

Meet Iran's Revolutionary Liberals



Abdullah Mohtadi, Secretary General of the reformed and mainstream Iranian Komala Party

SULEIMANIYA PROVINCE, NORTHERN IRAQ – One of the roads leading out of the city of Suleimaniya in Iraqi Kurdistan might as well be renamed Revolutionary Road. Two armed compounds inhabited by exiled revolutionary Iranian leftists were built less than a mile away from each other. My colleague [Patrick Lasswell](#) and I accidentally found ourselves in the armed camp of the military wing of the Communist faction of the Komalah Party when we intended to meet with the more moderate social democrats up the street. A few days later we returned to the area and met with the right people.

The Communists hosted us warmly and [kindly gave us a tour of their camp](#). But the liberals who split with them in the late 1980s proved to be far and away their intellectual and political superiors.

Secretary General Abdullah Mohtadi and Political Bureau member Abu Baker Modarresi sent two men to pick us up from our hotel – just to make sure we made it to the right place. They drove us to their safe house under armed guard less than an hour away from the Iranian border. We met over coffee and cigarettes.

MJT: You are both from Iran?

Mohtadi: Yes, yes we are.

MJT: How long have you been here?

Mohtadi: The first time our headquarters came inside Iraqi Kurdistan was in late 1983, when we lost the last liberated area in Iranian Kurdistan. So we moved our headquarters to Iraqi Kurdistan at that time, which was under Saddam Hussein. For some months they were reluctant to accept us, but they realized, okay, we are against the Islamic regime.

MJT: Did you ever have any problems with Saddam's government?

Mohtadi: Yes. They shelled us. Also, we are the only Kurdish Iranian party that has been gassed by Saddam Hussein.

MJT: Really. Were you gassed here?



The Komala Party Compound

Mohtadi: Twice. Not at this place, twice we were at different places at that time. Near Halabja. And also in our previous camp. We lost 72 people near Halabja on the banks of the River Siwan. The second time we lost 23 people. They were gassed by Saddam's airplanes.

MJT: Was this during the Anfal Campaign? [The Anfal Campaign was Saddam's attempt in 1988 and 1989 to utterly destroy the Kurds of Northern Iraq. 200,000 people were killed, and 95 percent of the villages were destroyed.]

Mohtadi: Yes, it was. Because they were suspicious – rightly – that we were dealing with the Anfal victims. We also had good relations with the Kurdish fighters, with the Peshmerga – of course, clandestinely. Thus they punished us for that.

And apart from that, we were shelled several times and we lost several people. It was not just once or by accident or as part of the large Anfal Campaign. No, they singled us out and hit us.



An armed guard watches the compound

MJT: Which regime was more oppressive to you?

Mohtadi: The Iranians.

MJT: Worse than Saddam?

Mohtadi: Yes, of course. To Iranian Kurds, yes.

MJT: Tell us something about this. Very few Americans, including me, know very much about what the Iranian government has done to the Kurds in Iran.

Mohtadi: That's exactly our problem. So many people in the West and in the world know that Kurds had problems in Iraq, they have problems in Turkey. But very few people know that Kurds are under oppression in Iran, as well.

MJT: They are oppressed more than the Persians?

Mohtadi: More than the Persians and the Azeris, yes. I am not saying that it's something like the Anfal Campaign or genocide has been taking place in Iran. Nevertheless, there have been lots of oppression and killings and torture and expelling people from their land and sending them to internal exile in Iran and shelling the cities and all kinds of oppression.

MJT: Why is the Iranian government doing this? Is it a religious war, an ethnic war, or is it political?

Lasswell: Or a combination?

Mohtadi: It is a combination but first of all political, and ethnic and religious as well.

There are three main religions in Kurdistan. Most of the Kurdish people are Sunnis in Iranian Kurdistan. But there is a considerable Shia minority in Iranian Kurdistan.

MJT: How many people are we talking about?

Mohtadi: At least 30 percent.

Kurds live in four different provinces. Only one of them is called Kurdistan in Iran. The first one, from top to bottom, is Western Azerbaijan, which is shared by Azeris and Kurds.

Mahabad is located in Western Azerbaijan. Mahabad, as you know, was the capital of the short-lived Kurdish Republic from 1945 to 1946. Then is the province of Kurdistan. Then is the province of Kermanshan. Then is the province of Ilam.

So we have four provinces in Western and in Northwestern Iran which are inhabited by Kurds. We also have Kurds – millions – how many, I really don't know. There are no reliable statistics on that. We have Kurds in the Eastern part of Iran. There were Kurds who were sent to exile during the Middle Ages by Safavids, by Khajars, even by Pahlevis – the first Pahlevi, not the second one. Because they thought Kurds were troublemakers. They confiscated Kurdish lands. They expelled them from their lands.

And also because Kurds were supposed to be good warriors. Iran was – every time in its history except for the Arab invasion – it was invaded from the Northeast by the Turks. So they sent Kurds to the eastern part of Iran, to the northeastern part of Iran and settled them there to defend Iran from there.

MJT: How many Kurds are in Iran now?

Mohtadi: In these four provinces, 12 million.

MJT: That's quite a bit more than here.

Mohtadi: It is. According to our sources in the Ministry of Budget and Planning in Iran, 35 percent of the whole internal Iranian water resources are located in Kurdistan. Apart from that, Kurdistan is very rich in terms of oil and minerals and all that.

Two places have been explored. We have gold mines. One of them was explored by the British and then the British went out of the contract, I don't know why. Perhaps for political reasons. All kinds of minerals – Kurdistan is very rich agriculturally, for the grain and all kinds of...it's a kind of grain house for Iran.

MJT: What do Kurds in Iran think of joining a Greater Kurdistan. We don't hear anything about this because journalists don't go to Iranian Kurdistan.

Mohtadi: It's a dream. People consider it a right, but Kurdish mainstream politics in Iranian Kurdistan is not for secession.

MJT: What is it for then?

Mohtadi: For a democratic, secular, federal Iran in which Kurds have their own rights.

MJT: Is this taken as a pragmatic position, or is this what people really want? If they had the option, would they choose a democratic federal Iran, or would they choose Greater Kurdistan?

Mohtadi: You can imagine this, but options have to be real. There is no real option for a Greater Kurdistan. When it becomes a real option people can choose between them. But the only feasible option that is there is Kurdish rights within Iran.

But I must add that historically there have been good relations between different parts of Kurdistan together. They have a great impact on each other, especially Iraqi Kurdistan and Iranian Kurdistan. They speak almost the same dialects. So they are very near. Politically they feel very close to each other. They are relatives to each other. You have families. Part of the family lives in Iran and part of the family lives in Iraq.



Komala Party Political Bureau member Abu Baker Modaressi

Modarresi: They are a safe haven for each other.

Mohtadi: Yes, exactly. In 1978-79 the revolution broke out in Iran. It was a huge opportunity for the PUK [Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the secular leftist party in charge of Iraq's Suleimaniya Province] and Iraqi Kurds who were fighting against Saddam. In fact it saved them from annihilation.

Lasswell: And again in 1991.

Mohtadi: Of course. And from 1991 Iraqi Kurdistan, with all its shortcomings of course, it is still a source of inspiration for Iranian Kurds.

For example, when the law about federalism in Iraq was adopted in the national assembly in Iraq there were huge demonstrations in most cities and towns in Iranian Kurdistan. When [Kurdish PUK party chief in Northern Iraq] Jalal Talibani

became President of Iraq there were huge demonstrations and clashes between police forces and people in Iran.

The same was true in 1945 and 1946 when a republic was established in Iranian Kurdistan, the Kurdish Republic. Also the Kurdish Iranian movement in 1979. It had a huge cultural and political effect on Iraqi Kurds. It brought with itself new concepts and new horizons for the Kurdish cause. A very close cooperation between Iranian and Iraqi Kurds and their parties began.

So whenever it becomes a real option that we can choose, we can decide. But right now it is just a dream, a right, an abstract right. But who knows, perhaps the time will come.



Two Komala Party members have lunch on the grass outside the compound

Lasswell: I suspect that if all of Kurdistan joins, they will have one language and it will be English.

Mohtadi: [Laughs.]

MJT: Well, how different are the dialects?

Mohtadi: They aren't dialects.

MJT: Is it more a question of accents?

Mohtadi: It's more than just accents. With two of them, it is more than just accents. The one which is called Standard Kurdish Sorani, which is spoken and written in Iranian Kurdistan and Iraqi Kurdistan. The other which is spoken and written illegally in Turkey and Syria.

MJT: Is it still illegal in Turkey? I understand the Turks have changed most of these laws.

Mohtadi: Yes, there is a process of change in Turkey. But they still have a long way to go.

MJT: I know they do. Last year I was in Turkish Kurdistan. It's not a nice place. There is still fighting going on there. And the economy is at zero.

Mohtadi: To be honest it's like...when we go to Istanbul and Ankara there are different parts if you look at Kurdistan. It's like a colony. You can feel that they have been exploited by colonialism and oppressed. It's not like 20th Century or 21st.

Lasswell: Or even the 19th. I think it would have been better under the Ottomans.

MJT: It probably was better under the Ottomans.

Mohtadi: It was. I mean, we have a famous Kurdish historian, Mohammad Amin Zaki. He was a very high-ranking official in the Ottoman Empire. And he tells us how he became aware of his Kurdishness. He says: *Nobody said we are Turks. Everybody said we are Ottomans. And we were alright. It was alright for us. Then people started to say we are Turks. And I realized I was not a Turk. So I realized I was a Kurd.*

They Turkified everything in Turkey. So there was no place for "others." And that was the beginning of...

Modarresi: ...the awakening.

Mohtadi: Yes, the Kurdish awakening.

MJT: Turkish Nationalism and Arab Nationalism are very similar in the way they are implemented.

Mohtadi: The British, the British colonialists ruled those areas and those countries. But they had nothing against ethnic origin. They had nothing against people's ethnicity. But in Turkey they want to deny our ethnicity, our identity. So it's more...it's more deep. The oppression is more deep. Colonialism is a kind of oppression, but it's from top to bottom. It's from above. It doesn't go to the texture of the society.

Lasswell: You sound very educated. Where did you study?

Mohtadi: [Laughs] Well, I'm not that educated. I studied in Tehran. I speak Farsi almost like my mother tongue. My father was a member of the forerunner to KDPI of Iran which established the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad. He was a minister in the cabinet of Ghazi Mohammad. Ghazi Mohammad was the President of the Kurdish Republic.

He was then hanged. He did not escape. He thought it was better to remain perhaps in order to prevent the Iranian authorities and the Shah from suppression. So he remained in the city of Mahabad and they hanged him along with two of his brothers and a cousin in 1946.

He was at that time supported, but also oppressed, by the Soviet Union.

Lasswell: They did not give support without strings attached. Perhaps "cables" would be a better description.

Mohtadi: That's true.

His Komala, it was not our party, that Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan, which was established in 1942. At that time, when the Allied Forces decided to occupy Iran and make it a bridge to send help from the United States and Great Britain and Western Allies to the Soviet Union and Stalin to defend against Hitler...when they occupied Iran they ousted Reza Shah, the father of Mohammad Reza Shah, the second Pahlevi who was toppled by the revolution in 1979.

Modarresi: Because of his good relationship with Hitler.

Mohtadi: Yes. He had started to make contacts with Hitler. He was a kind of – it was very strange, anyway – he had contacts with Hitler and tried to distance himself from Britain and make propaganda for Aryans and against the British.

So then they ousted him. 1941 to 1953 was the golden era of democracy in Iran. That's the only period when the Iranian people had a constitutional monarchy. It was at that time that the first modern Kurdish party, called Komala JK – Komala, which means Organization or Party, of the Revival of Kurds. That was the name of the party.

MJT: You had a split with the Komalah Party down the road at some point. We know about that because, as you know, we accidentally met them a few days ago instead of you.

Mohtadi: That Komalah Party was established as an underground organization in 1969, under the Shah. We were a leftist organization. It was the 60s and 70s. It was a struggle against the Shah, against oppression, dictatorship, for social justice, and against...the United States. Sorry. [Laughs.]

MJT: Well, that's alright.

Lasswell: My father was working pretty vigorously against aspects of the United States at the same time.

Mohtadi: We were also inspired by the anti-war movement in the 70s.

MJT: We wouldn't expect you to have any other position. You're a leftist, so...

Mohtadi: Yeah, ok. So, members of Komalah were arrested several times. Every other political dissident in Iran...there was no political freedom, especially in the 1970s. A system of very harsh and brutal torture was carried out in Iran, in the prisons. The dictatorship intensified. The Shah paved the way for his overthrow.

So many organizations in Iran were crushed and disintegrated. Komalah was not. We survived.

MJT: How did you survive?

Mohtadi: First of all, we were unlike other leftist organizations. We had real, real connections with people, with real people. We were a real movement. And that has been our characteristic for decades now.

MJT: How did that mean you were able to survive oppression from the state? Did you have more safe houses, things like that?

Mohtadi: We were among people. That was our safe house. We were among, for example, workers. Peasants. Teachers. Students. Different families. Neighborhoods.

We were against the guerilla warfare movement that swept the world in the 1970s. We had our theories against that. We believed in political work, raising awareness, organizing people. We said that was the real fortress. That was the real safe house.

MJT: You participated in the revolution of 1979, I assume.

Mohtadi: I did. He [referring to Modarresi] was arrested...twice, I suppose?

Modarresi: Yes.

Mohtadi: He was sent twice to prison under the Shah. Myself, three times. He spent three years?

Modarresi: Four years.

Mohtadi: I spent about three years in prison. Then in 1977 and 1978 we reorganized Komalah and we took part very actively in the revolution. At that time the KDPI of Iran were exiled. They didn't have connections, real connections with people, for two decades. We were the real activists who took part in the revolution. We were behind the demonstrations. We organized people. We gave speeches. We led people on different occasions. Because we had that network inside the society most intact under the Shah we were able to control the movement in almost every city and town in Iranian Kurdistan.

Lasswell: Do you think it helped that you didn't endorse the people who were committing violence?

Mohtadi: Let me clarify. We were not against revolution. We were not against overthrowing the regime of the Shah. What we were against was violence by small groups of guerillas who were separated from the mass movement. We put our emphasis on mass movements, on organizing them. We thought it was the people who had to do something about our fate.

MJT: Who did you have in mind, specifically at that time, of guerillas who were disassociated from a people's movement?

Mohtadi: The Fedayan. And also the Mujahideen Khalq.

MJT: Ok.

Mohtadi: There were two different groups, religious and secular leftist guerilla groups who were influential at that time. People thought they were the way out of the dictatorship. Many many intellectuals and students and political activists joined them. But we wrote different pamphlets criticizing their methods. And that made us people who had something, a kind of political theory for a movement.

MJT: What do you think of PJAK? [The Iranian wing of the Marxist-Leninist Kurdistan Worker's Party, the PKK, from Turkey.] Are they the kind of people you just described? Or are they more...popular than that?

Mohtadi: No, no, no, they are not popular. They are part of the PKK. When they cross the border [from Turkey] they change their name.

The problem with the PKK...I mean, the Kurdish toilers have every right to fight for their rights and their freedom. But the PKK as an organization is not reliable. They are very fanatic in their nationalism. They are very undemocratic in nature. They have no principles. I mean, they can deal with Satan. They can fight the Kurds.

MJT: They *have* fought the Kurds.

Mohtadi: Yes, they *have* fought the Kurds. They have fought the Kurds much more than they have fought the Turks. When you study the history of the PKK, you find out that they have been against every single Kurdish movement in every part

of Kurdistan. At the same time they have had good friendly relations with all the states where the Kurds live, where the oppressed live.

They have been friends with Hafez al-Assad [in Syria]. They have been friends with the Khomeini regime. And they supported Saddam in 1996.

MJT: So, really, Turkey is the only country they haven't had good relations with.

Mohtadi: Yes.

Lasswell: But they've used everyone else to maintain their power.

Mohtadi: Yes. They are very greedy.

Lasswell: The people down the road [referring to the estranged and unreconstructed Communist faction of the Komalah Party] said the PKK has a lot of money.

Mohtadi: They do.

MJT: Where do they get this money? Do they get it from these other regimes?

Mohtadi: The Kurdish-Turkish community in Europe is a huge community, unlike the Iraqi Kurds who are a few thousand or tens of thousands. They are millions. And they tax people. They impose taxes on people, on every business that Kurds have in Europe. They cannot fail to pay.

MJT: So it's basically a mafia now. In Europe.

Mohtadi: I think so, yes. Unfortunately, they are. They also have bases on the border between Iran and Turkey. They help people smuggle drugs and they tax them. It is a huge source of raising money.

PKK ideology is a mixture of Stalinism, Kurdish tribalism, patriarchalism.

MJT: I thought they were opposed to tribalism.

Mohtadi: They exploit the tribal culture. They have mobile phones, walkie talkies, satellite stations, but I don't consider them to be a modern party in the real sense of the word. Like the mafia. The mafia was modern in a sense, but they exploited the

medieval culture that was there in Italy, the family connections, the family loyalties. The PKK did not start the struggle against Turkey until they had eliminated other Kurdish groups and achieved a monopoly of the Kurdish movement.

MJT: Do you have any relations with them at all?

Mohtadi: We had. We supported them in a sense, but we always had reservations. At some times they were under pressure by Iraqi Kurds. We tried to mediate between them. We even helped them in some respects. But we found out that they are unreliable. They have no principles, no friendship, no contracts, no values. Perhaps it's a harsh judgment I'm making, but...

MJT: Well, I agree with your judgement. So I'm not going to say it's harsh. It may not be kind, but I think it's true.

Modarresi: They never believed in pluralism.

Mohtadi: In the name of the Kurdish movement, they eliminate everybody.

MJT: It sounds to me like they're a mafia, but they have the reputation of being a leftist group.

Mohtadi: They got some ideas and some organizational methods from the left, but just as a tool. They don't have the real genuine leftist values. I mean, you have to be...there are values.

MJT: I know.

Lasswell: In the United States the primary organizer of the anti-war movement is a group called ANSWER – Act Now to Stop War and End Racism.

MJT: They lost all the left values, as well. They support North Korea, for God's sake.

Mohtadi: How could they support North Korea! It's not Marxist, it's a kind of secular religion.

Lasswell: It's a Starvation Monarchy.

Mohtadi: [Laughs.] Yes, exactly. In 1983 we took part in the Communist Party of Iran, but after some years we realized it was a mistake. We criticized that and split from them. It took some years, of course. It was not just like that. [Snaps fingers.]

MJT: You split with them over what, precisely?

Mohtadi: Over so many things.

MJT: Are you referring to the party down the road here?

Mohtadi: Yes. [Laughs.] It's a lousy party now. It was not like that always.

Lasswell: They seem very ideologically controlled. They are very fixed in their belief structure. Do you feel you outgrew them?

Mohtadi: Yes, they are very dogmatic. They are very sectarian.

MJT: You mean ideologically sectarian.

Mohtadi: Ideologically sectarian. They have lost contact with the realities of the society. They're against the Kurdish movements. They aren't enemies of the Kurdish movement, but they have no sympathy for it. They have no sympathy for the democratic movement in Iran. We think the time for that kind of left is over. It was our belief in the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, and that was the real cause of our split.

We revived the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan, and we are now more affiliated with European social democracy.

MJT: Are you a member of the Socialist International?

Mohtadi: Not a full member, no. We have applied for that, and we are a member of the Kurdish Group of the Socialist International.

MJT: If I describe you as social democrats, is that accurate?

Modarresi: We won't be angry. [Laughs.]

Mohtadi: We haven't decided to take that name or not. But we are for democratic values. We are for political freedoms, religious freedoms, secularism, pluralism,

federalism, equality of men and women, Kurdish rights, social justice. We are for a good labor law, labor unions. There is an element of the left in our political program.

MJT: You sound like the mainstream left.

Mohtadi: But as a leftist and as a Kurd I thought the left discredited itself by associating itself with Saddam Hussein and with the political Islamist groups. The left, the genuine left, should have been the real defenders of democracy, of political rights, of political freedoms, of overthrowing dictators, no matter if the United States government is or is not against them.

To be continued...

Post-script: If you enjoy my articles from Northern Iraq, please help cover my travel expenses and support independent writing and journalism by donating through Pay Pal. The Kurdistan region of Iraq is an expensive place to visit, and these trips don't pay for themselves.

