



Query response

Iran: Increased Kurdish military activity in Iran

- The Iranian-Kurdish parties' role in the recent military escalation in north-western Iran
- Building of new Kurdish military bases in Northern Iraq's border areas to Iran
- The security situation in the border areas between Iran and Northern Iraq
- Arrests and executions of Kurds

Introduction

In the past few years, there has been a gradual increase of military activity among some Iranian-Kurdish parties in Iran's north-western provinces West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan and Kermanshah. From May to September 2016, armed conflicts between Kurdish guerrilla forces and Iranian security forces were reported almost weekly (Bucala & Enferadi 2016). In the past decade, it was mainly the Kurdish party PJAK that had military operations in north-western Iran. But since May 2016, the parties KDPI, KDP-I and PAK have also participated in military operations against Iranian security forces. All of these parties operate from military bases and camps in Northern Iraq. The Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has also strengthened its presence in the region in the same period and has attacked Kurdish villages on both the Iranian and Iraqi sides of the north-western border of the country.

It must be emphasised that access to sources about the situation in Iranian Kurdistan is limited. News reporting is characterised by stories published from the involved parties – i.e. the Kurdish parties on the one hand and the Iranian state on the other. Independent media agencies do not have access to the areas in question, and so there is little possibility of verifying the parties' accounts of events. In general, Kurdish sources report on more clashes than the Iranian media does. International media reprints the stories presented by the parties to some extent. Estimates of the number of people killed and wounded in reported military operations vary greatly and must be considered to be very uncertain. The parties' presentation of the counterparty's losses often seems to be exaggerated. The most credible information about losses is likely when the parties publish names and sometimes pictures of their own casualties. Furthermore, it must be emphasised that this response is based on English-language sources, including Kurdish and Iranian news media agencies that publish in English. Some of the information was obtained during Landinfo's fact-finding mission to Northern Iraq in March 2016.

Query response Iran: Increased Kurdish military activity in Iran

This query response particularly discusses the activities of two parties with highly similar names, which occur in different versions in different sources and are therefore often confused. We have used the abbreviation KDPI for the party Kurdistan's Democratic Party in Iran, which is led by Mustafa Hijri, and KDP-I for Kurdistan's Democratic Party – Iran, which since January 2017 is led by Mostafa Moloudi.¹ In some cases, the parties in question will be referred to differently by the cited sources. The different versions of their names include PDKI, PDK-I, PDK and HDK (from Kurdish: *Hezb Demokrat Kordestan*). As the abbreviations are not used consistently, it will often be the name of the spokesperson who comments which will define which of the parties is being discussed in various articles.



Many of the military skirmishes that are discussed in this query response are marked in this map of the border areas between Iran and Iraq, published by Critical Threats (see Bucala & Enferadi 2016).

Background

Armed Iranian-Kurdish parties, including Kurdistan's Democratic Party in Iran (KDPI) and Komala, which have had bases in northern Iraq since the 1980s, ceased their guerrilla operations against Iran in the mid-1990s as ordered by the newly established autonomous

¹ Mostafa Moloudi, former deputy leader of KDP-I, took over as Secretary General of the party after Khaled Azizi in January 2017 (Homa 2017b).

Query response Iran: Increased Kurdish military activity in Iran

Kurdish government, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). KDPI, which has traditionally been regarded as the largest of the Iranian-Kurdish parties, declared a unilateral ceasefire in 1996 that was generally observed for the next two decades (Bucala & Enferadi 2016). As a result of the ceasefire, KDPI moved its forces from the border areas near Iran and further into the autonomous Northern Iraq (Kurdistan Region of Iraq – KRI). Over the past two years, KDP-I and KDPI have rebuilt military bases in the same border areas they evacuated two decades ago.

In the last decade, only the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) has conducted active military operations in Iran's Kurdish regions. PJAK entered a ceasefire with Iran in autumn 2011, but sporadic skirmishes with Iranian security forces have occurred from time to time.

The military escalation in the Kurdish areas of Iran must be seen in light of the developments in the rest of regional Kurdistan in recent years. The relatively successful Kurdish self-government in Northern Iraq stands as an inspiration and a model for Kurdish parties in Iran. In Turkey, the collapse of the peace process between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the authorities has led to new unrest since 2014. Furthermore, the war against the Islamic State (IS) in both Syria and Iraq has led to mobilisation of Kurds across national borders, including military participation among Iranian Kurds who have enlisted as volunteers.

Peshmerga bases rebuilt in the border areas near Iran

According to KDPI's website, the party's guerrilla forces were re-established in the border areas between Northern Iraq and Iran in May 2015 (KDPI 2016e). At the time, the Kurdish news agency Rudaw reported on clashes between the newly arrived KDPI Peshmerga and guerrilla forces from the Turkish-Kurdish PKK, which have had bases in the same mountain ranges for several years (Rudaw 2015a). KDPI's leader of international relations, Loghman Ahmedi, explained that a KDPI Peshmerga was killed and two wounded in the fight, which was covered by several Kurdish media agencies (Ekurd 2015).

In summer 2015, KDPI published a series of pictures on Twitter of Peshmerga in their new bases in the border areas. The pictures were published either on the party's official Twitter account or on the KDPI Peshmerga's own Twitter account under the name Hezi Peshmerga. The places particularly mentioned in these messages were Qandil, Kalishin and Halgurd (see, for example, KDPI 2015a; Hezi Peshmerga 2015a; 2015b).² Since autumn 2015, it has also released pictures reported to be of Peshmerga inside Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI 2015b).

A journalist from Al Jazeera visited the border areas near Iran in September 2015, where he met members of both KDPI and KDP-I in the new Peshmerga bases. Activists reported that there had been sabotage operations in Iran and that there had been firefights with the Iranian army (MacDiarmid 2015).

KDPI resumes military resistance

KDPI's Secretary-General Mustafa Hijri announced a turning point in the party's attitude towards armed conflict in February 2016 when he announced the following in a Twitter statement: "We will restart armed resistance against the Islamic Republic of Iran" (KDPI

² The place names are spelled as they appear on Google Maps.

2016a). The day after this declaration about resuming armed resistance, the party sent out a new Twitter message claiming that it had conducted a successful operation against an Iranian military base of the volunteer Basij militia, which is connected to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Majid Xan by the city of Bokan (KDPI 2016b). Hijri explained the content of the decision in a speech in connection with the Kurdish New Year celebration Newroz, where he said that the party wanted to “change the course”. He was referring to the deployment of Peshmerga from the mountains of Northern Iraq to urban areas in Iran and explained that the party wanted to bring the Peshmerga closer to the younger population to give them an opportunity to join the party (Rudaw 2016a).

At the same time, KDPI initiated a campaign to recruit young Kurds in Iran. “Join the Peshmerga Forces. Our struggle is for equality and freedom”, was the message of a poster that was published on Twitter (KDPI 2016c). A fundraising campaign was also launched to support the struggle. Under the title “Support the Kurdish national liberation movement in Eastern Kurdistan”, followers were encouraged to donate money (KDPI 2016g).

From May to October 2016, KDPI reported on extensive clashes between Kurdish guerrillas on one side and IRGC and what they referred to as “mercenaries” on the other. Some of the fights have been confirmed by IRGC and discussed by Iranian media. However, reported casualties are often contradictory. It is not always clear which group the Peshmerga belong to when Kurdish or Iranian media report on clashes.

KDPI mentioned the first battle during this period on its Twitter account on 4 May 2016, when it was claimed that eight named members of IRGC had been killed in clashes in Sardasht the same day. KDPI did not accept responsibility for the operation (KDPI 2016d). The fights were confirmed by local witnesses and referred to in Kurdish regional media, but the alleged losses on the Iranian side were not confirmed by Iranian sources (Cheleng 2016a).

Independent sources have also reported frequent military operations since June 2016. The renowned Al-Monitor wrote that KDPI and IRGC had participated in battles at least five times in the weeks leading up to 1 July 1 (Salih 2016). Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reported that there had been fighting for a two-week period in June, first in Oshnavieh/Shno in the province of West Azerbaijan on 15 and 16 June and then in Sarvabad, Mahabad and Marivan (Esfandiari 2016). Irantracker reported on armed conflicts in the provinces of West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan and Kermanshah on the following dates: 4 May, 15 June, 26 June, 28 June, 10 July, 21 July and 7 September (Bucala & Enferadi 2016).

Iranian authorities and KDPI have presented conflicting versions of the skirmishes on 15 June. The Iranian Fars News Agency reported that IRGC had killed 12 members of “terrorist groups associated with anti-revolutionary groups” in Oshnavieh 15 June, after they had crossed the border. The 12 were allegedly killed after several hours of fighting, which also resulted in the death of three IRGC soldiers (FNA 2016a). An Iranian politician also claimed that the killed insurgents belonged to PJAK (RFE/RL 2016). KDPI claimed, on the other hand, that it was their Peshmerga forces who participated in battles on 15 and 16 June in the villages of Qereseqe and Sergiz by Shno. KDPI published names and pictures of six of their members who were reported to have been killed, and also claimed that 20 more soldiers were killed on the Iranian side (Wali 2016).

On 25 June, both Kurdish and Iranian media reported on battles in the city of Mariwan. KDPI issued a statement that Iranian soldiers attacked their Peshmerga in Du Choman, Bagrdan, Hassan Chap and Pengwen outside Mahabad. According to KDPI, several Iranian soldiers were

Query response Iran: Increased Kurdish military activity in Iran

killed and wounded in these attacks. Furthermore, the statement mentioned that Iranian soldiers had attacked Peshmerga in Sawllawa by the city of Mariwan, where one Peshmerga was reportedly killed. According to Iranian news reports, there were two Peshmerga soldiers who were killed. Kurdish media published pictures of bombed houses in what was reported to be damages caused by Iranian bombing of villages near the border (Dolamari 2016a; FNA 2016b). On 27 June, KDPI claimed on its website that the fighting continued for the third consecutive day and that the party had lost three Peshmerga soldiers, whose names were reported. KDPI also claimed that they were in possession of the bodies of eight killed Iranian soldiers. They had allegedly tried to exchange these for the bodies of two Peshmerga soldiers who were in the Iranian's possession. New fights reportedly broke out when IRGC refused the proposal for exchange (KDPI 2016i).

On 28 June, Fars News Agency quoted an Iranian general who claimed that IRGC had discovered a group of eleven members of "the banned Democratic Party" who had been monitored for ten days before IRGC took action and killed all of them. The source reported that three local IRGC soldiers were also killed in the fighting, which occurred in the district of Kouhsalan in the Sarvabad region in the province of Kurdistan (FNA 2016c). The Iranian TV station Press TV (2016b) also reported several clashes in June between "IRGC's Kurdistan border" and "Kurdish militants" who were also referred to as "counter-revolutionaries" and "terrorists".

Larger clashes were again reported from both Kurdish and Iranian sources in September. Eight members of KDPI were reportedly killed in fighting with Iranian security forces at the Iraqi border in the province of West Azerbaijan on 7 September, according to the Iranian news agency IRNA (Ekurd 2016b). The same day, KDPI (2016k) reported on its website that KDPI's Peshmerga forces had conducted two separate operations against two Iranian military bases near the city of Bokan, but did not mention any figures of casualties.

Offensive and defensive actions

KDPI has given some conflicting signals as to the extent to which their military operations are of a defensive or offensive nature. The leadership has said in several statements that the military presence is defensive and that the Peshmerga do not attack Iranian forces unless they come under fire themselves. As explained here in a statement on the party's website dated 30 June:

PDKI's Peshmerga Forces have not, in any of the clashes during recent weeks, targeted Iranian military personnel or institutions. It has been Iran's IRGC who have repeatedly attacked our political cadres and Peshmerga Forces and they have defended themselves in response to such attacks (KDPI 2016j).

Spokesperson Mohammed Qadiri at KDPI's political office has also claimed that the Peshmerga do not conduct offensive operations, but only have a presence in connection with their "political mission" and that they will only resort to weapons in self-defence if attacked by Iranian forces (Kurdistan24 2016). However, Secretary-General Mustafa Hijri warned in an interview in July 2016 that the defensive strategy could change and that the struggle would enter into a more offensive phase in the future (Salih 2016).

In this regard, it is worth noting that KDPI's leader of international relations, Loghman Ahmed, had already in 2015 proclaimed in an interview with Al Jazeera that KDPI was operating under new and more offensive guidelines. Previously, the Peshmerga were ordered to fire only in self-

defence, but this had now changed: “We have a clear order from our party leadership to fight this regime by all possible means,” claimed Ahmed (MacDiarmid 2015).

Thus, there are some contradictory signals from the party’s leadership regarding this.

Zagros Eagles (*Halogani Zagros*)

Since October 2015, there is a new and relatively little-known group that has operated under the name “Zagros Eagles” (also spelled “Zagroz” some places). The group allegedly conducted a series of attacks against Iranian forces in 2016. In several cases, the group’s operations have been announced on KDPI’s websites and are characterised by having a more offensive nature than is the case for actions conducted in KDPI’s name. The group has taken responsibility for attacks on Iranian forces that are in some cases presented as “revenge” for former Iranian attacks against the KDPI Peshmerga. One example is this message, which – indicatively enough – was published on KDPI’s websites during the fierce military operations in June 2016:

The Zagroz Eagles, named after the Zagroz Mountain Chain, is a Special Forces Unit operating in eastern (Iranian) Kurdistan. In a statement released today, the Zagroz Eagles announced that they killed a high ranking commander of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) by the name of Akbari and six other IRGC soldiers in the city of Saghez.

“The operation was carried out as revenge for Iranian attacks on PDKI’s Peshmerga Forces,” the statement reads.

The operation was carried out today in the Xosheder district of Saghez, on the road between Saghez and Mariwan.

The Zagroz Eagles also stated that they will continue to carry out similar operations all over eastern Kurdistan if Iran does not stop attacking PDKI’s Peshmerga Forces (KDPI 2016h).

Actions in the Zagros Eagles’ name have also been regularly published on KDPI’s Twitter account (@PDKIRAN). The following message was posted on 8 January 2017: “Zagros Eagles carried out an operation against a #IRGC base in Baneh yesterday. #Kurdistan #Rasan #Rojhelat#Twitterkurds #Iran #PDKI #KDPI” (KDPI 2017a).

The Zagros Eagles have also made threats against Kurds who cooperate with Iranian security forces. This warning was published on KDPI’s Twitter account on 24 January 2017: “Zagros Eagles issued a warning in the Ourmye Bazaar: we will punish those who work for the #IRGC. #Iran #Rojhelat #Twitterkurds #Kurdistan” (KDPI 2017b).

The Twitter message contained two pictures of posters where the threats are written in Kurdish, hung on a wall in a location, presumably in the bazaar in Ourmye, which is referred to.

KDPI’s leader of international relations, Loghman Ahmed, claims that KDPI has no connection with the Zagros Eagles, although KDPI’s media discusses the groups actions. Ahmed has written the following explanation in an email to Landinfo:

Regarding your question, our party does not have any relation with the Zagros Eagles, however we do disseminate some of their activities against the Islamic Regime in Iran. They describe themselves as an armed underground organisation that works to end the Iranian occupation of Kurdistan. It seems that it is a very decentralised organisation

Query response Iran: Increased Kurdish military activity in Iran

that target high-ranking Iranian military and intelligence officials that have been involved in different forms of oppression of the Kurdish people (email 24 January 2017).

However, a reputable Kurdish journalist has written to Landinfo that the Zagros Eagles are a part of KDPI. According to the journalist, the group was established as a separate group to prevent KDPI's relation with KRG from becoming detrimental to the military operations in Iran. The journalist, who wants to remain anonymous, said that he got this information from a source in KDPI (email, 21 January 2017).

This problem illustrates a central dilemma for KDPI and the other Iranian-Kurdish parties who operate from bases in Northern Iraq: On the one hand, they want to show their presence in Iran and have the opportunity to conduct resistance operations against the Iranian regime. On the other hand, they depend on good relations with KRG, who fear that a military escalation could lead to Iranian military actions against Northern Iraq.

KDP-I/East Kurdistan Defenders

KDP-I, which broke off from KDPI in 2006, has proved less active than KDPI in the extensive fighting in Iran in the summer of 2016. But KDP-I has also moved parts of their Peshmerga forces from the base by Koysanjak, east of Erbil, to the Qandil Mountains by the border with Iran. A journalist who visited KDP-I's new base in Qandil in September 2015 wrote that Peshmerga members rotated between different outposts for a period of up to 40 days before returning to the original base in Koysanjak (Cetti-Roberts 2015).

The party has established its own Peshmerga unit under the name East Kurdistan Defenders – in Kurdish, *Parizarani Rojhelat Kurdistan* – that operates in Iran. During Landinfo's fact-finding mission to Northern Iraq in March 2016, KDP-I's Secretary-General Khaled Azizi said that Parizarani's task was to go into villages and cities where they contact people. They conduct awareness-raising work and show their presence. The Peshmerga should be easily recognisable with their grey uniforms. "Parizarani talks to people and builds networks. They receive support from the population, who gives them food, among other things," says Azizi. He also emphasised that KDP-I respects the understanding with the KRG about not conducting warfare against Iran. Parizarani therefore never attacks Iranian soldiers unless they have first been attacked (Azizi, interview 12 March 2016). News reports confirm the impression that KDP-I has maintained a more defensive strategy against Iranian forces than is the case with KDPI.

However, KDP-I's Peshmerga have on several occasions been involved in military operations with IRGC. Two members of KDP-I's Peshmerga were reportedly killed in fighting with IRGC on 7 September by Bolfat outside Sardasht. KDP-I published names and pictures of the two killed (Dolamari 2016b). KDP-I claimed that six IRGC soldiers were killed in the same battles (Wilgenburg 2016b). According to KDP-I, the party was also involved in two other skirmishes that led to wounded on the Peshmerga side. A Peshmerga was reportedly wounded in fighting near Mahabad on 24 August, and two in fighting by the border to Northern Iraq on 21 September (KDP-I spokesperson, email 30 January 2017).

It was also reported that KDP-I was involved in fights with IRGC as early as two years earlier. On 13 September 2014, there was reportedly fighting by the cities of Marewan, Shno and Shandasht, and losses were reported on both sides. Secretary-General Azizi claimed that the Peshmerga were hit with an ambush and that they returned fire in self-defence (Saadullah 2014). Iranian media also mentioned the clashes. The Iranian Bultan News wrote that a group of

Query response Iran: Increased Kurdish military activity in Iran

terrorists from Khaled Azizi's democratic party was sent into Iranian Kurdistan and had attacked Iranian border guards at Sardasht. Two border guards were killed and several wounded, according to the news release (Bultan News 2014).

Iranian authorities executed a member of KDP-I, Mansour Arvand, in June 2015 (Rudaw 2015b). The KDP-I management has confirmed to Landinfo that Arvand was a member of the party and that he had been on a tour in KDP-I's base in Northern Iraq before returning to Iran (Zewayi, interview 12 March 2016).

Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK)

Another party which has also played a role in the military escalation in Iranian Kurdistan is the Kurdistan Freedom Party (Parti Azadi Kurdistan - PAK). In recent years, PAK's Peshmerga forces have gained significant military experience by having actively worked together with KRG's military forces in the fight against IS in Northern Iraq. On 20 April 2016, PAK's communications director Rezgar Abaszade declared that their guerrilla forces, who were referred to as The Kurdistan Freedom Eagles for East Kurdistan (HAK-R), had ended their ceasefire with the Islamic Republic. The spokesperson also claimed that PAK's forces had attacked the Iranian army in Sanandaj on 17 April in an attack where two Iranian soldiers were killed. PAK reportedly established the new Peshmerga group HAK-R, which had the task of fighting Iranian forces, according to the Kurdish news agency Wilgenburg (2016a).

PAK claimed that their Peshmerga had conducted new attacks against IRGC's positions in the villages of Hamran, Myouni and Sartaja outside the city of Sardasht on 5 May (ARA News 2016b).

A military commander in PAK, Hussein Yazdanpanah, claimed that PAK's Peshmerga had been involved in fighting with IRGC at least six times before the beginning of November (Dehghanpisheh & Georgy 2016).

PJAK

PJAK, which has conducted guerrilla operations in Iranian Kurdistan since 2004, entered a ceasefire with Iran in 2011. The ceasefire has repeatedly been broken by both parties. For example, PJAK conducted several attacks against IRGC as revenge after the PJAK member Sirvan Nezhavi were executed in August 2015. PJAK claimed to have killed 12 Iranian soldiers in an attack on a military base in Kamyaran in the Kurdistan province, while Iran confirmed that five soldiers were killed, according to Reuters. Later that same month, another imprisoned PJAK member, Behrouz Alkhani, was executed (Sharafedin 2015).

In the summer of 2014, PJAK was involved in several clashes, which were referenced in Iranian media. The Iranian TV channel Press TV reported that a group of five PJAK members were killed in an ambush by Iranian soldiers outside the city of Sardasht on 13 June. According to IRGC, the killed were terrorists who had been responsible for the killings of two local Basij members in the same city in April the same year (Press TV 2016a).

On 4 October 2016, the Iranian news agency Tasnim News Agency reported that IRGC had succeeded in destroying a "terrorist cell" by the border areas in the province of Kermanshah. All 12 members of the cell were allegedly killed and a large number of weapons and ammunition was seized by the soldiers. A source in IRGC said that three Iranian soldiers were

wounded in the operation (Tasnim 2016). PJAK confirmed on its websites that 12 members of their guerrilla forces East Kurdistan Defence Forces (YRK) were killed in the mentioned attack, which occurred in the city of Salasbajani in the province of Kermanshah. PJAK also published the names and pictures of the killed guerrilla soldiers, who were reportedly between 19 and 35 years old, and also suggested that those killed had been exposed to chemical weapons from Iranian air and ground forces which participated in the attack (Rudaw 2016d). PJAK declared that they would avenge this attack and Kurdish soldiers reported that the group conducted several attacks in the days that followed. The website Ekurd reprinted messages from PJAK that they had attacked IRGC and their “mercenaries” in several places, including in the village of Ruwari in the region of Harwaman and in Rabat and Jandaran outside the city of Sardasht in West Azerbaijan. PJAK claimed that as many as 32 IRGC soldiers were killed in this series of attacks. The alleged losses were not confirmed by Iranian sources (Ekurd 2016d).

An Iranian brigade general reported that IRGC repelled a new infiltration attempt on 11 October when a group of infiltrators from PJAK were reportedly forced to flee over the border from the Iranian province of Kurdistan back to Northern Iraq. They reportedly left “light and semi-heavy weapons” at the site, according to the Iranian TV station Press TV (2016d).

The new military activities of KDPI, KDP-I and PAK means the PJAK is no longer the only Kurdish group that conducts guerrilla operations in Iran.

Iranian attacks on Iraqi territory

The increased military activity in Iran has also had consequences for the security situation in Northern Iraq’s border areas in the east. On several occasions in the summer of 2016, Iranian forces responded to the Kurdish groups’ military activities by shelling targets in Northern Iraq. Several Kurdish villages in the areas of Sidakan and Haji Omaran on the Iraqi side of the border were hit by Iranian artillery fire from Iran on 26 June. Five people were reportedly wounded and ten villages were evacuated (Rudaw 2016b; Ekurd 2016b; Salih 2016). On 11 August, four villages in the Sidakan district were hit by powerful artillery fire (Rudaw 2016c). Several of the attacks resulted in extensive forest fires.

IRGC has threatened to initiate a more extensive invasion of Northern Iraq to destroy the main bases of the “terrorists”, which are situated further into the country, if their actions continue (Esfandiari 2016; Alsalmi 2016). A military adviser to Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei warned the Northern Iraqi autonomous government KRG against cooperating with Iran’s enemies. He accused parts of KRG of allowing Saudi Arabia’s Consulate General to supply Iranian “anti-revolutionary forces” with weapons (FNA 2016d).

Iranian attacks against targets in Iraqi territory have not been common in recent years, although they have occurred. KDPI’s main base in Koysanjak in Northern Iraq was attacked by Iranian forces in 1996 and PJAK’s bases in 2011. Secretary-General Hijri has emphasised that KDPI takes Iran’s threats of a greater military offensive in Northern Iraq seriously (Salih 2016).

Bomb attacks against KDP-I’s headquarters

KDP-I’s headquarters by Koysanjak in Northern Iraq were struck by a double bomb attack on 20 December 2016. First, a bomb went off at the entrance to the party’s headquarters. Then, another larger bomb exploded, afflicting party members and police who had gathered at the

Query response Iran: Increased Kurdish military activity in Iran

site. Five of the party's members and an Iraqi-Kurdish police officer from KRI were killed (Reuters 2016b). During the funeral of the victims, KDP-I leader Khaled Azizi accused Iran of being behind the attack (Trackpersia 2016). The event illustrates how the escalation in Iran may have also affected the security situation in Northern Iraq.

Attacks on local smugglers – *kulbaran*

For many years, there has been extensive smuggling of goods and persons across the border between Iran and Northern Iraq. The local smugglers are called *kulbaran*; “*kul*” being the Kurdish word for “back” and “*bar*” meaning “carrying”, because they carry the loads on their backs over hilly terrain. Kulbaran have been particularly affected as a result of Iranian security forces’ attention to irregular activities in the border areas. News sources in Northern Iraq reported that 49 kulbaran were killed and 47 wounded near the Iranian border in 2016 (Homa 2017a). The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran has previously criticised Iran’s practice of arbitrarily killing kulbaran by the border. The Special Rapporteur’s report from March 2016 referred to the human rights reports that confirmed that between 36 and 44 kulbaran were killed in 2015 (HRC 2016, p. 20).

Waves of arrests

Iranian security forces reportedly conducted extensive arrests in the wake of the military escalation.

According to local sources, the authorities conducted mass arrests in Oroumiyah, Mahabad, Oshnaviyeh (Shno), Moukan, Sanandaj and Mariwan in October and November 2016 (KHRN 2016). Dozens of civilian activists were reportedly arrested when Iranian security forces raided several homes in Mahabad and the surrounding area on 3 October, according to local witnesses (Yousef 2016). The arrests led to spontaneous protest demonstrations that spread to Mariwan and Sanandaj, and then again led to new arrests in the days that followed (Cheleng & Yousef 2016).

In late December, it was also reported that there were arrests in Mahabad, Sardasht and Piranshahr. Activists said that at least 20 were arrested on 29 December. The authorities said that the arrestees were suspected of contact with terrorist organisations (Cheleng 2016b).

In the past six months, Iranian media has reported on ongoing arrests of “terrorists”, who are often connected to parties such as PJAK, KDPI, Komala or to Salafists (see, for example, FNA 2016e).

Mass executions of Salafists

Iranian authorities have cracked down hard on activity among Salafists, whom they have accused of being responsible for much of the violence in the Kurdish region in recent years. Human Rights Watch reported that the court authorities in the Kurdistan province announced that 20 members of a “terrorist Takfiri group” were executed on 2 August. They were all accused of belonging to the Sunni Salafist group Jihad and Tawhid and for being behind several killings, including a prayer leader, and for other armed activities during the period 2009-2011 (HRW 2016). This is the largest mass execution in Iran for many years. The Ministry of Intelligence issued a statement that 102 members of the group Jihad and Tawhid had been

Query response Iran: Increased Kurdish military activity in Iran

arrested and were under investigation. It was claimed that the group was responsible for abductions, bombings, robberies and deadly attacks on both police and civilians (IRNA 2016).

Hadi Ghaemi, Director of the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, has noted that it seems like a convenient time for Iran to associate the persecution of Sunni Muslims with the Islamic State (IS). He believed the timing of the executions acts as a signal to the militant groups and the local Kurdish community, which spreads fear among the people (Dehghanpisheh 2016).

An alleged member of Komala – Communist Party of Iran was also executed in 2016. Mohammad Abdollahi, who was arrested in 2011, was sentenced to death in 2014 for conducting warfare against the state and for membership in Komala (ICHRI 2016).

In 2015, six members of Jihad and Tawhid, two members of PJAK and one member of KDP-I were executed (HRW 2016).

Summary: Increased tension in Iranian Kurdistan

The military mobilisation among several Iranian-Kurdish parties has led to an increased level of tension in the Kurdish regions in Iran. KDPI and KDP-I have moved Peshmerga forces from camps in Northern Iraq to the border areas near Iran, where they have built new military bases. The Peshmerga forces have entered cities and villages of three provinces in Iran, where they have participated in extensive fighting with Iranian security forces. This military activity appears to be a result of a strategic shift by KDPI and a break with the party's longtime reluctance towards military activity. Iranian forces have responded with increased military presence, attacks on Kurdish villages both in Iran and on the Iraqi side of the border in the northwest, and have stepped up attacks against smugglers over the border. Furthermore, Iranian authorities have cracked down on demonstrations, arrested Kurdish activists and executed more Kurdish prisoners than in many years.

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Query response Iran: Increased Kurdish military activity in Iran

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