

THE PKK'S GROWING INFLUENCE IN NORTHERN IRAQ: BEYOND THE RENEWED TENSION IN SINJAR

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With the advance of Barzani's Roj Peshmerga to Sinjar in early March and the consequent clash between PKK and KDP, it was highlighted that the atmosphere in the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government is quite fragile. Moreover, such a clash also showed that there is a potential in the region that can easily escalate into a conflict and drag regional and international actors in. Such a clash during the offensives against DAESH in Iraq and Syria is also criticized by the United States, claiming that it would damage the endeavors of anti-DAESH coalition. Even though there are actors that oppose PKK presence in Sinjar, due to this complex picture, PKK's growing influence in the KRG signals an even more difficult campaign with several actors opposing it, in case the conflict is renewed in the future.

On March 3, 2017, the Roj Peshmerga, a Syrian Kurdish group organized by Masud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) were sent to enter Khana-sour, a village in Sinjar of Mosul province close to the Syrian border. This move was opposed by the pro-PKK units known as Yekeni Parastini Sinjar (Sinjar Resistance Units -YPS), and the latter did not allow Barzani loyalists to enter the village. Clashes erupted and lasted for several hours leaving casualties on both sides. This incident was about to escalate to a full scale confrontation between Barzani loyalists and PKK militants. Had there been a major rupture between the two sides, it could have developed into a very bloody encounter which could have dragged in several regional governments. The leaders of PKK, The Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian affiliate of the PKK, and Barzani received firm warnings from the US-led anti-DAESH coalition leaders to halt the hostilities. Analysts think that this short-lived clash had revealed



how fragile the situation in the KRG is and some pointed out the alarming scenarios which might happen in case of any future confrontation between the PKK and Barzani loyalists. It would be valid to argue that the issues which keep the two Kurdish groups apart are too complicated and urgent, and have already taken the shape of a zero-sum conflict. There is no formula for compromise on the horizon. The clash had further demonstrated the alarming growth of PKK's influence in the northern Iraq. In this paper, underlying causes of the conflict are analyzed along with its possible implications in the future.

The Causes of the Clash

Both the KDP and PKK promote a different version of the story about who initiated the last round of the fighting and why. In Sinjar town and the villages around, both Peshmerga and YPS maintain check points. There is also a small Iraqi police presence and two battalions of Shiite militia known as the Hashd (Popular Mobilization Units). In addition, there are several hundred fighters of the PKK's People's Defense Forces (HPG) to support the YPS in Sinjar. The road to Khanasour, which Barzani loyalist wanted to capture, is important since it provides a connection between Sinjar and Rojava. Pro-PKK local sources speculate that within the Roj peshmergas there are both Iraqi Peshmerga forces and Turkish intelligence personnel, and they view their arrival in Khanasour as a step to isolate YPS from Rojava, and to build a base for future moves to control Rojava by the pro-Barzani Syrian Kurdish forces.¹ In addition, the Congress of Democratic Societies (KCD), issued a strong statement ascribing the fighting to the "ploys of Turkey to create crisis externally to inflame Turkish nationalist feeling" in order to win support for the forthcoming referendum

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on Turkish constitutional amendment. Their statement went on to say “We warn KDP to cease to be a tool of Turkey in attacking the gains our Yezidi patriots.”²

Turkey also has a stake in seeing a PKK- affiliated armed group being evicted from Sinjar. Turkish authorities say terrorists had used weapons for sabotage inside Turkey which had been acquired in Rojava. On 7 January 2017, Ibrahim Kalın, Presidential Spokesperson, stated “We will never allow a new Qandil (a reference to PKK headquarter in northern Iraq) to be established in Sinjar. We trust that Barzani will manage to expel them from there and we will do whatever needed to have this done.”³ This was reiterated by Turkish Deputy Prime Minister earlier.⁴

The Iraqi central government and Iran have also a role in this crisis. Iraqi central government at one point recognized YPS as a force within the Hashd and paid their salaries. This was an attempt to create a counter force to that of Barzani in Sinjar. There are now about 3,500 Yezidi fighters⁵ and their leader Saeed Hassan told al-Afaq, an Iraqi TV station, “We are Iraqis and not even Kurds. Barzani is trying to forcibly annex us to the KRG.”⁶

The Pro-PKK Yezidis within YPS units do not trust KDP forces, because they accuse them of having Sunni bias. PKK presents itself as a champion of Yezidism which it consider as the only true Kurdish religion. In addition, the pro-PKK Yezidis accuses that the KDP forces sold them out to DAESH in 2014.⁷ The PKK took advantage of DAESH attack on Sinjar to establish itself in the region. After the collapse of KDP units, the PKK had arguably managed to stop DAESH advance on Sinjar mountain, where 20,000 Yezidis had taken refuge. PKK had moved hundreds of young Yezidi boys and women and given them extensive military and ideological training.⁸

It appears that PKK is using its presence in Sinjar to put into practice its leader's theory of democratic federalism, which has been already in practice in Rojava. Abdullah Öcalan, imprisoned PKK leader, argues for democratic initiative and change from below. The "democratic confederalism" or "libertarian municipalism" is based on the theories of Bookchin, a US thinker frequently labelled as "eco-anarchist." His theory serves as ideological and philosophical foundations of a revolutionary project. PYD leaders seized the opportunity presented to them by the war in Syria to implement Bookchin's ideas in Rojava. In Bookchin's theory, women should have active presence in politics and state mechanisms. This has been reflected in Öcalan's writings, too.⁹ He considers western feminism as the only way to liberate women and as the precondition of the emancipation of society in general and the emancipation of Kurds in particular. In line with such an approach, in Sinjar, PKK has established Sinjar Women's Defense units.¹⁰

The pro-Barzani forces and Yezidi religious leadership do not support this ideology, which they consider alien and divisive by nature. In a recent statement by the Supreme Yezidi Religious Council, they call upon YPS and PKK to hand over Sinjar to the KRG. Officials also view "Öcalan's" mentioned concept of democratic federalism as divisive and weakening for the KRG government. The implementation of this, according to them, will fragmentize the society. In the KRG, there are numerous ethnic and religious minorities and the implementation of "Öcalan's" idea could easily pave the way for internal divisions and wars.¹¹

Temporary Containment of the Crisis

Masud Barzani's move of ordering his troops to take a forward posture in Sinjar was enabled by several local and

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regional actors' support and particular developments. The Yezidi paramount Chief, Mir Tahseen, gave his unconditional support to Barzani's call for the immediate withdrawal of PKK forces from Sinjar. In addition, the Supreme Yezidi Religious Council has issued a plea for the peaceful settlement of the crisis and asked the foreign PKK fighters to leave the region.¹² Besides, the Mosul Provincial Administrative Council, which is the *de jure* authority of Sinjar, asked PKK and YPS not to obstruct the pro-Barzani Kurdish government officials' work in the area.¹³ Finally, the Ministry of Peshmarga in the KRG issued a statement, calling YPS not to block Roj peshmerga's move to the border with Syria.¹⁴

However, Barzani was under immense pressure from numerous parties to put an immediate end to the hostilities with PKK units at Sinjar. The most important signal of such a pressure was the US officials' dismay with the development of the crisis in Sinjar. US officials were immediately on board asking Barzani not to pursue the fight against PKK. US considered any escalation of the crisis as harmful to their main agenda in the Middle East, which is fighting DAESH in Mosul and Syria.¹⁵ It appears that Trump administration will continue the previous administration policy of using PKK against DAESH.



A war in Sinjar would have forced PKK-PYD to relocate many of their fighters and resources to Sinjar. However, the US needs this force to be used in Syria against DAESH. Iran has sent equally strong messages to Barzani that the fighting in Sinjar is not going to be acceptable to them, because it will damage the ongoing war against DAESH in Mosul. Iranian revolutionary guard officers were dispatched to western Mosul to prepare plans with the Hashd units in the area to stop Barzani forces' advances in Sinjar, in case the war escalated. Iran considers western Mosul and Sinjar an important land corridor to its allies in Syria.¹⁶

Furthermore, the PUK and Gorran made it very clear that they are against the forceful means to evict PKK from Sinjar. Prominent military commanders of PUK such as Kosrat Rahul Ali, Anwar Sangawi, and Atta Serawai made it clear that Barzani has no mandate from the KRG to start the war against PKK.¹⁷ PUK, Gorran, numerous important news outlets, and tens of NGOs in the KRG staged mass rallies against the war in Sinjar. Masud Barzani got the message that if he had to pursue the war against PKK, he would have to do it alone and against the will of the US and Iran and could possibly see the Hashd units fighting in favor of PKK. Therefore, he ordered his Peshmerga to accept an immediate ceasefire. However, both Barzani and PKK have been amassing fighters and storing weapons and ammunition in Sinjar for the next round of fighting, which many think is imminent.¹⁸

The PKK took advantage of DAESH attack on Sinjar to establish itself in the region.

Imminent Future Flare up

Due to the reasons mentioned, it might not take too long before we have a new flare up in the fighting between Barzani loyalists and PKK. However, the timing of the start of the next round of the fighting will be determined by the



course of the events in the war against DAESH in Mosul and Raqqa. The Iranian instigation of PKK to act against the KRG is also a possibility to resume the fight. The central government may resort to the use of the crisis in Sinjar in any future conflict with Barzani.¹⁹

Besides, Turkey is eager to see an immediate end to PKK presence in Sinjar. KRG and Turkey made several joint statements, asking PKK to withdraw from Sinjar. But it is an erroneous assumption to argue that Barzani is merely acting under the pressure of Turkey in Sinjar. Although Turkey would like to see an immediate end to PKK presence in Sinjar and other parts of the KRG, it is Barzani who have been pressuring PKK to leave. PKK's ambition to dominate all regions of the Kurdish inhabited lands predates AK Party's rise to power in Turkey, as a response to PKK's monopoly of Kurdish politics to a considerable degree in Iran, Turkey, and Syria. By far it has been clear that, PKK dominates different parties in the region, with different acronyms. Zend Ruken, a female fighter of PKK was quoted by Matt Bradley and Joe Parkinson of Wall Street journal saying "It's all PKK but different branches... Sometimes I'm a PKK, sometimes

I'm a PJAK, and sometimes I'm a YPG. It doesn't really matter. They are all members of the PKK."²⁰

Barzani's KDP seems to be the only formidable foe to Iran among the Iraqi Kurds. Several prominent pro-PKK elements in the KRG have recently stated that PKK has no choice but to confront KDP militarily. Therefore, PKK considers Sinjar a golden opportunity to further penetrate into KRG.

KDP cannot afford to see PKK entrenches its position in Sinjar. Barzani considers PKK presence there as a security threat to his own power. In addition to decades old legacy of hostility between Barzani and PKK, Barzani feels he has been encircled by his enemies on all sides. PKK has been making steady progress on several regions in the KRG. In the north and west PKK has made considerable inroad. There are no less 400 villages within the KRG, which pro-KDP officials could not enter without special permit from PKK. Besides, in the border regions with Iran, PKK has managed to build its organizational basis. The economic and political crisis in the KRG, and the lack of an effective leadership within the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, have enabled PKK to make its presence felt in the region.²¹ Even Gorran has lately hinted at the probability of using the military weight of PKK to attack KDP.²² In the south and the east, KDP feels threatened by the unruly forces of PUK. The illness of Jalal Talabani has made PUK an easy prey for Iran's designs against KDP. Availing itself of the ongoing war against DAESH, PKK has also fortified its organizational and military basis in the southern districts of KRG, such as Garmian and Kirkuk. Finally, in "the post-DAESH Iraq", it is anticipated that Iran will utilize its influence within Shiite groups in Iraq to further isolate and put pressure on KDP.

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Political observers predict that the Shiite Hashd will soon replace DAESH as a more deadly threat to Barzani's power in the KRG. In many places, Hashd and PKK have already begun to coordinate their work against KDP.²³

For these reasons, Barzani cannot afford to wait too long on Sinjar affairs. It will most probably act on Sinjar, when the Mosul operation comes to an end. Then peshmerga forces will be able to transfer fighters to Sinjar. Should the Kurdish government want its help, Turkey would probably respond positively. Turkey has repeatedly stated that it will present all the needed logistic support in case of any confrontation with PKK.²⁴

However, any military action against Sinjar wouldn't be easy, because Barzani has to reckon with the fact PKK-PYD is now a US ally on the war against DAESH. Besides, Iran has an undeclared alliance with PKK and it will not tolerate any attack on the group. Iran will intervene in the future fight through the Iraqi government. Hence, an intra-Kurdish war has the potential to trigger a regional war. Although the ceasefire is still in effect, Ali Baper, the leader of KOMAL (Islamic Group) in Kurdistan, has rightly pointed out that the situation in Sinjar is like a barrel of explosive material which will need only a bullet to explode.²⁵

To sum up, the crisis in Sinjar has developed into a conflict with a zero-sum nature and it has all the potential to flare up very soon with a potential to have serious regional consequences. In such an atmosphere, Turkey's support to Barzani would be of great importance.

ENDNOTES

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