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## Kurdish insurgency in Rojhelat: from *Rasan* to the Oslo negotiations

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Despite the more than four decades of suffering since 1979 of the people of Rojhelat (Eastern/Iranian Kurdistan) from discrimination and arbitrary state violence at the hands of the Iranian government, their plight has been largely unknown, primarily because the Iranian state has been highly effective in fighting Kurdish opposition groups. Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution and establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran the Kurdish movement in Rojhelat has undergone significant transformations. The Revolution became a turning point for the emergence of a proactive and strongly politicised movement in Rojhelat.<sup>1</sup> While the 1980s witnessed strong Kurdish resistance against the Islamic Republic of Iran, rapid regional changes in the 1990s had a severe effect on the capability of the leading Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) and the Society of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan (known by its Kurdish acronym Komala), to conduct armed and political activities.

The US-led coalition against Iraq in 1991 as a reaction to the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in August 1990, and subsequently the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 which resulted in the fall of Saddam Hussein, drastically changed the regional balance of power in the Middle East. Arguably, these invasions empowered Iran's regional position, and provided the regime with unexpected opportunities of implementing its vision of a proactive foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> The strong Iranian presence in the neighbouring Kurdistan Region of Iraq since the 1990s, and then in the rest of Iraq, allows the argument that Iran's role in Iraq has played a crucial role in realising the Islamic Republic of Iran's vision of a proactive foreign policy. As result of Iran's strong influence on the affairs of Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the KDPI and Komala were forced into exile deep inside Iraqi Kurdistan, far from the border with Iran. With a challenging environment for conducting military and political activities, the 1990s was a decade of loss, deprivation and impotence for the political organisations of Rojhelat and their members in Iraqi Kurdistan; many hundreds were assassinated by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' (IRGC) Remazan Corps and its local Iraqi Kurdish collaborators.<sup>3</sup> The IRGC's shelling of the KDPI's headquarters and residential compounds from Mount Haibat Sultan near the small city of Koya (in Iraqi Kurdistan) on 31 July 1996 resulted in the KDPI's unilateral ceasefire on 4 August 1996, imposed by the IRGC and Iraqi Kurdistan's pro-Iran Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). This incident reduced the armed insurgency in Rojhelat to its lowest level since the Iranian Revolution. The KDPI and Komala ceased all their military activities against the Iranian regime, as the KRG's precondition for them being permitted to keep their bases in Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>4</sup>

The movement in Rojhelat also suffered severely from Iran's assassination of its expatriate leaders and rank-and-file members. Transborder state terrorism was systematically deployed by the Islamic regime in the 1980s and 1990s, in which the regime regularly dispatched operatives to Europe to carry out assassinations and other acts of terrorism.<sup>5</sup> Examples of Iranian transborder state terrorism conducted against its Kurdish opposition include the assassinations of

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the KDPI leader Dr Abdolrahman Ghassemlou and two other Kurds on 13 July 1989 in Vienna, during negotiations with Iranian government representatives for a peaceful solution to the Kurdish conflict in Iran;<sup>6</sup> Bahman Javadi (with the *nom-de-guerre* Gholam Keshavarz), on 27 August 1989 in Larnaca, Cyprus; a Komala leader Sedigh Kamangar on 4 September 1989 in Iraqi Kurdistan;<sup>7</sup> and Dr Sadegh Sharefkandi and three other Kurds and non-Kurds on 17 September 1992 in Berlin, an incident known as the Mykonos assassinations.

The Mykonos assassinations created headlines around the world, resulted in the famous 'Mykonos trial' of the assassins, and is among the very few acts of Iranian state terrorism for which high officials of the Iranian state have been held responsible. The Berlin trial on 10 April 1997 issued an international arrest warrant for the Iranian intelligence minister Ali Fallahian, and accused Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani of ordering the killings, in addition to sentencing two Iranian defendants to 23 years' imprisonment.<sup>8</sup> The 1990s and onwards, with multifaceted Iranian counter-Kurdish insurgency tactics (including targeting the KDPI and Komala in Iraqi Kurdistan and imposing pressure on the KRG to limit and monitor these parties' activities) resulted in a sharp decline of the insurgency in Rojhelat. In addition, sweeping securitisation of the Kurdish community and its social, economic and cultural activities have resulted in the rise and proliferation of sovereign violence in Rojhelat.<sup>9</sup> In particular, since 2005 – a date marking the beginning of Mahmud Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005-2013) – Rojhelat has witnessed a chain of demonstrations and episodes of public outcry, met with brutal reaction from the Iranian security forces. Among many other events occurring since 2005 can be mentioned Iranian security forces' killing of the Kurdish political activist Shawaneh Ghaderi (hereafter Shawaneh). The 9 July 2005 Kurdish students' demonstration marking the anniversary of the 1999 student protests in Tehran was cruelly attacked by the regime's security forces in the city of Mahabad, similar to the crushing of the 1999 protest. The security forces' shooting of Shawaneh and dragging of his injured body through the streets until his death, photographs of which were circulated in Mahabad and other Kurdish cities, became a symbol of regime brutality in Kurdistan. This sparked eight further days of mass protest all over the Kurdish region, with Mahabad as the epicentre. This unrest gave the Iranian authorities and security forces the justification to intensify their oppression of Kurdish society. Responding with martial law and the deployment of large numbers of security forces to the area, the Islamic regime closed publications and targeted journalists who covered Shawaneh's killing and the ensuing protests.<sup>10</sup> Kurdish protesters reported many deaths. In October 2005, several Kurdish protesters were sentenced to death for their involvement in the protests, which in turn provoked further protests.

## Rojhelat in transformation

Since 2010 Kurdish politics in Rojhelat has undergone a process of diversification. Acts of civilian disobedience and parties' reigniting the armed insurgency are examples of this diversification, deserving careful scrutiny.<sup>11</sup> For instance, 2017 and 2018 were eventful years, during which general strikes were among the methods of mobilisation deployed by Kurdish civil society in Rojhelat to express their discontent towards the Islamic regime's discriminatory policies in Kurdistan. The September 2017 general strike in Baneh, a city in Iran's Kurdistan Province, which began as a protest against Iranian security forces' killing of Kurdish *kolbers* (cross-border goods porters), lasted over three weeks and enjoyed widespread public participation.<sup>12</sup> In response, the Iranian government deepened its systematic militarisation of Rojhelat, with unprecedented measures taken by the IRGC and other Iranian security forces.<sup>13</sup> Targeting bases of Rojhelat's political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan with ballistic missiles or missile strikes from drones have become regular practices, along with the stationing of large numbers of Shiite militiamen of the Iraqi Hashd al-Sha'bi (Popular Mobilisation Forces) around Kurdish cities, including Saghez, Bokeran and Shno/Ushnoya.<sup>14</sup> While the stationing of foreign militiamen on Iranian territory by

the IRGC may seem surprising, the Iranian government's prioritisation of counterinsurgency measures, using militiamen trained by, and loyal to, the IRGC against the Kurdish movement in Rojhelat, is a potential explanation for this drastic step.

It is noteworthy that since 2010, a number of Rojhelat's political leaders, including Mostafa Hijri (KDPI) and Abdullah Mohtadi (Komala), have been invited to the USA and held meetings with American policymakers. These visits attracted the attention of media outlets, taking place at a time when Washington-Tehran relations, already tense following the American withdrawal from the nuclear deal agreed in 2015, reached a critical level.<sup>15</sup> Altogether, these events in recent years heralded a new stage of Rojhelat's political life. The outcomes of this ongoing transformation, and the changeable nature of the situation in Rojhelat, are yet unclear, though these developments can be analysed through the lens of 'conflict-in-context',<sup>16</sup> as they have been triggered by domestic, regional and international developments regarding the Kurds in Rojhelat and the Iranian government.

Since 2015, a swift transformation in the KDPI's attitude to the method of mobilisation of the Kurdish movement in Rojhelat has taken place. This has resulted in the initiation of a new phase of insurgency, known as *Rasan*.<sup>17</sup> *Rasan* was announced in the Newroz (Kurdish and Iranian New Year) speech of the KDPI General Secretary Mostafa Hijri in March 2016, highlighting the need for a proactive movement in Rojhelat. The KDPI's announcement of *Rasan*, and its first practical steps in this regard, led to supportive reactions from the KDP-I (Kurdistan Democratic Party-Iran, a party which split from the KDPI in 2006) and Komala. For instance, following the KDPI's decision to station some of its Peshmerga units in Keleshin, a mountainous border area dividing Rojhelat and Iraqi Kurdistan, the KPD-I and Komala too based some of their Peshmerga units in the same area in relatively close proximity. These steps are noteworthy, representing the restart of insurgency after two decades of unilateral ceasefire with the Iranian government.<sup>18</sup>

Under the impact of *Rasan*, even the PJAK (the Free Life Party of Kurdistan) that had observed a ceasefire with the IRGC since 2011, contributed in its own way to the intensification of the armed insurgency in Rojhelat. This also occurred in spite of PJAK's so-called 'roadmap for a democratic solution in Iran', a strategy promoting the democratisation of Iran based on the mobilisation of civil society. Since 2017, the PJAK has been involved in intense military clashes with Iranian forces, though the PJAK justifies attacks on Iranian military bases in border areas more as a matter of retaliation rather than a distinct strategy of its struggle against the Iranian government.<sup>19</sup> For instance, the PJAK attacked an IRGC base near Mariwan, killing eleven local members of the force in retaliation for the IRGC's murder of human rights activist Iqbal Moradi in Iraqi Kurdistan in July 2018.

As emphasised by Aso Saleh, a member of the KDPI's Leadership Committee, factors including the awareness of future threats and uncertainties emanating from Iran, the faint prospect of change in Iran through reform, and an attempt to benefit from potential regional changes to improve the position of the movement in Rojhelat, lie behind the announcement of *Rasan*.<sup>20</sup> These concerns can be identified in the justifications made by officials of Rojhelat's parties for the timing of *Rasan*. As emphasised by Hijri, the decision of *Rasan* was partially made following the disappearance of any domestic optimism toward the impact of the P5+1 nuclear deal with Iran, which had promised Iranians prosperity and improved living conditions. The intensification of the Iranian government's involvement in regional crises in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, as well as the continuation of its oppressive domestic policies, quickly turned any optimism to disappointment. As a result of the intensification of the militarisation of Kurdistan and the Iranian state's arbitrary suppression of Kurdish civil society, the KDPI concluded that being closer to Kurdish society, and carrying out the fight in an integrated and proactive way, would bring the Peshmerga and civil society closer together. Bringing *shar u shakh* (mountain and city, referring to Peshmerga and civil society) together, was the method chosen to magnify the capability of the Kurdish movement in Rojhelat. Throughout the *Rasan* campaign, the KDPI has encouraged civil society in Rojhelat to mobilise its resources in challenging the Islamic regime's policies in Kurdistan.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, *Rasan* has also been criticised by different sides for different reasons. Some have accused the decision of being made without the necessary preparations, and miscalculating domestic and regional circumstances, as since its announcement the KDPI has lost many Peshmerga fighters in clashes with the IRGC without any obvious accomplishments. Some critics have gone so far as to identify *Rasan* as a suicidal move of the KDPI, to which Hijri has responded that '*Rasan* is a long-term strategy, the achievements of which cannot be assessed in the short-term.'<sup>22</sup> Another criticism is that *Rasan*, and the decision of restarting the armed struggle, have resulted in the state's further militarisation of Rojhelat and consequently further securitisation of Kurdish civil society and its activities.<sup>23</sup> For instance Khaled Tavakoli, a reformist Kurdish politician and former Iranian MP, claims that '*Rasan* has resulted in the further militarisation of Kurdistan, since it has provided the government with excuses that have resulted in limiting the activities of the already squeezed civil society in Kurdistan.'<sup>24</sup> In response, Hijri argues that,

Despite the absence of the Peshmerga of the KDPI and other Kurdish political parties inside Rojhelat over the last two decades [1995-2015], we have witnessed the multiplication of the militarisation of Kurdistan, and not the other way around. So, our presence among our people has not had a significant effect on furthering the militarisation of Rojhelat.<sup>25</sup>

This development brings to the surface a critical aspect of cross-organisational relations in Rojhelat, in which some parties accuse each other of disloyalty to the Kurdish movement or collaboration with states oppressing their Kurdish populations. Polarised relations have placed the PJAK on one side of the spectrum, the Communist Party of Iran-Komala (CPI) in the middle, and the KDPI, KDP-I and Komala on the other side in Rojhelat's political landscape. The PJAK, commonly considered the branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Rojhelat, has a strained relationship with the KDPI and Komala, and its recent armed activities in Rojhelat have drawn criticism from its opponents. They accuse the PJAK of serving the agenda of the PKK, rather than genuinely challenging the Iranian regime's presence in Rojhelat. On the other hand, the high-ranking PKK official Murat Karayilan claimed that the tactic of *Rasan* serves only the interests of Turkey and Saudi Arabia in their geopolitical rivalry with the Iranian government.<sup>26</sup> Relations between the KDPI/Komala and PJAK are marked by distrust, with numerous examples of mudslinging and malicious allegations and comments made against each other.

## Escalating tensions in Rojhelat

The intensification of the armed insurgency in Rojhelat peaked in 2018, as different regions of Iranian Kurdistan hosted widespread clashes between the Peshmerga/guerrilla fighters and the IRGC. According to data collected and released by the human rights organisation Hengaw, in 2018 alone around fifty significant armed clashes between the Peshmerga and IRGC were recorded. The estimated number of casualties from these clashes is 150, including 97 members of the IRGC, 46 Peshmerga and guerrilla fighters, and seven civilians. In addition, ten additional incidents of clashes occurred for which none of the major political parties of Rojhelat took responsibility.<sup>27</sup> Most of these clashes took place in the Kurdistan Province, Urmia and the surrounding areas, the Kermashan Province, and border areas close to the Kurdish Region of Iraq.<sup>28</sup>

*Rasan* triggered a large variety of related incidents, complicating the already tense Kurdish-state relationship in Rojhelat to a new level. Following the presence of Peshmerga units and each operation of the Peshmerga inside Rojhelat, retaliatory actions were conducted by the IRGC. Assassinations of members of political parties and missile and bomb attacks on their bases inside Iraqi Kurdistan are among the measures used in recent years. In Koya, where the KDPI and KDP-I have their headquarters and some of their residential compounds (such as Kamp Azadi, Amirye and Zewi Spi), Kurdish targets have been attacked by the IRGC. An incident with international ramifications was the IRGC's missile strikes on the headquarters of the KDP-I and KDPI in close proximity in Koya

on 8 September 2018.<sup>29</sup> According to Asso Hasan Zadeh, the former Deputy General Secretary of the KDP-I, these strikes occurred while ‘the Central Committee of the KDP-I was preparing for a meeting between Kurdish parties, discussing a future meeting with representatives of the Islamic Republic, preparations for which were initiated several months previously.’<sup>30</sup> The IRGC’s ballistic rocket attack resulted in eighteen fatalities mainly high-ranking party officials (sixteen members of the KDP-I and two members of the KDPI), and 49 Peshmerga and civilian injuries. The Iranian satellite channel, PressTV, confirmed the attack and released photos and videos, stating that,

The missile unit of the IRGC’s Aerospace Force in cooperation with the drone unit of the [IRGC’s] Ground Force yesterday [8 September 2018] targeted the headquarters and a meeting of leaders of a criminal group and a center for training affiliated terrorists with seven short-range surface-to-surface missiles. Following wicked actions taken by terrorist groups affiliated with the global arrogance from the Kurdistan Region against Iran’s border areas in recent months, the IRGC decided to counter and punish the aggressors, it added.<sup>31</sup>

This and similar Iranian attacks deep inside Iraqi Kurdistan using high-tech military equipment, demonstrates the changing character of the conflict between Iran and its Kurdish opposition groups. Using drones and firing missiles from Iranian soil, the regime can both keep its Kurdish opposition parties under tight surveillance, and also target and inflict severe damage upon them at any time. In an era of technological developments in warfare, the political parties of Rojhelat are left significantly worse off from several angles. Furthermore, financial and logistical limitation, conditional use of Iraqi Kurdistan as a safe haven, decades of exiled nationalism, and political factionalism, are among the other challenges facing these political organisations at present.

Particularly since the 1990s, chronic political factionalism has been a major hindrance to the political parties of Rojhelat, causing frustration and disappointment among these organisations’ grassroots supporters and politically-active civil society in Rojhelat. There were several splits within Komala in 1998 and 2008 and the KDPI in 2006, and in 2021 three parties laid claim to the name Komala, and two KDPI groups distinguished themselves from each other by suffixes, prefixes or hyphenated names. Unity among political organisations has been a demand repeatedly raised by Kurdish intellectuals, the Kurdish diaspora, and voices from inside Rojhelat. Though the political parties of Rojhelat are far from united, some positive steps towards overcoming this disunity have been taken. For instance, in August 2012 the KDPI and Komala, which fought each other in a fratricidal war for several years in the 1980s, signed a strategic agreement for future cooperation. Some years later, ‘the two rival branches of the KDPI [the KDPI and KDP-I] initiated talks on reunification and on forging a common policy vis-à-vis the regime.’<sup>32</sup> Another significant step towards a platform for producing a shared strategy was the establishment of the Cooperation Centre of Iranian Kurdistan’s Political Parties (CCIKPP) in January 2018, with six political organisations – the KDPI, the KDP-I, Komala, the CPI, Komala-i Zehmat Keshani Kordestan (KZK, Society of the Toilers of Kurdistan), and the religious-nationalist party Khabat – constituting its founding members. However, due to disputes over strategy, Khabat and the CPI have since left the CCIKPP. According to Omar Ilkhanizadeh, General Secretary of KZK, establishing the CCIKPP was a step taking place in order to unite the political parties of Rojhelat under one umbrella, and meet the popular demand for unity. Ilkhanizadeh adds that ‘The CCIKPP should be able to provide guidelines for a joint strategy, and how to mobilise and deploy our resources to overcome our challenges in future.’<sup>33</sup>

An important accomplishment of the CCIKPP, while all six founding parties were members, is that, following the missile strike against the KDP-I and KDPI, and the execution of three Kurdish political prisoners in the early hours of 8 September 2018, the CCIKPP called upon Kurdish society to respond by organising a general strike on 12 September 2018.<sup>34</sup> The Kurdish public’s support for the CCIKPP’s call for a general strike, with only two days’ notice, was a symbolic success for these parties, as for decades they were effectively cut off from regular connections to society in Rojhelat. Despite the regime’s attempt to disrupt the strike, it was held successfully across

Rojhelat, and also became a platform for expressing the public's protest against the deprived socio-economic and political conditions of the Kurds in Rojhelat. Due to a high level of participation from different cities in the strike, the government and its security forces were caught by surprise. The overwhelming public participation and support for the strike provided a political and symbolic message, like a referendum saying 'yes' to the political parties of Rojhelat, and 'no' to the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>35</sup> The general strike, an incident of nonviolent civilian disobedience, underlined the attitude of Kurdish society and political parties in Rojhelat towards the state's oppressive policies: the IRGC's missile attack and the executions of the three political prisoners had a boomerang effect on the Islamic Republic, as the positive response to the call for the general strike strengthened the ties between Kurdish society and its political parties.

### Subjectivity and political factionalism

Deep political factionalism, and accusations of following the agendas of Kurdish political parties outside Rojhelat (*pashko boon*), have been features of the political landscape of Rojhelat's parties at different points in their cross-organisational relationship and activities. The range and content of these organisations' activities have been determined by and subject to geographical circumstances and the interests of the actors which dominate the regions hosting these organisations. The deep dependency of the KDPI and Komala on their safe haven in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq since the 1990s has subjected them to the interests of the PUK and the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party), the ruling political parties of Iraqi Kurdistan. The minimisation of the armed insurgency and other forms of activism of the Rojhelati parties have been among the main objectives pursued by the Iranian state in its close relationships with the PUK and KDP. The clearest example is the 4 August 1996 ceasefire with Iran signed by the KDPI, in return for being allowed to maintain its bases in Iraqi Kurdistan. It is still unclear how this ceasefire was negotiated, though all indications point to an agreement imposed upon the KDPI following the shelling of its headquarters in Koya.<sup>36</sup> This ceasefire resulted in a lull in the exiled-based movement lasting two decades, disconnecting the KDPI and Komala from their grassroots; this vacuum was filled by supporters of the PKK, and the formation of the PJAK.

The PKK seized the opportunity resulting from changes in the relations between the Iranian state and the parties of Rojhelat, and strengthened its position in the Kurdish region in Iran, investing significant resources in reaching out to the disenfranchised Kurds in Rojhelat. The PKK was aware of the presence of a politicised and deprived Kurdish society with significant potential as a field of action and recruitment; on the other side, the PKK's ideology became a magnet, attracting university students and other intellectuals inside Rojhelat. A strong indication of this was the occurrence of large, spontaneous solidarity rallies in different cities following the capture of the PKK's leader Abdullah Ocalan by the Turkish state on 15 February 1999.<sup>37</sup> Another aspect of the PKK's role in Rojhelat was its presence in border areas; following the early 1990s departure of the KDPI and Komala from their border bases in these regions deep into Iraqi Kurdistan, the areas became home to many hundreds of guerrillas of the PKK.<sup>38</sup>

In line with the flow of human resources to the PKK, this situation also presented a dilemma. On the one hand, the PKK was never genuinely interested in challenging the Iranian government; on the other, it had to satisfy its disenfranchised Rojhelati supporters who had been inspired by the PKK's movement and ideology. This required a pragmatic solution, ultimately met through the establishment of the PJAK. Despite the confident claims of the PJAK's Co-Leader Siamand Moeini, of organisational equality between the PJAK and the PKK, and PJAK's independence of decision-making regarding its actions in Rojhelat, Moeini also admits that 'the PJAK's activities, as with any other organisation, are determined by realities that have been imposed upon it'.<sup>39</sup> Between its establishment in 2004 and 2011, the PJAK undertook a sporadic though proactive armed struggle against Iranian forces. For instance, 'during 2005 alone, it has been

speculated that some 120 members of the Iranian security services were killed by PJAK operations, with PJAK operations being commonplace over subsequent years.<sup>40</sup> However, in 2011 the PJAK agreed a ceasefire with the IRGC,<sup>41</sup> leading to criticism and doubts over the PJAK's degree of independence of decision-making.<sup>42</sup> Critics argued that the ceasefire was agreed despite the worsening of socio-political and cultural conditions, and the Islamic regime's use of arbitrary violence against Kurds in Rojhelat, and claimed that the range of the PJAK's activity was determined by the interests of the PKK and subject to its regional strategy and attitude toward the Iranian government.<sup>43</sup> This does not imply that the relationship between the PKK and Iran is rosy, however. As emphasised by Karayılan, Iran put strong pressure on the PKK to withdraw all its support and sever relations with the PJAK, and shelled the bases of the PJAK and PKK in Qandil indiscriminately.<sup>44</sup> The PKK has attempted to avoid any major confrontation with Iran, as it is at war on two other fronts, in Turkey and in Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan). In a television interview with BBC Persian, Karayılan stated that the PKK had not declared war against Iran, and it did not wish to confront the regime. The PKK even recommended that the PJAK not attack Iran unless attacked first, and that because Iran was under international pressure PJAK should, rather than engaging in armed insurgency, seek to mobilise peaceful civil society activities. Karayılan stated that 'We have told the Iranians to stop oppressing the Kurds in Rojhelat, to stop executing them, and to not invade Qandil. If Iran stops attacking the PJAK, I am sure the PJAK would consider our recommendations. Otherwise, we would replace PJAK forces on the Iranian borders with our own forces.'<sup>45</sup>

Such statements from PKK leaders have led many Kurds in Rojhelat to view the PKK's attitude to the movement in Rojhelat critically and with suspicion, especially after an incident at Keleshin (a mountainous area separating Rojhelat from the Kurdish Region of Iraq) on 24 May 2015, in which a KDPI Peshmerga fighter was killed in a clash with PKK guerrillas while attempting to cross the border into Rojhelat. This demonstrates the poor relations which have existed since the late 1990s between Komala and the KDPI on one side, and the PKK and PJAK on the other.<sup>46</sup> This issue did not emerge overnight, but is a by-product of over two decades of political disagreements, which started in the late 1990s, and stems from the fact that the KDPI and Komala 'are reluctant to recognise PJAK as an independent party and regard it as an offshoot of the PKK in Iranian Kurdistan.'<sup>47</sup> KDPI and Komala officials have expressed their belief that the PKK's attitude toward the movement in Rojhelat is problematic and poses a challenge to the prospect of cooperation and integrity between the political parties in the region. On the other hand, the PJAK blamed Komala and the KPDI for not showing any signs of goodwill for the establishment of cross-organisational cooperation in Rojhelat. In the words of Moeini, 'After the PJAK's recent congress, we took the initiative and visited all the political parties of Rojhelat, including the Komala and KDPI leadership twice, though they did not show any positive response to the creation of relations based on mutual trust and cooperation.'<sup>48</sup>

Generally, the KDPI and Komala have been considered the mainstream political parties of Rojhelat, though since the emergence of PJAK in 2004, the political landscape of Rojhelat has changed drastically. While Komala and the KPDI have attempted to exclude the PJAK from any cross-organisational cooperation in Rojhelat, these parties are themselves suffering from chronic fragmentation. Ironically, despite the tense relations between these parties, they share similar histories, aspirations, and even visions for the future of the movement in Rojhelat. More importantly, they share the circumstances of being prohibited organisations in Iran. In addition, they all have their bases in Iraqi Kurdistan, which limits their freedom of action in Rojhelat because of the longstanding ties between Iran's Islamic regime and the Kurdish leadership in Iraqi Kurdistan.

### The 27–28 June 2019 negotiations with Tehran

From the early days of the post-1979 revolutionary era, Kurds in Iran have demonstrated a high degree of flexibility and concerted effort for raising their national claims through negotiations

with Tehran. The first round of meetings with the delegation of the Provisional Revolutionary Government with representatives of political organisations and civil society in Rojhelat, took place in Mahabad on 19 February 1979, some weeks after the fall of the Shah and Ayatollah Khomeini's return to Iran.<sup>49</sup> During the months after the Revolution, because of both the Kurdish movement's insistence on finding a peaceful solution for its claim of autonomy (*Khodmokhtari*), and its simultaneous resistance against the Iranian army's attacks on Kurdistan, the region experienced a period of 'no peace, no war'. Throughout the years of the Kurdish movement's proactivity and strength, armed insurgency was the only instrument used with an intention of forcing the Iranian government to negotiate for a peaceful solution to Iran's Kurdish question.<sup>50</sup> However, during such negotiations on 13 July 1989 in Vienna Dr Ghassemlou was killed by assassins occupying the other side of the negotiation table.<sup>51</sup> Since then, Kurdish distrust of the government has meant there have been no serious talks between Kurdish parties and the regime. However, leaks from anonymous sources have revealed that the four remaining organisational members of the CCIKPP met with representatives of the Iranian government in Norway on 27-28 June 2019. This meeting was organised by the Norwegian non-governmental organisation (NGO) the Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (NOREF) which acted as mediator, with Mohammad Kazem Sajjadpour heading the Iranian negotiating delegation.<sup>52</sup>

While these Kurdish parties initially denied such a meeting with Iranian representatives, Ilkhanizadeh, the periodical spokesperson of the CCIKPP, confirmed in an interview with *Deutsche Welle* that the meeting did take place. He revealed that preparation for the meeting began two years earlier,<sup>53</sup> and that 'this meeting was an initial step, but important negotiations are held at the senior level'.<sup>54</sup> After these revelations, Iranian Kurdish political officials cautiously described the incident as a 'preparatory meeting', rather than negotiations. The CCIKPP itself stated that,

The political organisations that are members of the CCIKPP genuinely believe that finding a peaceful solution is the only way to solve the Kurdish question in Iran, though the regime has shown no willingness or capability. To find a peaceful solution, the CCIKPP is in contact with international NGOs, and when circumstances for serious negotiations occur Kurdish society in Rojhelat will be informed of any progress.<sup>55</sup>

KDPI officials have neither confirmed nor denied the existence of negotiations taking place between the CCIKPP and representatives of the Iranian government, although Aso Saleh has stated that the KDPI will practise public transparency and will inform society in Rojhelat, if or when any negotiations with the Iranian government take place.<sup>56</sup> Tehran has remained even more tight-lipped on these negotiations.

Among the Kurds of Rojhelat, especially the diaspora community, this step of their political parties has been controversial. Heated debate on social media and various media platforms (e.g. BBC Persian and Voice of America (VOA)) has taken place, dominated by views sceptical of this meeting. The member parties of the CCIKPP have been criticised for not being fully representative of the Kurds in Rojhelat, as other significant political organisations such as the PJAK, the CPI, and Khabat were not represented in the meeting. According to Moeini, 'negotiation is part of achieving our rights in our fight with Iran, though any future negotiations between the regime and the political parties of Rojhelat should take place with a strategy formulated as result of a common understanding and agreement, reflecting the views of all Rojhelat's political parties'.<sup>57</sup>

Analysing the Iranian government's approach to negotiations with the Kurdish opposition reveals that negotiations with Kurds have taken place only when the government finds itself threatened by regional developments with the potential to empower the Kurdish movement in Rojhelat. Tehran is not motivated by the desire to find a peaceful solution for its Kurdish question but, as emphasised by Mahmud Alavi, Iran's Ministry of Intelligence, 'we have negotiated with the KDPI only to minimise their damage to us, especially the role of the Kurdish question in any overt American attack on Iran'.<sup>58</sup>

Ibrahim Alizadeh, General Secretary of the CPI, which left the CCIKPP due to strategic disagreements, also views the negotiation critically, and emphasises that his party informed the NOREF that any negotiations with the Iranian government are preconditioned on the regime ending political pressure and releasing imprisoned activists and members of Kurdish NGOs and civil society organisations.<sup>59</sup> Alternately, Reza Kaabi, Deputy General Secretary of the KZK, who participated in the Oslo meeting, emphasised that,

What happened in Oslo was just the exchange of a few messages; no real negotiation has yet taken place. As a precondition for any negotiation, we require the government to release a public statement about negotiating the Kurdish question, to stop the militarisation of the Kurdish region, to release political prisoners, and stop executions of Kurds. Doing these would mean that the Iranian government has shown some signs of sincerity, before any negotiations with us.<sup>60</sup>

In fact, despite accepting NOREF's initiative and invitation for negotiations with the Iranian government, these parties have continuously expressed their distrust of the regime. The KDPI in particular, with its unhealing wounds from the assassination of its leader Dr Ghassemlou and his companions, has no good experience from negotiating with the Iranian state.

Whilst these parties share the common belief that the Islamic regime has nothing to offer in terms of a solution for the Kurdish question in Iran, difficult and unpredictable conditions of their struggle, combined with over four decades of mobilisation of the movement from exile, have forced the political parties of Rojhelat to sometimes involve themselves in (unilateral) initiatives, resulting in further disputes rather than unification within the cross-organisational landscape. Different explanations are possible for the obscurity and lack of clear public statements on this issue, exhibited by the KDPI and other political parties of Rojhelat participating in the assumed meeting in Oslo. It may be argued that these parties are aware that public opinion in Rojhelat only supports negotiations that are conducted by a unified front consisting of all political parties, and not a fragmented front as currently exists, and fear of public criticism prompts them to hide their actions from the Kurdish public, unless they give a satisfactory result.

## Why negotiate?

Asso Hassan Zadeh, in response to criticism of the CCIKPP's negotiations with representatives of the Iranian state, explains that a responsible popular movement never dismisses the peaceful solution for achieving its rights. The Kurdish movement, with its peace-seeking nature, and given the difficult conditions it has always faced, has never fundamentally dismissed negotiations with the most ardent regime. Iran's greatest interest is in negotiating with Rojhelat's political organisations, in order to prevent the participation of the Kurdish movement in any potential domestic and regional turmoil with an impact on Iran. As claimed by Hassan Zadeh, the government attempts to mitigate the domestic and international threats that it is currently facing. In this regard, it should not be overlooked that the level of organisational and political cohesion in Kurdistan is higher than in other parts of Iran among other non-Persian nationalities who also desire their national rights and have grievances with the regime; Kurdish parties have both popular influence among their own constituency, and the attention of international actors that today play a role in shaping the future direction of the region. Despite the Kurdish distrust in the regime, the Kurdish movement with its belief in a peaceful solution for the Kurdish question welcomes any opportunity benefiting the Kurdish people.<sup>61</sup>

Despite their distrust in the regime, several factors have encouraged the political parties of Iranian Kurds to take any opportunity to engage in negotiations with Tehran, including unclear prospects for the future of the Kurdish movement in Rojhelat, its exile in Iraqi Kurdistan, and the pressures imposed upon the parties' activities primarily by the KRG. For instance, Nazem

Debagh, the KRG representative in Tehran, has encouraged the KRG authorities not to tolerate the armed insurgency of Rojhelat's parties; he has even described Iran's frequent shelling of Iraqi Kurdistan's borders as a matter of Iranian self-defence, blaming the Iranian Kurds for violating international law by attacking Iranian military forces from the soil of Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>62</sup> On the pressure coming from the KRG authorities, Hijri confirms that 'following meetings with the KRG authorities we have been warned to not conduct activities that provide Iran with excuses for shelling Iraqi Kurdistan', though he also reveals that 'we rejected their request because we cannot any longer reduce our movement to minor activities [referring to their cessation of military activity since 1996] with no satisfactory outcome'.<sup>63</sup> Anonymous KDPI officials argue that the outside world has an inaccurate perception of the KDPI's relationship with the KDP and the KRG, stating that the common belief is that the KDPI is allied with the KDP and acts according to the KDP's wishes and interests. However, as claimed by an anonymous KDPI official, 'in fact we are experiencing massive pressure from the KDP and the KRG to reduce our activities. For instance, the KDP does not even allow our TV channel [Tishk TV] to stream one hour of live programming from the KRG, and they monitor our organisation's every step'.<sup>64</sup>

Mohammad Khaki, a London-based political commentator, has argued that while Iranian authorities have for 40 years claimed that the Kurdish political parties in Iran are defeated and have no public support, the regime's contradictory July 2019 engagement in negotiations with them should be understood as a recognition of the popular support for these parties in Kurdistan. Khaki adds that the Islamic Republic is aware of the fact that Kurdistan will be the first region over which it loses control in the event of a large-scale crisis in Iran, especially a foreign military attack or invasion. However, like others, Khaki criticises the timing of the negotiations and their unrepresentativeness, as the four member parties of the CCIKPP do not represent the entire organisational spectrum of Rojhelat.<sup>65</sup> Critics have also assumed that the Iranian government, by negotiating with certain parties and excluding others, and/or requiring negotiation with single parties rather than a joint front of all the political parties of Rojhelat, has sought to sow division and distrust among these parties. Kamran Matin, a senior lecturer in International Relations at the University of Sussex and a scholar of Kurdish politics, explains that Kurdish-government negotiations have occurred because the regime is concerned by the international pressure applied by the American leadership; he claims that if there were no political crisis between Iran and the United States, there would probably be no such meetings. According to Matin,

The Iranians want to keep the Kurdish parties busy and make sure that the Kurds, in case of any clashes with the regime, do not cooperate with the US, and are not able to liberate any areas of Rojhelat. In fact, the 'philosophy' underlying the Islamic Republic's approach to negotiations is to suspend or thwart such moves or decisions by Kurds.<sup>66</sup>

However, the 27–28 June 2019, Kurdish-government meeting has not changed the nature of the conflict in Rojhelat, and several clashes between Peshmerga/guerrillas and the IRGC after the July 2019 meetings were reported. In addition, the IRGC intensified its shelling of border areas of Iraqi Kurdistan with advanced technology, resulting in deaths of civilian Iraqi Kurds. The most recent developments in the relation between the KDPI and the PJAK took place in 2019, as KDPI and PJAK representatives participated in the Kurdistan National Congress Consultant Meeting for Eastern Kurdistan on 14–15 September 2019 in Stockholm.<sup>67</sup> The gathering of these parties under the same roof was considered by participants a positive development at a time when the negative attitude of the KDPI and Komala toward the PJAK is recognised as having a severe impact on political cohesion in Rojhelat, and the future of the region and the Iranian government's attitude towards Rojhelat look increasingly uncertain. It is too early to ascertain the impact of this meeting on relations between the political organisations of Rojhelat, but it is regarded by party members and grassroots supporters as a positive step toward softening the strained cross-organisational relations.

## Conclusion

The multiplicity of developments in Rojhelat over less than one decade testify that Rojhelat is undergoing a process of transformation reflective of the potentials, challenges, uncertainties and complexity of the Kurdish movement of this part of Kurdistan. The developments inside Rojhelat, such as the general strike on 12 September 2018, are evidence of the existence of a strongly deprived and politicised civil society, capable of organising collective actions that can challenge the regime's authority. However, the escalating tensions between Rojhelat's political organisations and the regime, reflected in the sudden rise in armed clashes between Peshmerga/guerrilla fighters and the IRGC, particularly after the announcement of *Rasan*, reveals a picture composed of competing elements. The Iranian state's use of new technologies in fighting Kurdish opposition parties based in Iraqi Kurdistan, such as long-range missiles and drones, shows a new level of Iranian state aggression against the Kurdish movement in Rojhelat. Iran's deployment of high-tech armaments brings into sharp focus the high vulnerability of the Kurdish parties, as their bases and headquarters are targets of the IRGC's attacks at any time, with minimal ability for defence.

The political leaders of Rojhelat are aware of the challenges their movement faces. Ironically, in addition to those posed by the Iranian state, they repeatedly mention 'disunity and political factionalism', as their major challenge, but they have been incapable of finding a mechanism for cross-organisational reconciliation in overcoming it. Over the last decade, the movement has experienced a great expansion in the number of ideologies and organisations. In addition to the PJAK as discussed above, the Freedom Party of Kurdistan has also arisen in Rojhelat in recent years, gathering large Peshmerga forces since its establishment in 2006. While Rojhelat's parties each in their own way mobilise and conduct activities that challenge the Iranian government, due to their weak cross-organisational cooperation, discontent may still potentially escalate to fratricidal war. Overcoming this challenge requires creating a front composed of every political organisation of Rojhelat, regardless of ideological framework.

## Disclosure statement

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## Notes

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42. According to Moeini, 'after the intensification of the clashes between the PJAK and Iranian forces, and the IRGC's massive attack on PJAK bases in Qandil, we were recommended by the KNK [Kurdistan National Congress], PUK and KRG authorities, to agree a ceasefire with the Iranians'. He also mentions that 'due to financial difficulties and the high cost of armaments, the PJAK was not able to maintain the war against Tehran'. In response to the question of what was gained from this ceasefire, Moeini replied 'Nothing. It is one of those sad realities we have to deal with in our struggle'. Author's interview with Moeini. Nevertheless, Michael Gunter writes the following on the 2011 ceasefire: 'After relatively large-scale clashes between the PJAK and Iran in the summer of 2011, the two sides announced a cease-fire, and, in October 2011, KRG president Massoud Barzani declared that the PJAK would terminate its armed actions. However, low-level fighting continues, and Iran has hanged several captured PJAK members. Nevertheless, the PJAK has largely maintained the cease-fire, while declaring that it was going to send militants to join the PKK in the Kurds' Syrian struggle. Given the divisions that prevailed until at least recently within the KDPI and the decline of Komala, opportunity spaces for PJAK have clearly opened up and been utilized.' In M. M. Gunter, 'Iran's Forgotten Kurds', *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 43 (2020), p.65. Nevertheless, Sinkaya asserts that the PKK uses the PJAK as a bargaining chip in its relationship with Tehran, and claims 'accordingly, the ceasefire between PJAK and Iran in 2011 encouraged Tehran to utilize the PKK as leverage against Turkey because of diverging interests and contrasting regional policies of the two countries'. Sinkaya, 'The Kurdish question', p.855.
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65. See S. Alavi, '*Mozaker-e ahzab-e Kord ve Jumhori-e Islami*' [Negotiations Between Kurdish Parties and the Islamic Republic], *Iranwire*, 13 July 2019. <https://iranwire.com/fa/features/32036>.
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67. The meeting in Stockholm included representatives of the major political parties of Rojhelat. Aso Saleh, reading the official policy of the KDPI toward the Congress, stated the *Rasan* has also welcomed cooperation and the establishment of trust between different organisations of Rojhelat, though significant unpredictability and challenges face the movement in this part of Kurdistan. The authors of this article were, through participation in this event, able to observe and analyse the Congress.