

# Washington's proxy war inside Kurdish Iran

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A string of articles have appeared in the US press over the past week reporting on the Iranian shelling of border areas inside the Kurdish north of Iraq since August. One American journalist after another has trekked to the Qandil mountains to interview guerrillas belonging to the Party for Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), and describe first hand the resulting devastation to crops, livestock and impoverished villages.

The sudden interest in this remote, mountainous region has nothing to do with concern for the plight of local Kurds. It is another element of the anti-Iranian propaganda campaign being cranked up by the Bush administration and media. Iranian “meddling” in Iraq’s north is being added to Tehran’s alleged nuclear weapons programs and support for anti-US insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan. All of the articles deliberately obscure Washington’s responsibility in fuelling the conflict and turning northern Iraq into a potential regional battleground.

The establishment of an autonomous Kurdish regional government in northern Iraq was the Bush administration’s payoff to the Kurdish elites that fully supported the criminal US-led invasion in 2003. The encouragement of Kurdish separatism has created tensions not only with Iran, but also with Syria and US ally Turkey, all of which have substantial Kurdish minorities. The Turkish military warned earlier this year that it would invade northern Iraq to destroy PKK bases if the US and Iraqi forces did not do so. Significantly, Turkish shelling and incursions into northern Iraq in June and July did not prompt a gaggle of US reporters to travel to survey the damage.

The Bush administration has gone out of its way to pacify the Turkish government and military, while opposing any full-scale Turkish invasion that would destabilise northern Iraq. Last year, the US appointed retired air force general, Joseph Ralston, as a special envoy to Ankara to coordinate a joint approach on the PKK. In the case of Iran, however, the Bush administration is, in all likelihood, assisting, arming and training them, if not directly then through proxies, particularly Israel.

This duplicity is highlighted by the fact that the US State Department formally maintains the PKK, which operates

inside Turkey, on its list of terrorist organisations, while PJAK, which is carrying out attacks inside Iran, is not. And if the recent media coverage is any indication, the US will soon be hailing PJAK guerrillas as Iranian “freedom fighters” rather than denouncing them as terrorists.

Despite lame denials, the PKK and PJAK have the closest relations—by many accounts, the PJAK is simply the PKK’s Iranian offshoot. Both make similar appeals for a Kurdish confederation stretching across Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria. Their guerilla camps are in the same mountainous area. Indeed, the latest US press articles make little attempt to distinguish between the two groups, interviewing PKK and PJAK officials as if they were the same.

PJAK denies receiving any US assistance, but its pro-US sympathies and contacts are evident in recent interviews with US journalists. Local PJAK leader Amin Karimi told the *Pittsburgh Tribune Review*: “We had some contacts because the Americans are here in Iraq and they are our neighbours now. Sometimes they want to know who is PJAK and what we are doing.” But, he stressed, “we have no cooperation”.

PJAK leader Rahman Haji Ahmadi, who lives in exile in Germany, made a low-key visit to Washington in July to appeal for money and guns. While an account last month in the *Washington Times* played down any contact with US officials, *Newsweek’s* September 13 “exclusive” from the Iran-Iraq border quoted PJAK commander Beryar Gabare as saying that Ahmadi had held discussions “at a high level” with US officials over “the future of Iran”. He denied receiving support from the US, but added: “If some day our common interests [with the US] are on the same line, we’re ready, we can negotiate.”

The US is also quietly maintaining contacts with the PKK. Of those who recently interviewed PKK leader Murat Karayilan on the Iran-Iraq border, only the correspondent for the British-based *Telegraph* reported the obvious: “In the Qandil mountains, signs of a conflict gathering momentum are easily found. US army helicopters are reportedly used to shuttle officers to regular meetings with Kurdish fighters. There is a landing pad complete with spotlights near Mr Karayilan’s headquarters, while four wheel drive vehicles

belonging to a US private security contractor, are easily seen.”

Reports of the Bush administration’s efforts to foment armed opposition inside Iran not only among Kurds, but also other ethnic minorities including Arabs, Azeris and Baluchis, stretch back to 2003. Among the most detailed have been articles in the *New Yorker* by veteran investigative journalist Seymour Hersh. As far back as June 2004, he pointed out in an article entitled “Plan B”, based on senior American and Israeli sources, that the Israeli intelligence and military had trained Kurdish commando units to run covert operations inside the Kurdish areas of Iran and Syria to gather intelligence and plant sensors and other devices.

In an article entitled “The Next Act” published last November, Hersh wrote: “In the past six months, Israel and the United States have also been working together in support of a Kurdish resistance group known as the Party for Free Life [PJAK] in Kurdistan. The group has been conducting clandestine cross-border forays into Iran, I was told by a government consultant with close ties to the Pentagon civilian leadership, as ‘part of an effort to explore alternative means of applying pressure on Iran.’ (The Pentagon has established covert relationships with Kurdish, Azeri and Baluchi tribesmen, and has encouraged their efforts to undermine the regime’s authority in northern and southeastern Iran.) The government consultant said that Israel is giving the Kurdish group ‘equipment and training.’ The group has also been given ‘a list of targets inside Iran of interest to the US’.”

The White House has dismissed or ignored Hersh’s reports. The Israeli government has officially denied any involvement with the PJAK. However, it is no secret that the Bush administration is seeking “regime change” in Iran. In early 2006, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice sought \$75 million in extra funding for so-called pro-democracy activities—that is, to finance anti-government propaganda and opposition groups inside Iran. This May, ABC News reported that Bush had signed a “non-lethal presidential finding” in early 2007 authorising “a CIA plan that reportedly includes a coordinated campaign of propaganda, disinformation and manipulation of Iran’s currency and international financial transactions”. Unlike the Pentagon, the CIA requires a formal finding to engage in covert operations.

Significantly, an upsurge of PJAK attacks inside Iran this year has shown increasing sophistication. In February, PJAK claimed responsibility for shooting down an Iranian military helicopter with a shoulder-held missile, killing eight soldiers and capturing one. According to a recent *Gulf News.com* article, one of the dead was General Saeed Qahhari, a regional commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard

Corps (IRGC). “Since then,” the article noted, “the IRGC has issued cryptic reports about dozens of other ‘engagements’ in which scores of policemen, border patrols and IRGC members have been killed or wounded, while killing at least 100 Kurdish insurgents.”

At this stage, the PJAK does not appear to have roots among Iran’s Kurdish minority, but relies on its bases inside US-occupied Iraq. Most of its “engagements” appear to be in West Azerbaijan, rather than in the two Kurdish majority provinces of Kurdistan and Kermanshahan. Abdullah Mohtadi, secretary general of Komala, a long-standing Kurdish Stalinist party, told *Pittsburgh Tribune Review*: “If PJAK can be an independent party, we welcome them. But they are just taking their orders from somewhere else—they are just PKK... It does not help the Kurdish movement in Iran, and it doesn’t help the Iraqi Kurds.”

The result has been a build up of Iranian security forces along the border. According to *Gulf News*, the IRGC has established a special command centre at the Hamza Base, near the Iraqi border, and committed a full division plus one unit of airborne special forces to curb the insurgency. Over the past month, Iranian shelling of PKK and PJAK strongholds, at times in apparent coordination with the Turkish military, has wreaked havoc in Kurdish border villages and there are reports of at least one cross-border raid by Iranian ground troops. Tehran has rejected Iraqi protests, but there is little doubt of its activities. They are in keeping with the regime’s consistent reliance on state repression to stamp out any opposition, including from the country’s ethnic and religious minorities.

However, the chief responsibility for turning the northern Iran-Iraq region into a war zone rests with the Bush administration, which is cynically using the PJAK to undermine and destabilise the Kurdish areas as it draws up war plans for attacking Iran. It is a rerun of Washington’s strategy of using Kurdish guerillas to undermine the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq prior to the 2003 invasion. Once again, the Kurds are being manipulated by US imperialism, with the complicity of the thoroughly venal Kurdish leaderships, to advance its strategic and economic interests in the Middle East.



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