

The PKK-PMF Nexus in Iraq

Mamoon Alabbasi



Iran-backed Iraqi militia leaders are becoming increasingly vocal in their hostility towards Turkey as Turkish forces continue their counterterrorism operations against the PKK in Iraq. The latest tensions appear to be linked to the security situation in the Iraqi district of Sinjar, which is near the Syrian border and holds strategic importance regionally. This policy outlook seeks to examine relations between the Iran-backed Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) and the terror organisation known as the PKK and aims to understand the possible reasons behind the latest tensions in northern Iraq. It also seeks to analyse the possible Iranian role in fostering the apparent PMF-PKK alliance against Turkey.

Background

There has been an apparent escalation of anti-Turkey rhetoric by Iran-backed Iraqi militia leaders who object to Ankara's military operations against Kurdish terror groups in Iraq. The hostility towards the Turkish presence in Iraq is not limited to Iranian proxies but, on a few occasions, was expressed by [Tehran itself](#).

Iraqi government protests against Turkish incursions into Iraq are [not new](#), however, the latest flare-up in rhetoric as well as in mobilisation of Iraqi militia forces appears to be linked to the district of Sinjar, located in the north of Iraq and near the border with Syria. Its location is of strategic importance to Iran and by extension its proxies in Iraq, to the Kurdish separatists and to the security of Turkey.

While the Iraqi government appears to be more accommodating towards Turkey's security concerns in Sinjar, as Baghdad, in a recent agreement with Erbil, sought to clear the district of anti-Turkey terrorists, Iran-backed militiamen appear to be perturbed by the deal.

This policy outlook seeks to examine the relations between the Iran-backed Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Forces and the PKK and aims to understand the possible reasons behind the latest tensions in northern Iraq.



A screengrab captured from a video that shows a joint operation by Turkish Armed Forces and MIT against a senior PKK/KCK figure in Sinjar province, Iraq on August 15, 2018. (Anadolu Agency)

The PMF

The Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), also referred to by their Arabic name *al-Hashed al-Shaabi*, is the umbrella organisation of Iraqi militias that were grouped together following the call of top Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani to fight the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014. Some of these militias had already existed as the armed factions of Shia political groups in Iraq while others were newly formed as thousands of volunteers joined the fight against ISIS following the collapse of the Iraqi army in Mosul. The



A member of Iraq's PMF militia is seen in Mosul, Iraq, on October 20, 2016. (Hemn Baban - Anadolu Agency)

majority of the PMF militias – as well as their leaders – are Shia, however, the umbrella body also included [armed groups](#) from the country's other communities.

Iraq declared victory over ISIS in December 2018, however, the Iran-backed militia leaders, who are linked to political groups represented in parliament, have become more powerful and would not allow for the disbandment of the PMF. The Iraqi government has sought to control the PMF by officially incorporating it into the state's security forces, paying the salaries of the fighters and putting them under the ultimate command of the prime minister. However, the nominal changes did not alter the fact that its members answered only to the commands of their militia leaders.

The implication of PMF fighters in serious human rights violations and the loyalty of its militia leaders towards Iran has made the umbrella group a target of criticism from Iraq's popular anti-corruption protest movement, which objects to Iranian interference in Iraqi affairs. The hardliners of these militias are linked to Iran's Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which has exposed them to US sanctions and periodic US airstrikes in Iraq. The US-Iran proxy war inside Iraq peaked in January 2020 when the Trump administration ordered the killing



Iraqis attend a commemoration ceremony held on the first anniversary of the killing of Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani and the vice president of the PMF Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, near Baghdad's International Airport, Iraq, on January 03, 2021. (Murtadha Al-Sudani - Anadolu Agency)

of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, leader of Quds Force, along with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the de facto leader of the PMF, in an airstrike near Baghdad International Airport.

A year later, the US designated Faleh al-Fayyad, the civilian head of the PMF, as well as Abdul-Aziz al-Mohammadawi (known as Abu Fadak), the deputy chairman of the PMF, as terrorists. The [US accused](#) Abu Fadak of “the killing, abduction, and torture of peaceful protesters”, supporting Iran’s malign activities, and being involved in sectarian violence as well as attacks against foreign diplomatic facilities in Iraq. It is worthy to note that the top two PMF figures sanctioned by the US are officially part of the Iraqi state.

Suadad A. Al-Salhy, a senior reporter at Middle East Eye, told TRT World Research Centre that there is a difference between the PMF as a whole and the individual militias that are part of that umbrella group.

“There are factions that are part of the PMF but at the same time, they have their own separate forces outside the PMF, which they use for their own purposes. Sometimes the forces of the factions outside the PMF are larger in numbers than their forces within the PMF. As the PMF is a recognised part of the state, its title gives a ‘legitimacy cover’ to different factions when they act to further their own interests, including illegal activities [like smuggling and misappropriation of state funds],” said Al-Salhy.

“Shia politicians and factions are still behaving with the mentality of the opposition, not of rulers. The militia factions cannot rely on the backing of politicians as that support can change but their armed presence on the ground guarantees that their power remains. Sometimes different militia factions that are loyal to Iran have power struggles among themselves: they have their own agendas and interests [aside from supporting Tehran]. Iran does not always micromanage the militias,” she noted.

In fact, rival Iranian intelligence agencies are themselves [reportedly](#) giving contradictory commands to Tehran’s Iraqi proxies. Different Iranian intelligence services have influence over various Iraqi militias, politicians and media outlets. While some have called on their Iraqi proxies to act with restraint, others have pushed for escalation against US interests. In the past, such discord would have been resolved by General Soleimani, who had the last word in such matters. The new Quds Force leader, General Esmail Qaani, does not have the same overarching personal influence as his predecessor, either inside Iran or regionally.

Sinjar

Although the presence of the PKK inside Iraq has long been among the [main points of contention](#) between the



Turkish National Defence Minister Hulusi Akar (L) visits the Bilic Tepe Base Area in the north of Iraq, on May 01, 2021. (Arif Akdoğan - Anadolu Agency)

Turkish and Iraq authorities, the recent rise in tensions is specifically linked to the Sinjar district, near the border with Syria.

Located in the Nineveh Governorate, whose capital is Mosul, Sinjar is part of the so-called “[disputed territories](#)” between the Iraqi central government of Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Erbil. Peshmerga forces loyal to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the dominant political party of the KRG, took control of Sinjar following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and subsequent dismantling of the Iraqi army. The Peshmerga forces fled Sinjar in 2014 ahead of an ISIS attack, leaving the town’s Yazidi community to face slaughter and slavery on their own. ISIS was forced out of Sinjar by a joint effort of the US-led anti-ISIS coalition, Iraqi forces, the PMF, Peshmerga and PKK terrorists.

Although Sinjar became free of ISIS in 2015, the bulk of its residents remained refugees outside the district, most notably in camps in Duhok Governorate. The dominant militia forces in the town were Shia militias and Yazidi armed groups, the most notable of which is the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), a PKK terrorist offshoot. Part of the YBS has been incorporated into the PMF, in a trend that is similar to the conduct of some Shia militias (i.e. having members inside and outside of the PMF).

A deal between Baghdad and Erbil was reached in late 2020, which stipulates that Sinjar would be free from the PMF and PKK presence. Turkey welcomed the deal as it would, if implemented, cut off the route between the PKK-affiliated YPG in Syria, and the PKK in Iraq. However, the strategic value of Sinjar goes beyond that.

“Sinjar has a land route that links Tehran to Damascus, which passes to Beirut. Sinjar is a strategic area, whoever controls this position would have access to Syria, Lebanon and could threaten Israel. Sinjar is the highest point in Iraq and closest geographically to Israel. In 1991, Iraq had fired Scud missiles on Israel from the Sinjar mountains,” said Al-Salhy.

"Sinjar is also not far from Tal Afar [a city in the Nineveh Governorate], where the Shia community there still fear a return of ISIS. The atrocities that ISIS committed in Sinjar were not only against Yazidis but also against the Shias of Tal Afar: when ISIS attacked Tal Afar, the Shia community there went to Sinjar, where Shia women were later enslaved. Because the Peshmerga left Sinjar to face ISIS alone, most Yazidis and Shias in Nineveh have become suspicious of the KDP. The PMF factions have used this fear as a pretext to remain in the area," added Al-Salhy.

The new Sinjar deal gives the town three lines of defence: one local Sinjar police force, and two Iraqi federal forces. The KDP, which enjoys some political support in Sinjar, will not have a Peshmerga presence. The PMF will leave the town to solidify its forces in the nearby Iraq-Syria border area. The PKK will no longer have an official presence but as Yazidis are a [divided community](#), many supporters of the terror group are expected to remain in Sinjar.



Aid packages (of food and hygiene products) from the Turkish Red Crescent are distributed to displaced Yazidis at Eryan Camp in Duhok, Iraq, on September 01, 2020. (Ahsan Mohammed Ahmed Ahmed - Anadolu Agency)

It is important to note that Turkey has been reaching out to members of the Yazidi community and [sending aid](#) to



Iraqi Yazidis in Duhok stage a protest against the presence of the PKK and other illegal groups in Sinjar, Iraq, on November 08, 2020. (Ahmed Shingali - Anadolu Agency)

displaced Yazidis in Duhok in an apparent bid to send a message that Ankara's problem is only with the PKK.

According to [Human Rights Watch](#), the PKK and its affiliates had previously abducted Yazidi boys and girls and forced them to become child soldiers, while abusing those who tried to flee. Such actions mean that some members of the Yazidi community would undoubtedly be happy to see the terror group lose its grip in Sinjar.

Escalation

The Sinjar agreement, however, appears to have yet to be implemented. Since its announcement in October 2020, tensions have escalated in northern Iraq. PKK terrorists executed 13 kidnapped Turks in Iraq; Turkey has launched a new anti-PKK operation in Iraq; suspected [PMF attacks](#) against targets [in Erbil](#); unclaimed attack against a [Turkish base](#) in Iraq's Bashiqa; and most notably, [increased threats](#) from PMF leaders against Turkey.

Qais al-Khazali, the secretary-general of Asaeb Ahl al-Haq (AAH) Shia militia, [took to Twitter](#) to brand the Sinjar agreement as a "betrayal" of Yazidis, warning that any military conflict there would be in the interest of Turkey.

In a later [televised interview](#), al-Khazali, who is himself on the [US terror list](#), said the Turkish presence in Iraq was "more dangerous" than that of the United States. "The American project is to be present [in Iraq] to protect Israel militarily but the project of the Turks is to occupy and annex parts of Iraq [including Sinjar]," he claimed. In what sounded like a wild conspiracy theory, al-Khazali charged that Turkey agreed with PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan for the terror group to be stationed in Iraq so that Turkey would use that later as a pretext to occupy Iraqi territories. In the interview, al-Khazali called on Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi to provide the Iraqi army with an anti-aircraft system that would be used against Turkish planes, should they enter Iraqi skies. He called on the Iraqi government to either buy those systems from the US or get American permission to buy them from Europe, in order to counter Turkey. He said that he is expecting a Turkish "invasion" in the summer and vowed that he "will personally take up arms and fight" against Turkish forces. He said his "message to the Turks" is that "we won't fight a classic war, an army versus an army" but rather a "war of attrition" which he said is a skill that his militia has mastered. "Their [Turkey's] bases are not far from us [...] and we are blessed with a lot of missiles. If it was an issue to target the US embassy [...] then it won't be an issue to target the clear and present [Turkish] occupation," he charged.

Another PMF leader, Abdulrahman al-Jazairi, said that the PMF would not wait for government approval for the Shia



A Yazidi woman washes clothes near a tent in the outskirts of Sinjar mountain, Mosul, on March 2, 2015. (Emrah Yorulmaz - Anadolu Agency)

militias to fight Turkey if Turkish forces enter Sinjar. He [called on](#) the Iraqi government to negotiate with the PKK. “Why should we have differences with them [the PKK]? Now they [the PKK] are Iraqi with a Kurdish ethnicity. They have their fixed positions and land control; we must negotiate with them to solve the problem. Abdullah Ocalan established the PKK in 1978 and yet no Iraqi government negotiated with him all these years. The Iraqi government must sit at the negotiating table with this party [PKK]. We must deal [with the PKK] with political diplomacy,” said al-Jazairi. He claimed that Turkey has infiltrated Iraq due to the differences between the KRG and PKK, as well as differences between Iraqi government and KRG.

Meanwhile, a PKK information officer, Kawa Sheikh Mouss, [said that](#) his group’s relationship with the Iraqi militias “are not new, they go back years.” Mouss said the PKK-PMF coordination first began in the fight against ISIS and “today we have a relationship of friendship and coordination with the [Iran-backed] Iraqi factions,” adding that there is “continuous communication regarding the situation in Sinjar”.

An Iranian role?

Omer Ozkizilcik, an analyst at the SETA Foundation, a think-tank based in Ankara, told TRT World Research Centre that the hostile stance towards Turkey by the Iran-backed Iraqi militias reflects the general sentiment of the Iranian regime, even if Tehran does not publicly declare it.

“Iran has always seen the PKK as a buffer against Turkey. From the Iranian perspective, the PKK is a threat to Turkey and its activity keeps Turkey at bay. Iran sees Turkey as its natural rival, and the most potent actor to limit Iran’s ambitions of a Shia Crescent. Therefore, Iran wants to keep the PKK alive. In recent years, despite US support for the PKK/YPG in Syria, the PKK has suffered major setbacks. The terror group’s operational network in Turkey collapsed, Tur-

key cleaned the PKK camp on the Iraqi side of the border, thus preventing PKK infiltration into Turkey,” said Ozkizilcik.

Turkish military success against the PKK in Iraq, Ozkizilcik maintained, is viewed by Tehran to be at the expense of Iranian influence.

“At the moment, the PKK has only a presence in the Mountains of Gara, Sinjar, Makhmur, and Qandil. All of them are further south. When Turkey conducted an airdrop operation against the PKK in Gara, Iran feared that this might be the precedence for new operations, most notably in the Sinjar Mountains. To prevent the continuation of Turkish military operations and keep the PKK alive, Iran tries to hinder a Turkish military operation towards the Sinjar Mountains. Iran knows that if Turkey eliminates the PKK in coordination with the Kurdish Regional Government and the Iraqi Central Government, Iran’s military presence in Iraq will be threatened,” said Ozkizilcik.

Talha Abdulrazaq, a counterterrorism and security expert at the University of Exeter’s Strategy and Security Institute, told TRT World Research Centre that Turkey needs to pay more attention to the threat that is coming from Tehran.

“It’s often not discussed, but the Iranians have long enjoyed warm relations with separatist Kurdish militant factions in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey while stamping out Kurdish aspirations of statehood with extreme prejudice within their own borders. The founding of the modern Iranian republic and the PKK terrorist organisation came at almost the same time and, since the mid-1980s, the Iranians have used the PKK to smuggle arms to their Shia Lebanese jihadist proxy, Hezbollah. With obviously some caveats, Iraq’s PMF serves a similar function as Hezbollah in Lebanon in that it projects and sustains Iranian power in Iraq. The Sinjar region is vital to Iranian interests as it is utilised as a transit hub for IRGC-sponsored Shia jihadists to cross over into neighbouring Syria. Obviously, these areas are also heavily occupied by the YPG, which is the PKK’s sister organisation, and with the PKK and its affiliated Yazidi YBS faction in Sinjar, this poses a clear threat to Turkish national security which Iran is only too happy to exacerbate due to Turkey’s role as a regional competitor to Iranian ambitions. While Turkey has not, for a long time, expressed a powerful willingness to balance against Iran and instead sees its major threats coming from Russia, Israel, the Emirati Arab axis, and the United States, it is always going to be the most likely and most effective competitor to Iranian ambitions in the region. For that reason, whether Turkey is actively oriented against Iran or not, Tehran will always seek to undermine Turkish national security and stability while simultaneously benefiting from Turkish political, diplomatic, and economic support and bilateral relations. Ankara would be wise to start paying more heed to what Iran is doing in Iraq in particular or it will never shake off its perennial national security threat as represented by the

PKK,” warned Abdulrazaq.

According to Ozkizilcik, the Iran-backed militias have two drawbacks: one is military, as they are not as capable as the Turkish army, while the other is political, as they are mistrusted by various key Iraqi politicians and figures.

“We have seen in Syria several times that the Iranian-backed Shia militias are not capable of resisting Turkey. In Afrin as well as Idlib, Turkey targeted and eliminated Iranian militias. From a military perspective, Iranian Shia militias in Sinjar won’t make any difference. Iran aims to bring up the Iraqi public against Turkey and create a political crisis with the Iraqi Central Government, thus exploiting the Iraqi solidarity for its sectarian agenda. To prevent that, Turkey has to communicate well that the target is not Iraq, but that such an operation will empower the Iraqi people to regain control over Iraqi soil. Depending on if and how such a military operation might occur, Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhimi might come out of it empowered against Iran. If Iran can’t convince the public opinion in Iraq, a military setback for Iran in Sinjar would be a milestone for Iraqis to regain control of their own country from Iranian-backed Shia militias. In this regard, the position of Sistani and the Popular Mobilization Forces that aren’t controlled by Iran will determine the outcome,” said Ozkizilcik.

The PKK’s transformation

Kyle Orton, an independent analyst based in Britain, told TRT World Research Centre that the PKK has a long history of making deals with various, and sometimes opposing, political actors in the region.

“The PKK was formally established in Turkey in 1978 [but before the groups was expelled from the country in 1980,] its cofounder Abdullah Ocalan had already left to Syria in 1979,” where he formed a relationship with the regime of former Syrian president Hafez al-Assad, noted Orton. Assad senior, who was happy to host an enemy of his northern neighbour, was also acting on the behalf of the Soviet Union, which sought to undermine the security of NATO member Turkey, added Orton.

Thanks to Syria’s influence in Lebanon at the time, PKK terror operatives were trained in camps located in Lebanon’s Beqaa Valley and run by Soviet-backed Palestinians, noted Orton, who added that this did not prevent the PKK from establishing ties with Assad’s enemy, former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein.

The PKK had established a presence in northern Iraq since 1982.



PKK/PYD leader Abdullah Ocalan poster is seen at the northern Mount Qandil, Iraq, on June 9, 2018. (Yunus Keleş - Anadolu Agency)

“By the late 1980s, the PKK had territorial sanctuaries in Iran, which were safe from Turkish incursions in a way that was not true in Saddam’s Iraq, and a close working relationship with the Iranian intelligence services and IRGC directly, providing information not only about members of its own ranks but about American and NATO installations in Turkey. The current leader of the PKK, Cemil Bayik, is known to be close to the Iranians, and some of his leading commanders in the ‘Rojava’ area of Syria like Fehman Huseyn (Dr Bahoz) are tied into the Assad-Iran axis and have been for decades,” said Orton.

“If we fast forward to the current situation in Iraq’s Sinjar, then, the YBS/PKK dealing with Iran’s militias in the PMF is a kind of back to the future: these are actors that know each other very well and have retained a working relationship. One should not make the mistake of thinking the PKK-Iran relationship is a thing of the past; the 2012 deal by which Assad handed over northern Syria to the PKK was brokered by the Iranian regime, for example, and they attached their own condition that the PKK move its troops in Iran— [known as Kurdistan Free Life Party] PJAK—into Syria, which the PKK duly did. The ‘Rojava’ statelet has depended on Assad regime largesse, and the Assad regime is, of course, at this stage a creature of the IRGC,” noted Orton.

“In Iraq’s Sinjar ...there is a direct confrontation of interests



PKK terrorists gather with their guns and armoured vehicles in the streets of Kirkuk, Iraq, on October 16, 2017. (Faraj Faraj Mahmood - Anadolu Agency)

[between Tehran and Ankara], with Iran directly aligned with the PKK against Turkey. If Turkey moves on Sinjar, and the Iran-backed militias stand in the way, the Turkish forces will likely destroy them. This probably will not result in a major rupture with the Iranians, though, because the 'PMF' label gives a layer of deniability to all sides," added Orton.

It is worthy to note that historically, Iran had maintained a good relationship with the main Iraqi Kurdish factions. However, over the past decade Turkey has been forging better ties with the KDP, while the Kurdish group's main rival, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) remains close to the Iranian regime. In KRG-controlled areas, the Barzani family-linked KDP controls Erbil and Duhok, while the Talabani family-linked PUK controls Sulaymaniyah and Halabja.

Conclusion

While the norm has been for the PMF to channel its propaganda war against the United States and Israel, the latest escalation in anti-Turkey rhetoric by Iran-backed Iraqi militia leaders indicates increasing animosity towards Ankara in place of Washington.

On one occasion, as expressed by al-Khazali, the militia leader not only branded Turkey as a more serious enemy to them than America but even went as far as to call on the Iraqi government to seek US military help in order to counter Turkey.

Although in the long run, it remains unlikely for Turkey to take the place of the US as the ultimate enemy of Iran's proxies in Iraq, the latest hostility will undoubtedly hinder the improvement of relations between Ankara and Baghdad as the Iraqi government will feel pressed by anti-Turkish propaganda not to take significant reconciliatory steps towards its neighbour. The Iran-backed factions are clearly unhappy to see good relations between Turkey and the Iraqi authorities, including the central government in Baghdad and the KRG in Erbil.

Despite the fact that Iranian policies, whether directly or via its proxies in Iraq and the wider region, are counter to the security and interests of Turkey, it is unlikely that will translate to a direct conflict between Ankara and Tehran anytime in the near future.