

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentary, Yang Razali Kassim.

From Syria and Iraq to Iran: Kurdish Minorities Push For Autonomy

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

While Syrian and Iraqi Kurds battle against the Islamic State organisation, Sunni Muslim Iranian Kurds are campaigning for greater rights within the mainly Shiite Islamic republic. President Rouhani's approach appears to be producing results.

Commentary

MORE THAN than three years into Syria's brutal civil war, Syrian Kurds have carved out an entity of their own close to the border with Turkey. Their battle against Islamic State, the jihadist group that has conquered chunks of Syria and Iraq, for Kobani, a stone's throw from the Syrian-Turkish border, symbolises Syrian Kurdish aspirations. It has galvanised Turkish Kurdish emotions at a time of fragile peace negotiations between Turkey and the insurgent Kurdish Workers Party (PKK).

Across the border in northern Iraq, Iraqi Kurdish militiamen or Peshmerga, (those who confront death), man the frontlines against the jihadists in defence of their semi-state. Meanwhile the Peshmerga's allies, the 60-country coalition the United States has marshalled against Islamic State, seek to ensure that Iraqi Kurdistan remains part of a restructured Iraqi state.

Pacifying minorities

From their vantage point, Iranian Kurds who account for 11 percent of Iran's 77.5 million inhabitants, are no less fervent about their aspirations but keen to avoid the chaos and violence enveloping their Syrian and Iraqi brethren. To them, Iran's Islamic republic, established with the fall of the Shah in 1979, constitutes a bulwark against the violence that has enveloped much of the Middle East.

Yet, the Iranian Kurdish campaign, rooted in a bloody insurgency in the first decade after the toppling of the Shah, goes to the core of identity issues fuelling conflict across the Middle East; it poses no less a challenge to an Iran that has long denied its minorities communal political rights. Their decades-old struggle takes on added importance in a country in which 50 percent of the population belong to non-Persian minorities and a region in which ethnicity and sectarianism are redrawing borders.

Suppression of the Iranian Kurdish insurgency in the 1980s was but one instance of post-revolution Iranian efforts to pacify the country's minorities amid suspicions that Iran's multiple distractors had sought to fuel ethnic unrest. Iraq launched in 1980 its eight-year long Saudi- and Kuwaiti-backed war against the newly established Islamic republic - in the vain hope that the predominantly Arab population of the southern Iranian province of Khuzestan would rise in revolt and welcome Iraqi troops as liberators.

Iran suspects the United States of supporting Jundallah, a shadowy group that has claimed responsibility for more than 350 deaths in a series of bombings since 2007 in Sistan and Balochistan, Iran's largest, most impoverished predominantly Sunni, south-eastern province.

Falling behind

In Tabriz, the capital of the predominantly Azeri province of Eastern Azerbaijan, Traktorsazi FC, the football club, has emerged as a symbol of an Azeri national identity. Its stadium has been the scene of a number of environmental and nationalist protests and clashes with security forces in recent years in which fans chanted secessionist slogans. "The main (Iranian concern) is that the idea of Turkism is strengthening in South Azerbaijan," News.Az, a pro-Azeri news website, quoted Saftar Rahimli, a member of the board of the World Azerbaijani Congress, as saying. Rahimli was referring to Eastern Azerbaijan by its nationalist Azeri name.

Unrest among Azeris, Iran's largest ethnic minority, despite the fact that many Azeris have risen to high positions and exert influence within government, the military and the security forces, suggests that Iranian attempts to silence political demands by enhancing individual social and economic rights is failing.

Recent events in Iraq and Syria have refuelled the aspirations of a new generation of Iranian Kurds who fear they may be left behind. "We feel we have lagged behind and fallen from first position (among Kurds) to the fourth," a Kurdish activist recently told the Financial Times.

Like the PKK which has moved from pan-Kurdish aspirations to demands for greater freedom and self-rule within Turkey, Iranian Kurdish ambitions focus on equal rights and autonomy. They complain about being treated as second class citizens and as a security risk despite significant investment in Kurdish regions that has substantially elevated educational levels but failed to reduce unemployment of almost 30 percent.

Stepped-up Iranian Kurdish activism has sparked divisions in the Tehran government about how to respond and driven fears that US support for the Iraqi Kurds as well as Kurdish fighters in Kobani, and past and current Israeli support for the Kurds, could mean that Iran's foes may want to fuel conflict in Iranian Kurdistan.

Easing repression

Reformists and hardliners are united in their rejection of federalism which would involve granting other minorities the same right and a restructuring of the state that would significantly undermine the regime's grip on power.

Yet, in contrast to the Revolutionary Guards who advocate repression of dissent, President Hassan Rouhani sees economic development and inclusion of Kurds in his efforts to grant Iranians greater individual rights as the way forward. Iranian Kurdish leaders denied a statement in parliament by Intelligence minister Mahmoud Alawi that he had met in October with representatives of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) and the Organisation of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan (Komala).

President Rouhani's approach appears to be producing results, first and foremost among which is a desire by activists to push their demands peacefully. Violence has in recent years been limited to isolated, small scale attacks by The Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK), an offshoot of the PKK (The Kurdistan Workers' Party).

Iranian Kurds concede that repression has eased considerably since Rouhani was voted into office last year even if hundreds of Kurdish political prisoners remain behind bars. A mass rally in October in support of Kobani was the first time Kurds were allowed to publicly gather in an expression of their Kurdish identity. Islamic Azad University, Iran's largest university network, this year established the country's first Kurdish Studies Centre.

Expressions of Azeri nationalism in recent years would suggest that greater freedoms is ultimately unlikely to keep the nationalist Iranian Kurdish genie in the bottle. Some Kurds, nonetheless, believe Rouhani could succeed. "Even federalism can gradually wane if people see a fair distribution of power and wealth. Kurds are not Persians but are Iranians. The view that Iran belongs to us is gaining strength," Omid Varzandeh, the centre's director, told the Financial Times.

James M. Dorsey is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), co-director of the University of Wuerzburg's Institute for Fan Culture, and the author of The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer blog.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg