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DOI

[10.29333/ejecs/1465](https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/1465)

Publication date

2023

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies

License

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Mofidi, S., & Aghapouri, J. (2023). The Role of Kurdish Identity in Shaping Political Identity: A Case Study of Kurdish University Students in Rojhelat, Kurdistan-Iran. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 10(3), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/1465>

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The Role of Kurdish Identity in Shaping Political Identity: A Case Study of Kurdish University Students in Rojhelat, Kurdistan-Iran

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Abstract: This paper examines the relationship between the political and ethno-national identity of Kurdish university students in Iranian Kurdistan, also known as Eastern Kurdistan or Rojhelat. It aims to investigate the ways in which the Kurdish identity contributes to and influences the formation of political identity among these students within the legal and political context of Rojhelat. The findings reveal a significant correlation between the Kurdish identity and the political identity of the students. However, despite the strong presence of Kurdish identity in the social sphere of Rojhelat, it remains largely invisible in the official or legal-political sphere of Iran. The paper argues that the existence of a non-democratic political regime in Iran, which has prioritized Farsi and Shiite identities, has imposed limitations and restrictions on the visibility and representation of other identities, including the Kurdish ethno-national identity, in the legal and political domains.

Keywords: Kurdish identity, ethno-national identity, political identity, agency, Rojhelat, Kurdistan, Iran.

Identity is a complex and contentious subject within the field of social sciences, particularly in the past two centuries. Castells (2010) argues that individuals possess multiple identities and that the search for identity and meaning is inherent in people's lives. Local and ethnic boundaries, religious affiliations, gender orientations, and ethnic and national identities, according to Castells (2010), have become new sources of meaning, as they did not necessarily define one's identity in pre-modern times. While individuals' various identities and factors influence their political stances and behaviors, the prominence and visibility of a particular identity can vary depending on societal conditions and individual circumstances.

Iran is a diverse society with multiple religions and ethnicities, where different and layered identities play a role in individuals' socio-political lives. Eastern Kurdistan/Rojhelat, a Kurdish region within Iran, has been influenced by the dominant aspects of Iranian identity while maintaining its distinct cultural and Kurdish ethno-national identity, which differ from the Persian Shiite identity of Iran. This diversity of identities has impacted the political identity of the youth in Rojhelat. However, equal opportunities for the emergence of different social identities and factors within the political sphere have been lacking (Mofidi & Rahmani, 2022). Iranian nationalism, which is synonymous with Fars/Persian ethno-nationalism, revolves around Fars

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ethnicity, the Farsi language and culture, and Shia religion (Mofidi, 2022b). Throughout Iran's modern history, Farsi, as the official language, and Shia, as the majority religion, have been politicized. Iranian nationalists have sought to linguistically, culturally, and religiously assimilate the population, accompanied by the securitization of daily life and social interactions (Mohammadpour & Soleimani, 2020; Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2019). In this context, Fars-Shiite nationalism became the political ideology of both the Pahlavi and Islamic regimes, attempting to impose this identity on all citizens, while non-Fars and non-Shiite individuals have resisted in order to preserve their own identities (Mofidi, 2022a; Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2020). Consequently, Kurds have frequently faced challenges in participating in the legal and political spheres in Iran based on their own ethno-national identity, which is a significant social factor in Rojhelat.

Based on a quantitative analysis of survey data collected from 232 Kurdish students attending various universities in the city of Sine [Sanandaj], this paper aims to explore the perspectives of young university students and assess the role of Kurdish identity in shaping their political identity within the official and legal-political sphere of Iran. The research question guiding this study is: What is the contribution of Kurdish identity and how does it relate to the formation of political identity within the legal and official political domains of Eastern Kurdistan/Rojhelat?

It can be hypothesized that, similar to other social factors, the Kurdish identity of the students influences their political identity and behavior. However, due to the presence of a non-democratic and religious government, only the Fars-Shiite identity is officially allowed to openly engage in the political arena. In official politics, other ethnicities and ethno-national groups, including the Kurds, lack both social or “ethnic agency” (Jenkins, 1980). In fact, it becomes challenging to ascertain the true effects and share of various social factors on an individual's political identity under such circumstances. Nevertheless, considering the nature of the Iranian political regime, it is hypothesized that there exists a meaningful relationship between Kurdish identity and the political identity of individuals, even though the latter remains invisible in the legal political sphere in Rojhelat and Iran.

Through the analysis of this data, the paper aims to shed light on the opinions and perspectives of these students, providing insights into the relationship between Kurdish identity and political identity formation. The results of the analysis will contribute to our understanding of the complexities and challenges faced by Kurdish youth in the political landscape of Rojhelat, particularly within the context of the official political sphere in Iran. By delving into this topic, the paper aims to contribute to the broader understanding of the dynamics between identity and politics in the context of Eastern Kurdistan/Rojhelat and Iran.

Social and Political Identity

Identity, a complex and ambiguous concept, is not tangible and observable, yet it prevails in all aspects of everyday life (Malešević, 2006). In its basic sense, identity indicates knowing self (who I am, or who we are, and how do we think?) and knowing others (who s/he is, or who they are?). It is the characterization and understanding of the self that forms what and where the person is, in both social and psychological terms (Guibernau, 2007). Identity can be categorized as individual or collective. Individual identity represents the self-concept by which an individual makes a distinction between himself/herself and other individuals (Ashmore et al., 2004). It is understood as the process of “being” or “becoming”. One’s identity – one’s identities, indeed, for

“who we are” is always multi-dimensional, singular, and plural – it is never a final or settled matter (Jenkins, 2008). On the other hand, collective identity indicates the specific characteristics assigned to an individual, which defines the collective existence of the person in relation to other individuals and other groups or communities. Gilroy (2006) indicates that an analysis of communal and collective identity results in “the question of solidarity,” which asks us to comprehend identity as an effect mediated by historical and economic structures, instantiated in the signifying practices through which they operate and arising in contingent institutional settings that both regulate and express the coming together of individuals in patterned social processes. (Gilroy, 2006, p. 386)

Concerning the emergence of social identities in the political arena, the paper considers social identity as conceived by Richard Jenkins (2008). Jenkins (2008) refers to identity as a process of identification, he defines social identity based on two concepts, that of *similarities* and *differences*, specifically, the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities. It is the systematic establishment and signification, between individuals, between collectives, and between individuals and collectives, of relationships of similarity and difference. (p. 18)

Politics and power affect identities and play important roles in changing them by the processes of social categorization (Jenkins 2008). In association with the effect of power and politics on identity, we should consider the institutionalization of identity and the concept of institution as one of the important concepts in Jenkins’ theory. He emphasizes the main role of power in creating the identity process and institutionalizing the identities, particularly in formal and informal organizations, and in the processes of social categorization and identity categorization. In his view, government and political power are the important types of applied and effective power. The relationship of each field with the field of power particularly in politics and in the political arena is emphasized. All the same, government and the policies it implements are the most important external factors that affect identity especially one’s political identity.

In politics, an integral aspect of identity is one's political perspective, which is formulated in response to the fundamental question, “Who am I?” Additionally, related components include “demands” and “expectations,” where the former arises from the inquiry, “What do people like me seek?” and the latter emerges from the question, “What are our chances of attaining our desires, given our current circumstances?” These elements of identity formation are influenced by various factors such as culture, religion, ideas, language, history, and territory, all of which contribute to the construction of political identity (Bryder, 2005).

Depending on individuals' and society's conditions, certain identities may assume greater importance and become primary considerations in shaping one's political identity. Consequently, individuals tend to view politics through the lens of these prioritized identities. Issues surrounding political identity have become defining characteristics of social life worldwide, influenced and transformed by the integration of race, class, gender, and other pertinent factors into everyday political discourse.

The paper considers political identity as “a social identity with political relevance” (Campbell et al., 1960, p. 4) and that it is “situated in a political context” (Nisbet & Myers, 2010, p. 349). Based on the definition of social identity, political identities are “the social categories, attributes, or components of the self-concept that are shared with others and therefore define individuals as being similar to others,” resulting from the “interplay between cognitive processes and social or cultural influences” (Monroe et al., 2000, pp. 421–422). In other words, political identities are forms of individual schemas that organize information about our political situation,

status, and social relationships and make some aspects of our collective life world more politically applicable than others, for instance, nation-state, nationality, race, culture, language, religion, gender, class, and so on.

Group affiliation is the central point of the classical definitions of political identity that describe the ways in which a person might represent political opinions, attitudes, and activities as a member of a specific group (Ramon, 2017). In other words, as mentioned by Campbell et al. (1960), it normally “entails an identity as part of a group with norms concerning shared political beliefs, and the ‘correct’ group position on a political candidate, political party, policy issue, or course of political action” (p. 4). Although the group-based definitions of political identity are important and more practicable, the situation of politics and contemporary socio-political changes indicate that a person can earn a political identity based on either a common social identity or self-interest without a group affiliation. It is worth mentioning that some identities are naturally political, such as those based on a political party, ideology, or political issue, while others rising from the social identities might have obtained political content. Thus, a political identity can be defined as a social identity based on a common political view or one that has clearly become political through the norms of a political group that governs the views and actions of its members. From this perspective, the political identity paves the way to expand group-based political solidarity and cohesion (see Huddy, 2013) that can be shaped by race, colonialism, different economic class, and so on (Ramon, 2017).

Apart from the above-mentioned various socio-political factors, some other factors, such as, the level of political awareness of society, type of system, media, education system and so on affect the shaping and orientation of political identity. According to Erikson (1968), the development of political commitment is a key aspect of identity formation in adolescence. In this sense, governments attempt to define, and form their favorite political identity of people through their education system, and media or by force. For example, autocratic states form their desired political identity using force and torture, tactics that normally destroy the self, and dignity of people and are usually used to change the existing political identity or to create a new political identity. They can also be counterproductive and may reinforce the existing identity of people against the identity that the state aims to impose (see Parry, 2010). For instance, even though trouble and torture have been tools in the hands of the states in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, to assimilate the Kurdish people in Kurdistan, it has led to further resistance on the part of the Kurds.

The Fundamentals of the Kurdish Identity in Rojhelat

Kurds attribute themselves to their ancient ancestors in Mesopotamia and Zagros and its surrounding areas, including the Medes (Minorsky, 1986; Zaki, 1931). They mainly refer to Iranian Kurdistan as *Rojhelat* or Eastern Kurdistan. The region encompasses the same Kurdish regions that were previously under the rule of different empires and states since the Median Empire to the modern age. The area includes all Kurdish speaking provinces in the north-west of Iran which historically (until the second half of the 19th century) had their own self-ruling principalities, local governments, and autonomous tribes. Even though there is also another Kurdish dominated province in the north-east of the country, North Khorasan, it is distantly scattered and cannot be included within the geography of Kurdistan. In Iran, statistics are not provided based on ethnicity, but estimating the number of Kurds can be obtained through considering the cities or provinces which have a majority of Kurdish speakers. According to the

2016 general census and considering the general statistics of Iran's provinces provided by the Iran's Statistics Center, the Kurds of Iran are roughly estimated to be nine to 12 million comprising 10 to 12 percent of the population of Iran (Statistical Centre of Iran, 2020).

The relationship between the Persians/Fars and the Kurds has generally been ambiguous (Tahiri, 2007) and since the Kurds in Iran have been deprived from participating in politics with their own, and distinctive ethno-national identity and they "find it difficult to identify with the Iranian state, they turn towards their cross-border ethnic kin" (Akbarzadeh et al., 2019, p. 1). In fact, "Nationalist clamour" (Valluvan, 2019) of Fars-centric Iranian nationalism has silenced the voice of others. If fascism and the new nationalist anxieties have occasionally emerged in the Western countries around factors such as immigration, Muslims, and multiculturalism (Valluvan, 2019), the Iranian Fars-Shiite nationalism has continuously suppressed historically settled non-Fars ethno-nations, Sunnis, multilingualism, and multiculturalism throughout the last century.

In the beginning of the 20th century during the two decades of Reza Shah's reign, the non-Fars (non-Persian) ethnic groups were oppressed, and the Persian new nationalism and autocracy constituted the formal political organization of Pahlavi's regime. According to Ghassemlou (1988), the Persian/Fars ethnic group became the dominant group by exercising exclusive political power. To eliminate the history and culture of all ethnicities rather than Persians, Reza Shah prevented any and all forms of local cultural practice in Kurdish areas and even gave Persian names to the villages and cities, forbade ethnic cultural rites, and prohibited traditional attire (for instance, that of the Kurds, the Arabs and the Baluchis). He aimed at the eradication of the tribal system, the obliteration of tribal militaries, and the formation of army bases in the territories of ethnic minorities including in Kurdistan (Ghassemlou, 1965; Nerwy, 2012; Vali, 2011).

From 1920 to 1924 the widespread rebellions organized by *Simko Shikak* were the first Kurdish reactions to the dominant Persian nationalism and Reza Shah's policies (Ciment, 1996). Moreover, because of the interim power vacuum in the Kurdish areas of Iran in the mid-1940s, the Kurds in Iran were able to organize a modern political movement under the name of the Democratic Party of Kurdistan-Iran, (PDKI). So, on 22 January 1945, Qazi Mohammad, the leader of the PDK-Iran, declared the short-lived Republic of Kurdistan in the city of Mahabad. Due to the influence of the republic on the Kurdish movement, some scholars (e.g., Vali, 2003, 2011) regard the republic as the birthplace of modern Kurdish nationalism. Some of the aims noted within the manifesto of the republic were those of the PDKI including the following.

1. Autonomy for the Iranian Kurds within the Iranian state
2. The use of Kurdish as the medium of education and administration
3. The election of a provincial council for Kurdistan to supervise state and social matters.
4. All state officials were to be of local origin.
5. Unity and fraternity with the Azerbaijani people
6. The establishment of a single law for both peasants and notables (McDowall, 2004, pp. 24-24).

As a result of their history of marginalization under the Pahlavi regime(s), the Kurds were enthusiastic in their backing of the Iranian Revolution, which resulted in bringing the Islamic Republic to power in February 1979 (McDowall, 2004). After the revolution, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (PDKI) and Komala were the two influential political players in Eastern Kurdistan. And since the new Islamic regime was preoccupied with the collapse of the Shah's

regime and the revolution, the two political parties took the opportunity to rule over most Kurdish areas in Iran. This did not last long as war broke out between the Kurdish political parties and the Iranian Islamic state, so finally the state's army took control of all the Kurdish cities. The Kurdish political organizations were outlawed inside Iran and many prominent charismatic Kurdish leaders, including Abdulrahman Ghassemlou and Sadegh Sharafkandi, were assassinated in Europe by Iranian agents (Khayati, 2008).

Although the Kurds of Iran were involved in national activities even before the other parts of Kurdistan, the Kurdish national cause and issues in Iran seems to be less pronounced in public and academic arenas so the focus is on the Kurds in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. This lack of external attention along with the mentioned internal divisions has prevented the Kurds in Iran from being in the spotlight. This is even though Iran has often opposed any Kurdish national and political activities which suggest Kurdish separatism (Koochi-Kamali, 1992). The central question between the Iranian state and Kurdish nationalism is not "the supposed universalism of Islam, but rather...the boundaries of the nation-state called Iran" (Koochi-Kamali, 1992, p. 149). Since the Islamic revolution of 1979, the result of clashes between the Kurds and Iranian authorities and the discriminatory policies of the central government towards the Kurds is the lack of development as well as high unemployment in the Kurdish areas and tens of thousands of casualties on both sides.

The Kurds in Iran share common social and cultural characteristics with the Kurds in other parts of Kurdistan. In this regard, we can argue that the political dimension of Kurdish identity stems from its relationship with, and, as a reaction to the establishment of modern nation-states in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Thus, the common meaning of Kurdish identity could be similar to the Kurdish ethno-national identity outlined as a common culture, language, territory, set of symbols, memory and experience, and future political aspirations (Sheyholislami, 2011). In this regard, the measure of Kurdish identity for the Kurdish individual compared with the other identities in Kurdish society is most important for political action. It also shows the scale of the effect of the outlawed Kurdish political parties (PDKI, Komala, PJAK, etc.), the measure of the Kurdish people's awareness, the effect of the policies of the government in Kurdistan, and the effects of the media of both sides.

Thus, the Iranian governments in both the Pahlavi and Islamic eras have not been interested in the Kurdish identity becoming the basis of the political identity in Kurdistan and attempted the political socialisation and assimilation of the Kurdish individuals through force, education, media, and so on. For instance, in Iran, Persian (Farsi) became the official language in the early twentieth century, and the situation of the Kurdish language has remained unchanged and isolated under various governments and regimes (Hassanpour, 1992). This is despite the fact that Iran's current constitution concedes cultural and linguistic rights for the Kurds within the context of "the universality and expansion of Islam" (Koochi-Kamali, 1992, p. 149). Although Kurdish has never been officially banned in Iran, during both the monarchy and the Islamic regimes the language policy makers in Iran considered multilingualism as a threat to the territorial integrity of Iran. Thus, the use of Kurdish was restricted, instead the "supremacy of Persian" was encouraged as a mechanism to unite the ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous country (Sheyholislami, 2012, p. 21). What is more, following the Iranian revolution in 1979, the new constitution (Article 15) stated some basic cultural and language rights for non-Persian languages, although they were never implemented. During the presidencies of the Islamic reformist Mohammad Khatami and more recently the 'moderate' Hassan Rouhani, there were some promises that non-Persian languages would be taught at schools, yet these promises, to

date, have remained unfulfilled and the domination of the Persian language or the “Persianization of non-Persian languages” (Sheyholislami, 2012, p. 1) continues to be the driving force of the Islamic regime's language policy.

Methodology

This research utilizes a quantitative analytical approach to collect and analyze data, aiming to examine the correlation between Kurdish identity and the political identity of Kurdish youth. It treats the political identity of the students as a dependent variable that can be influenced, shaped, and developed by other factors, including ethnicity, gender, religion, and class. To facilitate this investigation, a questionnaire was designed to explore common concepts and issues related to the study. The questionnaire comprised several sections. The first part focused on gathering information about the respondents' individual characteristics, such as age, gender, marital status, religion, educational level, degree, and field of study. Subsequently, the questionnaire delved into the definition of key concepts, including Kurdish and political identities.

To measure Kurdish identity, three questions were included, addressing the respondents' perspectives on (a) the significance of honoring the Kurdish identity, (b) their sense of belonging to the Kurdish identity in comparison to other identities, and (c) their efforts to maintain and preserve this identity within society. Regarding the dependent variable of political identity, the questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first section explored the respondents' political perspectives and orientations, encompassing their views on civil liberties and their level of interest in organized political activities. The second section focused on political actions and performances.

The research population included 232 young Kurds in the city of *Sine* (Sanandaj) in Rojhelat. Since the sample population had to understand the concepts of the research and questionnaire, we preferred to select the participants from university students from different universities and departments. Then, the completed questionnaires in the academic year 2017/18 were analysed by SPSS to find the correlation between the variables and to explain the effect of the independent variable. The data gathered from the studied population was analysed and interpreted through descriptive and inferential (analytical) statistics. The collected data from the questionnaires for each variable was described in terms of statistical-numerical indexes, and an adequate knowledge was gained about the dispersion, demographical features, and a description of the respondents in various parts of the research. The relationships between the variables were examined and the hypothesis of the research was tested through appropriate statistical patterns.

Description of Respondents' Demography

As shown in Figure 1, the demographic profile of the respondents is as follows:

Age: Approximately 10 percent of the sample population falls within the age group of 15-20; 62 percent in the range of 21-30; and 28 percent in the range of 31-40. Two individuals did not provide answers to the questions.

Sex: Out of the sample population, 133 respondents (approximately 58 percent) identify as male, while 97 respondents (approximately 42 percent) identify as female. Two individuals did not respond to the questions.

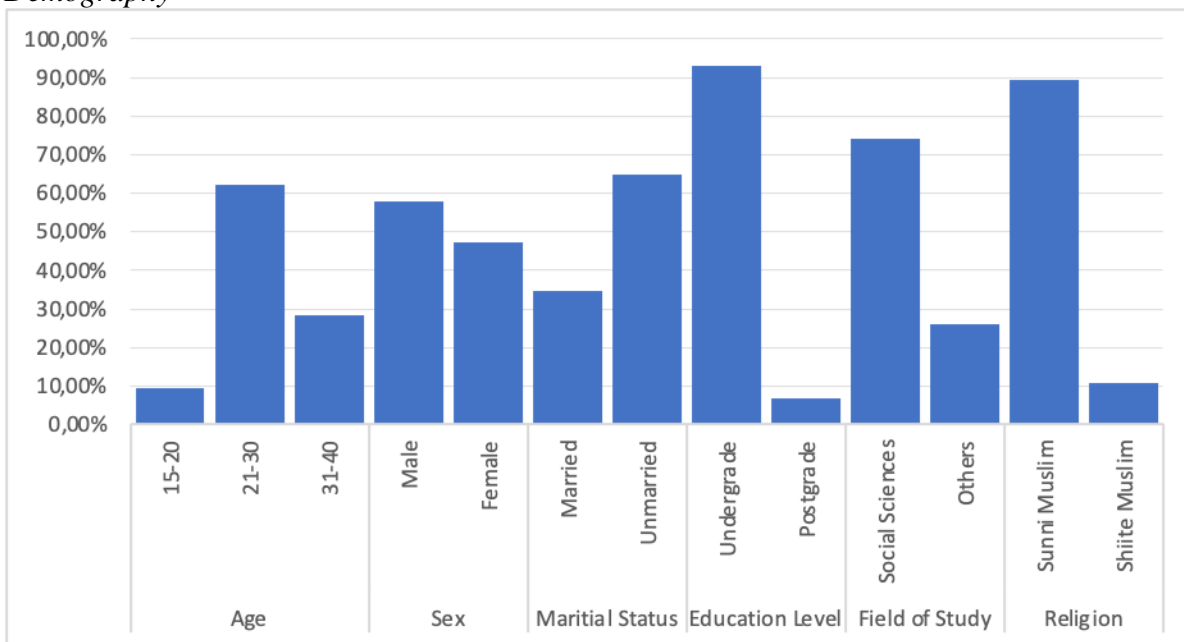
Marital status: Within the sample population, 80 individuals (approximately 35 percent) are married, and 150 individuals (approximately 65 percent) are unmarried. It is worth noting that due to religious and cultural restrictions, being unmarried often signifies being single, as it is uncommon to be in a serious relationship outside of marriage. Two individuals did not provide responses.

Level of education: The results indicate that approximately 15 percent of the sample population are pursuing associate degrees [Faq-e Diplom in Farsi], 78 percent are undergraduate (Bachelor's) students, and 7 percent are postgraduate (Master's and PhD) students.

Field of study: Among the respondents, 172 individuals (approximately 74 percent) are enrolled in humanities and social sciences, while 60 individuals (approximately 26 percent) are pursuing non-humanities fields, including sciences and other disciplines.

Religion: Among the sample population, 207 individuals (approximately 89 percent) identify as Sunni Muslims, while 25 individuals (approximately 11 percent) identify as Shiite Muslims.

Figure 1
Demography



Answering the Questions

In terms of the statement “*I honor my Kurdish identity,*” most of the sample population, namely 164 respondents (70.7 percent) *fully agreed* with the statement, 42 respondents (18.1 percent) *agreed*, 16 respondents (6.9 percent) had *no opinion*, 2 respondents (0.9 percent) *disagreed*, 3 respondents (1.3 percent) *fully disagreed*, and 5 people (2.2 percent) did *not answer*. Therefore, the answers show most of the respondents honor their ethno-national identity, namely, their Kurdish identity, more than they responded regarding their Iranian identity (see Figure 2). In a similar question about their opinion on the statement *Kurdish identity is above any other identity for me*, the answers show that 109 respondents (47 percent) *fully agreed* with the statement, while 62 respondents (26.7 percent) *agreed*, 26 (11.2 percent) had *no opinion*, 20

respondents (8.6 percent) *disagreed*, 9 respondents (3.9) *fully disagreed*, and 6 respondents (2.6 percent) *did not answer*. Therefore, for the overwhelming majority the Kurdish identity is more important than their other identities.

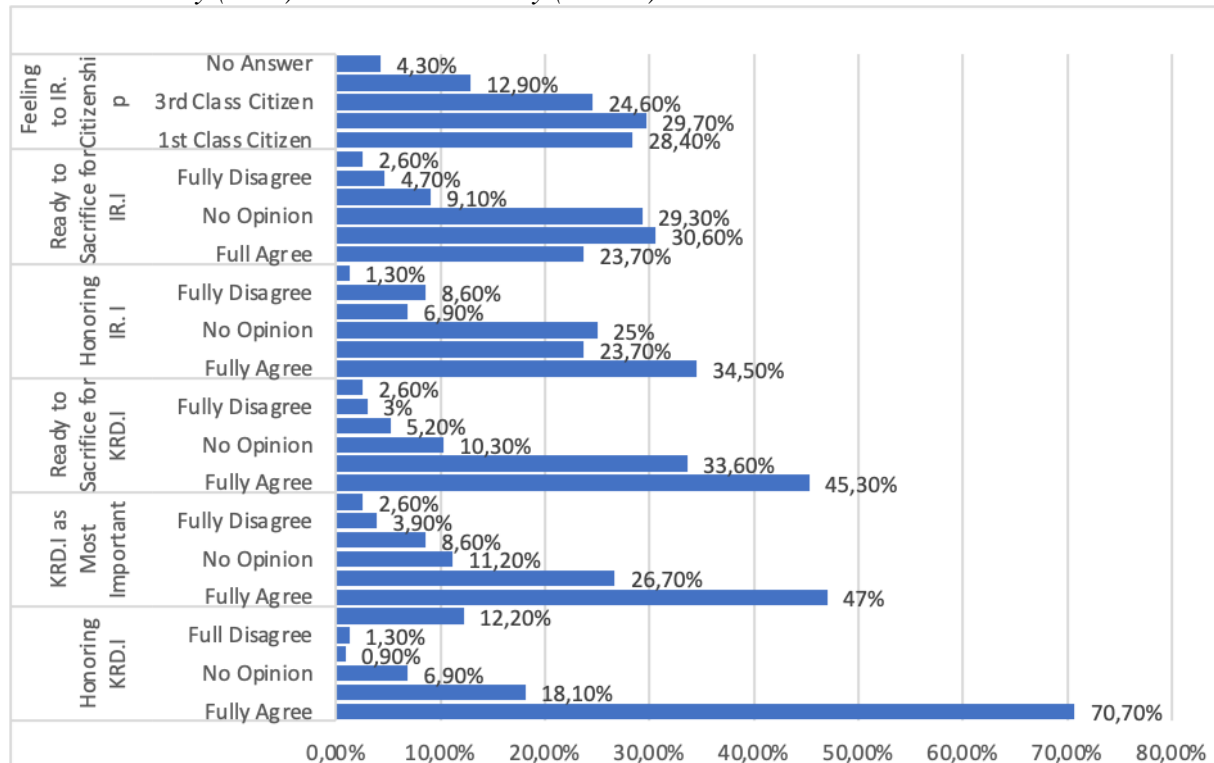
About the statement “*I am ready for any sacrifice to keep my Kurdish identity and serve it,*” the answers show that 105 respondents (45.3 percent) *fully agreed*, while 78 respondents (33.6 percent) *agreed*, 24 respondents (10.3 percent) had *no opinion*, 12 (5.2 percent) *disagreed*, 7 respondents (3 percent) *fully disagreed*, and 6 respondents (2.6 percent) *did not answer*. Therefore, most respondents are ready to pay heavy price (i.e., to sacrifice) to preserve their Kurdish identity.

Regarding the statement “*I honor my Iranian identity*” 80 respondents (34.5 percent) *fully agreed* with the statement, 55 respondents (23.7 percent) *agreed*, and 58 respondents (25 percent) had *no opinion*, 16 respondents (6.9 percent) *disagreed*, 20 respondents (8.6 percent) *fully disagreed*, and 3 people (1.3 percent) *did not answer*.

Regarding the statement on the *feeling/perception of their citizenship*, most of the respondents had the feeling of being second-class citizens in Iran. The results show that 66 people (28.4 percent) mentioned themselves as being *first-level* citizens, while 69 people (29.7 percent) mentioned *second-class*, 57 people (24.6 percent) *third-class*, 30 people (12.9 percent) had *no feeling to belong to Iran*, and 10 people (4.3) *did not answer*.

About the question of *being ready for any sacrifice to keep Iran and serve it*, the answers are: 55 respondents (23.7 percent) *fully agreed* with the statement, while 71 respondents (30.6 percent) *agreed*, 68 respondents (29.3 percent) had *no opinion*, 21 respondents (9.1 percent) *disagreed*, 11 respondents (4.7 percent) *fully disagreed*, and 6 people (2.6 percent) *did not answer*.

Figure 2
Iranian Identity (IR. I) vs Kurdish Identity (KRD.I)



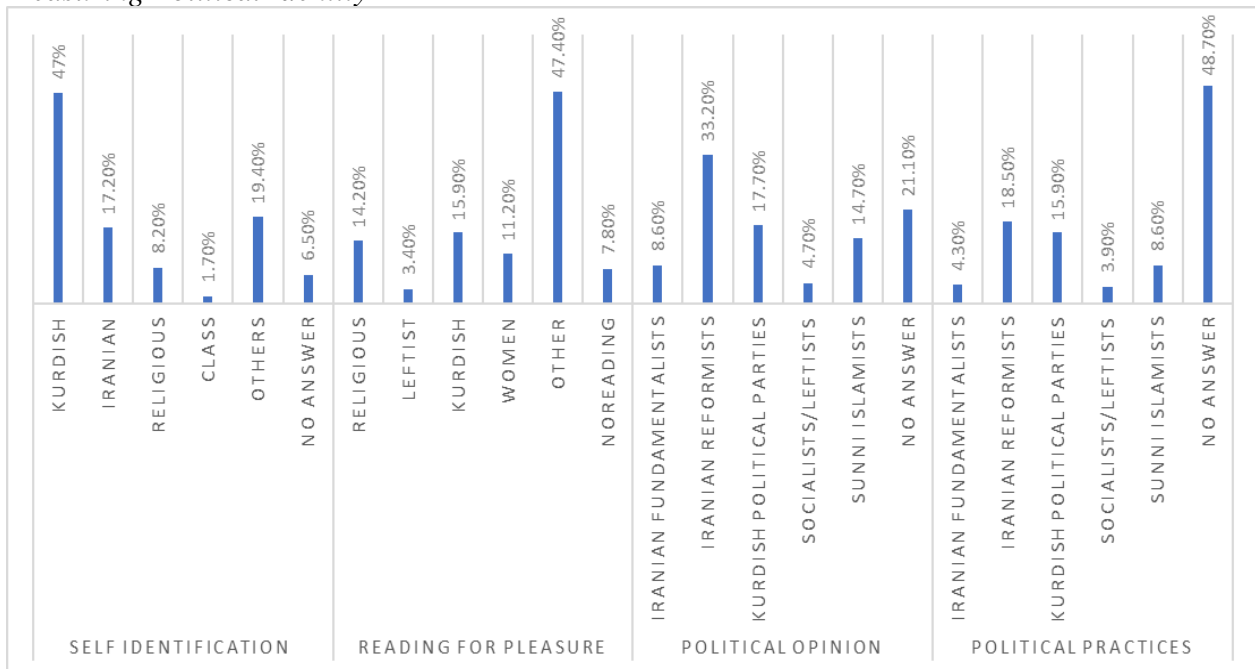
Concerning their political identity (see Figure 3), the statement was: *I often have relationships with people who are politically likeminded*. The following numbers were collected: 114 persons (49.1 percent) *agreed* with the statement, while 76 persons (32.8 percent) had *no opinion*, 34 persons (14.7 percent) *disagreed*, and 8 people (3.4 percent) did *not answer*.

About the statement on *introducing/identifying themselves*, the answers represent those 40 respondents (17.2 percent) who introduced themselves as *Iranian*, while 109 respondents (47 percent) identified themselves as *Kurdish*, 19 respondents (8.2 percent) as *religious/Muslim*, 4 respondents (1.7 percent) as *rich*, 45 respondents (19.4 percent) as *others*, and 15 people (6.5 percent) did *not answer*. So, most of them liked to introduce/identify themselves as *Kurdish people*.

Regarding the statement on their *study or reading interests*, 33 persons (14.2 percent) mentioned their interests in *religious studies*, 8 persons (3.4 percent) mentioned *Leftist literature studies*, 37 persons (15.9 percent) mentioned *Kurdish and Kurdistan studies*, 26 persons (11.2 percent) in gender or *studies on women*, 110 persons (47.4 percent) mentioned *other subjects*, or they had *no reading preference*, and 18 people (7.8 percent) did *not answer*.

In terms of the question on their *political perspective/opinion*, 20 persons (8.6 percent) showed a tendency to the Iranian so called Conservative religious factions, 77 persons (33.2 percent) to the Iranian so called Reformist religious factions, while 41 persons (17.7 percent) showed an interest to the Kurdish opposition political groups, 11 persons (4.7 percent) to the socialists, 34 persons (14.7 percent) to the Sunni Islamists [Muslim Brotherhood, Quran school, Salafists], and 49 people (21.1 percent) did not answer the question.

Figure 3
Measuring Political Identity



About their *criteria for their selection of candidates in political elections*, 14 respondents (6 percent) mentioned *religion* as the main reason of choice, while 44 respondents (19 percent) mentioned *Kurdishness/Kurdayeti*, 3 respondents (1.3 percent) mentioned *gender*, 130 respondents (56.1 percent) mentioned *level of education, background and good management*, 11 persons (4.7 percent) mentioned the *political faction* and the party of candidates, and 30 people (12.9 percent) *did not answer* the question.

Concerning the question *on the political acts and performances and tendency practically to the political trends* the responses included: 10 respondents (4.3 percent) who showed a tendency to *the Iranian so-called Conservative religious factions*, 43 respondents (18.5 percent) to *the Iranian so-called Reformist faction*, 37 respondents (15.9 percent) to *the Kurdish opposition groups*, 9 respondents (3.9 percent) to *the socialists*, 20 respondents (8.6 percent) to *the Sunni Islamists*, and 113 people (48.7 percent) *did not answer* the question.

Analysis

This section focuses on the examination of the hypothesis and the relationship between the independent and dependent variables, shedding light on the role and impact of Kurdish identity on political identity. The data underwent a normal distribution test, revealing that the significance level for Kurdish identity is less than 0.05. As a result, with 0.95 confidence, it can be concluded that the distribution of data related to the Kurdish identity variable is non-normal. On the other hand, the significance level for political identity is greater than 0.05. Therefore, with 0.95 confidence, it can be stated that the distribution of data related to the political identity variable is normal. Regarding the hypothesis, the analysis demonstrates a significant correlation between the two variables: Kurdish identity and political identity.

Table 1
The Relationship Between Kurdish and Political Identities

Political Identity				Variable
Coefficient of determination	Significance level	Correlation coefficient	Number	Kurdish Identity
2.656 %	0.001	0.163**	232	

Note. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level.

Based on the results of the Spearman Test, the obtained significance level is less than 0.05, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis and acceptance of the alternative hypothesis. In other words, with a confidence level of 0.95, it can be concluded that there is a significant correlation between Kurdish and political identities.

The results indicate a positive and direct significant correlation between the two variables ($r=0.163$). Furthermore, the coefficient of determination reveals that Kurdish identity accounts for 2.656 percent of the political identity of Kurdish youth, while the remaining percentage is attributed to other factors (see Table 1). When considering the questions related to other identities and factors, it is observed that they also have a positive and direct significant correlation with political identity. The coefficients of determination show that social class explains 9.060 percent, Iranian-religious identity explains 69.056 percent, gender explains 4.708 percent, and the type of media explains 10.368 percent of the political identity of Kurdish youth in the official and legal

political arena. The remaining percentages can be attributed to other factors. These findings support the hypothesis of the research.

Discussions

The Kurdish identity is a multidimensional identity encompassing various aspects such as ethno-national, religious, Iranian, gender, class, and others. Each of these dimensions contributes to the individual and collective political identity of the Kurdish people. The visibility of different aspects of identity is influenced by the socio-political environment individuals find themselves in. According to Jenkins (2008), political identity, like other social identities, becomes more visible in socio-political practices and processes. However, due to the limited availability of free and open political spaces for individual and group agency-based activities regarding most of these identity dimensions, they are not prominently visible in the official or legal-political sphere of Iran, despite their cultural and social influence.

While social phenomena such as gender and class are commonly addressed throughout Iran, ethno-national and religious issues are more localized, particularly in regions like Kurdistan. The city of Sine, being located in a Sunni Kurdish region, consists mostly of Sunni Muslim respondents. The Kurdish population in this region has experienced oppression under the Fars-Shiite government, and the intersection of Sunni and Kurdish identity has had an impact on their political identity. The role of religion in shaping the political identity of the Kurdish people and the state's religious policies have been previously analyzed (Mofidi, 2015; Mohammadpour & Soleimani, 2020; Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2019). However, this article focuses more on the Kurdish identity within the official political arena, considering the aforementioned intersection. However, the representation of such political identity is limited to unofficial arenas or “illegal” activities. A political identity based on non-Persian ethnic agency cannot be publicly and legally visible in socio-political actions in Iran. Therefore, the Kurdish ethno-national identity, despite its strong social existence among the university students, is not given any chance to be manifested in the official political arena. This is mostly due to the widespread aspect of a non-democratic and religious government, the lack of freedom of speech for Kurdish political activists, the outlawing of Kurdish political parties, and suppression of Kurdish free media.

The findings of the research highlight the significant relationship between Kurdish and political identities among undergraduate students, who constitute a significant portion of the university population. It is evident that Kurdish society has already been politicized, as indicated by the historical review of the Kurdish movement discussed in the section on the fundamentals of Kurdish identity. However, the expression of this political identity is confined to unofficial arenas or activities deemed “illegal.” A political identity based on non-Persian ethnic agency cannot be openly and legally visible in socio-political actions within Iran.

The Kurdish ethno-national identity, despite its strong presence among university students, is denied the opportunity to be manifested in the official political arena. This limitation primarily stems from the non-democratic and religious nature of the government, the lack of freedom of speech for Kurdish political activists, the outlawing of Kurdish political parties, and the suppression of Kurdish independent media. While the Shiite-Fars-centric state in Iran has not granted media freedom or supported political organizations for unrecognized identity groups, it has institutionally promoted and strengthened public institutions associated with Shiite religion and Fars/Persian ethnic groups. Even secular Persian intellectuals have recognized the political

importance of religion in assimilating society (Mofidi, 2022; Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2019).

The government's efforts to change or diminish the expression of non-Persian and non-Shiite social identities have restricted the public activities and organizations related to these identities. As a result, the representation of such identities is confined to clandestine political arenas. This situation has favored those aligned with Fars-Shiite identities, providing them with a platform to exert influence over society and politics. Consequently, the Kurds in Rojhelat are deprived of their basic cultural and political rights. The use of the Kurdish language in education and the expression of Kurdish national symbols, such as the anthem and flag are banned. Kurdish political parties are not permitted to form or engage in activities, and there is no parliamentary quota system in place to ensure their adequate representation, leaving the Kurds largely underrepresented in the government. The limited political space has effectively marginalized the Kurds, denying them formal recognition and agency within the system. Kurdish political parties operating outside Iran remain the only legitimate means of Kurdish representation (Kurda, 2022).

Both the Pahlavi and Islamic regimes in Iran have systematically marginalized ethno-national groups, leading to the politicization or securitization of their identity (Saleh, 2013). As noted by Akbarzadeh et al. (2019), there is a lack of trust between the Iranian government and the Kurds. Consequently, there are very limited political opportunities for the Kurds in Rojhelat, and their political activities are conducted within a securitized political environment. The Persian-centric perspective and definition of Iranian identity by the Persian elite have been detrimental to the ethno-national groups and their role in society and politics (Elling, 2013). Persian nationalists have long adhered to the motto of “One Nation, One Language, and One Country” and have pursued the assimilation of other ethno-national groups since the time of Reza Shah (Mohammadpour & Soleimani, 2020). The political practices of the Islamic Republic of Iran have also been deeply ethno-nationalistic, favoring Fars/Persian interests while denying political rights to other ethno-national groups, particularly the Kurds. During the Islamic regime era, Rojhelat has experienced a disproportionate number of political prisoners and executions compared to other regions in Iran (Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2019). The policies of the Iranian government have effectively suppressed the emergence of non-Fars communities and other ethno-national groups. Consequently, Kurdistan has been characterized as a colony, and the Kurds as an internally colonized community (Mohammadpour & Soleimani, 2020).

Additionally, beyond state-level policies, Kurdistan still maintains a traditional society where religion exerts a significant influence, acting as a barrier to the activities of secular nationalist groups in the political arena. In fact, the current religious government has utilized religion as a tool to counter Kurdish nationalist and leftist parties. It should be noted that the role and impact of various identities and factors on political identity in an official/legal sphere are most evident in an open political space. For instance, the Kurdish identity had a significant influence on the formation of political identity during official political periods such as the Republic of Kurdistan in 1946 or the semi-open political environment in the months following the 1979 revolution in Iran. During these times, Kurdish ethnic agency was manifested in official political processes. Kurdish political parties operated openly, and Kurds established a Kurdish government in 1946 or participated in the elections of 1979-1980. For example, the representatives of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) won seats in the Assembly of Experts of the Constitution and the first general elections of Parliament in their respective constituencies (“The names of the winners,” 1979; “Election results,” 1980).

However, it is challenging to fully assess or clarify the real effects of social factors on political identity in a context where any questioning or discussion about Kurdish ethno-national and political identities can have severe consequences for both researchers and respondents. Some questions were left unanswered primarily because respondents feared expressing their political opinions, even anonymously, due to the lack of a free political space.

The research concludes that in Rojhelat, there is an unequal opportunity for various aspects of Kurdish individuals' identities, especially agency-based Kurdish identity, to emerge in politics and political practices. Conversely, the government has fostered the growth of a specific form of Iranian identity predominantly embodied in Fars/Persian and Shiite identities. The Persian ethnic group is the only group with political agency in the political arena. Nevertheless, as the research has demonstrated, the Kurdish identity remains the most influential and defining identity in the cultural, social, and non-official political spheres of Rojhelat and could become a defining identity in the formation of political identity within official political actions should there exist a free and democratic space to express and represent it.

Conclusion

Political identities are often forms of collective social identities within a political context. These identities are shaped by various social factors, including class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and others. Furthermore, several socio-political factors influence the formation and orientation of political identity, such as the level of political awareness in society, the educational system implemented by governments, media influence, and interactions between governments, citizens, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In the context of Kurdish society, the political identity of Kurdish individuals in Rojhelat is further influenced by factors such as ethno-national identity (Kurdish identity), the Iranian identity promoted by the government and Iranian organizations, religious/Islamic ideology, social class/Left ideology, gender, and Kurdish political organizations opposing the Iranian government. The focus of this paper is on examining the role and impact of Kurdish ethno-national identity on the political identity of Kurdish youth and their relationship with official politics in Iran.

The paper argues that there is a significant correlation between Kurdish identity and the political identity of Kurdish university students in Rojhelat. However, due to the lack of ethnic agency granted to Kurds in the legal and official political arenas, Kurdish identity, despite its strong presence in the public sphere, remains invisible in official political processes. In contrast, the Fars/Persian people enjoy full ethnic agency in Iran, and Iranian-religious identity has a much higher visibility in the official socio-political sphere. According to the findings of this research, although the majority of respondents consider their Kurdish ethno-national identity as the most important, they are unable to represent or openly declare it in the legal political arena. Despite acknowledging political problems, economic difficulties, ethno-national discrimination, and inequality, they are hesitant to take action to secure their rights. This hesitancy stems from the absence of a free political space in Iran, which hampers the expression and representation of agency-based Kurdish identity in the country's political practices and processes. The research primarily focuses on undergraduate students, and future studies could comparatively explore the role of Kurdish identity in shaping the political identity of graduate students and other demographic groups.

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