

Unveiling the Marginalized: Translation to and from Kurdish in Iran during the Pahlavi Era (1925–1979)¹

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Abstract

Translation into and from Persian, the official language of Iran, has been the main focus of translation history in Iranian academia, neglecting other existing languages in the country. However, to provide a comprehensive account of translation history in Iran as a multilingual country, it is crucial to acknowledge multiple translation "histories" rather than a singular one. This study was designed to investigate the history of Kurdish translation in Iran during the First and Second Pahlavi eras (1925–1979). Employing a historical research method, primary and secondary sources were analyzed to address two key questions: what translated works to/from Kurdish were published during this period, and how the Pahlavi regime policies influenced Kurdish translation dynamics. The study used the Macro-polysystem theory to analyze the effect of ideological, political, linguistic, and economic polysystems on Kurdish translation during the era. The findings indicated that in the First Pahlavi era only one Kurdish translation was published in Iran, while in the Second Pahlavi era, five translations into Kurdish and eight translations from Kurdish were published. The results revealed the marginalized status of Kurdish translation during the Pahlavi era under the direct influence of the regime's ideological, political, and linguistic initiatives promoting nationalism, centralization, and Persianization.

Keywords: First Pahlavi era, historical research, Kurdish translation, macro-polysystem theory, second Pahlavi era, translation history

1. This paper was received on 04.01.2024 and approved on 11.03.2024.

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1. Introduction

Translation, despite its long-standing presence, has only recently emerged as a field of study within history. It was not until the 1980s that research on translation history began to gain popularity. Interest in the history of Persian translation appeared in the late twentieth century forming the predominant focus of translation history in Iran as the primary linguistic pathway of translation, neglecting the translation from and into other languages in the country (Azadibougar, 2010; Haddadian-Moghaddam, 2014, see also Mollanazar, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d). This limited perspective left a significant gap in our understanding of the translation history in Iran as a multilingual country.

Several languages coexist alongside Persian, the official language, in Iran. Approximately 40–50% of Iranians have a mother tongue other than Persian, including Azeri, Kurdish, Gilaki, Mazandarani, Luri, Arabic, Balochi, and Turkmen. The number increases if smaller languages and various local dialects are included. (Moradi, 2020, p.1174). Kurdish is the third-largest linguistic community in Iran after Persian and Azeri Turkish (Sheyholislami, 2019, p.95). Kurdish encompasses five distinct dialect groups: Northern Kurdish (Kurmanji), Central Kurdish (Sorani), Southern Kurdish (Kirmashani/Faili/Kalhuri), Zazaki, and Gorani/Hawrami. Central Kurdish is the predominant dialect group spoken among Kurds in Iran followed by Southern Kurdish, Northern Kurdish, and Gorani/Hawrami (Sheyholislami, 2012, p.25). Zazaki is specific to Turkey and not spoken in Iran (Hassanpour et al., 2012, p.5). The oldest written texts in Kurdish date back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (McCants, 2009, p.587). While the oldest documented translation into Kurdish can be traced back to the mid-18th century, marking a nearly 300-year journey (Pirbal, 1999, p.56). Given this, it seems essential to investigate the translation history of non-Persian Iranian languages besides Persian (Azadibougar & Haddadian-Moghaddam, 2019). As Long (2007,

p.66) suggests to provide a holistic account of translation history it is necessary to explore multiple "histories" rather than a single one.

To investigate the Kurdish translation history in Iran, this research uses Chang's (2000, 2001) Macro-polysystem theory which analyses translation in a broad sociocultural context in which multiple polysystems interact closely. According to Chang (2001):

The political polysystem includes institutions of power and marginalized groups. The ideological polysystem consists of competing and conflicting ideologies of all sorts in a given culture, sponsored by different groups. The economic polysystem includes norms that bind translation activities to certain economic principles. The linguistic polysystem requires conformity to the norms of a language variety. The literary polysystem offers certain recognized literary models for translations to emulate. And the translational polysystem includes norms that may be partially reflected in specific classroom exercises where the texts to be translated are not posited to serve any real purpose, and students are instructed just to translate, as if in a cultural vacuum. (p. 321)

Applying this, the present study aims to explore the history of translation to and from Kurdish in Iran during the First Pahlavi era (1925–1941) and the Second Pahlavi era (1941–1979). It seeks to analyze the impact of Pahlavi policies on the dynamics of Kurdish translation and its position within the literary polysystem in Iran.

2. Review of the Related Literature

The first significant investigation on Kurdish translation history (KTH) emerged in the late 1990s with Pirbal's study on the evolution of prose in the Kurdish language and literature from 1857 to 1957. This study presented a chronological history of the early translations of the Bible into Kurdish by Christian missionaries as pioneering efforts in translating foreign languages into Kurdish and as early instances of Kurdish prose. The study focused on the translators, their connections with the Kurdish community, their motivations for translating the Bible

into Kurdish, and how Kurdish readers received these translations. In another study, Pirbal (2002) explored KTH in two periods: from the 17th century to 1898 and from 1898 to 1932. This study introduced the published Kurdish translations and their translators, analyzing the significant historical, religious, political, and social influences in each era. Notably, the second period focused solely on Kurdish translations published in Iraq. This study is the most comprehensive exploration of KTH to date.

Following Pirbal (1999), four additional studies explored the history of Kurdish Bibles. Rzepka (2009) analyzed the evolution of the Kurdish Bible from the 19th century onwards, highlighting the socio-cultural background of its translations and the challenges encountered by missionaries. Rzepka (2014) studied modern translations of the Bible into Northern Kurdish within the framework of socio-political shifts in Kurdistan. Dalyan (2017) examined how translated Bibles by missionaries in the Ottoman Empire in the 1820s supported Kurdish nationalism by serving as a foundation for the Kurdish alphabet. Lastly, Rzepka (2018) went back to the missionaries' first attempts to translate the Bible into Kurdish in the early 19th century in the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Persia. The study examined how translated biblical texts in Kurdish reflected cultural changes and linguistic developments among Kurds in missionary records.

Recent studies on KTH focus mainly on the contemporary history of Kurdish literary translation. Mozafari (2018) evaluated the translation of Kurdish novels into Persian in Iran from 2005 to 2019, providing a concise history and a comprehensive list of translated texts, translators, authors, and publishers. Ghaderi and Scalbert-Yücele (2021) offered a historical overview of Kurdish literary translation into English since the early twentieth century. The study analyzed the actors and main practices of translation that have contributed to a (re)presentation of Kurdish literature in English translation from a social perspective. Miraki and

Noushamnd (2022) conducted the latest study on the history of Kurdish literary translation into Persian in Iran from 1997 to 2021. The research assessed how sociopolitical, linguistic, cultural, and economic factors influenced the translation flow from Kurdish to Persian. Despite these studies, the history of translation to and from Kurdish in Iran from 1925 to 1979 remains uncovered.

3. Methodology

Adopting a historical approach, this study seeks to answer two main questions:

1) What translated works from and into Kurdish were published in Iran during the Pahlavi era (1925 to 1979)?

2) How did the Pahlavi regime's ideological, political, economic, and linguistic policies shape the dynamics of Kurdish translation and its position within the Persian polysystem in Iran during the era?

The study data included 60 books written in Kurdish, five translations into Kurdish, eight translations from Kurdish, and some translated texts from Kurdish published in two university journals between 1925 and 1979, focusing solely on works published in book form or magazines in Iran. The data was collected through library and internet searches. Two specific bibliographies were consulted: Nariman (1988), covering published Kurdish books globally from 1787 to 1986, and Shaj'e'i (2006) including published Kurdish books in Iran up to 2004; In addition, ten online databases were searched, and various secondary sources on Kurdish history, language, and literature were consulted: The National Library and Archives of the Islamic Republic of Iran (<https://nlai.ir/>), The Library of Iranian Parliament (<https://ical.ir/>), The Library of Kurdistan Studies Institute of the University of Kurdistan (<https://ksi.uok.ac.ir/>), The electronic library of Kurdistan Studies Institute (https://library.uok.ac.ir), Iranian Libraries Information Website (<http://lib.ir>), Kurdipedia (<https://kurdipedia.org>), VejinBooks (<https://books.vejin.net/>), Zheen

Documentation and Research Centre (<https://zheen.org/>), The Internet Archive (<https://archive.org/>), and Iranian Book and Literature House (<https://ketab.ir/>).

The data collection process faced obstacles such as scarce academic studies, limited historical sources, and incomplete bibliographies in KTH. Published translations often lacked clear details on source languages and publication dates. Cross-checking was employed to ensure accuracy. The identified translations were then analyzed paratextually to determine the source languages, genres, authors, translators, Kurdish dialects, publishers, and publication locations. However, the translated texts were not subjected to textual analysis. Due to the need for textual analysis of the literary and translational polysystems, they were not incorporated. Primary and secondary sources on the history, politics, education, language, and literature of the Pahlavi era were reviewed to understand the influential policies and their impact on Kurdish translation in Iran.

4. Results and Discussion

The Pahlavi dynasty governed Iran for approximately half a century. It started with a coup led by Reza Khan in 1921, who became Reza Shah in 1925. He ruled until being forced to abdicate in 1941. His son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, then assumed the throne and remained in power until the Islamic Revolution in 1979. At its outset, the Pahlavi regime pursued three primary objectives: nationalism, centralization, and modernism, which remained central to all policies throughout both the first and second Pahlavi periods (Sheyholislami, 2021). The first Iranian Constitution of 1906 established Persian as the official language, disregarding the languages spoken by minority groups. This monolingual policy was further reinforced by the Persianization efforts of the Pahlavi regime, which aimed to establish a centralized nation-state by suppressing all languages other than Persian within the country (Amanat, 2017; Sheyholislami, 2021). Consequently, other initiatives were implemented to promote the use of Persian

among minority communities in various sectors, including education, media, military, and public administration (Sheyholislami, 2019). In the realm of education, the Pahlavi regime's efforts to promote Persian among minority groups extended to appointing non-native Persian teachers, enforcing standardized curricula and textbooks in schools, and imposing strict bans on Kurdish publications and educational activities (Rasouli et al., 2017; Abrahamian, 2008; see also Farahzad & Sanjarani 2023).

The First Pahlavi regime's focused efforts on linguistic homogenization and centralization resulted in intolerance for linguistic diversity and the marginalization of non-Persian languages like Kurdish. Any activities related to the Kurdish language, education, and publication were considered political threats, often resulting in severe punitive measures (Higgins, 1984). Faced with oppressive measures aimed at promoting Persian as the dominant language and the absence of Kurdish publishing, individuals resorted to smuggling or hand-copying Kurdish books, risking severe consequences (Hassanpour, 1992, p. 209). During the Second Pahlavi era, a policy of limited tolerance gradually emerged. This shift in approach led to some linguistic developments in Kurdish. A few selected publishers were authorized to publish Kurdish books. Periodical publications and state-sponsored radio broadcasting were established, and two university courses teaching Kurdish were introduced at the University of Tehran. (Sheyholislami, 2012, p. 39, Sheyholislami, 2021, p. 645.) Hassanpour, (1992, p. 130) describes this approach as a "safety valve" employed by the Second Pahlavi regime as a response to periods of vulnerability or challenges posed by Kurdish nationalist movements.

The only exception to the Kurdish publishing prohibition in the First Pahlavi era was the Kurdish Bible. *Nazani Mezgani* was the Kurdish translation of the entire story of the gospels in the *New Testament* into poetry in the Hewrami dialect. It was

published in Tehran in 1931 by Noore Jahan Press sponsored by the Christian literature committee. The translator, Saeed Kurdistani (1863–1942), was a Sunni Muslim who converted to Christianity after being influenced by an Assyrian missionary in Sanandaj. (Rzepka, 2015; McCants & Milani, 2004). Missionary associations targeted Kurdish regions due to the presence of religious minorities and to spread Christianity among the Kurds. (Sanaee & Rrasouli, 2022). Early attempts to translate the Bible into Kurdish emerged in the 1820s in Qajar Persia (Rzepka, 2018, p.188). The translations aimed to strengthen Kurdish-speaking Christians' self-identity and engage non-Christians with the scriptures (Rzepka, 2014). Hassanpour (1992) attributes the publication of *Nazani Mezgani* to the influence of the sponsoring Christian mission and the endorsement of Hassan Taghizadeh a Persian scholar interested in philology and dialectology. Kurdistani's translation featured prefaces by Hassan Taghizadeh, the Minister of Finance, and Heidar Ali Kamali, a journalist and writer which emphasized the role of the translation in increasing knowledge of Iranian languages, recognizing Kurdish as an Iranian language, and preserving it as an important aspect of the Pahlavi language. They also highlighted the linguistic and cultural connections between Kurdish and Persian.

The second translated text into Kurdish during the First Pahlavi period was *Ershad Al-Moznebin*. It was the translation of the *Old Testament* from English to Central Kurdish by Aziz Zandi who initially worked as a teacher and translator with the missionaries in Savojbloag (Gawhari, 2004, p. 34). He translated the *Old Testament* in 1926 but it was not published in Iran. It was published about twenty years later in 1945 in the United States by the American Lutheran Mission which played a prominent role in missionary activities in Savojbloag during the early Pahlavi period under the "Kurdistan Mission" (Sanaee & Rrasouli, 2022).

The prohibition on Kurdish publishing and education did not change immediately after Reza Shah was deposed in 1941. Between 1943 and 1945, three

Kurdish books were clandestinely published by a Kurdish political party, and an additional three were published in 1946 under the Kurdish Republic, without translations included (Hassanpour, 1992, p. 209). The publication of Kurdish books in the Second Pahlavi era started with *Kanz Al-Erfan*, a Gorani Kurdish divan, in Kermanshah in 1945. Between 1947 and 1971, four Kurdish dictionaries were published in Iran (see Table 4.1.)

Table 4.1. *Kurdish Published Dictionaries in the Second Pahlavi Era*

No.	Title	Author	Year	Publisher	City	Languages
1	<i>Mokri Dictionary: Birds' Names in Kurdish Dialects</i>	Mohammad Keivan Pourmokri	1947	Pakatchi	Tehran	Kurdish-Persian
2	<i>Mardokh Dictionary (Volume 1)</i>	Mohammad Mardokh Kurdistani	1954	Danesh	Tehran	Kurdish-Persian-Arabic
3	<i>Mardokh Dictionary (Volume 2)</i>	Mohammad Mardokh Kurdistani	1955	Artesh	Tehran	Kurdish-Persian-Arabic
4	<i>Kurdish Dictionary (Volume 1)</i>	Morad Orang	1968	Chehr	Tehran	Kurdish-Persian
5	<i>Kurdish Dictionary (Volume 1)</i>	Morad Orang	1969	Chehr	Tehran	Kurdish-Persian
6	<i>Similar Words in Pahlavi and Kurdish</i>	Sediq Safizadeh	1971	Roshdiyeh	Tehran	Pahlavi-Kurdish

The first translated book from Kurdish was published in 1951. It was a collection of Kurdish songs transliterated and translated into Persian by Mohammad Keivan Pourmokri, who had previously authored the first Kurdish Dictionary in the Second Pahlavi era. As indicated in Table 4.2, the publication of translations from Kurdish in book form did not resume until fifteen years later, with a Persian translation of Yarsan religious poetry from the Gorani dialect. The rest of the published translations from Kurdish during the era belonged to Tabriz and Pahlavi universities. Between 1966 and 1976, Tabriz University's Institute of History and Culture published six volumes of folk Kurdish ballads with Persian introductions and translations by Fattahi Ghazi, a Kurdish student at the university (see Table 4.2.).

Table 4.2. *Kurdish-Persian Translated Books during the Second Pahlavi Era*

NO.	Title	Translator	Year	Publisher	City
1	<i>Gorani or Kurdish Songs</i>	Mohammad Keivan Pourmokri	1951	Danesh	Tehran
2	<i>Yarsan Religious Poetry</i>	Mashallah Soori	1965	Amirkabir	Tehran
3	<i>Mehr u Vafa</i>	Ghader Fattahi Ghazi	1966	Tabriz University	Tabriz
4	<i>Sheikhi San'an</i>	Ghader Fattahi Ghazi	1967	Tabriz University	Tabriz
5	<i>Bahram u Golandam</i>	Ghader Fattahi Ghazi	1968	Tabriz University	Tabriz
6	<i>Shour Mahmoud u Marzingan</i>	Ghader Fattahi Ghazi	1970	Tabriz University	Tabriz
7	<i>Sheikh Farah u Khatoon Aste</i>	Ghader Fattahi Ghazi	1973	Tabriz University	Tabriz
8	<i>Sa'id u Mir Seifadin Beig</i>	Ghader Fattahi Ghazi	1976	Tabriz University	Tabriz

Tabriz University also published folk Kurdish ballads and their Persian translations in its quarterly journal of the Faculty of Letters between 1956 and 1969. Obeidollah Ayoubian, the university librarian, and Fattahi Ghazi translated them (see Table 4.3.).

Table 4.3. *Kurdish-Persian Translations Published in Tabriz University Journal*

NO.	Title	Translator	Year	Publisher	Issue
1	<i>Khaj u Siamand</i>	Obeidollah Ayoubian	1956	Tabriz University	36
2	<i>Mam u Zin</i>	Obeidollah Ayoubian	1961–63	Tabriz University	58–60, 62–64
3	<i>Chand Beite Kurdi</i>	Ghader Fattahi Ghazi	1964–69	Tabriz University	71–89

The Asia Institute of Pahlavi University also published several folk Kurdish ballads with their Persian translations in its journal from 1975 to 1979. They were all translated by Abdolhamid Hassani, a Kurdish student at the university (see Table 4.4.).

Table 4.4. *Kurdish-Persian Translations Published in Pahlavi University Journal*

NO.	Title	Translator	Year	Publisher	Issue
1	<i>Swaro</i>	Abdolhamid Hassani	1975	Pahlavi University	2
2	<i>Lashkari</i>	Abdolhamid Hassani	1975	Pahlavi University	3-4
3	<i>Kaka Mir u Kaka Sheikh</i>	Abdolhamid Hassani	1976	Pahlavi University	1-4
4	<i>A Review of Kurdish Versified Stories</i>	Abdolhamid Hassani	1977	Pahlavi University	1
5	<i>Brimok</i>	Abdolhamid Hassani	1978	Pahlavi University	2-4
6	<i>Brimok (part 2)</i>	Abdolhamid Hassani	1978	Pahlavi University	1
7	<i>Brimok (part 3)</i>	Abdolhamid Hassani	1979	Pahlavi University	2-4

Published translations into Kurdish in Iran emerged in the late 1960s. The first published translation into Kurdish in the Second Pahlavi era was "Shirin u Khasraw," an adaptation of Nizami Ganjavi's Persian tragic romance into the Hawrami dialect. Initially written by Khana Qubadi in 1740, this translation is the oldest recognized translation into Kurdish. In 1962, the Seyedian bookseller in Mahabad was granted permission to sell and publish non-political Kurdish books on religion, and poetry, and to reprint Kurdish works from Iraq. However, it had to use the printing facilities outside Kurdistan in neighboring provinces and countries (Hassanpour, 1992, p. 179). Seyedian published a total of 34 Kurdish books from 1962 to 1979 including four translations into Kurdish (see Table 4.5.).

Table 4.5. *Published Kurdish Translations in the Second Pahlavi Era*

NO.	Title	Translator	Writer	Year	Publisher	City
1	<i>Shirin u Khasraw</i>	Khana Qubadi	Nizami Ganjavi	1968	Chehr	Tehran
2	<i>Khabat la Re Kurdisitanda</i>	Naftula Aronovich Khalfin	Jalal Taqi	1971	Seyedian	Mahabad
3	<i>Chwarinakani Khayyam</i>	Abdurrahman Sharafkandi	Omar Khayyam	1973	Seyedian	Mahabad
4	<i>Tohfai Mozafariya</i>	Seyed Mohammad-Amin Shaikholislami Mukri	Oskar Mann	1975	Seyedian	Mahabad
5	<i>Masiyah Rasha Bchkola</i>	Farhad Pahlevan	Samad Behrangji	1970s	Seyedian	Mahabad

The second published translation during the second Pahlavi era was *Khabat la Re Kurdisitanda* (Struggle for Kurdistan) a book on Kurdistan's history written by N. A. Khalfin in Russian and translated by Jalal Taqi into CK. First Published in Sulaymaniyah city in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1971, it was reissued by Seyedian in the same year in Iran. The third published translation was Khayyam's Quatrains translated by Abdurrahman Sharafkandi from Persian to CK and published by Seyedian in 1973. Tuhfayi Mudhaffariyyah (Mudhaffar's Gift), a collection of Kurdish folk stories originally compiled by German orientalist Oskar Mann and transliterated into the German alphabet, translated by Mohammad-Amin Shaikholislami Mukri to CK and Published in 1975 in Baghdad was reissued in the same year by Seyedian. The last Kurdish translation published in the Second Pahlavi era was Masiyah Rasha Bchkola (The Little Black Fish) a children's story by Samad Behrangji, translated by Farhad Pahlevan from Persian to CK, and Published by Seyedian in the 1970s, with the exact date remaining uncertain. Besides the translations and dictionaries, the Kurdish published books during the Second Pahlavi era included 32 literary books, nine religious books, seven historical books, and two books on the Kurdish language published in Tehran, Mahabad, Sanandaj, Tabriz, and Kermanshah. The majority of published works were classical Kurdish

poetry in divan form, religious poetry, and a small collection of literary prose works, one play, and two novels.

5. Conclusion

In discussing the evolution of Persian translation during the Pahlavi era in Iran, Haddadian-Moghaddam (2014) observed that translation experienced significant advancements under Reza Shah's modernization policy, leading to a notable increase in the volume of translated works. Additionally, he highlighted the flourishing of translated novels from both English and non-English languages during Mohammad Reza Shah's reign (pp. 82–83). These developments occurred amidst the Pahlavi regime's modernization efforts, which, ironically, included a policy of linguistic intolerance towards languages other than Persian within Iran, such as Kurdish, ultimately resulting in the prohibition of translations in those languages

The Pahlavi regime's political, ideological, and linguistic initiatives, which aimed at promoting nationalism, centralization, modernization, and Persianization, led to the suppression of Kurdish language, education and publication. Any endeavors related to the Kurdish language, including translation efforts, were perceived as political activities by the regime and as forms of resistance by the Kurdish-speaking population. The interplay between the Pahlavi regime's objectives and initiatives ultimately led to the marginalization of Kurdish translation throughout the Pahlavi Era. During the first Pahlavi era, Kurdish publication was severely restricted, except for the Kurdish translation of *The New Testament*, which was permitted under the direct patronage of the Christian mission. No other Kurdish translations were published during this period.

During the Second Pahlavi era, a policy of limited tolerance emerged, leading to a modest rise in Kurdish publications. The published works primarily centered on dictionaries, literary pieces, religious texts, and non-political works. Translations into Kurdish increased to five in the second Pahlavi era. However, the

direction of translation efforts predominantly favored translating from Kurdish to Persian, aligning with prevailing linguistic policies. Published Kurdish translations strategically emphasized the linguistic affinity between Kurdish and Persian to promote national unity, reflecting the regime's agenda. The economic considerations in the Pahlavi era took a backseat to publishing books in languages other than Persian. There were limited resources in Kurdish but high demand, however, the prohibition on Kurdish publishing resulted in minimal financial incentives for publishers.

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