

My Kurdish Brother, Amir Hassanpour

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Amir. Your name is so simple. “The Commander.” But, in fact, it’s more complicated than that. Your father changed it from Omar to Amir knowing that you would be in a Shi’a land in Tehran for the last years of high school. In fact, there was nothing simple about you at all.

Born on November 17, 1943 in Mahabad, Iran, you reached your seventy-third birthday this year, dear friend, and your life has been full of accomplishment. We all sat at your hospital bed standing watch as you slipped away in your long struggle with cancer, eyes closed and breathing heavy though stable and calm through it all. Then, at 5:49 on Saturday morning on June 24 of this year, you quietly left us weeping by your side motionless with blinding grief and shaken by the thought that you were no longer on this planet. Peace in Paradise. Oh yes, I know how you would dislike these words, but you know that the Persian word, *pardis*, is the root of our English word. When I first met you, I heard your name was “Kak Amir,” a Kurdish version.

On his return from his two-year stint in Iran with the American Peace Corps, Thomas Ricks completed Indiana University’s graduate program in “Persian Studies” and then in “Middle East History” before returning to Tehran to work on his doctoral dissertation and teach at the Tehran International School (Iranzamin). He also taught at Macalester College, Georgetown University, Birzeit University, Villanova University and the University of Pennsylvania.



Then, as time went on, we all began to call you “Amir Khan,” in a reference to your faux military status which you scorned. You got even with me by naming me, a Peace Corps volunteer of all things, “Tom Khan.”

I met you on one of those frigid Zagros mountain days in December 1964. You were comfortably ensconced in your home reading, just down the alleyway from the bazaar. Bob Abramson, the other Peace Corps English teacher, led me to that heavy wooden door of your house and banged the knocker loudly. We had tea and cookies that day according to polite society customs, just Bob, you and me. We came to your house a few more times again, but usually met in our second-floor apartment in the old bank building on the main street. After introductions and brief mention about what I was going to do in Mahabad, you corrected me about the town’s name. “Tom, we actually call this place “Cool Spring” or *soujboolak* in Kurdish.” This was just the beginning of the avalanche of information on a myriad of subjects from Amir.

From these early days of our brotherhood, there began a long list of historical and archaeological discussions about the writings of British, Australian, French, and Italian historians aligned with the Communist Party or from Socialist activist backgrounds, including your all-time favorite work, *Man Makes Himself*, by the Australian-born Marxist scholar, V. Gordon Childe. We spoke about that and several other of Childe’s writings on Labor and Civilization. All these and more were new to me though I had studied Tomistic philosophy and French literature at Notre Dame in Indiana. You had asked me if I had read much fiction and I had said some American and French as school requirements. I had then asked you the same question, and you said very little except in school. And so, for the next fifty-two years, we discussed a range of topics in history, anthropology, philosophy, archaeology, and Marxism as well as any number of social sciences, debating their virtues and failings. Religion did not figure high at all in these discourses so when I told you that I had been in Mashhad for the previous eight months, and that some of my Persian friends took to calling me “Mashti Tom,” you had

looked disapprovingly on such mirth, and announced that for you, I was only “Tom Khan.” We never spoke again about Mashhad or pilgrimage sites focusing instead on civilizations, dialectical materialism and class struggle in nearly all that we read the years I spent in Mahabad. We also talked a lot about socialism and the communist party of Iran, the Tudeh Party.

Bob was amused by our exchanges and debates, interjecting his questions and comments about the present Kurdish conditions, society and economy, and the doings of the Pahlavis in Tehran and the countryside or *rusta*. Together, Bob and I recalled the beginnings of Peace Corps, our training programs in Oregon and Michigan respectively, and our own unpreparedness for anything Iranian, much less Kurdish. We both had had our brief introduction to the linguistics of second language learning, but that did not count for much. We were Bachelors of Arts and Sciences, or, as Peace Corps dubbed us, “AB generalists” thrown into developing societies of the Third World.

We were witnesses, as Amir observed, of the modernity process of global outreach of industrial countries to pull other countries into rapidly expanding capitalist relations, and if we looked closely, we might observe various forms of resistance to this process. These discussions and others with Amir made me rethink so many of my older assumptions, and he became our main source of information about “Modern Iran” and the Kurdish resistance movement in Iran and in the Middle East, particularly in northern Iraq and eastern Turkey, countries that bordered northwestern Iran. It was Amir who introduced us to the fairly recent history of Mahabad and its singular Mahabad Republic of Kurdistan of 1946 and the reasons for its rise and fall. He took us to the grave site of Ghazi Mohammad, the leader of the Republic, who was executed by the Pahlavi forces in the winter of 1946.

Throughout the spring and summer of ’65, Bob and I saw Amir

almost daily. As one of our colleagues and an increasingly close friend, he was introducing us to his perspective on the limited rights of Kurdish people as a minority under Pahlavi rule, the issues of US and Iran relations and military advisors, the Vietnam War, the role of women and families in Iranian society, the daily forms of resistance to modernity, and the complicated gender and family relations in Iran. In fact, these discussions were both instructive and amusing at the same time. My first encounters in Mahabad were with some of Bob's friends whom he had befriended in evening get-togethers in their homes over the previous fall term before I had arrived. On nearly my second or third day in Mahabad, I met a Kurdish banker friend of Bob's who began our conversation with "the rules of the street." I was told that there are two languages spoken in Mahabad, "Kurdish and English." The second rule was that politics was everything – he wanted to know why the CIA killed President Kennedy. Stunned by both "rules" as no one had broached such matters to me while I was in Mashhad, I answered that I was willing to learn Kurdish though I had been studying Persian for nearly a year by then, and had no idea how to get Kurdish language materials, and secondly, had a few notions about Kennedy's death, none of which included the CIA! From these early days in Mahabad, I had learned some important lessons about Kurdish nationalism, and Iran-US politics. Bob and I had met our first Kurdish scholar, companion, and teacher, dear Amir. It was over time that Amir and I became brothers in many ways.

Amir had just completed his BA degree in English from the University of Tehran, and following those four years, he went on to complete a year at the Tehran Teacher Training College. Now, he was assigned to teach in Mahabad's secondary schools or at the *dabirestan* level. In short, we and Amir had become colleagues in teaching English as a second or third language to the young Kurdish and few Azeri and Armenian adventuresome high school students in that remote mountain

town comprised of 90% Kurdish Mokri and Debokri Sorani-speaking peoples of Kurdistan. We discussed why there were no more pastoralists in Kurdistan as that was part of an older period of history. While some texts on Iran do talk about the Kurdish tribes as do the American diplomats in their consular reports, Mr. Eagleton, a past US consul in Tabriz does not use those words in his introduction to Kurdish language. Come to think of it, in trying to follow the advice of Bob's banker friend, I had asked the Peace Corps Office in Tehran to send me a Kurdish grammar and funds for a Kurdish language tutor. The reply was a little stunning – the PC Office told me that since Kurdish is a dialect of Persian, there are no funds for dialects so they could not support my language studies. I then asked my twin brother Ted in the States to find Professor Ernest McCarus' Kurdish grammar used in his classes at the University of Michigan where he taught, and send a copy to me. My brother found the book and sent it. It was a lesson in the Iranian linguicide of Kurdish. I left it behind with Amir when I returned to the States in 1966.

Proud of his town's historical role in the on-going Kurdish national struggle for self-determination and the survival of Kurdish as an endangered world language, Amir's home was stocked with Persian, Kurdish and English works on a wide spectrum of topics hidden away from Iranian security and public eyes. I found that unlike so many other educational colleagues, he had an unquenchable thirst for books. He was equally enthusiastic about Marxist theories and world view. I found that in those two years in Iran and for the rest of my life that there was just no one else like Amir Khan.

It was Amir Khan who led us to a summer excursion into the Zagros plateau north of Mahabad in search of ancient caves with some Peace Corps friends from distant Rezayeh who were also engaged in English training. During the summer months, we also spent time on picnics with our Kurdish, Gilaki, and Persian

teacher and professional friends in the valleys and dells of the surrounding mountain streams in laughter-filled story-telling and mountain-naming mixed babble of English and Kurdish according to the “rules.” In more somber moments, Amir related some of his experiences during his Tehran stay at the university, such as the time when he and several other Kurdish undergrads asked to be included in the underground students’ socialist club, mainly followers of the forbidden Tudeh party—they were accepted immediately with another kind of “rule” or understanding about their use of Kurdish. They were told by the Persian-speaking students to not speak Kurdish, or there “would be consequences.” It was not the first time that I began to learn of the factionalism in the Iranian student movement.

By the fall of 1965, Amir and I were deep into our discussions about Marx and Marxist theories of historical change and historical generalizations with a growing list of new works for me. I had already discovered Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé, part of the British “social historians” in their eye-opening work on the threshing machine protest by workers of Sussex near Kent, England. They had based their research mainly on the police records of the striking peasants in their co-authored work, *Captain Swing* - the mysterious signature found at the bottom of the warnings that appeared on local parsons’ doors of the possible burning of local wheat fields using threshing machines and not human labor. This wonderful work was my introduction to the English social history school while I was in Mashhad where I had by chance met the British Consul and took some liberties with the British Council’s library. Before the year was out, Amir and I had read and discussed other British and French historians’ works, such as E. H. Carr’s seminal work, *What Is History?*, E. P. Thompson’s recently published *Making of the English Working Class*, and the equally groundbreaking work of Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*. We promised each other to continue reading the English social historians and the

French *Annales* school historians after I left Mahabad at the end of my two-year obligation that had begun in February 1964. We also completed a translation project of a Kurdish romance story in the midst of our school work that included Bob and me conducting Friday (a holiday) classes in acquired language learning with all the English teachers of Mahabad and nearly free evening Adult English classes in one of the high schools for anyone interested in the subject. As with everything else, Amir was a fellow teacher in both Teacher and Adult Evening classes.

The English translation of a Kurdish folk tale that Amir and I did was his idea. The story, *Khadj va Siamand*, in both Persian and Kurdish, was based on a popular Kurdish ballad concerning the youth of Kurdistan in Sorani Kurdish. Khadj was the attractive young daughter of a wealthy Kurdish merchant who had forty sons from his four wives as well as several daughters. Khadj was the most beautiful of them all. Siamand, on the other hand, was a strapping young and good-looking shepherd from a neighboring village who saw Khadj and other young Kurdish girls coming to the communal well on the outskirts of the town. In the midst of the collective spring flower gathering, and the summer harvests from nearby fields, Khadj and Siamand became more acquainted, falling in love with each other over time. They then planned to run away to the mountains to live together, fearing in part her father's outrage and the forty brothers of Khadj whom she knew would be close behind. In the eventual confrontation in the mountains, first Siamand fell in combat and then, in despair, Khadj leapt to her death off the mountain. We translated the text into polished English and ran off copies of the ballad in Persian and English for the advanced students in the high schools – we were forbidden to use Kurdish by the principal. The mimeographed story was a hit, needless to say. I told Amir that I was sending our translation off to the Netherlands to be published. I found out later that the translation

was only listed in a bibliography of Kurdish literature and not published. That would have to wait until later.

By February 1966/1345, I was getting ready to leave Mahabad and then Tehran for the States. Before doing so, Amir and I had decided to translate small parts of E. H. Carr's *What is History?* and V. Gordon Childe's *Man Makes Himself* into Persian over the next year. We wanted the social studies teachers and advanced students to benefit from these authors. Amir was to do most of the translations, while I was to work on some bibliographic information. We planned for a translation into Kurdish but it was never done as we were both too busy in graduate programs. We did finish the two translations of Carr and Childe into Persian that I left with Amir.

Little did I realize how important we would become to each other over the next three decades. By 1975, I had married Janice and completed my doctorate at Indiana University in Middle East history with a minor in Persian Studies thanks to a US grant while Amir had gone to the University of Illinois at Chamagne-Urbana in the mid-1970s. While Amir continued his studies in Communication, I was soon hired first by Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, and then by Georgetown University in DC. We met a couple of times first in Chicago at the 1975 American Historical Association meeting, and then again at Illinois University as the Iranian Revolution was beginning in 1977/1356. I was the one of the guest speakers of the Confederation of Iranian Students – US at the University of Illinois and took part in one of their campus-wide conferences on Iran.

By 1979/1358, in the midst of the Iranian Revolution, like so many other Iranian students, Amir had returned to Iran with hopes for a better Iran in his mind and heart. In 1986, Amir completed his Illinois doctorate program, and, with his family, immigrated to Canada, settling first in Toronto, then in Windsor and Montreal, and finally back to Toronto taking teaching

positions in those cities' universities in Communication and Middle Eastern studies. In 1992, Amir published his revised thesis with the new title of *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan, 1918-1985* in which he made a very strong case for the role of a nation-state in the evolution and survival of languages such as Kurdish. He also argued for the standardization of Kurdish language that would contain the northern/southern Kurdish dialects of Kirmanji and Sorani. Amir continued to read and write about Marxism and applied his Marxist perspective in his writings and teachings in his many articles on oral traditions of Kurdistan, linguistics, linguicide, genocide, Turkish and Iranian policies, the role of language formation in the media, in song and music throughout his academic career at the University of Toronto. His final work of articles in Farsi was published in April 2017, which was particularly special to him and is entitled, *Bar Faraz-e Mooje Nuvin-e Kumunism* [On the New Wave of Communism].

On reflection, Amir was my brother, colleague and closest academic life companion. We had left the level of normal friendship long ago during our continued conversations, debates and discussions. Amir had radicalized me in both my politics and historical research. Many of my American Peace Corps volunteer companions had remarked, rightfully, that the Peace Corps and their Iran experiences had “changed their lives.” For me, Amir, Kurdistan, and contemporary Iranian struggles for political and economic independence had changed my life. My dear mother took about three seconds upon my return to our Lafayette, Indiana home after my two-year Peace Corps absence to say that, “Tom, you’ve changed.” She was absolutely correct. It took me several years to completely understand that statement as “Yes, Mom, I have changed because of my Kurdish brother and the Iranian people’s life and death struggles against various imperial powers including the United States.”

Sometime after I had left Georgetown University and was invited to Birzeit University in the Occupied Palestinian Territories that I understood how much of Amir's world view or *jahan bini* influenced my thoughts as an analyst of contemporary US foreign policy as well as an historian of 18th century Iran. Amir and I had also discussed Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems analysis of center and periphery dialectics and the role of US development polices within Washington's Consensus and world geopolitics that contributed to "underdevelopment." We continued our discussions of Andre Gunnar Frank, Paul Baran, Samir Amin and Walter Rodney regarding dependency theories and US Agency for International Development, or USAID. My own reading of these political economic theories was in relation to historical studies of greater Asia and world historians' work over the past three centuries as became evident in my courses and more recent writings.

Thus, Amir's death has left a "hollow in the land" according to the Southern African adage. I would add that his death has now left a deep hollow in all the hearts and minds of those who knew Amir Hassanpour. His many intellectual feats, his own radical perspective of this world and its affairs, a Marxist perspective from beginning to end, and his amazing historical imagination and humor will not pass as quickly as he did physically in Princess Margaret Hospital in Toronto, Ontario. He, more than any of my life friends and acquaintances, fulfilled Samad-e Behrangi's famous dictum in his international literary work, *Mahi Siyah-ye Kuchulu*, (*The Little Black Fish*) when the Little Black Fish notes towards the end of the story, "Living or dying is not that important. What is important are the influences one may have on the lives of other."

So, *beduwa* and goodbye, Kak Amir, for now. I long to be with you again someday, my dear Kurdish friend, colleague, and companion. I am bowed from grief for Shahrzad and Salah, and all of Amir's fine students for their and our immense loss.