



QĀSEMLU, 'ABD-AL-RAḤMĀN

QĀSEMLU (Ghassemlou), **'ABD-AL-RAḤMĀN** (b. Urmia, 22 December 1930; d. Vienna, 13 July 1989; [Figure 1](#)), Kurdish political leader, who as secretary general of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), led the Kurdish nationalist struggle for autonomy and democracy in Iran. (The original name of the party was Kurdish Democratic Party [KDP]. The word “Iran” was added to the title in parentheses during the party’s third congress in 1973.)

Early life. Qāsemlu’s father, Moḥammad Qāsemlu, was a well-known Kurdish nationalist feudal lord from the Šekāk tribe. At the end of the 19th century, the shah gave him the title of Woṭuq-e divān (Krucich, p. 21). Qāsemlu’s mother, the third wife, was a Christian Assyrian converted to Islam. ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān Qāsemlu received his early education in Urmia, and by the time he was a teenager, he could speak several languages, including Sorani Kurdish, Persian, Azeri Turkish, Arabic, and Assyrian (Randal, 1986, apud, Prunhuber, pp. 141, 143). Later on he would learn French, Russian, Czech, and English.

Qāsemlu became interested in politics in the early 1940s, when the Allied forces invaded Iran and the nascent Kurdish nationalist movement was revived during the occupation of the two Azarbaijan provinces by the Soviet forces.

The Kurdistan Democratic Party was founded on 16 August 1945 by Qāzi Moḥammed (1893-1947; Eagleton, pp. 62-63; Roosevelt, pp. 245-55, 260-63) and attracted many young people to its ranks. On 22 January 1946, the short-lived Republic of Mahabad was publicly announced (Roosevelt, p. 257; Ghassemlou,



pp. 118-22) with Qāzi Moḥammed as president. But the Soviet troops retreated from northwestern Iran in the fall of 1946, leaving him without military and economic aid. Border conflicts with neighboring Azarbaijan and growing internal dissension further weakened the republic (van Bruinessen, p. 176). In December, the Iranian army regained the region, and the Republic of Mahabad fell (Roosevelt, pp. 266-67). When the repression against the Kurds intensified following the fall of the republic, Qāsemlu was sent to Tehran to finish school. In 1947, Qāsemlu left for France.

Student in Europe. After an assassination attempt against Moḥammad-Reżā Shah in 1949 at the University of Tehran, Iranian students in Paris organized a demonstration against the shah. Qāsemlu gave a speech at the event. The Iranian embassy put him under surveillance. His father was not allowed to send him any more funding, so Qāsemlu, through his contacts with the International Students Union, which was controlled by the communists, received a scholarship to study in Czechoslovakia (Randal, 1986, apud Prunhuber, p. 167; Krulich, p. 27).

In 1949 Qāsemlu entered the School of Political and Economic Science of Prague. It was the beginning of the Cold War, and the Stalinist regime was now gripping the country. As a young student and dogmatic Marxist-Leninist, Qāsemlu considered himself a Stalinist. He was elected president of the student union and participated in youth festivals in the International Congress of Students of Prague in 1950, and later in Berlin in 1951 (Randal, 1986, apud Prunhuber, pp. 167-68). He also met Helene Krulich, whom he would marry in 1952. They had two daughters Mina (1953) and Hiva (1955).

Political life. Qāsemlu returned to Iran in 1952 when he graduated from the School of Economics and Political Science (Kruclich, p. 27). He started his clandestine political activities in the country by revitalizing the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP), which was then an appendage of the Tudeh party (McDowall, pp. 249-50). According to Qāsemlu (pp. 128-29), the Tudeh communists would neither support nor defend the aspirations of the Kurdish nationalist party in Iran. After the collapse of the Republic of Mahabad, the party's organization was in such disorder that the KDP "became reliant upon its relationship with the Tudeh Party" (Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, p. 15). In 1955, the KDP cut organizational ties with the Tudeh.

In 1959, Qāsemlu stayed to Iraq for a year. Back in Prague, he completed his doctorate in economics and political science in 1962. He also taught the theory



of economic growth and long-term planning at the School of Economics at the University of Prague (Randal, 1986, apud Prunhuber, p. 179). He published *Kurdistan and the Kurds* in Slovak, depicting the Kurdish world from a Marxist-Leninist perspective. The book was later translated into four languages.

The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, which led to purges, witch-hunts, and sentences, ended Qāsemlu's identification with communism and led him towards social democracy (Prunhuber, pp. 94-95, 158-59). He returned to Iraq in 1970, where he worked as an advisor to the Ministry of Economic Planning (Chris Kutschera, in Prunhuber, p. 181). In 1973 he was elected secretary general of the KDP (Iran), a position he held until his assassination in 1989 (McDowell, p. 254). During his leadership, he initiated the modernization of the party, drafted a new political program, and established its core political concept: "democracy for Iran, autonomy for Kurdistan" (Ghassemlou, p. 132).

Qāsemlu and the Kurdish problem in Iraq. Qāsemlu followed closely the politics of the Iraqi Kurds (Korn, 1994; Kissinger, pp. 576-92). Following negotiations over Kurdish autonomy, the Iraqi Kurds and Ṣaddām Ḥosayn signed their first agreement on 11 March 1970. Talks continued for another four years with no agreement on the situation in Kirkuk and other oil-producing areas (McDowall, pp. 327-35). Qāsemlu, whose presence had been requested by the Iraqi authorities, attended the last meeting between the Kurdish delegation, headed by Edris Bārzāni, and the state representatives (Randal, 1986, apud Prunhuber, p. 184).

Qāsemlu left Iraq and returned to Prague in 1974. Two years later he was deported from Czechoslovakia, presumably due to the Tudeh party interference. In 1968, at an unscheduled meeting of the party, Qāsemlu had not approved the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia; moreover, the party disapproved of Qāsemlu's views regarding the Kurdish issue (personal communication with Krulich, February 2012). In 1976 he left Czechoslovakia to reside in Paris, where he worked as an assistant professor of Kurdish at the School of Oriental Languages (Blau, 1991, apud Prunhuber, p. 187). While in Paris, he developed relationships with politicians and journalists, which augmented public interest on the Kurdish question.

Qāsemlu returned to Iran in 1978 as the revolution unfolded. He went to visit Ayatollah Kōmeyni in Neauphle-le-Château, but the Ayatollah did not receive him (Hélène Krulich-Qāsemlu, in Prunhuber, p. 36). He, however, supported



Ayatollah Komeyni, because he believed that the Ayatollah, the symbol of opposition, would eventually overthrow the shah (Randal, 1986, apud, Prunhuber, p. 36). In Iran, he surreptitiously began to rejuvenate the debilitated party, many members of which were in prison, exiled, or had been executed. He set the ideological and practical foundation of the party, created secret committees, updated the cadres, and incorporated younger activist members (Šarafkandi, apud Prunhuber, p. 40).

In March 1979, the KDP (Iran) officially announced the resumption of its political activities, putting an end to thirty years of clandestine functions. At the end of that month, Qāsemlu held his first political meeting in Mahabad. During this first celebratory political demonstration of the KDP (Iran), Qāsemlu “declared that his party was ready to cooperate with the new regime if the rights of the Kurds were guaranteed” (Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, p. 17). He announced the political agenda of the KDP (Iran) and asked the Tehran government to accept the Kurds’ autonomy demands, thus emerging as the political leader of the Kurds.

During the turbulent early 1979, Qāsemlu was building the armed resistance of the *pešmergas* (Kurdish fighters; lit. “those who face death”) and, at the same time, working to reach an agreement with the central government. Although he was meeting with the authorities from Tehran and also went to visit Ayatollah Komeyni twice, he considered that the government was biding time (Randal, 1986, apud, Prunhuber, p. 63). He publicly declared that the Kurds would support the government as long as it clearly promoted democracy for Iran and autonomy for Kurdistan (Shams, p. 175).

After his first meeting with Komeyni, it was clear to Qāsemlu that the Ayatollah had no intention of respecting the Kurds’ demands (Randal, 1986, apud, Prunhuber, pp. 62-63). Elections for the Assembly of Experts (Majles-e kōbragān) were held on 3 August 1979 with the goal of drafting a new constitution for the Islamic Republic. The Kurds participated in this election, and Qāsemlu was elected with more than 80 percent of the votes as the representative of the city of Urmia. He was one of two secular politicians elected to the Assembly who did not belong to an Islamic current (Moin, p. 219). For Qāsemlu it was imperative to attend the Assembly sessions in order to oppose the clerical monopolization of power that was certain to thwart the liberties of the Iranians (Randal, 1986, apud, Prunhuber, p. 73).

A few days prior to the opening session of the Assembly of Experts, armed



Kurds defeated the regime's troops in Kurdistan. Komeyni threatened to punish "in a truly revolutionary way the incompetent and corrupt government forces" (*Le Monde*, 1 July 1979), if they did not crush the Kurdish revolt. Qāsemlu did not attend the opening session of the Assembly of Experts, during which Komeyni publicly condemned Qāsemlu (Schriazi, p. 32) and banned the KDP (Iran) as "the party of Satan, corrupt and the agent of foreigners" (McDowall, p. 272).

Towards the end of the summer of 1979, the *pešmergas* controlled a part of Kurdistan. Qāsemlu's goal was "to achieve some kind of tolerance and a national equilibrium that would permit a strengthening of the Iranian state." He was convinced that autonomy could be negotiated, because the Kurds already had created an autonomous zone. He thought this was the moment for dialogue "for the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish issue" (Kravetz, in Prunhuber, p. 75). Several delegations of the KDP (Iran) met with Iranian authorities, trying to avoid armed conflict, but the regime launched a fierce offensive and, by the end of August, almost all the Kurdish cities held by the rebels were controlled by the government forces. Qāsemlu led the resistance in very harsh conditions from the mountains. After what is known as "Three-Month War," Qāsemlu returned to Mahabad on 20 October 1979 and declared that the revolt would continue as a guerrilla campaign (Ghareeb, p. 19)

By December, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards had strengthened their military presence and retaken Kurdistan, while the *pešmergas* of the KDPI—the official name became the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran In early 1980—withdrew even further into the mountains. Between 1981 and 1982, the Kurds controlled a major portion of Iranian Kurdistan, excluding the towns. The military and political situations were propitious to them, as the KDPI had become a strong organization with clear objectives. Qāsemlu established a military administrative structure within the region. Eventually the KDPI settled in Kurdish territory on the Iraqi side of the border, where they have remained since 1984 (Prunhuber, p. 89).

Relations with the Iraqi regime. Although he had a close relationship with the Iraqi government, Qāsemlu always maintained his independence. Trapped by the geopolitical situation of Kurdistan, he lived and worked in Iraq off and on, while maintaining contact with the Iraqi regime. Yet he never collaborated militarily with Baghdad against Iran during the Iraq-Iran War (Ṭālabāni, in Prunhuber, p. 245; McDowall, pp. 273-74).



When the Iraq-Iran War (see IRAQ vii. IRAN-IRAQ WAR) began in 1980, the Iraqi government invited Qāsemlu to declare the formation of a Kurdish state in Iran and offered him money and weapons. Even the budget for the future Kurdish government would be provided by the Iraqis, who would officially recognize it. However, Qāsemlu responded that what he wanted was democracy and autonomy within the Iranian state (Ṭālabāni, in Prunhuber, p. 245). He was in a difficult position regarding Iraq. In private, he spoke about the horrors of the Iraqi regime, yet publicly he was obliged to be discreet. Nonetheless, he openly criticized the chemical bombings of the Kurds by the Iraqi regime in an interview with an Arab magazine (Hassanzadeh, in Prunhuber, p. 39).

Political vision. Even though he led an armed struggle against the Iranian regime, his party opposed popular terrorist methods (*Actualités du Kurdistan*, 1988, p. 5). Qāsemlu believed in equality between men and women and tried to have women's rights implemented within the Kurdish community. This included putting an end to polygamy among party members and integrating women into the party ranks. For the first time within Kurdish society in Iran, women joined the KDPI on their own and as individuals equal to men (interview with Maryam Alipour, KDPI activist, KDPI Tishk TV [Paris], 6 July 2010).

Unity among the Kurds was of prime importance for Qāsemlu, and he was tormented to see the division among the Kurds, which often turned into violence among conflicting parties. He worked to put an end to the in-fighting among the Kurds. Komala (the Revolutionary Organization of the Toilers of Kurdistan of Iran) considered the KDPI as its main enemy in its class struggle and accused them of “collaborating with feudal elements” (van Bruinessen, p. 18) and “resented the KDPI’s presumption as representative of the Kurdish people” (McDowall, p. 265). The KDPI suffered several internal divisions (Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, p. 15; McDowall, pp. 273, 275-76). In 1988, members of a socialist, doctrinaire faction within the party accused Qāsemlu of “turning the KDPI from socialism to social democracy” and rejected his reasoning for dialogue with the regime. This faction left the party and “attracted a substantial following of KDPI leftists and others who resented what they considered Qāsemlu’s undemocratic methods” (McDowall, p. 276). Following Qāsemlu’s death, there was another schism in the KDPI, further weakening the Kurdish cause in Iran.

Qāsemlu considered the Kurds’ desire for full independence unrealistic. His



plan was pragmatic; he would consent to a federal union if the rest of the minorities wanted it. But he remained adamant about local autonomy. Recorded on tapes found by the Austrian police during his discussion with the Iranian emissaries in Vienna prior to his murder, Qāsemlu clearly stated that there were only three solutions to the national problem: independence, federalism, and autonomy (*Actualités du Kurdistan*, pp. 3-4).

During his ten years of leadership in the Kurdish movement following the Iranian revolution, he mainly resorted to peaceful dialogue and was mindful of the fact that the Kurdish problem in Iran cannot be exclusively resolved through military actions (Institut Kurde de Paris, pp. 11-12). In 1988, when the war between Iran and Iraq was over, Qāsemlu feared that both governments would agree to crush the Kurdish rebellions in their respective countries, as had happened in 1975 following the Algiers Agreements (*Actualités du Kurdistan*, p. 2). Therefore, he thought that the time was ripe for sitting down and negotiating (Gueyras, *Le Monde*, 6 June 1989; McDowall, p. 276)

Murder in Vienna. Through Jalāl Ṭālabāni (Iraqi Kurdish leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan [PUK]), Tehran proposed a dialogue with the KDPI. The party accepted it, and Qāsemlu traveled to Vienna to meet the Iranian representatives in December 1988 and January 1989. Ṭālabāni organized the meetings with extreme security measures. The meetings were supposed to continue in March, but the Iranians interrupted the negotiations with the excuse of Ḳomeyni's sickness and the opposition of hardliners against these talks. They also sidelined Ṭālabāni from any future meetings, alleging that his men had broken confidentiality and spoken about the gatherings (Ṭālabāni, in Prunhuber, pp. 217-22).

According to Abu'l-Ḥasan Bani Ṣadr (in Prunhuber, p. 286), this was part of the Iranian plan to plot Qāsemlu's murder. The first set of meetings with the Iranians was to create confidence in Qāsemlu about the negotiations (Bani Ṣadr, in Prunhuber, pp. 285-86). Once Ṭālabāni was sidelined, the Iranians found a dispensable intermediary in Fāzel Rasūl, an Iraqi Kurdish intellectual with connections to the Iranian regime (Ṭālabāni, in Prunhuber, p. 204). Rasūl contacted Qāsemlu and invited him to meet once more with the Iranian delegation in Vienna in July. Qāsemlu accepted and did not inform the party, which no longer believed in the negotiations (Prunhuber, pp. 8, 16, 221). He mistakenly believed that Iran, weakened by eight years of war with Iraq, needed to resolve the Kurdish problem after Ḳomeyni (Ben Bella, in Prunhuber, p. 210; McDowall, p. 276) and that Akbar Hāšemi Rafsanjāni,



speaker of the Majlis and candidate for the Iranian presidency, was pragmatic enough to wish to resolve the Kurdish issue (IHRDC, 2008, p. 26).

Qāsem lu and Abdullah Gaderi-Azar KDPI's representative in Europe, attended the first meeting in an apartment in Vienna on 12 July 1989 with Fāzel Rasul. Qāsem lu did not take any security measures. Iran's emissaries were Moḥammed-Ja'far Şaḥrārudi, head of the Kurdish affairs section of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence, Hāji Moşṭafawi, head of the secret service for West Azarbaijan Province (Kurdistan), and Amir Maņşur Bozorgiān, bodyguard and agent of the Iranian secret police (Institut Kurde de Paris, p. 2)

On 13 July, during a second meeting with the Iranians, Qāsem lu, Ghaderi-Azar, and Rasul were mortally shot and Şaḥrārudi was hit in the arm by a stray bullet. Moşṭafawi disappeared. Şaḥrārudi and Bozorgiān were detained by the Austrian police. Oswald Kessler, head of the Austrian Special Anti-Terrorism Unit said, "We've got dead Kurds and surviving Iranians. The matter is clear. The rest will be politics" (Danninger; IHRDC, 2008, p. 28).

Bozorgiān was released from police custody and allowed to return to the Iranian embassy. Şaḥrārudi was released from the hospital and escorted by the Austrian police to the airport to leave the country. Three months later, in November 1989, the Austrian public prosecutor issued arrest warrants for the three men. Şaḥrārudi was later promoted to the rank of Brigadier General in the Revolutionary Guards and became the head of the Qods Forces Intelligence Directory (IHRDC, 2008, p. 28)

The release of the only witnesses angered the Austrian public and media. The Austrian daily *Arbeiter Zeitung*, responding to a Foreign Ministry official's remark that Iran had threatened reprisals if its nationals were taken into custody, wrote: "This kowtowing to Iran will protect Austria for a while from the mullahs' wrath. But it's an invitation saying, 'Austria's pretty; come here to kill'" (Randal, 1989).

In 1991, Qāsem lu's widow, Helene Krulich, initiated legal proceedings against the Austrian state for not pursuing an investigation of the murder, releasing the assassins, and allowing them to leave the country. In 1992, the Austrian high court dismissed the case (IHRDC, 2008, p. 29).

Qāsem lu and Ghaderi-Azar were buried in Paris at the Père Lachaise cemetery. With Qāsem lu's death, the Iranian Kurdish movement suffered a



severe blow, which impacted the progress for an autonomous Kurdish nation.

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