

# **PJAK in Northern Iraq: Tangled Interests and Proxy Wars**

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The Kurdish area in northern Iraq has become one of the most complex fronts in the war in Iraq, a place where Iranian, Turkish, Kurdish, Iraqi and American interests clash. An often perplexing role in the region's conflicts is played by the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), an Iranian Kurdish offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) that engages in frequent clashes with Iran's Revolutionary Guards. PJAK claims its aims "are to unite the Kurdish and Iranian opposition, to change the oppressive Islamic regime in Iran and to establish a free democratic confederal system for the Kurds and the Iranian peoples" (PJAK Press Release, May 7). Iran regularly accuses the movement of being a U.S.-funded proxy, but recent PJAK claims that Turkey used U.S. intelligence and U.S.-made bombs in an air raid on a PJAK target have brought the U.S.-PJAK relationship into question.

Soon after the May 1-2 bombing, a PJAK spokesperson announced: "We have changed our stand toward the United States government and we are standing against them now ... Maybe someday ... individual combatants might launch suicide attacks inside Iraq and Turkey, and even against American interests" (AP, May 5; Today's Zaman, May 5). PJAK's leadership quickly refuted the announcement, describing it as "untrue and fabricated" and in violation of PJAK principles. This did not prevent them from venting their anger with the United States: "The USA tells the world that it has a strategic conflict with the theocratic regime in Iran. But when the Kurdish people in Iran wage a sacrificing, modern struggle for the democratization of the country, they provide the means for an attack on them" (PJAK Press Release, May 7).

## War on the Iranian Border

Earlier this week, Turkish warplanes bombed PKK bases in northern Iraq several nights in a row (Today's Zaman, May 13). During previous raids on May 1-2, Turkish warplanes bombed northern Iraq's Qandil Mountains, where Kurdish fighters are thought to be hiding. A military statement claimed that more than 150 rebels were killed during the operation (Today's Zaman, May 5). However, it appears that targets of the bombings were, at least partly, PJAK members, and not exclusively PKK fighters. This would be a sign of increased security cooperation between Turkey and Iran.

PJAK fighters and Iranian troops regularly fight across the Iraq-Iran border, which is part of "Greater Kurdistan" according to the Kurds. On April 14, Iranian artillery shelled PJAK positions in the Qandil Mountains, killing one high-level commander (Hurriyet, April 15). The timing of the shelling—just before a counter-terrorism meeting between Iranians and Turks—was interpreted as a signal of cooperation from Tehran (see Terrorism Focus, April 22). On May 4, Iranian forces captured leading PJAK commander Resit Ehkendi in an operation carried out in the Iranian region of Sakiz. The prosecutor will seek the death penalty for terrorist activities, murder, armed robberies and other illegal activities (Anatolia, May 7). The capture occurred in the context of heightened combat between Kurdish rebels and Iranian and Turkish troops (Anatolia, May 10).

## Turkish-Iranian Cooperation

Turkey and Iran signed a memorandum of understanding stating their willingness to develop cooperation on security issues during the 12th Turkey-Iran High Security Commission held in Ankara last month. The fight against the Kurdish insurgency was part of the memorandum. "The escalation in

terrorist activities in the region is harming both of the countries," the document said. "The most effective method for dealing with this illegal problem is an exchange of intelligence and cooperation in the security field" (Today's Zaman, April 18).

Although worrisome for the United States, this cooperation is unlikely to become very effective, at least in the short-term. Indeed, Turkish officials have publicly expressed their distrust toward the Iranian regime (Today's Zaman, April 21). It should also be remembered that the previous High Security Commission meeting in February 2006 had reached a similar agreement with little improvement in cooperation (Sabah, April 14). Turkey and Iran are powerful regional actors with divergent agendas. Therefore, both countries are likely to remain competitors, although casual cooperation is possible.

More worrisome to the United States is the growing Iranian influence in northern Iraq, where Iran has established relations with most Kurdish groups. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), for instance, whose leader is Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, sees Iran as a crucial trading partner and as a potential ally to ensure Kurdish security. Last August, "Iranian pressures" allegedly compelled Talabani's PUK peshmerga militia to attack Kurdish guerrilla fighters (International Herald Tribune, October 22, 2007).

Parallel to the growing influence of Iran in Iraqi Kurdistan, Kurdish support to the PKK and PJAK decreased substantially in Iraq, as indicated by the following: First, the skirmishes with the PUK; second, Kurdish guerrilla fighters in Iraq now concentrate mainly in the isolated Qandil Mountains, where, despite their remoteness, the insurgents are on the run after the recent air raids, according to the Turkish military (Today's Zaman, May 13). Third, the PJAK leadership recently accused Nechirvan Barzani, the prime minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), of collaborating with Turkey and Iran, warning that this could lead to a "national tragedy" for

Kurdistan (Hawlati [Sulaymaniyah], May 11). Barzani has condemned PJAK multiple times. In an interview with the pan-Arab daily Al-Sharq al-Awsat, Barzani claimed:

"[The KRG is] determined to maintain the best relations possible with all neighboring countries. Iran is a very important neighbor for us, and we have a very long common border with it. Regrettably, Iran's occasional artillery bombardments of the border area within the Kurdistan Region because of the presence of PJAK elements mar these relations. I again reassert that we will not allow any armed group to attack any neighboring countries from the territory of the Kurdistan Region" (Al-Sharq al-Awsat, May 10).

#### A U.S. Proxy in the Struggle with Iran?

Iran accuses the United States of backing PJAK. Iranian intelligence claims to have evidence of such support, but have not produced any proof. Many analysts, however, believe that Iranian assertions might be correct. Undoubtedly PJAK offers a tempting asset for the United States to carry out operations against Iran. It is well known, for instance, that the United States collaborated with the Iranian Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and even before, although the group was—and is—classified as a terrorist organization by the State Department. Although the United States allowed Turkey to conduct several cross-border raids against the PKK in order to secure a strategic alliance, the United States is unlikely to collaborate with Iran against PJAK. On the contrary, the Bush doctrine of regime change is more likely to lead to the support of anti-Tehran insurgents. PJAK vehemently denies any suggestion of U.S. support: "PJAK is a self sufficient and independent organization. It depends on the Kurds' and Iranian people's support, contrary to the Iranian dictatorial regime misinformation campaign that PJAK is getting help from the USA and the West" (PJAK Press Release, May 7).

Osman Ocalan, brother of imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan and a founder of PJAK, claims that PJAK has a "good relationship" with the United States and that Americans offer "some military, economic and medical assistance" to the movement (Los Angeles Times, April 16). According to Robert Baer, a former CIA operative with close ties to Kurdish northern Iraq: "I understand that the U.S. provides intelligence to PJAK so that they are better able to protect themselves in any conflict with the Iranians. This force protection intelligence is given to them through the Delta Forces" (Spiegel Online, April 14).

Last summer, PJAK leader Abdul Rahman Haji Ahmadi visited Washington. Officially, he was given a cold shoulder and did not meet any member of the administration. Therefore, it is not clear whether his visit was an attempt to create contacts with the United States—suggesting that such contacts are nonexistent—or whether a planned secret meeting occurred in Washington.

Whether the United States supports PJAK or not, the relationship between the two parties has been generally good so far. Since the beginning of May, nevertheless, tensions have arisen between PJAK and the United States. PJAK leaders, who are usually supportive of the United States, accused Washington of sharing intelligence with Turkey and—indirectly—with Iran, as well as claiming that the Turkish Air Force dropped U.S.-made gas bombs on Qandil during the May 1-2 air raids (Kurdish Aspect, May 7).

The United States is not the only Western country that has paid close attention to PJAK. With a large Kurdish population, Germany also monitors the activities of the group. Last July, Tehran sent a verbal note to the German ambassador to protest against German indifference to PJAK's "terrorist activities." Several German citizens are thought to be fighting

in PJAK's ranks. Should one of those fighters kill Iranians or be captured, it could create major diplomatic tensions between Tehran and Berlin and also have a potential impact on German relations with Ankara, and on the large Kurdish and Turkish communities in Germany.

## Conclusion

PJAK was created for three reasons: To establish Kurdish activities in Iran; as a means of escaping the PKK terrorist designation; and to obtain U.S. support in actions against the Iranian regime. Although PJAK claims to be different from the PKK, its history, its goals and its leadership suggest that the two groups remain tightly connected [1]. PJAK counts somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000 fighters. Interestingly, half of the members are women, which are gathered under a branch named the Eastern Kurdistan Women's Union (YJRK). Fighters are trained in hit-and-run tactics and armed with Kalashnikov rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, Russian-made sniper rifles and machine guns.

During the last few years, the Kurdish insurgency has become more than a remote fight for Kurdish nationalism. Untangling the varied national interests at work in the area could have a dramatic impact on the region's long-term stability. The current balance is extremely fragile and every player acts with extra precaution in an effort to maintain their alliances while pursuing their individual interests.

## Notes

1. Soner Cagaptay, Zeynep Eroglu, "The PKK, PJAK, and Iran: Implications for U.S.-Turkish Relations," The Washington

Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch #1244, June 13, 2007.