

The Struggle of Kurdish Language in Turkey and Iran

Your Excellency Special Rapporteur on minority issues,

Diakurd, representing Kurdish Diaspora organizations, sounds the alarm on the escalating threat to the Kurdish language in Turkey and Iran. Discriminatory language policies in these countries systematically marginalize Kurdish speakers, obstructing their full assimilation, posing a grave risk of linguistic genocide in the long term. Despite Kurdish being the fourth most spoken language in the Middle East, its recognition and promotion remain critically deficient specially in Turkey and Iran. This document emphasizes the imperative to confront these injustices and urges international action to safeguard Kurdish linguistic rights.

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As a federation bringing together several Kurdish organisations in Europe, Diakurd has the honour of drawing your attention to the situation of Kurdish citizens in Turkey and Iran with regard to the discriminatory language policies of these two countries.

As a result of these language policies, the Kurdish language and its speakers are excluded from many spheres of social, political, educational, artistic and cultural life, and the full integration of Kurds into national communities is prevented. At a time when linguistic diversity, tolerance and the necessary inclusion of all in contemporary societies are being promoted, the absence of linguistic rights for Kurdish communities in Turkey and Iran is a flagrant violation of these principles.

Kurdish is an Indo-European language belonging to the Iranian language sub-group. The two main and clearly related dialects of Kurdish are Kurmanji and Sorani. Kurdish is spoken by over 40 million people in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and the republics of the former Soviet Union. Kurdish is the fourth most widely spoken language in the Middle East.

Kurdish enjoys a better level of official recognition and promotion in Iraq and Syria. In Iraq, Kurdish has been the country's second official language, alongside Arabic, since 2005. In the autonomous region of Kurdistan, Kurdish has become the language of education, communication, the media and institutions. In Syria, the official language is Arabic, and Kurdish was excluded from the education system, administrations and official institutions under the rule of Bashar Assad. However, since the civil war that has been raging in the country since 2011, a large part of the Kurdish region in Syria is controlled and self-administered by Kurdish organisations. The Kurdish language has been introduced into the school and university system, and learning the language is also possible within cultural associations. Three universities (Qamişlo, Hasekê and Kobanê) also offer courses in Kurdish.



It is in Iran and Turkey that the language has been most repressed and Kurdish speakers deprived of their linguistic rights, such as education in the Kurdish mother tongue or the use of Kurdish in political and cultural activities.

Kurdish is Iran's third-largest language (around 7 to 8 million speakers) and its speakers make up the second-largest Kurdish population after Turkey. Apart from the interlude of the Republic of Mahabad, from 1945 to 1946, which established Kurdish as the official language of the republic, the language has never enjoyed official status, let alone any form of recognition. Under the reign of Reza Khan Pahlavi (1925-1941), a regime banning the use of the language was put in place against the Kurds, who suffered double discrimination: as Kurds and as Sunni Muslims in a predominantly Shia country (Hassanpour 1992). His son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941-1979) relaxed assimilation policies towards minorities somewhat, authorising publications and public broadcasting in Kurdish.

The post-Islamic revolution constitution adopted in 1979 gave the illusion of a linguistic opening to the minority languages of Iran, of which the Ethnologue estimates there are seventy-six. Article 15 of the constitution states:

1) The official language and script common to all Iranian people are Persian and the Persian script. Documents, correspondence and official texts, as well as school books, must be written in this language and script.

2) However, the use of local or tribal languages in the press and the mass media, as well as for the teaching of the literature of these languages in schools, is authorised alongside Persian.

Numerous requests for linguistic rights, in particular mother-tongue education, both in Kurdistan and in other regions (e.g. Azerbaijan), have been addressed to the Iranian authorities on the basis of Article 15 of the Constitution. However, the Iranian state only considers requests for teaching in minority languages from a purely security point of view, seeing them as a threat to the integrity of the state. Kurdish language activists and teachers are regularly arrested and sentenced to long prison terms for teaching their language in associations.

The Iranian language policies towards Kurdish are like those of Turkey in many respects, where lives a community of 20 million of Kurds. The modern Turkish state was established in the 1920s with the objective of homogenization of its population, adhering to the European nation-state ideology of "one-nation and one-language"; thereby strengthening Turkish as the only national and official language at the expense of all other minority languages including Kurdish. The policy of ethno-linguistic homogenisation was clearly reflected in the Constitution adopted in 1924, two articles of which concerned the status of language and the redefinition of citizenship based on ethnicity. Article 2 of the Constitution declared Turkish as the official language of the state and made it compulsory in schools, administrations, and courts, while Article 88 stated that "all those who live in Turkey, without racial or religious distinction, are designated as Turks". Following this, a decree-law issued on 3 March 1924 banned all Kurdish schools, associations, and publications, as well as the use of the terms Kurds and Kurdistan in discourse. To achieve the goal of an ethnically homogeneous nation,



the Turkish state embarked on a policy of forced assimilation. The Turkish government's Plan for the Reformation of the East "proposed to curtail 'Kurdishness' and 'Turkify' the Kurdish populations through a variety of instruments". Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the centralization project of the newly established Turkish state embarked on a variety of strategies, actions, and programs to assimilate its Kurdish population, such as forceful admission of children into school boards, renaming places and even animals with Turkish names, resettlement and education, and an outright ban of Kurdish in all domains.

As part of its accession process to the European Union (EU), which officially started in 1999, Turkey started to relax its oppressive policies towards Kurdish identity and language in the early 2000s. Turkey lifted the ban on speaking Kurdish, allowed private teaching of the language in 2004, and established a state-owned television channel, TRT 6, later named TRT Kurdi in 2009. A few publishing houses started to publish Kurdish periodicals, literature, dictionaries, and even school textbooks for the teaching and learning of the language. Moreover, for the first time in the history of the Turkish republic, Kurdish language and literature became the focus of BA programs in two universities in the Kurdish region. Essentially, the situation started to look like Iran. Kurdish was tolerated; the community could engage in language teaching and learning activities, but the state assumed no responsibility for the development or maintenance of the language. Private schools have faced many bureaucratic obstacles created by the state, and their pupils have gradually withdrawn from these programs because students cannot see why they should pay to learn their mother tongue in their own country.

A more positive step was taken in 2012, where through a pilot project Kurdish was to be introduced to the country's public education; students at the secondary level could take both Kurmanji and Kirmancki/Zazaki varieties as an elective course, like all other "foreign languages," for two hours a week. To that end, teacher training programs were established in three universities. This gave the Kurdish population tremendous hope for saving their culture and language, which was under threat, for several decades in Turkey. The results, however, have been disappointing. The two-hour Kurdish classes in high schools secondary schools have been largely unsuccessful due to the lack of resources, such as materials and trained teachers, and the fact that an indigenous language is lumped up with "foreign" languages. Instead of being a source of identification and identity construction, the language has become a source of alienation. The sincerity of the state in carrying out these language reforms has been questioned, because, during the very same reforms, the Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, called mother-tongue education a recipe for disintegration of Turkey, and one of his deputies stated on national television that Kurdish was "not a language of civilization, hence inappropriate for being used as a medium of education". Since the coup attempt of 2016, Turkey has curtailed many venues and opportunities that helped with the cultivation and development of Kurdish, especially during the peace process with PKK (2013–2015).

The favourable developments since the early 2000s have, therefore, not led to any official recognition of Kurdish. No "linguistic right" specific to the Kurdish population in Turkey has yet been established. In parallel with the increase in political repression, the stigmatisation of Kurdish speakers has taken the form of verbal and physical violence. The numerous cases of violence, reported by the Turkish media, range from physical attacks to the lynching of speakers for simply speaking Kurdish in major Turkish cities. The same pattern of a positive policy and disappointing implementation exists in



education. For example, according to the Turkish newspaper Milliyet (“Öğretmen Atama Kontenjanlari Branş Dağılımı [Teacher appointment quotas branch distribution],” 2023), in 2023 the Turkish Ministry of National Education will have hired 50 secondary school teachers for Kurdish, in contrast to 2433 teachers for English, 440 for Arabic and 250 for German. At present, the total number of Kurdish teachers in Turkey, teaching Kurmanji and Zazaki, is 132 for a Kurdish population of over 20 million. This figure is a stark contrast with the 1683 Turkish teachers employed in 27 countries to teach Turkish to the Turkish diaspora. Turkish language policy, after lifting restrictions on the oral and written use of Kurdish, refuses to recognise collective linguistic rights for Kurds in Turkey and continues to marginalize it. The few linguistic openings are part of a pseudo-liberal, laissez-faire approach, aimed primarily at individual linguistic rights and show that Kurdish continues to be considered as problem in Turkey.

Furthermore, Kurdish continues to be the subject of a policy of invisibilisation. A recent example of this is the absence of Kurdish in the six languages of the KADES (Emergency Anti-Women Violence) application developed by the Turkish police in March 2021. The application is available in Turkish, Arabic, Persian, English, French and Russian, but does not include Kurdish, the country's second language. Another example is the ban on performances in Kurdish of a play entitled Trumpets and Raspberries, by the Italian writer and playwright Dario Fo. The prefectures of Istanbul and Sanliurfa banned the play on the pretext that it was PKK propaganda. Many concerts of traditional Kurdish music, which is completely apolitical, are also regularly banned by official governors.

The absence of public education in Kurdish in Turkey seems to have considerably affected the mechanisms of intergenerational transmission and reduced its vitality. In order to reverse this worrying development for the future of the language, Kurdish activists launched a number of actions from the 2000s onwards intended to obtain official status for their language and a Kurdish-based mother tongue education. These actions initially centred on Tevgera Zimanê Perwerdahîya Kurdî ‘Movement for the teaching of the Kurdish language’. A petition launched in 2010 attracted more than a million signatures and was submitted to the Turkish National Assembly. This demand was taken up by the Kurdî Der ‘Kurdish Language Union’, which launched another petition in 2013 calling for mother-tongue teaching in schools. Another petition was launched in 2014 for the return of Kurdish place names, which have been turkified after the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923.

The demands also were relayed by two institutions, the Kurdish Institute of Istanbul founded in 1992 and the Mesopotamia Foundation created in 2013. While the former aims to promote the Kurdish language in Turkey, the latter aims to promote research on Kurdish and set up a multilingual university in Diyarbakir, the unofficial capital of Turkish Kurdistan. More recently, two other movements have been set up, Platforma Zimanê Kurdî ‘Kurdish Language Platform’ in 2018 and Hereketê Zimanê Kurdî ‘Kurdish Language Movement’ in 2020.

This brief overview shows that Kurdish communities in Iran and in Turkey are deprived of the right to education in their mother tongue, that they are victims of linguistic injustice and that this injustice and discrimination are the source of many social, educational, political and cultural inequalities. The only approach adopted by Iran and Turkey is to regard linguistic diversity, and Kurdish in particular, as a problem, while languages can also be seen as resources, enabling the construction of a pluralist society



and the development of societal multilingualism. Indeed, experiments based on the teaching of first languages show that students who take part in such teaching have better academic results, greater social mobility, more harmonious identity construction, more meaningful democratic participation, earlier metalinguistic awareness and pluriliteracy skills, increased social and cultural capital, improved social justice and equality of opportunity and, more globally, improved human rights.

We kindly ask you to put the situation of the Kurdish language in Iran and Turkey on the agenda of the next forum which will be held in October 2024, and to invite these two states to lift all restrictions on the oral and written use of the language in social, political, cultural and artistic activities, and to introduce education in Kurdish as a mother tongue in regions where there is a significant Kurdish community.

Kurdish Diaspora Confederation – Diakurd
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