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Party for Free Life in Kurdistan: The PKK's Iranian Wing Bides Its Time; Terrorism Monitor Volume: 16 Issue: 1

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In response to Iraqi Kurdistan's referendum on independence in early October, members of Iran's Kurdish minority—an estimated population of six to eight million people—held widespread public celebrations, including in the mainly Kurdish Iranian cities of Baneh, Mahabad and Sanandaj (Kurdistan24 (<http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/8ff3ad1e-ebe9-48ed-a6b5-c6841f21258d>), September 25). The Iranian government largely avoided a direct crackdown on this uncommon public demonstration of pan-Kurdish feeling, likely for fear of aggravating the situation. However, in a rare display of unity between President Hassan Rouhani and hardliners, Iran backed the Iraqi government's diplomatic and military move against Iraqi Kurdistan. This led to the Iraq army and IRGC-backed Shia militias rapidly recapturing most territories gained by Iraq's Kurds since 2003. Iraqi Kurdish leaders subsequently agreed to significant and humiliating curbs on their autonomy, dealing a dramatic blow to Kurdish separatist aspirations across the region, including in Iran. This action by Tehran—as intended—rapidly deflated Iranian Kurds, and pro-Kurdish demonstrations in Iran quickly tailed off.

These developments—in early January, the Kurdish demonstrations have since been followed by economically triggered protests in Persian areas of Iran that spread into Kurdish districts—reflect Tehran's enduring concern that Iranian Kurds, who make up around 10 percent of the country's population, could demand greater autonomy for themselves. Kurdish nationalism in Iran has in recent decades been subdued in comparison to Iraq, Syria and Turkey. This is partially due to demographics. Kurds in Iran represent a relatively smaller part of the total population, which mitigates against a successful insurgency.

However, some indicators suggest that, despite Tehran's recent success in containing Kurdish separatist feeling to date, Iran's Kurdish community may become more restive in the coming years. Key potential accelerants include rising Kurdish national feeling across the region, especially given the high-profile success of People's Protection Units (YPG) in carving out a self-governing region in northeastern Syria. Wider developments, such as the rise of social media activism—in Iranian Kurdistan, as elsewhere, this has

allowed isolated activists to transcend national boundaries and evade the state's attempts to control information—has given life to the formerly abstract idea of a transnational Kurdish identity. In this context, the recent trajectory of the largest and most capable Kurdish militant group in Iran, the Party for Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), requires a detailed examination.

Structure

PJAK was founded in the mid-1990s as an independent student-led movement inside Iran. However, it is today part of the People's Congress of Kurdistan (Kongra-Gel). A purported umbrella group for regional Kurdish movements, Kongra-Gel is in practice dominated by the Turkish-Kurdish Kurdistan's Workers Party (PKK). Like the PKK, PJAK is loyal to PKK founder Abdullah Ocalan's Marxist-derived ideology, which it seeks to apply to the Iranian context.

Moreover, the group's central platform is a call for "democratic self-administration," which is derived from Ocalan's principle of "democratic confederalism"—essentially a form of ethnic self-governance. The party also puts a strong emphasis on issues such as cultural rights, ecology and gender equality, and has a female co-chair; priorities like these have greatly helped its Syrian equivalent, the PKK-aligned Democratic Union Party (PYD), gain significant international legitimacy in recent years.

PJAK therefore functions today as the PKK's Iranian wing, although it includes non-Iranian Kurds and its Iranian personnel move between it and both the PKK and the YPG. Like other PKK groups, PJAK is also nominally divided between its military wing, the East Kurdistan Defense Forces (YRK), and its political wing, the East Kurdistan Democratic and Free Society (KODAR). The group likely has one or two thousand fighters, the majority of whom are in Syria and Iraq. As with other PKK branches, the group ostensibly seeks to work with all Iranians, but in practice its membership is almost exclusively Kurdish.

Militant Wing

The group's military wing is based in the Mount Qandil area of Iraqi Kurdistan, close to the PKK's camps there. PJAK's military arm conducted a sporadic low-level insurgent campaign in Iran from the early 2000s to 2011. This killed dozens of Iranian security force members, mainly in hit-and-run operations in and around Kurdish-majority towns such as Urmia and Mariwan, close to the mountainous and porous border with Iraqi Kurdistan. The group, however, declared a ceasefire in 2011, in part because its operations were showing no sign of producing results. Ironically, this occurred shortly before the Arab Spring, which, particularly as a result of the collapse of the Syrian state, created new opportunities for the PKK and its constituent groups.

As the Syrian civil war gained momentum, the PKK and PJAK began to send fighters to Syria. This was stepped up from 2014, as areas held by the YPG came under increased pressure from Free Syrian Army forces, backed by Turkey, and from Islamic State (IS) fighters, most notably at the siege of Kobane. Indications of this came from the YPG's announcement of the death of Iranian Kurdish militant Raman Çalak in the Iraq-Syrian border town of Rebia in April 2015, followed by its announcement of the death of female fighter Leyla Eyrampur, from the Iranian city of Mariwan, at Kobane in June 2015. [1]

However, despite PJAK's increasing involvement in Syria, the group nonetheless abandoned its ceasefire with Iran in 2015, largely in an attempt to capitalize on widespread outrage and protests over the death of a Kurdish woman at the hands of the Iranian security forces in Mahabad in May. This led to the group resuming attacks on Iranian troops, which triggered increased violence between PJAK and the Iranian government, peaking in August 2015 with a PJAK attack in Mariwan that reportedly killed 20 members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The government responded by executing imprisoned Kurdish activists, including prominent prisoner Behrouz Alkhani (EKurd.net (<http://ekurd.net/pjak-kills-20-iranian-revolutionary-guards-2015-08-08>); August 8, 2015; Rudaw (<http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iran/26082015>); August 27, 2015).

This heightened activity created fresh divisions between PJAK and its Iranian Kurdish rivals, such as the smaller militant-political group Komala, which warned in September 2015 that PJAK's actions would give Tehran an excuse to "militarize" Kurdish areas (EKurd (<http://ekurd.net/kurds-warn-clashes-give-excuse-iran-2015-09-15>), September 15, 2015). However, such complaints only highlighted PJAK's militant credentials, which were already boosted by its association with the PKK and YPG. Since then, PJAK attacks have continued sporadically. In one of the most notable attacks, for instance, in early November, the governor of Iran's West Azerbaijan province reported that PJAK fighters killed eight border guards near the Chaldoran border crossing with Turkey (Press TV (<http://www.presstv.com/Detail/2017/11/03/540888/Iran-West-Azarbaijan-Chaldoran-Alireza-Radfar-border-guards-terrorists>), November 3, 2017). The group has also sought to exploit anger at Iran's intervention against Iraqi Kurds. Likewise, it has tried to highlight the Iranian government's allegedly poor response to a series of earthquakes in Iranian Kurdistan, which PJAK's co-chair, Zilan Vejin, said was evidence of Iran not fulfilling its "humanitarian duties." [2]

Political Wing

Despite PJAK's insurgency, the group's political wing, KODAR, which is based in Europe and Iraq, and operates underground in Iran, has pursued a pragmatic approach toward Tehran. For instance, ahead of the 2017 Iranian elections, KODAR called for a boycott of the presidential vote, rejecting both the conservatives and the reformists. Strikingly, however, the group did not oppose Kurds voting in town and village elections in Kurdish majority regions, on the grounds that previously low Kurdish participation had led to power-hungry "Persians" winning such elections, and then enforcing central

government demands in Kurdish areas. [3] The group therefore found itself in the position of tacitly recognizing the Islamic Republic's existence, and even the legitimacy of its elections.

Meanwhile, however, the group has used its militant wing to present itself as defending Iranian Kurds from the regime, notably in response to Iranian Kurdish anger at the security forces' harsh treatment of the "kolbar," Kurdish smugglers who carry low-value goods across the mountainous Iran-Iraq border. For instance, when Iranian security forces killed two Kurdish "kolbari" on September 4, Iranian Kurds held largely spontaneous protests the same day in the cities of Baneh, Serdest and Mariwan—this event further illustrates the growing power of social media in the area. The following day, in response to the killings and in an attempt to capitalize on public anger, PJAK shot dead two Iranian troops near the border, in what they said was retaliation for the killings—the incident also shows the ability of the group's militants to strike rapidly when needed.

However, in September, in response to continued anger against Iran's treatment of the smugglers, PJAK publicly called on "Kurdish parliamentarians in Iran" to support the rights of these individuals. In this, KODAR's co-chair, Fûad Bêrîtan, described the government's crackdown on the smugglers as a "political problem" that requires a "political solution." However, he also advised the smugglers to organize self-defense forces against the government, and warned that if Tehran did not respond on the issue, the Kurdish people have "other options," a reference to military force.

PJAK's response to the emotive kolbar issue shows how it seeks to use a combination of non-violent political pressure, including on Kurdish MPs in the Iranian parliament, and military force to win concessions for Iranian Kurds. It aims to enable itself to simultaneously position itself as the most vocal defender of Iranian Kurdish rights, and also as a relatively pragmatic political force that is even willing to somewhat recognize the Iranian parliament's legitimacy. This pragmatic approach likely reflects an assessment that waging a successful insurgency against Iran is all but impossible, and it is also intended to allow the group to win popular grassroots support that could facilitate a more extensive insurgency when conditions allow.

Future Strategy

PJAK's current strategy combines a number of elements. These include sustaining a low-level and persistent insurgency within Iran, with attacks linked to popular issues that allow the group to build grassroots support. At the same time, however, the group is to some extent willing to engage with Iran's political system, for instance attempting to pressure Kurdish MPs in the Iranian parliament and tactically encouraging greater Kurdish participation in local elections. Meanwhile, PJAK's deployment of significant forces in Syria to support the YPG is intended to support the PKK's wider regional strategy and to allow its fighters to gain military experience.

This suggests that the group is pursuing a long-term strategy, one likely predicated on gradually preparing the ground for a future insurgency while waiting for a suitable opportunity, such as the weakening of the central government. It is similar to the strategy of the PKK and YPG, which for decades avoided attempting an insurgency in Syria, but then moved swiftly and effectively to exploit the breakdown in governmental control there in 2012-4.

Since the outbreak of protests in Iran on December 28, 2017, PJAK's response has been muted. On December 31, the group issued its only statement on the demonstrations to date, noting cautiously that these "have the potential to lead to great changes. They could lead to a democratic transformation for the whole of Iran" (ANF (<https://anfenglish.com/kurdistan/pjak-calls-on-peoples-of-iran-to-fight-and-stand-together-23940>), December 31, 2017).

It additionally argued that, although the protests were superficially economic, their root cause was political and that a "democratic solution" was needed. The statement concluded saying that "we are calling on the Kurdish people and all the peoples of Iran to the ranks of the struggle for freedom" (ANF (<https://anfenglish.com/kurdistan/pjak-calls-on-peoples-of-iran-to-fight-and-stand-together-23940>), December 31, 2017). Although the restrained statement expressed support for the protests, it was far from a call to arms.

PJAK's strategy to date suggests that it will continue to respond pragmatically to the Iranian protests, and to take a long-term view. This means that as long as the protests remain relatively small PJAK is highly unlikely to launch a significantly enhanced insurgency in response, not least because such an uprising would both be rapidly crushed and would risk unifying pro- and anti-regime Persians against this irredentist threat to Iran.

That said, the group is likely to respond to any regime attacks on Kurdish protesters with targeted and calibrated violence against state forces—as with its response to the Kolbar deaths—in an attempt to present itself as the guardian of Iranian Kurds. In the unlikely event that the protests do lead to a fundamental weakening of the regime, PJAK, backed by other PKK-linked groups, can be expected to rapidly throw its full resources into seeking to trigger a general uprising in Iranian Kurdistan—following the PYD's example in Syria—with a view to establishing an autonomous region there.

NOTES

[1] "Martyr Raman Calak", YPG (April 24, 2015) <http://t.co/oykmOPdoLJ> (<http://t.co/oykmOPdoLJ>) and <http://twitter.com/dersi4m/status/615883839899107328> (<http://twitter.com/dersi4m/status/615883839899107328>)

[2] "PJAK Co-chair: Iran is in a dirty alliance against Kurds," Firat News Agency (November 30, 2017)

[3] KODAR: "If the democratic developments does not in the Iran's upcoming election, there will a major disaster", (April 2, 2017) <https://www.kodar.info/KODAR%3A-If-the-democratic-developments-does-not-in-the-Iran%E2%80%99s-upcoming-election%2C-there-will-a-major-disaster>

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