

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

VOLUME XIX | ISSUE 21

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## Anti-Taliban Resistance Struggles for Relevance in Afghanistan

*Jacob Zenn*

After initially attempting to launch an insurgency against the Taliban following the its conquest of Kabul in August, Ahmad Massoud, the son of the legendary anti-Soviet mujahideen leader, Ahmad Shah Massoud, and deposed Vice President of Afghanistan, Amrullah Saleh, reportedly fled to Tajikistan ([news18.com](https://www.news18.com), October 12). Massoud, who studied at the Franco-Afghan Lycée Esteqlal and maintains close ties to France, is now seeking France's international and Tajikistan's regional backing. Massoud, for example, wrote a public letter to French intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy requesting that Lévy appeal to French president Emmanuel Macron to continue supporting the anti-Taliban

resistance and called France the "last hope" of the anti-Taliban resistance ([leidd.fr](https://leidd.fr), August 14). Massoud's National Resistance Front of Afghanistan has also registered to lobby the U.S. government to become "the protector of America's 20-year investment in Afghanistan and the force to rid the country of intolerance and terrorism" ([Axios](https://www.axios.com), October 28).

Tajikistan appears willing to host Massoud's anti-Taliban resistance. However, part of the resistance's required 'low profile' involves not conducting cross-border attacks into Afghanistan, which, if occurred, would likely need to receive at least tacit backing from Central Asia's major geopolitical power, Russia. Tajikistan's president, Emomali Rahmon, meanwhile, appears to be taking advantage of the situation in Afghanistan to portray himself as both a defender of ethnic Afghan Tajiks from the "Pashtun" Taliban and of Tajikistan itself from Islamist militants in neighboring Afghanistan, which has improved

Rahmon's popularity domestically ([france24.com](http://france24.com), April 10).

Without any military force on the ground, Massoud's efforts within Afghanistan are confined to diplomatic negotiations with the Taliban. However, in mid-October Tajikistan was willing to host talks between Massoud and the Taliban, but, unsurprisingly, the Taliban did not send any representatives ([rferl.org](http://rferl.org), October 13). Pakistan has nonetheless appeared to take on the role of promising Tajikistan that it will work to bring Afghans, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, and other minorities, together ([tribune.com.pk](http://tribune.com.pk), September 18). As a result, Tajikistan would have no need to support an anti-Taliban resistance, such as Massoud's, to protect Afghan Tajiks.

If there were any other potential lifeline for the anti-Taliban resistance, it would ironically be Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP). Although ISKP's harsh vision of sharia law stands in full contradiction to Massoud's promotion of democracy and religious tolerance, ISKP's own insurgency against the Taliban is picking up pace and disrupting the Taliban's efforts to stabilize Afghanistan and establish full control of the country ([Terrorism Monitor](http://Terrorism Monitor), October 20). Should the Taliban become mired in its own counter-insurgency against ISKP, it will have diminished resources and legitimacy, which could provide an opening for Massoud's anti-Taliban resistance to reconstitute itself in areas where support for the Taliban is relatively weak, such as Panjshir or Badakhshan, the latter of which borders Tajikistan.

A remaining question would be whether any foreign countries would offer Massoud's loyalists any military support, clandestine or otherwise, to make the Taliban wage a counter-insurgency on two fronts: against ISKP and Massoud's loyalists. Moreover, while Massoud's anti-Taliban resistance and ISKP would never become former allies, supporters of the former in France have acknowledged that ISKP has a number of Tajik fighters, and that both see the Taliban as their enemy and want revenge against the Taliban ([Twitter.com/@AL\\_HAQo](https://twitter.com/AL_HAQo), October 4). The anti-Taliban resistance and ISKP therefore will not cooperate, but the success of one could ultimately lead to greater success of the other vis-à-vis the Taliban.

*Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.*

## **Islamic State in Khorasan Province's Insurgency Against the Taliban Consolidates in Nangarhar and Beyond**

*Jacob Zenn*

Although the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP)'s newest primary enemy is the Taliban, the group continues to settle scores against its old enemy: the former U.S.-backed Afghan government and its allies. Abdul Rahman Mawin, for example, was a human rights activist from Laghman who had been working in Jalalabad city, Nangarhar Province until his assassination on October 12 while driving his car ([aa.com.tr](http://aa.com.tr), October 12). ISKP soon after claimed the assassination, accusing Mawin of being loyal to the now deposed Afghan government ([@natsecjeff](https://twitter.com/natsecjeff), October 13).

Killings in Nangarhar, similar to that of Mawin's, have become commonplace as the province spirals into increasing violence. Just before his assassination, a woman was found shot to death in Nangarhar and an ISKP judge was assassinated, with the former presumably by ISKP for violating its sharia codes and the latter presumably by the Taliban ([pajhwok.com](http://pajhwok.com), October 11). The tit-for-tat violence between ISKP and the Taliban had been escalating in Nangarhar, including an ISKP roadside bombing that killed Qari Fayaz, who was the deputy district governor for Nangarhar's Rodat District ([@AfghanAnalyst2](https://twitter.com/AfghanAnalyst2), October 9). The following day Taliban social media accounts indicated that a 500-strong Taliban force would be deployed to Nangarhar to combat ISKP ([@AfghanAnalyst2](https://twitter.com/AfghanAnalyst2), October 10). Despite this, ISKP attacks against the Taliban continued, including with ISKP assassinating a Taliban "intelligence officer" in Jalalabad, Nangarhar on October 30 ([@Natsecjeff](https://twitter.com/Natsecjeff), October 30).

The escalating conflict in Nangarhar between ISKP and the Taliban comes amid the Taliban's announcement that it will not cooperate with the U.S. to counter ISKP (thehindu.com, October 9). Nevertheless, the Taliban is proving incapable of containing ISKP in Nangarhar. For example, from mid-September to mid-October, ISKP had conducted nearly 30 attacks in Nangarhar, with virtually all directed against the Taliban with the exception of Mawin, which represents an expansion to attacking civilians as well (Twitter.com/@abdsayed, October 13). In an ironic twist, the Taliban, which had once made U.S. soldiers fearful of venturing out in Afghan towns, has itself now ordered fighters to not go out once it becomes dark in Nangarhar ostensibly for fear of ISKP ambushes (Twitter.com/@sahibzadaPTM, October 11).

Beyond Nangarhar, ISKP is also challenging the Taliban more broadly with its narratives. ISKP, for example, claimed a suicide bombing at a mosque in Kunduz, northern Afghanistan on October 8, which killed more than 40 people (aljazeera.com, October 8). The attacker was a Uighur from China, and ISKP pointed out in its claim that the Taliban was cooperating with China (opindia.com, October 9). Not only did this attack expose the Taliban's duplicity for allying with Uighur jihadists' enemy in the Chinese government and demonstrate that ISKP could attack the Taliban from Nangarhar, to Kabul, to Kunduz, but it also undermined the Taliban's claim that it could protect Afghan minorities, such as Shias, who worshipped at that mosque in Kunduz. ISKP's subsequent attack on another Shia Mosque in the Taliban's heartland of Kandahar on October 15, which killed around 60 people, only further served to undermine the Taliban's narrative of securing Afghanistan and even its home city (aljazeera.com, October 16).

ISKP's attacks against the Taliban in Nangarhar and against minorities and civilians elsewhere in Afghanistan are revealing that Taliban control over Afghanistan remains tenuous. The Taliban is likely to face a growing insurgency from ISKP due to the Taliban's diplomacy with countries like China and its embracing of 'infidel' Shia minorities as fellow Afghans. These developments will become the ideological fodder for ISKP to accuse the Taliban itself of becoming just another 'infidel' occupier

similar to the accusations used by the Taliban against the United States during its stay in Afghanistan. ISKP will try to capitalize off these efforts by using its sophisticated social media apparatus to message these claims, photographs, and videos. This could be sufficient for ISKP to recruit more extremist defectors away from the Taliban, and will certainly weaken the Taliban's anti-ISKP insurgency in Nangarhar and beyond.

*Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.*

## **Ethiopia's Tigray Defense Forces Advance Toward Addis Ababa**

*Michael Horton*

Ethiopia's Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) are carrying out yet another successful counter-offensive against the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) and its allies. The current counter-offensive, which is coordinated with the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), may result in the fall of the government of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the fragmentation of Ethiopia.

In early October, Abiy Ahmed and his government launched an ill-advised offensive on TDF positions in the northern districts of the Amhara region ([TRT World](#), October 9). This offensive was meant to expel the TDF from the Amhara region and force its fighters to retreat within the borders of the Tigray region. The government-backed offensive incorporated elements of the ENDF and regional militias, namely ethnic-based militias from the Amhara region.

Despite an aerial bombing campaign as well as the use of newly acquired drones, the government-backed offensive failed to force the TDF to retreat from its positions in the Amhara region ([ORYX](#), October 5). Instead, the TDF, which launched a similar counter-offensive in June, maneuvered around, behind, and through the ENDF and militia positions and provoked a disorderly retreat. The retreat allowed TDF forces to rapidly move south toward the towns of Dessie and Kombolcha, which

they claim to have captured on October 30 and 31, respectively ([Al-Jazeera](#), October 31). Both Dessie and Kombolcha are on the A2, a major road that leads to the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa, roughly 200 miles to the southwest. On November 2, Abiy Ahmed's government announced a sweeping state of emergency and called on all residents of Addis Ababa to register their weapons and prepare to defend the city ([Addis Standard](#), November 2).

### **The TDF: A Formidable Foe**

The TDF's senior officers draw on decades of experience with traditional and guerrilla warfare. Its military leadership, which includes former general officers from within the ENDF, is keenly aware of the weaknesses of the ENDF and its attendant militias. These weaknesses include poorly defined chains of command and a pronounced lack of coordination between the ENDF and the militias, a problem that has worsened over the last four months. The ENDF also depends on heavy weapons and fixed positions that are not suited to the terrain or insurgent warfare.

In contrast, the TDF relies on small, well-trained, and lightly armed units that can quickly cover large amounts of ground. These units, which are the eyes, ears, and tip of the spear for the TDF, operate independently, infiltrate enemy lines and positions, and launch hit and run attacks. These attacks frequently cause ENDF soldiers, most of whom are conscripts from other ethnic regions, to abandon their positions. The TDF also uses these units to soften up ENDF formations and sever supply routes ahead of deploying their mainline soldiers against hardened positions. [1]

These tactics were previously used by the TDF in its June counter-offensive against the ENDF and ethnic militias. That counter-offensive resulted in the TDF retaking the capital of the Tigray region, Mekelle ([Addis Standard](#), June 28). The TDF continued to retake and capture new territory in July when its forces moved into northern Amhara and the Afar region. Rather than adapt to the TDF's tactics and learn from previous mistakes, the ENDF and the government of Abiy Ahmed persisted in utilizing the same failed tactics that they had previously used: massed frontal assaults on the far nimbler TDF. The only change the ENDF appeared to make was the

use of more drones in an attempt to track and target TDF leaders and elite units.

At the same time, the Abiy Ahmed government ratcheted up anti-Tigrayan rhetoric. In July, Abiy Ahmed, despite being a Nobel Peace Prize winner in 2019, referred to Tigrayans as "Ethiopia's cancer" ([All Africa](#), July 19). This kind of rhetoric, along with a deadly blockade of the landlocked Tigray region, worked to drive TDF fighters forward. For the TDF, failure on the battlefield would mean that many of their families starve ([Ethiopia Insight](#), February 18).

In contrast, ENDF soldiers are conscripted from multiple ethnic regions and lack the esprit de corps and determined leadership that the TDF enjoys. Many of the soldiers—the recent conscripts—do not share a common language and are from distant parts of Ethiopia. The conscripts and recruits suffer from poor training, low or non-existent pay, and an untrusted officer corps. The TDF, whose leadership, officers, and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) possess knowledge of the inner workings of the ENDF, have taken advantage of all these weaknesses. At the same time, the TDF maintains high levels of discipline within its ranks and its leadership is careful to ensure that POWs and fleeing soldiers are well-treated by its forces ([Al-Jazeera](#), July 10). This is not to say that the TDF and allied forces have not committed abuses; however, the TDF leadership understands how important the psychological and moral components are to winning an insurgency.

### **Will Addis Ababa Fall?**

The rapid advance of the TDF southward indicates that the ENDF is broken as an effective fighting force. Further, the Ethiopian Air Force (ETAF), one of the most capable in East Africa, has failed to provide consistent air support for the retreating ENDF. It is likely that this lack of support is an early indicator of splits within the armed forces and Abiy Ahmed's government. [2] With adequate air support, the ENDF and allied militias should have been able to stop the TDF's headlong rush south. Instead, the ENDF continues to retreat south and west toward the capital. Much of the ENDF's heavy weaponry and thousands of soldiers have been captured or stranded behind what are now enemy lines.



Most worrying for Abiy Ahmed's government is the fact that the TDF has linked up with the OLA south of the town of Kombolcha. The OLA broadly supports self-determination for the Oromo people. The Abiy Ahmed government's attempt to dismantle Ethiopia's ethnic federalism reinvigorated the OLA. While there is plenty of bad blood between the TDF and the OLA, the two groups still managed to announce an alliance in August 2021 ([Ethiopia Insight](#), September 2).

Concurrent with the TDF's advances south, the OLA has captured territory northeast and northwest of Addis Ababa ([Somali Guardian](#), November 2). OLA forces currently operate less than forty miles northwest of Addis Ababa. [3] The OLA has also moved to secure southern sections of the A2 road in what appears to be close coordination with the TDF. A majority of the ENDF conscripts and recruits are Oromo, which is the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia. The OLA does and will encourage Oromo ENDF soldiers to desert and defect. The rates of desertion and defection will increase as both the OLA and TDF exert more pressure on what remains of the ENDF.

If the ENDF and Amhara militias do not stop the TDF and OLA advance along the southern A2, Addis Ababa could be overrun within days or, at most, weeks. At the same time, the ENDF must also contend with increased OLA activity to the west, northwest, and south of the capital. The TDF uses small teams of advance units to conduct reconnaissance deep within enemy territory. Given the alliance between the OLA and TDF, it is likely that TDF units are operating south of the city where critical military facilities are located, such as the airbase at Bishoftu.

### **Future Outlook**

Barring a negotiated settlement, the future of Ethiopia as a unified state looks grim. The window for negotiations with the TDF and its political arm has probably closed. The TDF knows that the ENDF is a spent force and that it must push forward at all costs. The decision of Abiy Ahmed's government to pursue a punitive war in Tigray left the TDF with few choices but to fight. The threat of famine and the rhetoric that gestures toward ethnic cleansing foster an intense clarity of purpose. The coming days and weeks will

be critical to determining Ethiopia's future as a unified state.

Unlike in 1991, when the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) helped oust Mengitsu Haile Mariam, the TDF and its political arm do not enjoy widespread goodwill. Ethnic tensions across Ethiopia are at a breaking point. Global food inflation and a moribund economy will further aggravate ethnic and regional tensions. Without negotiations between all warring parties, Ethiopia will face years of instability as competing ethnic and political groups attempt to carve up what was once a unified state. As the anchor state in the Horn of Africa, prolonged instability in Ethiopia will have a profound impact on the countries that make up the Horn of Africa.

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### **Notes**

[1] Author interviews with multiple analysts based in the region, November 2021.

[2] Author interview with an in-country analyst, October 2021.

[3] Author interview with an in-country analyst, November 2021.

# The Haqqani Network's Martyr: Inside Afghan Taliban Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani's Reception Honoring Suicide Bombers

*Abdul Sayed*

The Taliban Interior Minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani, hosted a large reception for the heirs and families of hundreds of Taliban suicide bombers in the five-star Inter-Continental hotel in Kabul on October 19 ([RFE/RL](#), October 19). [1] This first ever public appearance for Haqqani also involved praise for the Taliban's jihadist victory against the U.S. and its allies, and for the sacrifices of these suicide bombers. Haqqani further touched on the history of suicide attacks in Afghanistan and explained how his group, the Taliban's most powerful faction called the "Haqqani Network," commenced suicide attacks after 9/11. Lastly, Haqqani emphasized to the reception's participants that the success of the Taliban government came at the cost of the blood of these martyrs. He then urged everyone to strive to preserve the Taliban government and solve all challenges facing it. This article summarizes the content and significance of the video of this reception, which reveals that the Haqqani Network under Sirajuddin introduced the tactic of suicide bombings in Afghanistan with al-Qaeda support, which caused devastating affects to the U.S. and its allies.

## Sirajuddin Haqqani and the Decisive Role of Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan

Sirajuddin Haqqani, known as "Khalifa Saib" (the successor) in Taliban circles, is not only the Taliban's Interim Cabinet's Interior Minister, but also the Taliban's deputy supreme leader and former military chief. He now leads the Taliban's Haqqani Network, which is named after his father, Jalaluddin Haqqani ([Militant Leadership Monitor](#), October 6). The latter was a senior Afghan jihadist commander in the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. The Haqqani family joined the Taliban after the latter's emergence in the mid-1990s. After 9/11, Haqqani took control of the

Haqqani Network when his father suffered from serious health issues. The Haqqani Network then turned its strongholds in Waziristan, Pakistan into the most enduring safe haven for al-Qaeda fighters, who took shelter there after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001. Haqqani is one of the five Taliban commanders on the U.S.' Most Wanted list with a \$10 million bounty on him. The other four on the Most Wanted list also belong to the Haqqani Network, including Haqqani's brother, uncle, and brother-in-law, who each have a \$5 million reward for their capture.

In the reception video, Haqqani stated that the resistance against the U.S. and its allies at the beginning was seen as a futile and dangerous mission. Critics, for example, would warn the Taliban that defeating the U.S. was beyond the realm of possibilities. He added that the massive propaganda exaggerating the U.S.' advanced military technologies had made any victory against the U.S. seem hopeless, but the sacrifices of the suicide bombers and their attacks were a "gift from God" that falsified all such claims and played a decisive role in the jihadist victory against the U.S. and its allies in Afghanistan.

## The First Haqqani Network Suicide Bomber and Silence about Al-Qaeda

Haqqani also narrated the account of the first suicide attack in Afghanistan after the U.S. invasion, which targeted the German forces' convoy in Kabul in June 2003. He stated that his group facilitated this attack although it was planned by "others." He was silent on details about these "others," who, according to him, established the foundation for suicide attacks in Afghanistan and taught the tactic to the Haqqani Network, but it is a well-established fact that these "others" were none other than al-Qaeda. The al-Qaeda *as-Sahab* media wing documentary entitled "Winds of Paradis-1," for example, was released in July 2007 and included details about this first suicide attack in Afghanistan by al-Qaeda member, Abdul Rahman al-Najdi from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia ([As-Sahab](#), July 2007). Al-Najdi was trained in the 1990s at al-Qaeda's al-Farooq camp in Afghanistan and, according to a declassified U.S. court document, al-Qaeda senior military commander, Abdul Hadi al-Iraqi, funded and planned al-Najdi's attack [2].

The Haqqani Network's silence on al-Qaeda's role in introducing this crucial "jihadist technology" to the Haqqani Network might remain a question for many. Al-Qaeda might have been expected to deserve a special tribute for guiding the jihadists in Afghanistan who began using this tactic. However, the Haqqani Network's silence may be intended to hide the relationship of the Taliban to al-Qaeda. Since the peace talks with the U.S. in Doha in 2020, the Taliban leadership has been focusing on denying any connection to al-Qaeda or foreign fighters and has alleged for diplomatic reasons that they no longer remain in Afghanistan, although this has not been true ([Militant Leadership Monitor](#), September 2021).

### **Tributes to Badruddin Haqqani and Suicide Bombers' Families**

Haqqani explained that with the increasing number of suicide bombers approaching him to conduct suicide attacks, he set up a separate brigade for suicide operations and appointed his brother, Badruddin Haqqani, to be in charge. He also narrated several suicide bombers' stories, which showed that he was also directly involved in those attacks. The Haqqani Network's suicide attack brigade was named after Badruddin and became known as the "Badri Brigade" after Badruddin was killed in a U.S. drone strike in August 2012 in the tribal region of North Waziristan, Pakistan, which borders Afghanistan ([Dawn](#), August 25, 2012). Haqqani added that he himself had survived several drone strikes and noted that the Badri Brigade eventually trained 150 suicide bombers to carry out suicide attacks.

In his address to the families of the suicide bombers, Haqqani stated that he feels highly indebted to them because they sacrificed their beloved sons for restoring Taliban control in Afghanistan. He apologized to the families about not being able to fulfill his wish to meet them years ago because time and security constraints prevented him. However, he noted that it was inevitable that such a day would come when he could meet them all. He promised two special rewards for the families of suicide bombers: first, the issuing of special certificates to guarantee them a special protocol for travel across the country; and, secondly, the allocation of land for their houses. He told the reception audience that these rewards

are not solely for the Badri Brigade suicide bombers, but also for the families of every suicide bomber who carried suicide attacks for the Taliban.

Haqqani also explained to these families that although no one in his family carried out a suicide attack, he takes pride that his brother Badruddin met a similar death as the suicide bombers. He noted that the drone strike had caused Badruddin's body to resemble the bodies of the suicide bombers he trained because Badruddin's body was untraceable after the attack. In fact, only a portion of his chest was ever found.

### **Conclusion**

This video of the reception reveals that the Sirajuddin Haqqani played a central role in the rise and expansion of the Haqqani Network since 9/11, although he only became its formal chief in 2018 when his father passed away. Secondly, it reveals that Haqqani and the Haqqani Network have deep roots with al-Qaeda, although he kept silent on it. Lastly, it is notable that Haqqani also showed concern about the Taliban's signature weapon of suicide bombings being used by its rival, the Islamic State in Khurasan Province (ISKP), against the Taliban itself. The most recent example validating Haqqani's concern is the November 2 multiple suicide bomber attack in Kabul, which killed a senior Taliban commander among nearly 20 other people ([Al-Jazeera](#), November 2).

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### **Notes**

[1] The reception video was released on October 20, 2021 on the Taliban Ministry of Interior's Telegram channel.

[2] See the Rewards for Justice website profiles on Sirajuddin Haqqani and his brother Aziz Haqqani, uncle Khalil Haqqani, brother-in-law Yahya Haqqani and his senior commander Abdul Rauf Zakir: <https://rewardsforjustice.net/english/most-wanted/south-and-central-asia.html>

[3] Charge sheet against Abdul Hadi al-Iraqi, US court document, dated February 3, 2014.

## Iran's Impending Military Intervention in Iraqi Kurdistan: Catalysts and Unintended Consequences

*Jacob Weiss*

The Iranian Foreign Ministry warned on October 4 that its “strategic patience” with what it described as anti-Iranian terrorist groups operating in the Iraqi Kurdistan region had come to an end ([Pars Today](#), October 5). The remarks followed threats by both Iran's top military commander, Mohammad Bagheri, and minister of intelligence, Esmail Khatib, of intensified Iranian military activity in Iraqi Kurdistan if the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Iraqi government continued to refuse to confront these anti-Iran groups ([Tehran Times](#), September 25).

In recent years, Turkey has also intensified its military presence in northern Iraq to target the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) by establishing up to 40 military bases and pushing its buffer zone deeper into KRG territory ([The New Arab](#), June 18). [1] Compared to this, Iran's military footprint in Iraqi Kurdistan has remained low-profile. However, with Iran now mimicking the “either you do it, or we will” rhetoric used by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan regarding Turkey's extensive military operations against the PKK, it appears that Iran could be laying the groundwork for a similar large-scale military intervention of its own in KRG territory ([Shafaq](#), June 2).

### Contextualizing Iran's Kurdish Conflict

The Iranian threats came after a notable escalation in cross-border hostilities between the Iranian military and the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), an Iranian Kurdish political and militant group. In August, the KDPI accused the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) of assassinating a senior party member in Erbil ([Rudaw](#), August 7). The Zagros Eagles, a militant group linked to the

KDPI that operates in Iran, subsequently shot an official from Iran's Basij paramilitary force in Kurdish-populated Mahabad, Iran on August 25 ([Rudaw](#), August 30). The Iranian military then escalated tensions by targeting KDPI militants with drone strikes in the Sidakan and Choman areas of Erbil province on September 9, prior to launching multiple drones, mortar, and airstrike attacks on Iranian-Iraqi border zones, which continued sporadically throughout September ([Rudaw](#), September 9).

Like Turkey, Iran has fought to suppress Kurdish militant insurgencies throughout its modern history. As the oldest surviving Iranian Kurdish militant and political group seeking greater autonomy for Iran's roughly ten million Kurds, the KDPI took advantage of the chaos that ensued during the Islamic Revolution of 1979 to briefly carve out a degree of autonomy in Mahabad and other Kurdish majority areas in West Iran. [2] However, this period of short-lived autonomy ended after former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini declared jihad against the KDPI, causing a large IRGC military offensive in 1980 which led to the re-establishment of Iranian government control. [3]

The KDPI waged guerrilla warfare against Iran intermittently throughout the 1980s, before the group relocated to Erbil's Koysinjaq district in Iraqi Kurdistan, and later announced a ceasefire in 1996. [4] However, following increased Iranian repression of its Kurdish minority, the KDPI announced in March 2016 that it was giving up its two-decade ceasefire with the Iranian government ([Al-Monitor](#), July 1, 2016).

### Iran's Lack of Influence in Iraqi Kurdistan

While the KRG's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) has regularly criticized the PKK and demanded it leave the Kurdistan region, the KRG leadership has not attempted to exercise the same pressure on the KDPI. Following the escalation of Iranian military operations targeting the KDPI in September, KRG officials called upon the Federal Iraqi authorities to respond to Iran's bombings rather than condemn the KDPI itself ([Al-Arabiya](#), September 20). If Iran's escalation of military activity had been aimed at increasing KDP pressure on the KDPI, the most it achieved was condemnation from the Kurdish ambassador in Iran of unspecified “activities” that led



to the Iranian military retaliation ([VOA](#), September 23).

Compared to the PKK, the relative laxity of the KDP in its dealings with the KDPI highlights Iran's limited influence in the Kurdistan region relative to Turkey. While economic relations with Turkey, including the exportation of oil from Erbil to Europe via Turkey, are vital to the KRG, internationally sanctioned Iran is a far less economically attractive partner. [5] The desire to maintain strong economic relations with Turkey has contributed to Turkey's success in pressuring the KDP to facilitate Turkey's ongoing military operations against the PKK. [6] Economic relations with Iran are not as economically central to the KRG, and Iran has been forced to wield influence indirectly through Baghdad, using the militant and political organizations it formed and embedded in the Iraqi federal state as a conduit ([Terrorism Monitor](#), February 12).

The KDP is also constrained by domestic opinion to move against the KDPI. The KDP has faced a PKK media campaign criticizing its relationship with Turkey, with the KDP accused of facilitating the Turkish killing of Kurds ([ANHA](#), February 12). If the KDP were to expel or disarm the KDPI in order to appease Iran, accusations that the greater Kurdish struggle for autonomy had been betrayed would multiply, and potentially influence KDP's domestic support base. The KDP itself is also unlikely to have forgotten how Iranian-backed proxies embedded in the Iraqi state security institution, the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), seized control of Kirkuk alongside the Iraqi army from the KDP's Peshmerga in 2017. Therefore, the KDP is reluctant to move against the KDPI and contribute to furthering Iran's strategic interests, whether that be in Iran or Iraq.

### **Iran Attempts to Link KDPI to Its Regional Rivals**

With Iran aware that it cannot force the KDP to move against the KDPI, statements by Iranian officials over recent months reflect an attempt to prepare both domestic and international audiences for further unilateral Iranian military intervention against the KDPI. For its domestic audience, Iran has increasingly linked its localized conflict with Kurdish militant groups to its self-proclaimed global struggle against the anti-Islamic US-Israeli axis. On September 9, before launching the first of its drone

attacks against the KDPI in Erbil province, the IRGC posted a Quran verse calling to "fight the disbelievers" ([IRGC Twitter](#), September 9). [7]

The weeks that followed saw Iranian officials, while never mentioning the KDPI by name, claim that Iranian military activities were a crushing response to counter-revolutionary and terrorist groups organized by the intelligence services of hostile foreign powers ([The National News](#), September 20). Ali Shamkhani, the Secretary of Iran's Supreme Security Council, linked the increased movement of terrorist groups in the Iraqi Kurdistan region to the alleged new U.S. National Security doctrine in the region ([Mehr News Agency](#), September 12). Iranian General Mohammad Bagheri then directly accused the U.S. of supporting Kurdish militant groups and holding secret meetings at al-Harir air Base in Erbil ([al-Monitor](#), September 22). Unlike in Turkey, Iran's conflict with Kurdish separatist groups has always been seen as a much more peripheral issue. By labeling the KDPI as disbelievers and promoting the narrative of U.S.-KDPI links, Iran seeks to re-contextualize its suppression of the Kurdish insurgency in a form that would be more relevant to Iran's domestic audience.

Meanwhile, for an international audience, Iranian officials on several occasions appealed to Iran's legal right to secure borders and the KRG's alleged breach of international law for allowing terrorist groups to receive military training to attack Tehran ([Press TV](#), October 6). By anonymizing the KDPI, Iran hopes that the international community will show the same nonchalance towards Iran's greater military activity in the region as the international community has shown towards Turkey's military activities in northern Syria and Iraq. [8]

### **Iranian Intervention in Iraqi Kurdistan: Opportunities and Risks**

Iran's goals in Iraqi Kurdistan have remained constant over the past decade: secure Iran's borders from Iranian Kurdish militants, force the withdrawal of U.S. forces, and maintain access to Syria. Iranian-aligned PMU proxies have achieved the latter by controlling border crossings and strategic locations from the Iran-Iraq border through Federal Iraq to the Syrian border. [9] Likewise, with the U.S. confirming

plans to withdraw all remaining combat troops from Iraq, Iran's attention can now focus on border security ([Al-Jazeera](#), July 27). The concern over Iran's borders has been amplified following the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan in August and increased tensions with Azerbaijan in October. Iran knows that its PMU proxies would be too stretched to launch an offensive against the KDPI while maintaining their current territorial control that facilitates access to Syria. Additionally, with Muqtada al-Sadr becoming the main winner of the Iraqi parliamentary elections on October 10, overstressing PMU resources could strategically backfire. Al-Sadr has already indicated that he would seek to return total state control over the use of armed force in Iraq, thereby casting doubt over the future of the Iranian-aligned militias in the PMUs ([Hamdi Malik Twitter](#), October 11). These concerns make the use of Iran's own armed forces in Iraqi Kurdistan more pertinent.

For a successful military intervention in Iraqi Kurdistan, Iran could seek to replicate Turkey's military activities in the region. Turkey has reduced PKK cross-border capabilities through its 35–40-kilometer buffer zone and its many military bases throughout the region. There is already some evidence that Iran has begun establishing a direct military presence in Iraqi Kurdistan. In September, local Kurdish officials claimed that Iran de-facto annexed the peak of the Cheekha Dar mountain in northern Erbil province to build a military outpost ([Rudaw](#), September 29).

However, it is not clear if Iran could escalate its military activity against the KDPI without threatening the delicate balance of alliances it maintains in the region. Through the PKK aligned Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), which joined the PMU in 2017, Iran is currently in an indirect alliance with the PKK. This alliance has been vital in maintaining Iranian influence through the PMU in Sinjar, which came under threat after the November 2020 Sinjar Agreement between Federal Iraq and the KRG, which aimed, and has so far failed, to re-establish Federal Iraqi control ([Terrorism Monitor](#), December 17, 2020). Sinjar is important for Iran because it diversifies Iran's routes into Syria. Likewise, the PKK has benefitted from PMU clout throughout 2021 when Turkey threatened to launch military

operations against the PKK in Sinjar ([Terrorism Monitor](#), July 16).

Iran's alliance with the PKK could be threatened by Iranian escalation against Iranian Kurdish militancy. If an Iranian military intervention were to eradicate the KDPI, then it would only be a matter of time before Iran eventually turns on the PKK-aligned Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) that operates in roughly the same area as the KDPI. This would directly threaten the political and military alliance that the PKK has built with Kurdish militias from Syria, Iraq, and Iran, including PJAK, Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), and YBS but not Shia militias, and thereby undermining the PKK's overall reach and operational capability. [10] Therefore, significant Iranian military action in Iraqi Kurdistan would likely encourage the PKK to rethink its alliance with Iran, which could have the unintended consequence of threatening Iran's influence in Sinjar.

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## Notes

[1] The Turkish presidency issued a map of its 'military points' in KRG territory in 2020 ([Rudaw](#), June 7 2020).

[2] See David McDowall, *A Modern History Of The Kurds*, pg. 279-281, (I.B Taurus, 2021).

[3] Ibid.

[4] See Gareth Stansfield & Allan Hassaniyan, "Kurdish insurgency in Rojhelat: from Rasan to the Oslo negotiations" (Middle Eastern Studies, 2021).

[5] See Soner Cagaptay & Christina Bache Fidan, "Turkey and the KRG: An Undeclared Economic Commonwealth" (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015).

[6] This is not to say it is the only factor contributing to KDP-PKK relations, but rather in this author's

opinion it is the most significant. See Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "The complexities of the PKK's ties to the KRG" (Crisis Response Council, 2021).

[7] Similarly Ba'athist Iraq blasphemously quoted the Quran when naming its genocidal counter-insurgency campaign targeting Iraqi Kurdistan from 1986-1989.

[8] Regular claims of human rights abuses have followed Turkey's recent campaigns in both countries. See Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Turkish Airstrike Disregards Civilian Loss" (2020).

[9] See Hannah Lynch, "The Budding Kurdish-Iranian Alliance in Northern Iraq" (New Lines Magazine, 2021).

[10] The PKK, PJAK, and PYD are all included in the Kurdistan Communities Union, which is committed to PKK leader's Abdullah Öcalan's ideology of democratic confederalism. There is ample evidence of mutual military support and fluid membership between these groups. See Mcdowall pg. 484