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CHAPTER 12

Iran and Kurdistan: A Studied Ambiguity

William O. Beeman

Introduction

The killing of Shivane (Shwan) Qadiri¹ reportedly a member of, or sympathizer with the Revolutionary Union of Kurdistan (Yeketi Shorishgerani Kurdistan) or the PJAK² by Iranian Pasdaran

¹ Seyyed Kamal Seyyed Qader (also known as Shavaneh and identified elsewhere as Seyyed Kamal Astam).

² The PJAK (Kurdistan Independent Life Party) is an Iranian branch of the PKK, according to most sources. It is, however, a weak resistance movement. It reportedly had its first formal meeting on March 25, 2004. See Max Chamka and Victoria Bryan (translator), "PJAK, the Unknown Entity of the Kurdish Resistance in Iran," *Chaucaz Europnews*, August 31, 2005.

www.caucaz.com/home_eng/breve_contenu.php?id=183#top

Because it is so little known, I include the following lengthy passage from Chamka and Bryan's report: Proof of this link [with the PKK] is that one of the former PJAK leaders is none other than Shapour Badoshiveh, an Iranian Kurd and former Canadian citizen who went missing in 2004 and who is in charge of the western Kurdistan division within the PKK. Having truly stepped into the limelight in 2005, PJAK held its first meeting on 25 March 2004 after having moved through several different forms. This branch of PKK remains an unknown entity and its set-up is still unclear. One of the theories bandied about and that has been backed up by different reports in Mahabad is that PJAK is based in Turkey, although its leader is an Iranian Kurd. One party, five

in Mahabad on July 9, 2005 was a tragic event that sparked protests throughout Kurdish areas of Iran. Qadiri's killing appears to have been unjustified and brutal (the security forces reportedly tied Shivan Qadiri's body to a Toyota jeep and dragged him in the streets), and thus all the more tragic.³ It was also symbolically important because it occurred roughly on the anniversary of the assassination of Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) leader Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou by Iranian agents on the 13 July, 1989.⁴

The fact that newly elected President Mahmud Ahmadinejad was implicated in this assassination on July 5, 2005 by the KDPI did not help matters. It increased the tension between the two communities. In fact, the Revolutionary Union of Kurdistan had opposed both the election and Ahmadinejad—a fact that probably was the reason for the Pasdaran presence in Mahabad to begin with.⁵

networks Heading PJAK, Abdul Rahman Haci [haji] Ahmedi used an official visit to Norway in June to hold an interview at the Institute of Human Rights in Oslo. It was his opportunity to publicly discuss his fears for Iran of mullahs and to set out the political views of his party. "PJAK distances itself from all the current forms of traditional Kurdish nationalism as it is convinced that it is better to favor peaceful coexistence and cooperation in order to achieve a true multi-ethnic democracy rather than dividing up the country into lots of small states." This federal form of Kurdish resistance is divided up into five political and armed offshoots: The Union of Women in Western Kurdistan (YJKR), the Union for Youth in Western Kurdistan (YCR), the Union for the Democratic Press (YRD) and finally, political circles and military forces for self-defense. Since the founding meeting was held, the armed division of PJAK has claimed responsibility for more than 80 military operations in Iranian Kurdistan, and thirty or so direct clashes with the forces of law and order of the Islamic regime.

³ Pictures of his mutilated body circulated internationally on the Internet, adding to the outrage.

⁴ Cf. Bill Samii, "Iran: Country Faces Agitated Kurdish Population," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, July 22, 2005. www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/07/16b8fdcd-3577-425a-ba99-369e3ce6f058.html

⁵ Iran denied Ahmadinejad's involvement in Ghassemlou's assassination, dismissing it as Zionist propaganda. On the face of it, the Zionist

As the clashes continued, by July 20, 2005, 15 more arrests had taken place. However, the Kurds retaliated in spectacular fashion. On July 27, 2005, forces from the PKK attacked Iranian forces in Siahkuh, killing 5 and wounding 4 more. Further protests in the remote town of Saqqez on August 3 (in which 2 policemen and 6 civilians were reportedly killed) and Bukan on August 6 were indicative of how widespread the violence had become.⁶ By some accounts, 100,000 Iranian troops had been deployed throughout the Kurdish region. This conflict was pronounced enough to spill over into the normally quiet Kurdish region in Khorasan, widely separated from the Western areas of Iran, where clashes with local officials shut down the Mashhad-Nishabur road on July 28, 2005.

The details of all of these events are in dispute. Some accounts put the deaths of Kurds at the hands of Iranian forces at above 40. The Iranian government made additional claims of attacks by Kurdish forces.

Growing Tensions

It is easy to view this event as a simple clash between Kurdish nationalism and a repressive Iranian state, but this analysis is much too one-dimensional. As tragic as these deaths and attacks are, they are the surface phenomena in a growing struggle between Iran and its Kurdish population that is sure to grow stronger as events in Iraqi Kurdistan develop. Jalal Talabani's election as president of Iraq was widely celebrated in Iranian Kurdistan, including the display of Kurdish flags (one of the crimes of which Qadiri was accused).

Of course, as the possibility of an autonomous Kurdistan in Iraq grows, so will the hope of some kind of similar independence movement in Iran increase, resulting in increased conflict between Iranian Kurds and the forces of the Islamic Republic. But this dynamic is just one factor in the complex political interconnections of the region. It is just the tip of the political iceberg.

charge seems specious, except for the fact that Israel's secret service, Mossad, has been accused of working in Kurdistan (see below).

⁶ In addition to Bukan and Saqqez, protests were reported in Baneh, Divandareh, Ashnavieh, Piranshahr, Sanandaj, and Sardasht

The fact conflict between the Iranian government and Kurdistan is incipient and possibly growing has created an international situation that is highly volatile, and is being exploited by outside forces—by the United States and Israel on one side, and by forces opposed to the United States and Israel on the other.

There are, in fact, so many different sides and so many different players in this political and military game that it is difficult to keep track of the sides. In this presentation, one might unravel some of the more tangled knots in this political ball of string. Unfortunately, the United States government and the press do not help us understand these matters very well. They regularly attribute actions that originate with outside players, such as the Ansar al-Islam, with the Iranian government. They have no idea about the interchanges between Kurdish populations in Iran, Iraq and Turkey, and they overestimate the willingness of the entire Kurdish population to follow a separatist agenda.

Five Points (Predictions)

In this brief presentation, the following five major points will be elaborated:

1. The Kurdish desire for autonomy is a given factor in the politics of the region. Given any encouragement, there is always a reservoir of support for this autonomy, which has been exploited by outside powers for more than a century.

2. However, because it is a relentless, constant force in Kurdish political life, Iranian Kurdistan will grow ever more autonomous from the Iranian Central government while maintaining close cultural ties to Iranian civilization.

3. The Iranian government views Iranian Kurdistan as integral Iranian territory and will fight to maintain it as part of Greater Iran in some fashion—even if they must make a devil's bargain with Turkey in order to do so.

4. The United States and Israel will make a large miscalculation in assuming that Kurds in Iran as a whole are implacable enemies of the Iranian State. To be sure, there are militant elements.

5. The Kurds in Iran eventually will control their own territory and their own destiny. Attempts on the part of outside powers to intervene and interfere will meet with failure.

The Desire for Autonomy

The unfortunate events surrounding the last days of the Ottoman Empire and the Great Power deception of the Kurds is all too familiar to many history readers. What is not so well understood is that having divided Kurdistan into small pieces, rivals for power in the region could use these pieces as surrogate opposition forces to create trouble for their neighbors. Iran at times has supported Kurdish forces in both Iraq and Turkey. Iraq, Turkey and the Soviet Union exploited Kurdish desires for independence to create difficulties for Iran. Thus, the external powers had a cheap, ready-made military engine that they could always cynically use against their neighbors. The Kurds would always rise to the bait, but never succeed in achieving the goal of autonomy, much less independence.⁷

The fall of Saddam Hussein changed matters in a dramatic way. Suddenly it seemed that Iraqi Kurdistan would in fact succeed in achieving virtual independence. This threw Turkey, Iran and even Syria into panic, for a crucial component of the “engine” of Kurdish exploitation was now turning into something that could no longer be exploited, but would be transformed into a force in its own right.⁸

Iran, Turkey and Syria in 2003 suddenly grew very close. This was a surprising development given the religious nature of the Islamic Republic and the hitherto secular nature of Turkey and Syria. However, with the rise to power in Turkey of the Islamist-oriented Justice and Development Party (AKP) in No-

⁷ James Climent, “The Kurds: State and Minority in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran,” *Conflict and Crisis in the Post-Cold War World* (New York: Facts on File, 1996); Farideh Koochi-Kamali, *The Political Development of the Kurds in Iran: Pastoral Nationalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); and David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1997).

⁸ George Baghdadi, “Iraq; Kurd Unrest Spreads to Syria,” *New York Amsterdam News* 95 (25) 2004, p. 2; Guy Chazan and Hugh Pope, “Turkey Strengthens Ties with Two U.S. Adversaries: Iran, Syria,” *Wall Street Journal-Eastern Edition* 241 (70) 2003, p. A11; and Steve Forbes, “Getting Serious about Syria and Iran,” *Forbes* 173 (13) 2004, p. 31.

vember 2002, Iran began to look more compatible.⁹ Turkey proposed a meeting in Istanbul on July 19, 2005, to launch a joint defense against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which had plagued it for decades. Syria more or less came along, joined to the other two powers by its concern over rising Kurdish power.

Ties with Iranian Civilization

Kurdistan has gradually carved out for itself an autonomous zone in Western Iran that is the equivalent of the Kurdish region of Iraq. During the Revolution of 1978-79, Iraq controlled its own border and many escapees from the Islamic Republic went over that border. Likewise, in the Iran-Iraq war, Tehran realized that it had to make concessions with the Kurds if it had a hope of fighting the war at all. Virtually the entire border was controlled by the Kurds, and the Iranians appreciated this fact by leaving the Kurds to govern largely without interference from Tehran. Just as in Iraq, the Kurds became used to this state of affairs, and the Qadiri killing was one of the only serious incursions made by Iranian forces in many years.¹⁰

Kurds largely control their territory by commanding its formidable mountainous geography. Only a few times in history has Iran succeeded in controlling territory beyond the Zagros Mountains, and then for only a small period of time. The Kurds are part of the reason. Virtually no roads penetrate the region, and the Kurds control those, as well as their borders. Even today, the borders are totally permeable¹¹ Thus it is most likely that the drive toward greater autonomy will continue. It is also, incidentally, the Kurds' right to do so under the current Iranian constitution.

However, it will only be semi-autonomy, because there is a cultural boundary as well as a physical one between the Iranian

⁹ Chazan and Pope, "Turkey Strengthens Ties with Two U.S. Adversaries."

¹⁰ Nader Entessar's chapter in this book argues otherwise. Editor's note.

¹¹ The United States is complicit here. As long as there are forces in Washington and Tel Aviv that hope for regime change in Iran, an open border is an asset. See below.

world and the world beyond to the west. The Kurds are closer culturally to Iran than to their Western Arab neighbors. The Iranian Kurds are under the Persian cultural umbrella. As many Iranian Kurds have pointed out: “We are not Fars, but we are Iranian.” Their brand of Sunni Islam, with many mystical elements, is closer to the Sufi practices found in Shiism than either to the secular Arabs, or to the more severe pietistic Sunnis of the Arab world. Kurdish is an Indo-European language, with many Persian borrowings. Thus, there will still be affinities with Iran even as the drive toward autonomy continues. Chris Kutschera points out two trends in Iranian Kurdish politics: “While some Kurdish intellectuals claim that [the] trend, known as ‘independentist’ is the main one, others claim that the ‘gradualists’ represent the dominant tendency. These more moderate intellectuals say the thesis of independence is not defensible. One must be realistic, tune one's dreams with the realities of the Middle East and reach one's goals, step by step, in a globalized world.”¹² The PJAK is also seen as a “moderate” wing of the PKK favoring the gradualist approach, despite the confrontational posture of the group during the 2005 presidential elections.

Kurdistan Integral to Iran

Iran has a longstanding policy of multi-ethnic integration. Some would claim that it is a hegemonic vision, where “Fars” dominates other minority groups within their territory. My view is somewhat more benign. Iran sees Kurdistan as part of the Greater Persian culture. The raw ethnic prejudice that one sees elsewhere in the world is absent in Iran. Whereas Kurds claim discrimination in a number of areas from education to hiring, there has never been all-out violence launched against Kurds merely for being Kurds, however brutal government actions have been against opposition political leaders.

Iranians would, by and large, feel a great national wound if Kurdistan were to separate from their nation. This is one of the reasons for the opposition to the short-lived Mahabad Republic of 1946. Concessions in recent years, especially on language and

¹² Chris Kutschera, “A Kurdish Awakening,” 352 *Middle East*, 2005, p. 30.

cultural matters have reversed policies from the Pahlavi era. Instruction in Kurdish has now started in elementary schools, and in the University of Kurdistan. Newspapers, albeit controlled, are printed in Kurdish (using modified Arabic script, rather than Latin or Cyrillic) and media broadcasts in Kurdish are also seen. However, beyond these essentialist feelings, Iran suspects that Kurdish desires for autonomy make it vulnerable to exploitation by outside enemies of the Iranian state. From the Mahabad Republic onward, this has been a constant theme in Iranian politics. The attack on Qadiri would not have taken place, if Iran did not think that Israel, the United States and the Mujahideen-e Khalq were not somehow involved with the Kurdish political movements with which Qadiri was alleged to have been a sympathizer. Iran will fight to maintain Kurdistan as part of its nation. The balance between integration and autonomy is the larger question that needs to be worked out over time.

Outside Interference

Seymour Hersh wrote in June 2004 that Israel was aiding the Kurds, as a means of blunting the force of its enemies, the insurgent Islamic forces in Iraq and also the government of Iran.¹³ The idea that the Kurds could serve as this kind of bulwark against “Islamic extremism” is novel and interesting. Certainly, this promise has been one of the factors that have assured American support for Kurdish autonomy, and it has had odd consequences. The free interchange of populations between Iran and Iraq was actually facilitated by the United States, which kept the Iran-Iraq border in Kurdistan open during the American conflict.

Hersh quotes one of the most prominent neo-conservatives in Washington:

Patrick Clawson, who is the deputy director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, with close ties to the White House, explained. “There’s no question that we took no steps last summer to close the border, but our attitude was that it was more useful for Iraqis to have contacts with ordinary Iranians coming across the border, and thousands were coming across every day—for instance, to

¹³ Seymour Hersh, “Plan B,” *The New Yorker*, June 28, 2004.

make pilgrimages.” He added, “The questions we confronted were ‘Is the trade-off worth it? Do we want to isolate the Iraqis?’ Our answer was that as long as the Iranians were not picking up guns and shooting at us, it was worth the price.”

Clawson said, “The Israelis disagreed quite vigorously with us last summer. Their concern was very straightforward—that the Iranians would create social and charity organizations in Iraq and use them to recruit people who would engage in armed attacks against Americans.”¹⁴

Clawson is, of course, completely disingenuous. The open border also facilitated the incursion of the Mujahideen-e Khalq into Iran, and this Iranian opposition group is one that the Bush administration hoped would be instrumental in effecting “regime change” in Iran. Clawson is an active supporter of this agenda, having lobbied the Bush administration to remove the Mujahideen [Jihadists] from the U.S. Terrorist organization list. Iran is keenly aware of this. Iranian Parliamentarian Mahmud Nabirudaki said on August 9, 2005, that “one of the main reasons for the unrest” was a purported meeting between PJAK members and American military personnel in Iraq’s Salahadin.¹⁵ The plan backfired, of course. Open borders allow traffic in both directions after all, and the open border allowed any number of incursions from external figures opposed to the American presence in Iraq which now shore up the insurgency.

However, Hersh’s charges are more serious. He claims that Israeli Mossad agents are operating in Iranian Kurdistan today:

Israeli intelligence and military operatives are now quietly at work in Kurdistan, providing training for Kurdish commando units and, most important in Israel’s view, running covert operations inside Kurdish areas of Iran and Syria. Israel feels particularly threatened by Iran, whose position in the region has been strengthened by the war. The Israeli operatives include members of the Mossad, Is-

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Bill Samii, “Kurdish Grievances Remain a Thorny Issue,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 17, 2005.
www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/08/1c10b0c2-7db4-44bc-9b00-8395b7ea4a82.html

rael's clandestine foreign-intelligence service, who work undercover in Kurdistan as businessmen and, in some cases, do not carry Israeli passports.

Asked to comment, Mark Regev, the spokesman for the Israeli Embassy in Washington, said, "The story is simply untrue and the relevant governments know it's untrue." Kurdish officials declined to comment, as did a spokesman for the State Department.

However, a senior C.I.A. official acknowledged, in an interview last week [June 21, 2004], that the Israelis were indeed operating in Kurdistan. He told me that the Israelis felt that they had little choice: "They think they have to be there." Asked whether the Israelis had sought approval from Washington, the official laughed and said, "Do you know anybody who can tell the Israelis what to do? They're always going to do what is in their best interest." The C.I.A. official added that the Israeli presence was widely known in the American intelligence community.¹⁶

It is hard to tell if Hersh's claims are true, but if they are, Israel's desires to train commando units to counter Iran's government forces are likely to fail. Again, the best outcome they could hope for would be that Kurdistan would serve as a barrier to Iranian influence in Iraq—something that has already been established fact. In essence, if Israel is in Iranian Kurdistan, they have either failed or they came too late.

Kurdish Destiny

The mere fact that the Kurds continue to control their own borders in Iran and Kurdistan is proof of their inherent control over their own destiny.¹⁷ The Kurds know very well what kind of a governmental structure they want for themselves and their population. The old saying is, "Kurds have no friends." Despite the fact that they have been cheated, used and oppressed by surrounding powers for many years, they still maintain their civilizational and cultural integrity.

¹⁶ Hersh, "Plan B."

¹⁷ Max Chamka and Victoria Bryan, "Kurdistan: Between Iran and Iraq, a Permeable Border." KurdishMedia News, August 31, 2005. www.kurdmedia.com/news.asp?id=7589>

The Qadiri killing was a sad, but somewhat anomalous. It appears that the Pasdaran who killed him were looking for someone to shoot. If Seymour Hersh wrote that Mossad agents were active in Kurdistan, the Iranian government would have known about this charge, and it would not matter if it was true or not. When the KDPI claimed that Ahmadinejad was complicit in the assassination of Ghassemlou, the Iranians would have then suspected that Israel (along with the Mujahideen-e Khalq and the American neocons) had created this story to besmirch the reputation of the new president. They also were likely aware of the existence of the PJAK and saw it as a growing separatist threat co-opted by the same triumvirate—the United States, Israel and the Mujahideen-e Khalq—that has attacked them on many other grounds, particularly the nuclear development issue. The fact that the Pasdaran showed up in Mahabad four days after the charges had been leveled, attacked a somewhat hapless Kurdish youth and killed him was likely designed to warn everyone not to engage in this kind of activity. The Kurdish retaliation was in proportion to the original event, but the PJAK having made their point, the attacks did not continue.

Kurds are both smart enough and perceptive enough not to be drawn into a useless fight. Rather than the precursor to increased violence between the Iranian government and the Kurds, the Qadiri incident appears to have been yet another standoff—another clear indication that the Iranian government will remain engaged with the Kurdish population in their midst whenever they see Kurdish activists as indicative of cooptation by Iranian state enemies. Otherwise, Iran will keep a respectful distance.