

Rojhelat at the Crossroads: Politics, Development, and Stability in Iran's Kurdish Regions

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Abstract

This study examines the political, economic, geographic, and cultural dynamics of the Kurdish regions of Iran, commonly referred to in Kurdish discourse as Rojhelat (Eastern Kurdistan). Located along Iran's western frontier and dominated by the Zagros Mountain System, the region occupies a strategically significant position bordering Iraq, Turkey, and Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan region. The study explores how geography, historical developments, demographic diversity, and state policies have shaped the contemporary conditions of Kurdish communities in Iran. It analyzes key dimensions including political mobilization, economic development, natural resources, education, cultural life, and regional geopolitics. While Rojhelat possesses significant environmental resources, strategic trade corridors, and growing educational institutions, it continues to face structural challenges such as uneven development and tensions surrounding cultural and political representation. The article examines the historical roots of Kurdish political movements, from tribal autonomy and early nationalist movements to contemporary political coalitions, and situates them within Iran's broader national framework. By integrating geographical, historical, and socio-political perspectives, the study highlights the region's dual role as both a peripheral frontier and a critical geopolitical corridor. In conclusion, the future stability and prosperity of Rojhelat will depend on balanced approaches to regional development, political inclusion, and cultural recognition within Iran's multiethnic society.

Keywords: Rojhelat, Eastern Kurdistan, Iran

1. Introduction

The Kurdish regions of Iran—often referred to by Kurdish political discourse as *Rojhelat* or Eastern Kurdistan—constitute one of the four major Kurdish-populated regions of the Middle East, alongside those in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria (McDowall, 2004; Entessar, 2010). These regions span several western Iranian provinces including Kurdistan, Kermanshah, and Ilam, as well as parts of West Azerbaijan, Hamadan, North Khorasan, and Lorestan (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Location of Kurdish-inhabited regions in western Iran. The area commonly referred to as *Rojhelat* includes the provinces of Kurdistan, Kermanshah, Ilam, and Kurdish-populated areas of West Azerbaijan, Hamadan, North Khorasan and Lorestan. These regions lie along Iran’s western frontier bordering Iraq, Turkey and Azerbaijan’s Nakhchivan region are dominated by the Zagros Mountain System.

Kurds constitute approximately 10–17% of Iran’s population, making them the country’s third-largest ethnic group after Persians and Azeris (Minority Rights Group International, 2023). *Rojhelat* occupies an important place in Iran’s political geography due to its strategic location along the borders with Iraq, Turkey, and Azerbaijan’s Nakhchivan region, as well as its position within the Zagros mountain corridor, which has historically shaped patterns of settlement, security, and political interaction. The region has long served as a center of Kurdish political mobilization and contains considerable cultural and linguistic diversity (Romano, 2006). However, despite these

geographical and social advantages, it has faced persistent political tensions and developmental disparities that Kurdish activists and scholars often attribute to centralized governance structures and restrictions on cultural autonomy.

This article explores Rojhelat’s contemporary condition across geography, politics, economics, culture, education, and development, highlighting the tensions between regional identity and national integration.

2. Geographic Foundations of Rojhelat

2.1 The Zagros Landscape

The physical geography of Rojhelat is dominated by the Zagros Mountains (Figure 2), which cover approximately 90% of the region’s terrain (Gunter, 2011).



Figure 2. The Zagros Mountains extend approximately 1,500 km from northwestern Iran to the Persian Gulf. The mountain system forms the geographic backbone of Kurdish regions in Iran and has historically influenced settlement patterns, agriculture, and political autonomy.

This mountainous environment shapes several aspects of regional life, including settlement distribution, transportation infrastructure, agricultural production, and security and political dynamics. Because of the rugged terrain, villages are often scattered and transportation networks are more difficult and costly to develop, which also limits large-scale farming and encourages smaller, localized agricultural practices. Historically, these mountains allowed Kurdish communities to preserve semi-autonomous tribal structures and cultural independence, while the

difficult landscape made it challenging for central governments to fully control or penetrate remote areas.

2.2 Environmental Resources

Annual rainfall in many parts of the Zagros region ranges between 300 and 600 mm, which is higher than many central Iranian areas. This precipitation supports forests, rangelands, and agriculture production in valleys and plains (Kreyenbroek & Sperl, 1992). Rojhelat's natural resources include fertile valleys suitable for wheat cultivation, forest ecosystems that support livestock grazing, freshwater from mountain snowmelt, and rich biodiversity within the Kurdo-Zagrosian ecological zone. These resources create opportunities for agriculture, eco-tourism, and renewable energy development. The region contains diverse ecosystems including forests, wetlands, mountains, and grasslands that support rich biodiversity, including thousands of plant species, mammals such as wolves, bears, and leopards, and many migratory birds in the wetlands (Kreyenbroek & Sperl, 1992). For example, the Arasbaran forests (figure 3) contain more than 775 plant species and are recognized as a UNESCO biosphere reserve.



Figure 3. Arasbaran forest located in East Azerbaijan Province, Iran, is a UNESCO biosphere reserve that hosts over 775 plant species and diverse wildlife, illustrating the ecological richness of Rojhelat and its potential for conservation and eco-tourism (Kreyenbroek & Sperl, 1992)

Water resources in Rojhelat mainly come from mountain precipitation and snowmelt, with rivers originating in the Zagros Mountains supplying water for agriculture, drinking, and hydroelectric power. Important water bodies include Lake Urmia, Lake Zarivar in Kurdistan Province (Figure 4)—a freshwater lake supporting irrigation, fishing, and tourism—as well as reservoirs regulated by major dams such as Shahid Kazemi Dam and Azad Dam used for irrigation, water storage, and hydroelectric power generation.



Figure 4. Important water bodies include Lake Urmia (left) and Lake Zarivar (right)

3. Demography and Provincial Overview

Population distribution in Rojhelat is mainly Kurdish and in some regions it is uneven and ethnically mixed, with Kurdish majorities in some provinces and mixed Kurdish–Azeri or Kurdish–Lur populations in others (Table 1).

Table 1: Major Provinces of Rojhelat

Province	Capital	Population (approx.)	Ethnic Composition	Economic Features
Kurdistan	Sanandaj	~1.6 million	Predominantly Kurdish	Agriculture, trade
Kermanshah	Kermanshah	~2 million	Kurdish majority	Industry, border trade
Ilam	Ilam	~600,000	Kurdish (Feyli)	Oil, agriculture
West Azerbaijan (partial)	Urmia	~3 million	Kurdish–Azeri mix	Agriculture, commerce
Hamadan (partial)	Hamadan	~1.7 million	Kurdish-Lur and others	Agriculture
Lorestan (partial)	Khorramabad	~1.8 million	Lur–Kurdish	Livestock

North and Northeast Iran	Bojnord	~1.5	Kurds-Turkman	
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Across the broader region, estimates suggest 9–11 million Kurds live in Iran, though precise numbers remain politically sensitive.

4. Historical and Political Development

Before the twentieth century, Kurdish society in Iran was primarily tribal and semi-autonomous. Local chieftains often governed mountainous regions with limited interference from the central state (McDowall, 2004). During the late Qajar period (19th–early 20th century), weak central authority allowed Kurdish tribes to maintain relative independence. However, this autonomy gradually declined as Iran attempted to modernize and centralize its administration.

The rise of Kurdish nationalism in the early twentieth century was driven by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, the spread of ethnic nationalism in the Middle East, increased centralization in Iran, and economic changes in Kurdish society, all of which strengthened Kurdish collective identity and political mobilization.

One of the earliest major Kurdish rebellions in Iran was the revolt led by tribal leader Ismail Agha Simko Shikak against the Qajar state. The uprising attempted to challenge Iranian authority in the northwestern Kurdish regions.

With the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925), the Iranian government pursued aggressive centralization and nation-building policies. These reforms aimed to integrate peripheral regions but often suppressed minority identities. Kurdish identity in Iran predates the modern Iranian state, with Kurdish dynasties and principalities ruling parts of the region during the medieval period.

Modern Kurdish nationalism emerged in the early twentieth century amid the collapse of imperial structures in the Middle East. One defining historical moment was the Republic of Mahabad, which briefly established a Kurdish autonomous state in northwestern Iran in 1946 (McDowall, 2004). Although the republic lasted less than a year, it remains a powerful symbol of Kurdish political aspirations.

Following the Iranian Revolution, Kurdish political groups demanded regional autonomy, linguistic rights, and decentralized governance, but negotiations with the new Islamic Republic of Iran collapsed, leading to armed conflict in the early 1980s. Since then, Kurdish politics in Iran have diversified into three main strands—autonomy within Iran, federal democratic reform, and independent Kurdish statehood—although most contemporary Kurdish parties now emphasize federalism and democratic decentralization.

5. Contemporary Political Dynamics

The relationship between Kurdish communities and the Iranian state remains complex, as Kurds participate in national politics and local governance while many activists argue that structural inequalities persist in areas such as language rights, economic investment, and political representation. International observers also report periodic arrests of activists and restrictions on cultural expression in Kurdish regions.

Kurdish regions have often served as centers of political mobilization, particularly during nationwide protests (Romano, 2006). The 2022 “Women, Life, Freedom” movement—sparked by the death of Kurdish woman Jina Amini—originated partly in Kurdish cities before spreading across Iran (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Analysts argue that ethnic minority regions may play a key role in shaping future political transformations in Iran.

Several political movements advocate Kurdish rights in Iran. The situation of Kurdish political organizations in Rojhelat in 2026 remains active but complex. They are politically more unified than before, yet militarily limited and under strong pressure from Iran.

In February 2026, several major Kurdish parties—including the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI), Kurdistan Freedom Party, Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), Organization of Iranian Kurdistan Struggle, and Komala of the Toilers of Kurdistan, later joined by the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan—formed the Coalition of Political Forces of Iranian Kurdistan to coordinate Kurdish political strategy, oppose the Iranian government, advocate for self-determination or federal autonomy, and increase cooperation between armed wings and political parties. This historic step marked a significant shift, as Kurdish parties in Iran had previously been fragmented.

6. Economic Structure and Development

Rojhelat has a mixed but generally less-developed economic structure compared with central Iranian regions like Tehran or Isfahan. Its economy is shaped by agriculture, border trade, some industry, and services, but it also faces structural challenges such as unemployment and limited industrialization.

Agriculture, the backbone of the rural economy, includes crops like wheat, barley, grapes, and fruits, along with honey and dairy, supported by mountain ecosystems for livestock and beekeeping and water resources for fisheries and irrigation. Mountain ecosystems support beekeeping and livestock herding, while water resources enable fisheries and irrigation.

Rojhelat is also rich in mineral resources—including iron ore, copper, lead and zinc, and limestone—and, as part of Iran’s vast reserves estimated to reach tens of billions of tons, these resources make mining a key economic sector supporting industries such as metallurgy, construction, and chemical production. Iran possesses some of the world’s largest oil and natural gas reserves, and many of these resources are located in the Zagros Basin in Rojhelat. The provinces of Kermanshah, Ilam, and Lorestan are situated along this geological belt and host numerous hydrocarbon reservoirs. Oil and gas production in this region is mainly managed by the West Oil and Gas Production Company, a subsidiary of the Iranian Central Oil Fields Company.

Ilam province, considered the energy hub of western Iran due to its vast hydrocarbon reserves—including an estimated 17 billion barrels of oil and 14 trillion cubic meters of natural gas—produces over 230,000 barrels of oil per day and 1.5 billion cubic meters of gas annually from major fields such as Dehloran, Tang-e Bijar, Cheshmeh Khosh, Azar, and Danan. For example, the Danan oil field, discovered in 2007, currently yields thousands of barrels daily and is projected to reach about 25,000 barrels per day once fully developed.

The Tang-e Bijar gas field is a major energy resource, producing millions of cubic meters of gas per day and supplying feedstock to regional processing facilities, while Kermanshah province hosts several strategically important oil fields near the Iran-Iraq border, including Sumar, Saman,

and Naftshahr, some of which are shared with Iraq. Recent development projects aim to expand production—boosting Sumar and Saman output to around 20,000 barrels per day—with the crude oil supporting the Kermanshah refinery and contributing to domestic fuel supply and regional employment.

In addition, Lorestan province contains several oil reserves, including the Sarkan Maleh Kuh oil field in Pol-Dokhtar County, which has produced crude oil since the early 1990s, holds about 900,000 barrels of recoverable oil, and transports daily production to the Kermanshah refinery via pipelines.

Moreover, Rojhelat’s proximity to Iraq, Turkey, and Nakhjawan makes cross-border trade an important economic sector. However, limited formal employment has also led to the emergence of informal trade networks, including the work of kolbers—laborers who transport goods across mountainous borders. This phenomenon reflects broader structural issues such as unemployment and uneven development.

7. Science, Technology, and Medical Development

Education in Kurdish regions has expanded significantly over the past decades. University enrollment among Kurdish youth has increased. Higher education institutions in Rojhelat play an important role in regional scientific development, healthcare training, and technological innovation.

Across Rojhelat, there are roughly 450–460 universities and higher-education centers when Azad, Payame Noor, and state universities (plus other institutions) are included. The main state universities are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. List of the main state universities in Rojhelat

Province	University	City	Main Fields
West Azerbaijan	Urmia University	Urmia	Science, Engineering, Agriculture, Humanities
West Azerbaijan	Urmia University of Medical Sciences	Urmia	Medicine, Pharmacy, Nursing, Health Sciences
Kurdistan	University of Kurdistan	Sanandaj	Science, Engineering, Humanities
Kurdistan	Kurdistan University of Medical Sciences	Sanandaj	Medicine, Dentistry, Nursing, Public Health
Kermanshah	Razi University	Kermanshah	Science, Engineering, Agriculture

Kermanshah	Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences	Kermanshah	Medicine, Health Sciences
Ilam	University of Ilam	Ilam	Science, Engineering, Agriculture
Ilam	Ilam University of Medical Sciences	Ilam	Medicine, Nursing, Health Sciences
Hamadan	Bu-Ali Sina University	Hamadan	Science, Engineering, Humanities
Hamadan	Hamadan University of Medical Sciences	Hamadan	Medicine, Dentistry, Health Sciences
Hamadan	Hamadan University of Technology	Hamadan	Engineering, Applied Sciences
Lorestan	Lorestan University	Khorramabad	Science, Agriculture, Engineering
Lorestan	Lorestan University of Medical Sciences	Khorramabad	Medicine, Nursing, Health Sciences

8. Culture and Artistic Expression

Kurdish culture in Rojhelat, characterized by strong oral traditions, music, literature, and visual arts, is expressed through several dialects, including Sorani, Kurmanji, Southern Kurdish, and Hawrami (Gorani) with many Kurds being bilingual in Kurdish and Persian.

Kurdish culture possesses a rich heritage expressed through music, dance, theater, and traditional handicrafts, with music deeply connected to social life, spirituality, and oral tradition, serving as a medium of historical memory and cultural identity and featuring instruments such as the daf, tanbur, saz, kamancheh, duduk, and dozelleh. Dance traditions like Govand are also central to community celebrations, highlighting the vibrant cultural expressions of the Kurdish people.

Traditional arts in Kurdish regions extend beyond performance into handicrafts and material culture, including carpet and kilim weaving, pottery, and jewelry making, which serve as both artistic expression and economic livelihood for rural communities. In towns such as Marivan and Sanandaj, these crafts also play a key role in cultural tourism and heritage preservation.

The roots of Kurdish literary life in Rojhelat extend back to medieval times. Early Kurdish literary expression was strongly influenced by oral traditions and regional dialects, particularly Gorani, Hawrami, Laki, and Kalhori. In many cases, Kurdish intellectuals wrote in Persian or Arabic, as these languages dominated scholarly and administrative life in Iran.

One important feature of Kurdish literary history is the role of Gorani as a literary lingua franca across much of Iranian Kurdistan until the nineteenth century. Gorani poetry employed syllabic meters derived from pre-Islamic Iranian traditions and was widely used by court poets and religious scholars.

Modern Kurdish literature has developed significantly since the twentieth century, producing poets, scholars, and journalists who contribute to Kurdish cultural revival.

9. Tourism, Lifestyle, and Sports

Rojhelat is rich in historical and natural attractions, featuring sites such as the Taq-e Bostan archaeological complex, the Bisotun inscription, Lake Zarivar in Marivan, and Lake Urmia, which together reflect the region's Persian, Kurdish, and Mesopotamian heritage. Visitors can enjoy diverse tourism opportunities, including mountain trekking, eco-tourism, and cultural festivals, while sports like football, wrestling, mountaineering, and horse riding play a central role in local life. Community celebrations are vibrant, often coinciding with Nowruz, the Kurdish and Persian New Year festival.



Figure 5. The Taq-e Bostan archaeological complex in Kermanshah

10. Strategic Importance and Regional Geopolitics

Rojhelat occupies a geopolitically crucial position along Iran's western frontier, sharing borders with Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey, and Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan region. This location has historically served as a vital corridor for both military operations and trade, linking Iran to key regional neighbors and facilitating the movement of goods, people, and ideas across borders. The region's strategic significance is further reinforced by its role in broader security dynamics, as it lies at the intersection of several ethnically and politically sensitive areas. In recent years, rising geopolitical tensions—including disputes over border security, energy transit routes, and regional alliances—have highlighted the enduring importance of western Iranian provinces. Beyond security

considerations, Rojhelat's position also offers economic and logistical advantages, enabling it to act as a gateway for cross-border commerce and regional cooperation. Collectively, these factors underscore how geography, history, and contemporary geopolitics converge to make Rojhelat a focal point in Iran's regional strategy.

11. Future Prospects of Rojhelat

The future of Rojhelat will depend on a combination of political, economic, social, and cultural factors. Political reform that encourages the meaningful participation of Kurdish and other minority communities in local and national governance will be essential for building trust between the state and its multiethnic population. Economic investment, including the development of infrastructure such as transportation, healthcare, and education, will play a crucial role in improving living standards and reducing regional disparities. At the same time, increased integration into regional and cross-border trade networks could stimulate economic growth, create employment opportunities, and strengthen ties with neighboring areas.

Cultural and linguistic recognition of Kurdish identity is another important factor, as it can foster social cohesion and preserve the unique heritage of the region. Efforts to support local language education, media, and cultural institutions can empower communities while promoting inclusion within the broader national framework.

Balancing these regional aspirations with the need for national stability remains a key challenge for Iran's multiethnic society. How the Iranian government and Kurdish communities navigate issues of representation, development, and cultural recognition will significantly shape the trajectory of Rojhelat, determining whether it becomes a region of opportunity, stability, and inclusion, or one marked by persistent tension and underdevelopment.

12. Conclusion

Rojhelat represents a region where geography, identity, and politics intersect in complex ways. Its mountainous terrain, strategic border position, and rich natural resources have historically shaped both the opportunities and challenges faced by Kurdish communities in Iran. As the article has shown, the region possesses considerable economic potential through agriculture, energy

resources, cross-border trade, and emerging educational and scientific institutions. At the same time, structural economic disparities, limited industrial development, and political tensions have contributed to ongoing debates over representation, regional autonomy, and cultural rights.

Historical experiences—from the Republic of Mahabad to post-revolutionary conflicts and contemporary political mobilization—continue to influence Kurdish political consciousness and relations with the Iranian state. In recent years, evolving political alliances among Kurdish organizations and the role of Kurdish regions in nationwide social movements demonstrate that Rojhelat remains an important actor within Iran’s broader political landscape.

Looking forward, the long-term stability and development of the region will likely depend on policies that encourage inclusive governance, equitable economic investment, and recognition of cultural and linguistic diversity. Strengthening infrastructure, expanding educational opportunities, and integrating Rojhelat more effectively into regional economic networks could help reduce disparities and promote sustainable development. At the same time, constructive dialogue between state institutions and local communities will be essential for building trust and addressing longstanding grievances.

If these political and developmental challenges are addressed with inclusive and forward-looking policies, Rojhelat has the potential to evolve from a historically marginalized frontier into a dynamic bridge connecting Iran with the wider Middle East, fostering economic cooperation, cultural vitality, and long-term regional stability.

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