

Turkey's Waiting Game in Sinjar

Michael Knights

The battle to dominate the district of Sinjar, 100 kilometers west of Mosul, has been approaching like a sandstorm on the horizon. This is because Sinjar, the scene of Yezidi genocide¹ since 2014, is undergoing a multi-faceted struggle for power between the various factions fighting the Islamic State (IS). These groups include the Iraqi Kurds, the Iraqi government, Iranian-backed elements of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the Syrian-Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), and numerous Yezidi factions aligned with the different players.

Background on Sinjar

Situated on the Iraqi-Syrian border, Sinjar is the last Iraqi city on Highway 47, the trade road between Mosul and Syria. The Yezidis and Kurds of the district were brutalized by the Ba'athist government in the 1970s and 1980s, with rural populations displaced into dismal collective villages called *mujamma*.² After Saddam's fall, the majority of Yezidis continued to live in the *mujamma*, which by that point had grown into towns and fallen under the political dominance and security aegis of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the dominant Kurdish force in the northern part of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The rural areas of Sinjar were policed by the (mainly Yezidi) 3rd Iraqi Army division.

The Iraqi Army disintegrated when the Islamic State attacked in June 2014, and then two months later, the KDP Peshmerga also fled as the Islamic State's war spread into the Kurdistan Region.³ The Yezidis formed the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), which received support from the PKK armed wing and the neighbouring Syrian Kurdish YPG, an affiliate of the PKK.⁴ These forces sustained a safe haven for Yezidi civilians on Sinjar Mountain, a forty-kilometer-long anticline towering nearly 700 meters above the surrounding plains. Another Yezidi militia called the Protection Force of Êzîdkhan (HPE) operated at a slight remove from the PKK and eventually fell under the control of the KDP Peshmerga.⁵

Though the KDP Peshmerga and their Yezidi allies played a major role in relieving the Islamic State siege of Sinjar Mountain in November 2014, tensions have remained high between the Kurds and most of the other militias in the area. From my experience visiting the area before the Islamic State takeover, I can attest that the Yezidis of Sinjar were never overly fond of KDP domination of their local politics, but nonetheless desperately needed Kurdish protection, being lodged between the terrorist hubs of Tel Afar, Ba'aj, and the Syrian border. Since the failure of the KDP Peshmerga in 2014, Yezidi forces, such as the YBŞ, are now seeking greater autonomy in local governance and have set up their own Self-Administration Council with PKK and YPG support.⁶ Yezidi forces in the YBŞ lacked the military power to liberate the Yezidi villages south of Sinjar, and pro-KDP Yezidi forces have suffered the frustration of sitting in static defensive positions under KDP command, less than 30 kilometers from the homes, for the last two years.⁷ For the Kurdistan Region, although the domination of Yezidi towns became a political habit, these towns were not considered worth sustaining high casualties to liberate.

Enter the Outside Players

Turkey and Iran-backed PMF militias crashed into this complex picture during the first half of this year. Ankara's interest in the issue has been twofold. First, the PKK and YPG roles in Sinjar were alarming to Turkey because the area appears to provide the anti-Turkey groups with a land bridge between their bases in Iraqi Kurdistan and Syrian Kurdistan, known as *Rojava*. Turkey and the KDP had collaborated on closing the KDP-Rojava border,⁸ and Sinjar seemed to give the PKK and YPG a way to flank this obstacle. For both the Turks and the KDP, expansion of PKK military power inside the Kurdistan Region is considered deeply unsettling. An escalation of pressure against the PKK in Sinjar may have been appealing this summer, considering President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan needed military distractions to placate the Turkish General Staff.⁹

The problem for Turkey is that the PKK, YPG and Yezidi YBŞ enclave in Sinjar is not such an easy target. Contrary to depictions of Sinjar as “another Qandil,”¹⁰ Sinjar is not a formidable redoubt with imposing physical defenses, such as those of the PKK's base camps. Instead, the difficulties of attacking Sinjar are primarily political. The KDP-PKK battles of the 1990s¹¹ left today's Kurdish leadership with a deep impression of the PKK as a fanatical and skilled adversary. Additionally, spilling PKK blood, Kurdish blood, would be politically unpopular in the Kurdistan Region. For these reasons, the KDP's preference was first to use KDP-trained Syrian Kurds, the so-called *Rojava Peshmerga*,¹² to isolate Sinjar Mountain and the surrounding areas from the Syrian border, and thus from the assistance offered by the YPG. This effort failed when the YPG backed up Yezidi YBŞ and PKK forces on Sinjar Mountain's northern foothills. Using two hundred troops, eight tanks, and two-dozen anti-aircraft cannons,¹³ the YPG blunted the *Rojava Peshmerga* in a series of skirmishes¹⁴ in early March 2017. The Syrian Kurds were clearly sensitive to the risk that Sinjar might be cut off from its Syrian base of support – an indication of YPG commitment to its salient into Iraq.

As a senior Kurdish security official told me in April 2017, for the KDP, the second best solution is for Turkey to intervene against the PKK in Sinjar.¹⁵ Intensified Turkish drone operations, probably launched from the KDP's Suhela camp 90 kilometers to the northeast, were followed by demonstrative Turkish airstrikes¹⁶ on YBŞ and PKK positions in Sinjar on April 25, 2017. A new Turkish-backed offensive by the *Rojava Peshmerga* seemed to be impending in the lead-up to President Erdoğan's White House visit on May 16, but the prospect of a major Turkish air and special forces effort later faded away. One interpretation is that intensified provision of U.S. targeting intelligence¹⁷ to Turkey has diverted Turkish attention towards a renewed campaign targeting the PKK leadership in Qandil, where airstrikes have accelerated since late May 2017.¹⁸

Popular Mobilization Forces and the Syrian border

A new impetus for potential Turkish intervention was provided by the PMF operation launched towards the Syrian-Iraq border on May 12, 2017. The seventeen-day operation saw Iran-backed militias of the Badr Organization and Kata'ib Hezbollah penetrate 100km of sparsely defended desert between their jump-off positions near Tel Afar and the Syrian border.¹⁹ For Turkey, one key fear related to the extension of Iranian proxy forces onto the eastern edge of the northern Syrian theater of operations. With Assad forces creeping towards the Syrian Euphrates River Valley to the southwest,²⁰ the PMF's advance created additional concerns that Assad and Iran were positioning to dominate security and political arrangements in post-Islamic State eastern Syria. If Iran were to strike a deal with the YPG, for instance, they would gain an indirect route between Iran and Damascus, albeit via Syrian Kurdish areas. This could give the YPG additional options if their relationship with the United States were to cool post-Raqqa.

As important, from Turkey's perspective, the PMF's advance brought the Iraqi Shi'a militias into direct contact with the PKK, YPG, and Yezidi YBŞ forces in the Sinjar salient. The PMF advance saw the Iraqi forces seize the Yezidi mujamma that the KDP has chosen not to liberate, and saw the PMF establish at least two battalions of Yezidi PMF "hold forces." KDP-associated Yezidi forces began to suffer desertions to the PMF during May.²¹ Eventually, the PMF contacted the 35-kilometer stretch of frontline between Sinjar city and the Syrian border held by the PKK, YPG, and Yezidi YBŞ.

But what happened next may have surprised the Turks. For a couple of years, the dominant narrative in Ankara and Erbil has been that Baghdad and Tehran pay and support the YBŞ via the YPG-held Qamishli airport.²² Yet, when PMF forces advanced south of Sinjar, there was instead evidence of competing objectives. The PMF began to draw Yezidi recruits away from the YBŞ, while the PKK and YPG did their best to prevent this transfer. As Matthew Barber noted, "One area where the KDP and PKK arch-rivals agree is that Sinjar should be distanced from Baghdad. The PKK's message to the local Yezidi population has been 'you are not part of Iraq'. The [PMF] has the opposite message."²³

Outlook for Sinjar

We have already dodged two bullets in Sinjar this spring and summer: a major Turkish escalation against the PKK and the chance of KDP-PMF fighting. Are these possibilities like to remain at bay, or does their forestallment merely reflect a calm before the storm? It may be that after Raqqa is liberated, when the YPG is less vital to the United States, Turkey and the KDP will act more resolutely in Sinjar. If the area can be isolated from Syria, then a better-planned Rojava Peshmerga offensive backed by Turkish and KDP Special Forces and heavy weapons could be attempted once again. One factor to watch is the PMF's readiness to step in to aid the YBŞ, testing the local Yezidi willingness to trade out the PKK and YPG as protectors. The risks of military setbacks or political opportunism by Baghdad would loom large over any Turkish military escalation in Sinjar.

For Turkey, the optimal outcome may instead involve using soft power to remove the PKK and YPG from Sinjar, leveraging the threat, but not the actual use, of force. This could involve a combination of U.S. and international pressure, Kurdish and/or Iraqi inducements of self-governance, and security guarantees for local Yazidis. Ankara will remain ready to make a “Sinjar for Bashiqa” deal, in which a Baghdad-brokered PKK and YPG departure from Sinjar would result in a Turkish withdrawal from the Bashiqa base, which would constitute a major public relations victory for Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi in the forthcoming election year. A trilateral Iraqi-Kurdish-Yezidi “combined security mechanism,”²⁴ such as the joint checkpoints and headquarters run by the U.S. military in Sinjar before 2011, might be another option for Turkey to support.

Michael Knights is a Lafer Fellow with [The Washington Institute](#) and author of its 2016 report "[How to Secure Mosul](#)." He has worked in all of Iraq's provinces and spent time embedded in the country's security forces. [mknights\[at\]washingtoninstitute.org](mailto:mknights@washingtoninstitute.org)

Notes

- ¹ Valeria Cetorelli, Isaac Sasson, Nazar Shabila, and Gilbert Burnham, "ISIS' Yazidi Genocide," *Foreign Affairs*, June 8, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-06-08/isis-yazidi-genocide>.
- ² Human Rights Watch, "Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds," July 1993, Chapter 11, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1993/iraqanfal/>.
- ³ Christine Van Den Toorn, "How the U.S.-favored Kurds Abandoned the Yazidis when ISIS Attacked," *The Daily Beast*, August 17, 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/how-the-us-favored-kurds-abandoned-the-yazidis-when-isis-attacked>.
- ⁴ Joanna Paraszczuk, "Yazidi Militias Fight IS In Iraq, Amid Kurdish Rivalries," *Radio Free Europe*, June 11, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-yazidi-militias-kurdish-region/27066780.html>.
- ⁵ Mohammed Salih, "With the Islamic State gone from Sinjar, Kurdish groups battle for control," *Al-Monitor*, December 10, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/iraq-kurdistan-sinjar-liberated-isis-hegemony.html#ixzz4jqUkYVXa>.
- ⁶ Saad Salloum, "Yazidi infighting, disputes over Sinjar stall battle against Islamic State," *Al-Monitor*, August 18, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/08/kurdistan-yazidis-armed-forces-influence-sinjar.html#ixzz4jqVPfXV0>.
- ⁷ Matthew Barber, "The end of the PKK in Sinjar? How the Hashd al-Sha'bi can help resolve the Yazidi Genocide," *NRT*, May 30, 2017, <http://www.nrtv.com/EN/birura-details.aspx?Jimare=6196>.
- ⁸ Ahed al-Hendi, "Iraqi Kurds Restrict Movement of US-backed Anti-IS forces in Syria," *VOA News*, April 12, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/iraqi-kurds-restrict-movement-of-us-backed-anti-islamic-state-forces-in-syria/3808191.htm>.
- ⁹ For an early assessment of the regrowth of military influence in Erdogan's government, see Halil Karaveli, "Turkey's Military Rulers," *New York Times*, September 11, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/12/opinion/turkeys-military-rulers.html?_r=0.
- ¹⁰ Fehim Tastekin, "Will Iraq's Sinjar become new base for PKK?," *Al-Monitor*, November 18, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/11/turkey-syria-iraq--shengal-become-second-qandil.html#ixzz4jqYLZE7Y>.
- ¹¹ Aylin Unver Noi, "Turkey's Fight With ISIL and PKK: A Return to the 1990s?," *Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/aylin-unver-noi/turkeys-fight-with-isil-a_b_8008904.html.
- ¹² Rudaw, "Kurdish presidency says Rojava Peshmerga more legitimate than YBS," May 3, 2017, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/050320172>.
- ¹³ Author's interview with KRG security official, date and name withheld at interviewee's request.
- ¹⁴ Tomáš Kaválek, "Yet Another War in Shingal: The Sword of Damocles," *MERI*, March 5, 2017, <http://www.meri-k.org/publication/yet-another-war-in-shingal-the-sword-of-damocles/>
- ¹⁵ Author's interview with KRG security official, date and name withheld at interviewee's request.
- ¹⁶ Al Jazeera, "Turkey targets Kurdish fighters in Iraq and Syria," April 25, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/04/turkey-targets-kurdish-fighters-iraq-syria-170425081224935.html>.
- ¹⁷ Gordon Lubold, Julian E. Barnes, and Margaret Coker, "U.S. to Expand Intelligence Cooperation With Turkey," *Wall Street Journal*, May 10, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-to-expand-intelligence-cooperation-with-turkey-1494436533>.
- ¹⁸ Based on a daily collation of Turkish airstrikes in Iraq. On May 30 alone, thirteen strikes fell on the foothills and mountain areas of the Qandil massif.
- ¹⁹ Michael Knights and Hamdi Malik, "Building a 'Joint Force' to Control Liberated Yazidi Towns," *Fikra Forum*, June 6, 2017, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/building-a-joint-force-to-control-liberated-yazidi-towns>.
- ²⁰ Tom O'Connor, "Syrian Forces Threaten to Fight Back After U.S. Military Strikes Multiple Times," *Newsweek*, June 7, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/syria-forces-fight-back-us-military-strikes-622588>.
- ²¹ All detail drawn from Matthew Barber, "The end of the PKK in Sinjar? How the Hashd al-Sha'bi can help resolve the Yazidi Genocide," *NRT*, May 30, 2017, <http://www.nrtv.com/EN/birura-details.aspx?Jimare=6196>.
- ²² Author's interviews with numerous KDP leaders, dates and names withheld at interviewees' requests.
- ²³ Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "PKK resents Shia paramilitary presence in Yezidi region of Sinjar," *ARA News*, June 8, 2017, <http://aranews.net/2017/06/pkk-resents-shia-paramilitary-presence-in-yezidi-region-of-sinjar/>.
- ²⁴ Michael Knights, "Preventing Allies from Fighting Each Other in Iraq's Disputed Areas," *Policywatch 2812*, May 31, 2017, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/preventing-allies-from-fighting-each-other-in-iraqs-disputed-areas>.