

Potential for wider Iranian Kurdish insurgency increases

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Iranian Kurdish insurgents are stepping up their military activities against the government in Tehran. Dr Jonathan Spyer reports from northern Iraq on the fallout from Iranian action against the PDKI and KDP-I

Key Points

- The relatively low-level Iranian Kurdish insurgency garnered headlines on 8 September, when Iran launched a ballistic missile attack on the facilities of two Iranian Kurdish organisations.
- PDKI insurgents have been engaged in efforts since 2016 to lay the foundations for a wider insurgency among the Kurdish population of Iran, yet their intelligence and military capabilities remain limited.
- Tehran nevertheless takes Iranian Kurdish insurgent activities seriously and aims to forestall any putative Kurdish uprising by making long-term investments in relationships and developing political, military, and intelligence clients in Iraq.

Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) launched seven Fateh-110 short-range surface-to-surface ballistic missiles on 8 September 2018, at facilities maintained by two Iranian Kurdish dissident political-military organisations in the Koya area of northern Iraq. Koya – also known as Koy Sanjaq, or Koysinjaq – is within the territory under the jurisdiction of the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, and is situated approximately 60 km east of Erbil, the KRG capital.

The Iranian-made Fateh-110s have a range of up to 300 km. Claims regarding the number of casualties varied: the Iranian Tasnim news agency, associated with the IRGC, listed the names of 11 people that it said were killed in the attack. One of the Kurdish movements targeted in the attack, the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (Partiya Demokratik a Kurdistana Êran: PDKI), announced officially that 15 people had been killed, whereas the pro-KRG Rudaw website put the number at 16.

According to the IRGC-associated Fars News Agency, the missiles hit three targets: the PDKI's training centre; the political bureau of a second Kurdish group, the Kurdistan Democratic Party – Iran (KDP-I); and a Peshmerga complex. Most fatalities came from the attack on the KDP-I's political bureau: Iran successfully targeted a room in the large Koya complex in which the KDP-I's political bureau was holding a routine meeting.

The KDP-I split from the PDKI in 2006, maintaining an almost identical name. Notably, only the PDKI is engaged in active insurgency against the Iranian government, while the KDP-I engages in unarmed political efforts. A third Iranian Kurdish organisation that is engaged in insurgency against

Tehran, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (Partiya Jiyana Azada Kurdistan: PJAK) – associated with the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan: PKK) – was not targeted in the IRGC action.



Iranian Kurdish KDP-I Peshmerga members investigate the damage after an Iranian missile on their headquarters in Koya on 8 September 2018. The attack was carried out by the Iranian IRGC. (Safin Hamed/AFP/Getty Images)

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Increasing insurgency

The Iranian attack followed an increase in military activities by Kurdish groups in the preceding months against Iranian government facilities and personnel. On 21 July, 11 IRGC personnel were killed during an assault by militants on a border post near the town of Marivan. This incident followed a slow build-up in the tempo of PDKI actions against Iran during the summer months of 2018 (the current PDKI armed campaign against Iran began in early 2016).

On 8 June, the PDKI announced that it had killed nine and wounded 18 IRGC personnel in the Shino mountain area, close to the border. On 24 June, the movement claimed to have killed an IRGC officer near the city of Piranshahr, and on 25 July it announced that two of its own fighters had been killed in West Azerbaijan province, while “paying visits to the family of martyrs and members and friends of the party”.

After the September attack, there was a lull in armed clashes between the PDKI and the IRGC. The PDKI’s campaign nevertheless continues and is not only military in nature. Rather, it is engaged in

an ongoing effort to build a political and popular infrastructure within the Kurdish communities of western Iran, with the intention of activating this against the government at a future date. In this larger campaign – known as the Rasan, or Rising Up – military actions are undertaken only when PDKI Peshmerga are located by government forces on Iranian soil.

The PDKI's current campaign against Tehran has received relatively little attention in the West. By contrast, Iran's own support and sponsorship of a variety of political and military organisations in nearby states – such as Hizbullah in Lebanon – is well documented.

An emergent US strategy is focusing on pressure on Iran, as outlined by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on 21 May 2018, with the reimposition of sanctions on the energy and financial sectors, and amid sporadic popular unrest in Iran during 2018. The PDKI's experience is informative because of the insights that it offers into the methods used by Tehran against the movement, with a multifaceted battle between Iran and its enemies containing economic, conventional military, and political-diplomatic elements.

However, the field of low-intensity operations, intelligence and counter-intelligence, paramilitary activity, and the mobilisation of proxy organisations is an additional key arena within this larger conflict framework. In November 2018, *Jane's* travelled to northern Iraq to interview key PDKI officials – including eyewitnesses to the 8 September missile attacks – at the group's headquarters outside Erbil, and to accompany its fighters on the porous Iraq-Iran border as they planned and conducted their activities against the Iranian government. The PDKI relocated to Erbil after the Koya attacks.

Veteran fighters

The PDKI is one of the most veteran of the militarised political parties that characterise Kurdish political life. Founded in the Iranian town of Mahabad in 1945, the party declared a Republic of Kurdistan on 22 January 1946. PDKI leader Qazi Muhammad was declared president of this republic, which existed for less than a year before the Imperial Iranian Army reconquered Mahabad in December 1946. Qazi Muhamad and other leaders of the party were executed.

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(815 of 2903 words)

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