

Kurdish Jihadism and Extremist Groups

OE Watch Commentary: Kurds have waged a successful battle against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to end its territorial control. However, thousands of Kurds also have formed or joined the ranks of extremist groups in the region. The excerpted article from *Rudaw*, a news network based in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR), provides an extensive analysis of Kurdish jihadist groups.

The article provides historical background on several Kurdish groups, which led to the creation of Ansar al-Islam (AAI), the most prominent Kurdish extremist group. AAI was founded in Iraq in 2001 by Mullah Krekar. However, its roots date back to the 1990s and consist of several factions split from the Kurdistan Islamic Movement (KIM), which was founded in 1979 in Halabja, a town in the IKR bordering Iran.

The article also explains how jihadi ideology spread among the Sunni Kurdish population of Iran and Iraq. Two Iranian Kurds have shaped the radicalization among the Kurdish population: Abdul Qader Tawhidi who created the Islamic Movement for the Sunnis of Iran after negotiations failed with Iranian Shia clerics in 1984; and his student Abdul Rahman Fattahi. In 2016, Fattahi was a top mufti of the Movement of the Muhajerin of Iran's Sunnis (Muhajerin) when the group pledged allegiance to Abu Mohammad al-Julani then head of Fath al-Sham (now Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, HTS). Halabja, on the Iranian border, where Tawhidi studied Islamic teachings, has been a significant center for Kurdish jihadism with the help of Iran, which directed the Kurdish jihadists to fight Saddam Hussein's regime in the 1980s.

The article bases its analysis on digital data including announcements, pictures, and videos. The data indicates extremist groups such as HTS have actively engaged in propaganda to radicalize and recruit many young Sunni Kurds from Iran to fight in Syria. These radicalized young Kurdish men were initially used to fight in the ranks of AAI mostly in Iraq. However, with the Syrian Civil War, Kurdish jihadists from Iran traveled to Syria to join the ranks of Jabhat al-Nusra (JAH), which rebranded itself several times before currently becoming HTS. While these Kurdish jihadists previously fought under the banner of JAH, they have formed their own group called Muhajerin. The author claims that violent jihadi ideology spread among Iranian Kurds "with the tacit approval of Iranian intelligence and paramilitary services allowing [Kurdish] jihadism to become woven into" the "global holy war."

While Kurdish extremist groups including KIM were mostly blending Kurdish nationalism and Islamism, "Hezi 2 Soran was particularly important in the establishment of a multi-ethnic, transnational brand of Kurdish-led jihadism." In fact, Hezi 2 Soran was one of the groups comprising AAI. Soon after it was founded, AAI "established the Byara Emirate, a mini Islamic state in the highlands of the Hawraman region that straddles the Iraq-Iran border." While the AAI leadership disbanded itself to join ISIS in 2014, the Syrian branch rejected the merger and continued to operate under the same name. **End OE Watch Commentary (Gündüz)**



Mullah Krekar.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mullah_Krekar.jpg

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Continued: Kurdish Jihadism and Extremist Groups

Source: Fazel Hawramy, “Journey to jihad: Iran’s Sunni Kurds fighting a holy war in Idlib” *Rudaw*, 23 June 2020. <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/23062020>

Thousands of young, Sunni, Kurdish men from Iran have sought solace in carrying out religious warfare, or jihad, in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and beyond.

Kurds have been a critical part of the international, ongoing fight against the Islamic State (ISIS) and other terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq. But a smaller current of Kurds have travelled to these two countries over the years to perform their religious duty of jihad, on the side of ISIS, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly the Nusra Front), and other groups.

Guided by the digital materials, Rudaw’s investigation in the Kurdish area in Iran has revealed that the group has actively promoted jihad, and continues to recruit many young Kurdish men to the battlefields of Syria.

These Iranian Kurdish jihadists once operated as part of the better known Ansar al-Islam group, a sophisticated and independent Kurdish jihadist group that has repeatedly refused to come under the yoke of the international jihad ringleader al-Qaeda. Ansar al-Islam was founded sometime in late 2001 and gained infamy when they soon established the Byara Emirate, a mini Islamic state in the highlands of the Hawraman region that straddles the Iraq-Iran border.

Iranian Kurdish jihadists who had made the journey to Syria chose to fight under the Nusra umbrella, but retain their own name and structure. They operated as the “Movement of the Muhajerin of Iran’s Sunnis”, a mostly Kurdish group that also counted jihadists from the Arab, Turkmen, Gilaki and Balochis areas of the country among its ranks.

The group pledged allegiance to Fath al-Sham head Abu Mohammad Jolani in July 2016, in a statement calling for unity among jihadist groups. The Muhajerin’s top mufti, or advisor, is Abdul Rahman Fattahi, an Iranian Kurd who began his journey to jihadism in the early 1990s.

Fattahi’s course embodies how violent jihadist ideology spread in the Kurdish areas in Iran with the tacit approval of Iranian intelligence and paramilitary services, allowing Kurdish jihadism to become woven into a holy war of global proportions.

Fattahi was shaped by Abdul Qader Tawhidi, an Iranian Sunni Kurd who studied in Halabja, Iraqi Kurdistan in the mid-1970s, then travelled across Kurdish areas of Iran to familiarize himself with its Islamist religious currents. The two became a near inseparable student–teacher duo in the 1990s who shaped Kurdish jihadism for decades to come.

With IRGC support, Halabja became a gravitational centre for jihadism, where local subscribers to the movement and smaller jihadist groups were brought together to establish the Kurdistan Islamic Movement (KIM), fighting Saddam Hussein’s regime for two years before Iran withdrew its support from Kurdish opposition groups...

...The KIM’s hardcore elements, along with other smaller jihadist groups, came together to establish the now-infamous Ansar al-Islam.

One Ansar al-Islam contingent, Hezi 2 Soran, was particularly important in the establishment of a multi-ethnic, transnational brand of Kurdish-led jihadism.

Hezi 2 Soran ... was established in 1995, named after the Erbil province city where the KIM ran an important military academy...

A long-established principle in the KIM was that it be an exclusively Kurdish nationalist Islamic project, but Hezi 2 Soran provided training to Iraqi and Syrian Arab jihadists who sought it.

The most radical of the KIM’s groups – Hezi 2 Soran, and two smaller factions, Tawhid and Hamas – came together to establish Jund al-Islam in September 2001. The group lasted around 100 days, before merging with Krekar’s Islah to become Ansar al-Islam.

Ansar al-Islam took charge of Iraqi Kurdish Hawraman to establish the Byara Emirate, implementing a severe interpretation of Islamic penal code.

Iranian Kurds who aided Ansar al-Islam refuge in Iran “obtained approval from the Iranian side, on the condition that the transportation [of Ansar fighters] was done quietly and secretly...

Many Iranian and Iraqi Kurds carried out jihad for the Islamic State when the group took over parts of Iraq and Syria in the summer of 2014.

It appears that the Muhajerin of Iran group operated as part of Ansar al-Islam up until mid-2016... On July 2, 2016, the Muhajerin issued its first announcement pledging allegiance to Julani, and called on other jihadist groups to do the same.