

WHY AND WHY NOT

In memory of Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou (1930 – 1989)



Presentation on 13 July 2024, for KDPI Australia
by Dr. Gina Lennox, Co-Chair & Public Officer, Kurdish Lobby Australia

Thank you Kak Salah and KDPI Australia for inviting me to speak at this commemoration for Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou. In 'Why and Why Not?' I will focus on Ghassemlou's meetings with Ayatollah Khomeini and those Iranian 'envoys', his assassination, and lessons that we can learn.

A Brief Background of Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou

Ghassemlou was 15 when he became a member of the Tudeh Communist Party's youth group. Over time he realised Communists were not interested in Kurdish self-determination, and after the KDPI was established, he co-founded its youth wing. His baptism of fire as a political activist was witnessing the rise and fall of the Republic of Mahabad in 1946. Realising he needed a world view to help achieve his fellow Kurds' aspirations, he left Iran to become a student and teacher at the Sorbonne in Paris, and Charles University in Prague, where he continued to be politically active while studying and later teaching economics and Kurdish studies, and also becoming fluent in nine languages. In 1952, he met and married H  l  ne Krulich. The couple returned to Iran in 1953, the year Prime Minister Moseddegh was overthrown in a US and UK-instigated coup.

Throughout the late 1950s, into the 1960s, 70s and 80s, between making trips to Europe, Ghassemlou clandestinely revitalised the KDPI in Rojhelati towns, and trained Peshmerga in the Qandil mountains. It was in the mountains that his friendship with Jalal Talabani became strong, especially in the late 70s with the proximity of PUK and KDPI Peshmerga bases.

In the late sixties, many Iranian Kurds supported Iraqi Kurds in their armed struggle for autonomy in Iraq. In fact, after Ghassemlou was elected Secretary General of the KDPI in 1971, he was

involved in negotiations between Iraqi Kurds and their Baathist government, but a year after the 1975 Algiers Agreement between Iran and Iraq, he returned to Prague, then moved to Paris, in both places connecting with journalists and politicians, including the Mitterrands, informing them of what Iranian Kurds needed.

Demonstrations against the Shah began in 1977. What really ignited the largest strikes and demonstrations across Iran was a tragedy blamed on SAVAK in August 1978, when 400 people died in a cinema fire.

That same year, over in Paris, Ghassemlou and the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini met on several occasions. Few sources mention this and one source claims Khomeini refused to meet Ghassemlou. However, KDPI insiders verbally confirm these meetings took place. Ghassemlou likely told the Ayatollah what he told everyone - that 'Kurds will support a revolution against the Shah on condition there is "Democracy for Iran and autonomy for Kurdistan"'. This included the right to be educated in one's mother tongue. Khomeini's response is unknown but it would seem unlikely that he repelled Ghassemlou's offer of support in overthrowing the Shah, and therefore he was likely vague in his response to Ghassemlou's insistence on non-Persian political and cultural rights because he returned to Iran in November 1978 full of hope for what was about to happen.

Many aspects of Khomeini's return to Iran on 1 February 1979, remain secret. Just 10 days later, he claimed the mandate to form a new government. Four Iranian Kurdish political parties formed a delegation to negotiate, led by Ghassemlou and the progressive Kurdish cleric, Sheikh Izaddin Husseini who was linked with Komala, a Kurdish social democrat party founded in the 1960s. Over time the delegation realised Khomeini had no interest in recognising Rojhelat as an autonomous region. For Khomeini, all Iranians were in 'the community of Allah'. That Ghassemlou so strongly advocated autonomy earned him Khomeini's label 'an evil on the earth'.

The clerical elite wasted no time consolidating power. By mid-March loyal clerics were assigned to every town and province. In response to this imposition there was a three-day uprising in Sanandaj, and clashes elsewhere. Khomeini's next step was to hold a referendum on the last two days in March. Determined to implement 'the Absolute Guardianship of the Jurist' the referendum asked one question: 'Do you want an Islamic Republic?' Ghassemlou and Sheikh Izaddin advocated a secular democracy, so they organised a widespread boycott of the referendum. The outcome was that 97 percent of all voters voted 'yes' despite having no information about how the theocracy would function.

In April, Khomeini established the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, hereon called the IRGC or Revolutionary Guards. The IRGC would answer to Khomeini, protect the theocracy, and keep in check troublemakers and the existing armed forces. Over the next period various groups launched isolated clashes against the government, with Kurdish Peshmerga managing to take control of different parts of Rojhelat. Meanwhile, Ghassemlou, Sheikh Izzadin and others continued to negotiate. In August 1979, Ghassemlou was elected Urmia's representative to the Assembly of Experts that would draft a new constitution, but a Kurdish uprising a few days before the Assembly met caused Khomeini to announce that Ghassemlou and Sheikh Husseini were 'enemies of God', that KDPI was a party of Satan, and hereon banned. Khomeini ended with a declaration of war - a holy war - on Kurds. Needless to say, Ghassemlou did not attend the Assembly.

As military forces attacked different Rojhelati towns, people began to strike and demonstrate. Many non-violent political activists were executed so a Kurdish armed struggle ensued. Kurdish Peshmerga managed to drive government forces out of Rojhelat and keep them out for six months.

In this time, Ghassemlou continued building KDPI's political and military capacities, establishing a KDPI headquarters in the mountains. In April 1980, government forces launched a full-scale air and ground assault that lasted 24 days. KDPI and Komala fought back. The war killed 10,000 Kurds, displaced 200,000, and destroyed hundreds of villages. By 1982 the revolution was crushed, although isolated clashes continued until 1984.

Intelligent, charismatic leaders like Ghassemlou, especially those willing to take up arms, are always going to be a threat to tyrants, and in 1984, with the Iran-Iraq war at its bloodiest, Ghassemlou returned to Europe to network and gain support for the Kurdish cause.

First and Second Meeting in Vienna, 1988 – 1989

This means that by 30 December 1988, when Ghassemlou had his first meeting in Vienna with two Iranian 'envoys', ostensibly to negotiate autonomy for Rojhelat:

- He had direct experience of Khomeini's devious ways.
- He had lived the hard life of a Peshmerga in the mountains.
- He had witnessed the carnage of Khomeini's Holy War on Kurds.
- He had seen the Islamic Republic introduce lessons on martyrdom in school classrooms.
- He had too many of his friends and colleagues die fighting on either side of the eight-year war with Iraq.
- He had seen the unbelievable heartlessness of Iran's ruling clerics in sending up to 550,000 child soldiers as young as nine to the front lines, where they were made to advance over mine fields in 'human wave' attacks. Hence, in the name of Allah and their own power, these clerics had sacrificed up to 95,000 children - Iran's future;
- As well, he had survived multiple clashes between Kurdish parties and even within the KDPI,
- And he had rejected an Iraqi government offer to support KDPI to fight Iran, in return for a victorious Iraq bestowing autonomy on Rojhelat. Given Iraq had refused Iraqi Kurds their autonomy, preferring to massacre and displace them, Ghassemlou was wise to reject this offer.

I list these horrors to emphasise the main question:

- Why did Ghassemlou trust Iran's intentions and its two 'diplomats' sent to Vienna to secretly negotiate with him on 30 December 1988, again in January 1989, as well as two meetings in July?

The eight-year war had ended. Ghassemlou's overriding reason to resume negotiations was likely driven by an awareness that Iran and Iraq could team up to crush the Kurdish movement once and for all on both sides of the border.

He knew the solution to the Kurds' struggle had to be the outcome of political negotiations. He saw this offer of meetings as a window of opportunity to avoid genocide and advocate Kurds' rights, at a time when the Islamic Republic was shell shocked, its treasury and manpower were depleted, and the country was facing a massive reconstruction effort on which the IRGC was about to profit. Fractures had even appeared in and between the theocracy and the Revolutionary Guards. An increasing number of clerics did not trust the IRGC's interference in politics, and its growing economic clout.

- But why trust a regime that had imposed its will on the Iranian people, had refused all Iraq's offers of a ceasefire, and insisted on meetings being secret?

-

Sure, Ghassemlou trusted his friend, Jalal Talabani. It was Talabani who had organised the first two meetings, implemented 'security measures' and was present throughout these meetings. The first meeting even took place in a PUK member's flat.

- But why put all one's trust in Talabani? Ghassemlou knew Talabani was well connected with Iranian officials. Mam Jalal had a complex history of wheeling and dealing, of being involved in strategic alliances with 'the enemy', as leaders who survive in a hostile environment often do. After all, the Iranian regime had supported Talabani to fight Iraq in the 1980s.
- Even if Talabani was squeaky clean – and after much reflection I think he was in relation to Ghassemlou – why trust the Iranians with whom Talabani liaised?

The first two meetings had no positive outcomes. The Iranian envoys were not decision-makers and did not have influence on those who were. Iran cancelled meetings scheduled for March. Hence, in July, when it was proposed Ghassemlou meet the same two envoys, he accepted.

Third and Fourth Meeting in Vienna, mid-July 1989

By this time Talabani had been sidelined.

- So, if Ghassemlou knew that Jalal Talabani was no longer involved, why did he agree to secretly meet the same officials without an independent observer?

Ghassemlou had requested the meeting be held in Paris, but Iran insisted on Vienna.

- Was this because Austria had armed neutrality in international affairs, and Austria and Iran were in the middle of another illegal arms deal, as well as legal trade negotiations that would increase by 60 percent over the next decade – meaning, Iran had strings to pull?
- Why meet so soon after Khomeini's death on June 3?
- Did Ghassemlou think he could take advantage of the inevitable political reshuffles?
- Did he realise that reshuffles provided a way to avoid taking responsibility for an action?

For previous meetings and the meetings on July 12 and 13 the two Iranian envoys were: Mohammed Jafar Sahraroudi, head of Kurdish Affairs in Iran's Ministry of Intelligence, and Hadji Moustafawi, head of the secret service in Western Azerbaijan. Allegedly they arrived in Vienna with an IRGC officer and staunch Khomeini-supporter, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Evidence suggests that the future president's role was to collect weapons from the Iranian embassy. For both the July meetings the two envoys were accompanied by a third Iranian, described as a bodyguard: Amir Mansur Bozorgian. A man of many names. All planned to fly home straight after the July 13 meeting.

- Did Ghassemlou know that Ahmadinejad was in Vienna? Probably not.
- Was Ghassemlou informed about Bozorgian?

Bozorgian was another Revolutionary Guard. One source claims he was Special Forces, another that he was in the Secret Police. Whatever the case, he arrived in Austria under a false identity.

- Did Ghassemlou ask why the Iranians needed a bodyguard?
- What guarantees did Ghassemlou receive regarding his delegation's safety? And
- Why did Ghassemlou keep these meetings secret, even from KDPI?

One source notes that Ghassemlou made an appointment to meet the chief advisor of Austria's Interior Ministry an hour before the second meeting, but the Interior Ministry cancelled at the last minute.

- What did Ghassemlou want to talk about?
- What made the Austrians cancel?

Ghassemlou was accompanied by Abdullah Ghaderi Azeri, a member of PDKI's Central Committee, and a newcomer, Fadhil Rassoul, an Iraqi Kurdish university professor with Iranian connections who had arranged the meetings and organised their location: an apartment in Linken Bahngasse Street in a block with tight security measures.

- How well did Ghassemlou know Rassoul and his Iranian connections?
- Was any Kurd carrying a weapon and trained to respond in case of an attack in a confined space?
- Were the six men checked for weapons before entering the apartment?
- Had the apartment been checked for weapons?
- If not, why not?

The meeting was meant to discuss Ghassemlou's return to Iran to engage in high level discussions about Kurds gaining autonomy and cultural rights. Ghassemlou had secretly organised an audio tape recording. On this recording Ghassemlou says, "I cannot say that Iran is working for the autonomy promised." Another source says there was discussion about arranging another meeting for the next day. Whatever the case, suddenly there were multiple gun shots.

One report claims that armed men burst into the room and killed the three Kurds. This is the story that Sahraroudi told police, but this is not reflected in the audio recording, the undamaged apartment door, Bozorgian's testimony, and the weapons found in a nearby trash can in the street. These weapons were traced back to the Iranian armed forces. Yet this story fits the Iranian government's lie that Kurdish radicals had barged into the flat and carried out the assassinations, as noted by H el ene Krulich in her book *A European Woman in Wolf Country*.

Ghassemlou was shot in the forehead, temple and throat. Rassoul was shot in the head and neck. Abdullah Ghaderi Azeri had received seven shots. All three received a final shot to the head.

A neighbour called the police. When the police arrived, Hadji Moustafawi had already escaped. They found signs of a struggle, a wounded Sahraroudi with multiple injuries from one ricocheted bullet, and Bozorgian shouting, "They shot my friend."

The Austrian anti-terrorist police were next to arrive. Their officer, Mr Kessler, assessed the situation was an open and shut case: the Iranians had assassinated three Kurds, but noted, 'The rest is politics'.

Police took Sahraroudi to hospital where he was put under police surveillance. Nine days later, Austrian police escorted Sahraroudi to the airport and allowed him to leave the country.

Bozorgian was taken to Schottenring police station but after 24 hours was released.

- Why?
- Why did they let him go to the Iranian Embassy, where he found refuge before being smuggled out of the country?
- Why did the Austrian authorities allow three Iranian government-appointed envoys directly connected to three political assassinations on Austrian soil, leave the country?
- Why was there no investigation for another four months?
- Why were the findings of that investigation not made public?
- And why did no country execute the international arrest warrants issued in November for the three assassins?

It was not the first time that political assassins on European soil were let go. And it was not the last.

Back in Iran, Bozorgian was promoted to the rank of general, and appointed head of the Pasdaran headquarters in Urmia, where Ghassemlou was born.

Jafar Sahraroudi was promoted to the rank of Brigadier General and appointed the head of the Quds Force Intelligence Directory.

Hadji Moustafawi was appointed Governor of the province of Kurdistan.

And Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president of Iran for two terms, from 2005 to 2013.

As for the Kurds of Iran, Ghassemlou's assassination kick started a bloody insurgency that lasted until 1996, and which only led to more persecution. No wonder Kurds ask, "When will justice be served?"

- But why would Austria re-open a case when the country has so much to hide?

Reopening the case would only mean more questions:

- Why are Western countries and international organisations reluctant to hold Iranian killers on foreign soil to account?
- Surely the nuclear deal, years of sanctions and boycotts, and Iran's expanded Axis of Resistance operating in multiple countries mean there may never be a right time to re-open the case, especially given:
 - The failure of Krulich's 1990 lawsuit against the Viennese government.
 - The failure of Austrian magistrates' investigation in 2005 into Ahmadinejad's role, and finally,
 - The farce of what happened to the killers of Ghassemlou's successor, Sadegh Sharafkandi in Berlin. Even after the two assassins were found guilty of the 1992 murder, and were sentenced to life in prison, in 2007 they were simply released and deported back to Iran and Lebanon. This was after a Berlin court ordered an international arrest warrant for Iran's Minister of Intelligence, Hojjat al-Islam Ali Fallahian, who oversaw the assassination on the auspices of Ayatollah Khamenei and President Rafsanjani.

To this day, Iran denies any involvement in political assassinations on European soil.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To conclude, there are many lessons to be learned from Ghassemlou's life and assassination, and the perilous dynamics of the Kurdish struggle.

- Surely Ghassemlou would have weighed up the risks and rewards of these meetings?
- If so, did he think his life was unimportant for the cause? Or was Ghassemlou simply naïve? After all, throughout his life he had gone where angels fear to tread.
- Was he cursed with unwarranted trust?
- Why didn't he take precautions?
- Why didn't he insist on independent observers or mediators?

This combination of naivety and unwarranted trust is what many Kurdish leaders exhibit to this day, except when dealing with other Kurdish leaders.

Other lessons for surviving a long, perilous struggle, include Kurds needing to:

- Choose their battles. Prioritise. Don't get distracted.
- Prepare for worst-case scenarios, whether dealing with perceived allies or enemies.
- Act in the best interests of the Kurdish cause – the whole cause, not just for one party.
- Act in accordance with a set of principles that uphold best international standards.
- Prepare for the next opportunity. For there will be one, and
- Be ready to act when the 'stars' align – politically and, if necessary, militarily.

To attain self-determination, Kurds need to learn how to work the international transactional political paradigm *for the benefit of Kurdistanis*. Kurds need to position themselves as a critical actor in a broader conflict or dilemma, as they have done in Iraq since 2003, and since 2014, when fighting ISIS, and in welcoming US-led coalition bases inside Bashur and Rojava. Importantly Kurds, need the self-confidence, awareness and skills to drive a hard bargain. I suggest Kurds need to:

- Find common ground with other like-minded parties, even if there are disagreements. Isolate those, and build relations in multiple ways, including via sport, culture and trade.
- Form a joint platform or council that includes a broad cross section of respected people from both sexes and the diaspora, and for this council to identify joint goals and enact agreed on strategies to achieve them.
- Have this body negotiate with others in and outside Iran, including others struggling for self-determination and relevant decision makers with power to affect change.
- If there is a power imbalance, insist negotiations include impartial observers or mediators.
- Ensure the representative body gains international support and recognition. That is, a council must be credible and useful without selling out, just as Khomeini presented a case to overthrow the shah and acted according to his principles. Just leave out his questionable principles! But yes, we must learn from our enemies as well as our friends and mentors.

For more than a century Kurds have been swimming in a terrible mix of despair and hope. Both are problematic if unaccompanied by meaningful action. Could the recently elected Iranian president, whose mother is Kurdish, and who spoke Kurdish in Kermanshah saying 'Long Live Kurdistan' in July 2024, be a sign of a new era, or is he a tool for clerics to prolong the life of the Islamic Republic? Whatever the case, the people of Iran need to prepare for the day after the clerics are forced off the stage, and before the monarchists hog the theatre.