather than within their historical and political context. Their visibility was thus episodic and selective, confined to moments of strategic relevance rather than sustained engagement with the conditions of ongoing violence and precarity. What emerged was not simply

misrepresentation, but a patterned form of mediated visibility in which Kurdish life was detached from its temporal and political depth (Hall 1997; Butler 2009).

A salient instance of this selective visibility was the announcement of a Kurdish party coalition, which attracted disproportionate media attention. This coverage was accompanied by widespread misinformation, including claims that the United States was arming Kurdish groups despite their long history of independent armed struggle. Such representations intensified geopolitical pressures, contributing to an escalation of bombardments against Kurdish opposition parties in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, resulting in civilian and Peshmerga casualties.

Simultaneously, Kurds were portrayed as natural allies of the United States and Israel, reduced to actors lacking political agency and positioned as extensions of external agendas (Hall 1997). This narrative was subsequently mobilized within Iranian political discourse, where both right- and left-wing opposition groups framed Kurds as separatists or foreign proxies. As a result, Kurdish political actors were subjected to an additional layer of pressure: to demonstrate loyalty to Iran's territorial integrity while disavowing alleged alignment with imperial powers—effectively imposing a coercive burden of political justification.

Across these layers, Kurdish political subjectivity was systematically denied. First, media narratives distorted their role; second, military escalation intensified on the ground; and third, opposition discourse imposed moral and political pressure. However, these overlapping frames fail to account for the historical and structural violence that defines Kurdish lives, rendering their precarity visible only when it becomes politically useful.

The frame of "no to war"

Although opposition to war is a principled position, and some segments of the Iranian left have historically opposed wars in different contexts (including Iran's interventions in Iraq, Syria, and Kurdistan) this section is primarily concerned with the recent emergence of a "no to war" campaign in a critical moment, as well as the significant unity among parts of the Iranian left in condemning the war. It also examines the politics of selective responses to violence in the region.

Prior to this war, the Iranian left was divided between two broad tendencies in relation to imperialism. One aligned with what is often referred to as the "Axis of Resistance," which frames US and Israeli influence as the primary form of imperialism and tends to view the Islamic Republic within an anti-imperialist framework. The other, often described as a

"progressive" left, argues that Iran itself also functions as a regional imperial power. While the question of how imperialism is defined lies beyond the scope of this paper, what is important here is how the outbreak of the current war has temporarily brought these two tendencies into alignment. This convergence has produced a shared "no to war" stance across these groups, despite their prior political differences, particularly in relation to Iran's regional role and proxy networks. This section focuses on the implications of this unified anti-war position, particularly its selective engagement with different forms of violence in the region and its limited attention to Kurdish experiences of ongoing violence. It also examines the moral obligations imposed on Kurds to align with this anti-war stance.

This paper argues that the recent "no to war" campaign operates as a frame that defines certain forms of violence as war while excluding others. First, it recognizes violence primarily when it occurs within the context of nation-states. Second, shaped by an anti-imperialist orientation that largely identifies the United States and Israel as the principal imperial actors, it tends to interpret violence through the lens of foreign intervention against Iran. As a result, other forms of long-standing and systemic violence —such as the militarization and securitization of Rojhelat, the occupation of Kurdistan, and repeated bombardments in Bashur (southern Kurdistan known as Kurdistan Regional government in Iraq)— are not recognized within this framework of "war."

Talal Asad argues that violence is not experienced or judged uniformly; rather, its moral intelligibility depends on whether it is framed as legitimate or illegitimate within dominant political and ethical orders (Asad, 2007). This distinction is crucial for understanding how certain forms of killing become normalized or morally acceptable, while others are rendered intolerable and demand urgent ethical response.

Similarly, Iran's regional military interventions and proxy wars in Iraq and Syria have not generated comparable "no to war" mobilization or unified responses across different segments of the Iranian left. This selectivity reveals that the campaign is not purely ethical or humanitarian, but deeply political in its framing of violence. It prioritizes certain forms of suffering while rendering others invisible, thereby determining whose lives and deaths are politically legible.

By focusing on specific conflicts while ignoring decades of normalized militarization and structural violence in Rojhelat and the wider region, the campaign risks reproducing the very hierarchies of recognition it claims to oppose. In doing so, it raises fundamental questions about how anti-war discourse distributes visibility, value, and moral concern across different populations.

For Kurds, the question is not simply whether to oppose war, but how to articulate a political position that accounts for decades of continuous violence. While opposition to war is principled, it becomes insufficient when it fails to address the ongoing structural violence that limits the political agency and subjectivity of stateless populations in Iran. For Kurds, who have long experienced sustained violence without equivalent protection or visibility, a simple "no to war" stance cannot fully capture their lived reality. To truly oppose war, it is also necessary to oppose the structures that render some lives less visible, less grievable, and less politically recognized (Butler, 2009).

In this context, a significant degree of political and media pressure has contributed to the intensification of attacks on Kurdish party camps. However, rather than addressing the weaponization of media narratives against Kurds, the "no to war" campaign has been largely preoccupied with concerns about potential Kurdish alignment with the United States and Isreal as an imperial actors. This selective focus reveals the limits of the campaign's ethical horizon.

The central issue, therefore, is not only the physical violence directed at Kurds - from missile strikes and regional bombardments to political pressure from multiple state and non-state actors- but also the representational violence that reduces Kurds to figures of militancy or foreign proxy collaboration. Within this framework, Kurdish lives are not primarily recognized as lives exposed to precarity; instead, they are often only rendered visible through suspicions of political alignment. The concern becomes not the structural conditions of Kurdish vulnerability, but the imagined possibility of Kurdish collaboration with external powers.

Judith Butler discusses how, in the aftermath of 9/11 in the United States, public grieving was directed primarily toward U.S. citizens, producing iconic images of national loss, while the deaths of non-citizens (and especially undocumented migrants) were largely excluded from public mourning. For Butler, this differential distribution of grief is a politically significant process, as it determines which lives are recognized as worthy of mourning and which are not. Following this logic, public affect and grieving are not neutral emotional responses but are regulated by power. In contexts such as the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, grief and outrage were carefully managed and often redirected in ways that supported the war effort and reinforced nationalist belonging. Open mourning for those killed by U.S. military action is therefore limited, regulated, or made politically illegible through dominant interpretive frameworks (Butler, 2009).

This demonstrates that the distribution of public grief is closely tied to recognition: only those whose lives are already considered valuable are fully grievable. In the context of the

current war, the emergence of "no to war" campaigns and pro-war responses reveals how moral responses - that first take as affect- are shaped in advance by interpretive frameworks that determine what counts as legitimate violence, whose suffering matters, and which forms of grief are publicly permissible.

Talal Asad further argues that when violence is perceived as legitimate (for instance, in the context of war conducted by recognized state actors) death is often experienced as lamentable or unfortunate, but not as radically unjust. However, when violence is attributed to actors deemed illegitimate, such as insurgent groups, affective responses shift significantly and the same act of killing becomes morally intolerable (Asad, 2007). This distinction helps explain why Iran's military interventions in Syria and Iraq, as well as ongoing violence against Kurds in both Eastern and Southern Kurdistan, have not generated sustained "no to war" mobilization within Iran. These forms of violence are often framed as legitimate, either as anti-imperialist action or as necessary for protecting territorial integrity from threats such as ISIS (Asad, 2007).

In contrast, the reported coalition of Kurdish parties and the unverified possibility of cooperation with the United States and Israel produced a strong affective reaction among segments of Iranian society, including both pro- and anti-war groups. This perception generated fears of an imminent threat to Iran's territorial integrity and led to a broad political convergence against Kurdish actors. In this framing, Kurdish political coordination was interpreted as illegitimate violence, producing a moral and emotional response oriented toward containment or elimination. This illustrates what can be understood as the politics of moral responsiveness: what we feel is shaped by how we interpret events, and in turn, interpretive frameworks actively structure and transform affect itself. Moral and emotional responses are therefore not pre-political, but conditioned by dominant frameworks that define legitimacy, threat, and violence.

Butler argues that moral responses are grounded in affect, but affect is never purely spontaneous. What we feel is already shaped by the interpretive frameworks through which violence becomes intelligible to us (Butler, 2009). Within this framework, Kurdish actors are pre-judged through affective and political assumptions of potential alignment with so-called imperial powers, even when such claims remain unverified. This produces a moral economy in which Kurdish political agency is not evaluated on its own terms, but filtered through suspicion, fear, and threat. As a result, Kurds are not primarily approached as populations exposed to sustained violence and precarity, but as potential threats whose actions must be morally scrutinized in advance. This demonstrates Butler's point that affective moral responses are not simply reactions to violence, but are structured in advance by regimes of recognition that determine

what counts as legitimate violence and whose lives are considered worthy of ethical concern (Butler, 2009).

The distance that some Kurdish actors maintained from the recent "no to war" campaign can be understood in relation to a longer history in which Kurdish lives have not been consistently recognized as worthy of protection or mourning. Rather than indicating passivity or opportunism - as it was often interpreted by segments of the left- this distance reflects a political position shaped by sustained exclusion from dominant regimes of recognition, as well as a refusal to align either with the "Axis of Resistance" or with selective moral frameworks that marginalize Kurdish experiences of violence and precarity. In this context, moments of outrage and disidentification emerge not despite this exclusion, but through it, as responses to conditions in which Kurdish life has been only partially acknowledged within prevailing political frames (Butler 2009).

This dynamic also informs arguments advanced by some pro–"no to war," anti–Islamic Republic groups, who contend that the conflict has strengthened the Islamic Republic by producing internal consolidation and enhancing its external legitimacy, while positioning the Iranian population as the primary victim of war. While it is true that wars between imperial powers do not benefit ordinary people, and that this conflict may have, to some extent, contributed to the consolidation of the Islamic Republic, these claims require closer examination. What strengthens the perceived legitimacy of the Islamic Republic is not simply the absence of a "no to war" position, but the shallow understanding of imperialism within segments of the global left, the ideological commitments of "Axis of Resistance" discourse, and a broader pattern of selective responsiveness to violence. These frameworks repeatedly center the Iranian nation-state as the primary site of injury while marginalizing the long-standing violence experienced by stateless populations such as Kurds.

Conclusion

For Kurds, then, the question is not only whether to oppose war, but how to name the wars that have already structured Kurdish life. A "no to war" position becomes politically limited when it recognizes war only at the moment the Iranian state itself is threatened, while overlooking the continuous militarization, bombardment, securitization, and dispossession that have shaped Kurdish existence for decades. To oppose war meaningfully requires more than rejecting foreign intervention; it requires confronting the frames that decide whose suffering is visible, whose death is grievable, and whose violence is allowed to remain unnamed.

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