

Ahrar Sinjar: Militia Employment of the Yazidi Community

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Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [Militia Spotlight \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight)

or see [Part 1: How to Use Militia Spotlight \(/policy-analysis/how-use-militia-spotlight\)](#)

Ahrar Sinjar is a worrisome example of Iran-backed militias using minorities to undertake cross-border rocket attacks and build terrorist cells in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

The online brand Ahrar Sinjar (Free People of Sinjar) became active February 3, 2022, and has claimed four attacks on Turkish targets in the Kurdistan Region since then. It represents a return to the classic facade formula: an online brand that partially conceals the real-world *fasail* (armed group) undertaking attacks, in this case Yazidis recruited by Iran-backed militias carrying out attacks on Turkish and Kurdish targets.

Ahrar Sinjar's Claims

Ahrar Sinjar's first claimed attack was the February 3 [122 mm rocket attack on Turkey's base at Zilkan \(/node/17434\)](#). This attack was claimed by Ahrar Sinjar and took place the night after a heavy Turkish airstrike on February 2 on Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS) operating under the umbrella of the 80th Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Brigade.

Other evidence suggests the kinetic cells that form the basis of Ahrar Sinjar have undertaken at least four other attacks on Turkish

bases in Iraqi Kurdistan and were planning to commence a broader terrorist campaign within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Ahrar Sinjar claimed the April 3 attacks by a truck-mounted 122 mm multiple rocket launcher and an April 4 122 mm attempted attack. Most recently, Ahrar Sinjar claimed a drone attack on Zilkan on May 21, with unproven claims that between four and ten drones were used, and with one apparent non-Turkish fatality caused.

Penetration of the Kurdistan Region by Yazidi Militants

On May 16, 2022, the Kurdistan Regional Security Council (KRSC) issued a seventeen-minute video in which four Yazidi suspects were accused of smuggling 107 mm rockets into Iraqi Kurdistan for the purpose of rocketing a political office, two local dams, plus a small power station and an electrical substation.

Of interest, the training received by the alleged terrorist cell intersected with 80th PMF Brigade locations such as Tal Uzayr/Qahtaniyah, and involved other PMF units ([Kataib Hezbollah \(/node/16641\)](#)) and the 53rd PMF Brigade (Imam Hussein) that have provided training and financial support to the YBS since they were incorporated into the PMF.

Weapons Intelligence Points to Unclaimed Attack Plots

From a weapons intelligence point of view, a signature piece of equipment turned up in the February 3, 2022, rocket attack on Zilkan and the May 16 video of the detained cell's nine-rocket arsenal. This commonality is the green timers with white tape patches, which are quite a unique piece of kit (see figure 1).



(/sites/default/files/2022-05/Little%20green%20boxes.J

Figure 1: The green timers with white tape on January 15 (left), February 3 (center), and in the May 16 KRSC video (right).

Even more interesting, the green timers and white tape also showed up on January 15, 2022, when another Yazidi terrorist cell inside Iraqi Kurdistan fired Iranian Haseeb/Fajr-1 107 mm rockets towards the Turkish base at Zilkan from *within* the Kurdistan Region. This suggests that the May 16 cell was drawing on the same stock of timers within Iraqi Kurdistan as the January 15 cell, or later received similar timers to the January 15 cell, or were modifying both the January 15 and May 16 timers locally in Kurdistan. The rocket stands (figure 2) used in both the January 15 and May 16 images were also identical (while the February 3 and April 3 attacks were vehicle-mounted).

These factors suggest that the same group (which claimed four attacks as Ahrar Sinjar) also undertook unclaimed attacks on January 15 and supplied the May 16 cell.

What We Know About Ahrar Sinjar

Based on observed evidence and the KRSC video, the Ahrar Sinjar brand and the three known kinetic cells detected so far have the following characteristics:

- **Yazidis trained by Iran-backed *fasail*.** One May 16 Yazidi detainee, Husein Dakhil Hassan, claimed to have received training on 107 mm rocket systems

from an Arab man (Abu Ali) at a base run by the 53rd PMF Brigade in Tal Afar. Another May 16 Yazidi detainee, Elias Akram Ali, claimed to have been trained by the same Arab man at a PMF base in Tal Uzayr/Qahtaniyah (south of Sinjar city) and to have received two other training courses on rockets in Tal Uzayr, one of which was attended by thirteen individuals. [Kataib Hezbollah \(/node/16641\)](#) provided a trainer for at least one session.

- **Yazidis with an alleged PKK connection.** According to the KRSC, all the May 16 detainees had connections to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Sinjar, and the vehicle used to smuggle in the 107 mm rockets was purchased with \$9,500 provided by a PKK intelligence officer. One May 16 Yazidi detainee, Khalis Ismail Sharo, claimed to have undertaken previous intelligence-gathering work for the PKK inside Iraqi Kurdistan. The nature of the PKK-PMF collaboration is unclear, but a highly dangerous overlap of anti-Turkish and anti-Kurdistan Region motives is emerging—in part driven by Turkish airstrikes on Yazidi headquarters in Sinjar.
- **Basing from refugee camps inside the Kurdistan Region.** The May 16 detainees were living in the Kabartu internally displaced persons (IDP) camp (northeast of Lake Mosul), the Shariya IDP camp (south of Duhok city), and the Esiyan IDP camp (near the Erbil-Duhok road). At least one camp was used as a hide site for rockets.
- **Attacking both Turkish and Kurdistan Region targets.**



Figure 2: Car jacks used as launch elevators for 107mm rockets: in the January 15 attack (top) and May 16 video (bottom).

The phenomenon of Iran-backed *fasail* using micro-minorities is [very well-established \(https://ctc.usma.edu/irans-expanding-militia-army-iraq-new-special-groups/\)](https://ctc.usma.edu/irans-expanding-militia-army-iraq-new-special-groups/): Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis built out Shabak, Turkmen, and purportedly Christian units of the PMF that were especially close to their Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps handlers. More recently, some of the rocket attacks into the Kurdistan Region have come from villages of the Kakai minority in parts of the Nineveh Plains closest to targets in Erbil. On April 15, 2022, the *fasail* launched a drone attack on the Kurdistan Region's oil export pipeline from a base of the 78th PMF Brigade (a Sunni auxiliary unit called Nawadir) north of Zummar town. The mass adoption of more than three thousand Yazidi fighters into the 80th PMF Brigade has similarly created a recruitment pool for terrorist operations. This is an evolution that should be closely followed and will be in forthcoming Militia Spotlight coverage.



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