



**Middle East
Research Institute**

www.meri-k.org

Policy Brief

04 December, 2016. Vol. 3, No.22

Iran and its Opposition Kurdish Parties: The Need for Dialogue

Hawraman Ali*

Iran and its opposition Kurdish groups have been involved in intermittent armed conflict for decades. Considering the new political realities of the region and the domination of US politics by the Republicans after the recent election, Iran should engage in dialogue with its Kurdish opposition parties.

Background

Despite Iran and the Kurdish parties of Iran being engaged in intermittent armed conflict for decades, Iran has not been able to eradicate these parties and, similarly, Iran's armed Kurdish parties have not been able to force their demands upon the state. There is therefore a need for mutual compromise. The Kurdish parties have shown willingness to negotiate with the government of Iran, provided that the latter is serious about finding a lasting solution.

Opposition Kurdish Parties

There are several opposition Kurdish parties that stem from Iran's Kurdish population. Among these are the [Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran](#) (KDPI), established in 1945, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which split from the KDPI in 2004. There is also the [Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan](#) (Komala), founded in 1969, which has also split into two more factions: the [Komala Communist Party of Kurdistan](#) and the [Komala Communist Party in Iran](#). The KDPI has recently announced that it has renewed its armed struggle in Iran in order to force the Iranian government to grant equal rights to its Kurdish minority. [Kurdistan Free Life Party](#) (PJAK), closely allied to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), is also operating in Iran. There are also other smaller groups such as *Sazmani Khabat*.

Iran's Kurdish parties [collectively assert](#) that their struggle is to obtain civil and political rights for what they consider to be Iran's Kurdish nation. They argue that Iranian politics is being dominated by one ethnic community (the Persians), and religious sect (Shi'a), and thus claim that they are striving for equal rights for Iran's different ethnic and religious communities.

They also maintain that Iran is not genuinely interested in peaceful negotiations. For instance, they accuse Iran of having assassinated Iranian Kurdish (KDPI) leaders [Abul Rahman Ghassemlou](#) (Vienna 1989) and

* Research Fellow, The Middle East Research Institute, Erbil, Kurdistan Region, Iraq

[Sadegh Sharafkandi](#) (Berlin 1992). They emphasise that Ghassemlou was involved in secret negotiations with Iranian representatives in good faith to give peace a chance and that he was killed at the negotiation table.

Internal Dynamics

Despite their demands, the Kurdish parties in Iran remain divided. They have not been able to come up with a single vision or roadmap on what steps they should take together. This disunity has been detrimental to their aspirations. In the mid-1980s, hundreds died in fighting between the KDPI and Komala. The ongoing fragmentation is further evidenced by the splits that have taken place among Komala and the old KDPI. The opposition Kurdish organisations therefore need to come up with their own realistic initiatives and take a reconciliatory approach. They also need to develop one united vision for how to deal with the government of Iran and act according to a unified approach which will be taken more seriously.

Iran, on the other hand, considers these Kurdish parties to be outlaws, enemies of the state who undermine the country's peace and stability. Iran holds that the Kurds are free to take part in elections and practice politics within the law of the land. Indeed, many Kurds have been elected to the Iranian parliament and hold government positions. However, only recently the authorities in Iran's parliament [rejected a request](#) for the formation of a Kurdish bloc in Iran's parliament.

The US: Trump Factor

The election of the new president in the United States (US) may have major implications for the US' policy in the Middle East and in particular with regards to Iran. Iranian policymakers may wish to consider potential policies of the next US president towards Iran. President-elect [Trump has already vowed to scrap the Iran nuclear deal](#) and he has been considering hardliners (at least when it comes to Iran) such as [John Bolton](#), [Rudy Giuliani](#), and [Mitt Romney](#) to join his administration. He has already chosen [Michael Flynn](#) and [Reince Priebus](#), two known hawkish figures, as his National Security Advisor and Chief of Staff respectively. It is therefore reasonable to expect heightened tensions between Iran and the US under the forthcoming administration. To add to this, [the US Congress has just passed a bill re-authorising the Iran Sanctions Act \(ISA\)](#), which was due to expire at the end of 2015, for another 10 years. This, however, must also be approved by the president to become law. What these new dynamics demonstrate is that a significant focus of the new administration will be on Iran and therefore by reconciling with its Kurds, it will eliminate the possibility of this issue attracting international attention and comprising another element for Trump's administration to target.

Regional Political Context

Much of the Middle East is going through political turbulence and/or armed conflict, and Iran has a stake in almost all of these from the crisis in Yemen to the war against the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and the multifaceted Syria War. The Syrian and Iraqi Kurds are at the forefront of fighting IS and this has greatly added to their status. The Kurds in Iraq have established a federal entity within Iraq (The Kurdistan Region of Iraq), which is recognised by the international community and the Iraqi constitution, while the war in Syria has resulted in the establishment of another *de facto* Kurdish administration in Syria, known as the '*Rojava*' federal administration (*Rojava*: Kurdish for 'western' Kurdistan). *Rojava* is also seen as a key ally in the fight against IS by the coalition forces (excluding Turkey) to such an extent that the [US has so far rejected Turkey's demands to choose between it and Rojava](#). Thus, Iran and the Kurdish opposition must take the radical political changes that are happening in the Middle East into account as the potential is there for better relations between the Kurds in the wider region and Iran.

Through Iran having good relations with the two named Kurdish entities in Iraq and Syria, it has the potential to boost its influence in both of these countries. By having better relations with the Iraqi Kurds, Iran can

have a greater say in the future of post-IS regions of Iraq. Similarly, regardless of the fate of Assad's government in Syria, better relations between Iran and *Rojava* will result in Iran holding greater leverage in the future of Syria. However, the renewal of armed clashes and the deterioration of the situation between Iran and its opposition Kurdish parties has the potential not only to impede stronger relations between Iran and the Kurds in the wider region but it could also have a profound negative impact on these relations.

In contrast, an equitable settlement with opposition Kurdish parties and/or granting the Iranian Kurds equal rights will result in a new era of better relations not only between Iran and its Kurdish minority but also between Iran and the Kurds in the wider region. Ultimately, this will strengthen Iran's unity internally and it will also enhance Iran's regional status; Iran cannot achieve the regional leadership it desires without genuinely reaching out to the Kurds at home, and treating them as partners.

Indeed, Iran and its Kurdish parties can take inspiration from solutions to other armed conflicts such as [the recent agreement](#) that was signed between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc). This deal will end a 52-year conflict that has claimed the lives of thousands of people with millions displaced. [The Good Friday Agreement](#) (April 1998) is another example that, along with the St Andrews Agreement, ended a 30-year conflict in Northern Ireland. However, it is important to note that it would be difficult to reach an agreement during armed combat, a point the KDPI should take heed of.

Recommendations

Under the current and emerging regional political dynamics, Iran should engage in genuine peace talks with its opposition Kurdish parties aimed towards a mutually beneficial settlement. This will boost Iran's status as a leading regional power, and therefore Iran itself will be the first beneficiary of this. However, leaving the issue unresolved could be detrimental to Iran, to the region in general, and it could have a destabilising effect on Iran's relations with the Kurds in the region. The road to building better ties with the Kurds in the neighbourhood, however, starts with Iran's Kurds first and foremost. In relation to the Kurdish parties themselves, if they are to be taken seriously, they must put aside their differences, disengage in armed conflict, and work towards developing one realistic vision that they can achieve together.

Article Citation: Ali, H. (2016) *Iran and its Opposition Kurdish Parties: The Need for Dialogue*, MERI Policy Brief. vol. 3, no. 22.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of MERI.