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From the Editors

Dear Friends,

The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies is proud to present the June 2017 issue of our monthly publication, *Turkeyscope*. In this issue, Michael Knights from the Washington Institute discusses the imperative and difficulty of Turkey's pushback against Kurdish and Iranian-backed militant groups in the Sinjar district of Iraq. The second article by Ceng Sagnic analyzes Turkey's involvement in the Gulf crisis to support Qatar against a Saudi-led bloc, and potential scenarios about the future of such support.

Sarah Jacobs contributed to this month's issue as assistant editor.

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 (YBŞ), 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 Êzidkhan (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 Yezidis. 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.

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Theories versus Scenarios: Ankara's Qatar Game

Ceng Sagnic

In the midst of the ongoing Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) crisis, Turkey decided to expedite the deployment of 3,000 to 5,000 troops to Qatar.²⁵ The Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* - AKP) government also launched a diplomatic campaign in support of its gas-rich ally in the Gulf, which may further escalate regional tensions. Some allege that Turkey's controversial decision to support Qatar against the coalition of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Egypt results from Qatari financial support for President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. However, consideration of Ankara's wider political aspirations, including its demonstrated will to preserve an active involvement in Middle Eastern political arenas and to counter the US-led international coalition's Syria policies, reveals a more complex rationale for such unprecedented military and political support.

Gulf in Crisis: Qatar against Arabs

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt imposed severe sanctions on Qatar this month, accusing the tiny, gas-rich monarchy of supporting both Sunni and Shi'i terrorism throughout the Middle East and North Africa.²⁶ The Saudi Arabia-led bloc issued statements listing some 50 geographically diverse Sunni and Shi'i organizations and figures that allegedly receive financial and political support from Qatar. Even though most of the rhetoric concerning Qatar focused on the Al Thani monarchy's support for the Muslim Brotherhood, militant Shi'i organizations, like the Bahraini *Saraya al-Mokhtar* and the Yemen-based *Ansar Allah* (Houthis), were also included in the GCC statements. The Saudi Arabia-led Arab coalition suspended Qatari participation in the war against the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen.²⁷ Meanwhile, prominent Sunni-jihadist figures, like Abdullah al-Muhaysini and the imam of the Muslim Brotherhood Yusuf al-Qaradawi, were called proxies of the Al Thani regime. In other words, the Arab coalition accused Qatar of supporting terrorist organizations and persons spanning from Shi'is, considered a threat to Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, to Sunni-jihadists and the Muslim Brotherhood, considered a threat to all Arab regimes.

The dispute between Qatar and the Saudi Arabia-led bloc in the Gulf, Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and its support for several Sunni groups in Syria allegedly linked to al-Qa'ida are not new phenomena. In contrast, the severity of allegations connecting Qatar to Iran represents a departure from the past. In recent years, GCC governments have accused Qatar-based media outlets, such as *al-Jazeera*,

of a pro-Iran bias several times, and criticized Qatar's unbearable tolerance towards Iran. Nonetheless, Qatar remained an active participant in the Arab coalition opposing Iran-backed Houthis, and purportedly backed Sunni organizations in Syria that have indeed been at odds with Iran and its regional proxies. It should be noted that Qatar rejected these recent allegations, including Bahrain's claims that the Al Thani regime offered support to Bahrain's main Shi'i opposition group, *al-Wefaq*. A statement released by the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs documents communications with these Shi'i groups as facilitating mediation efforts, rather than constituting direct support for destabilizing the region's Sunni-led governments.²⁸

Indeed, the Gulf crisis is a multi-faceted case, with allegations of Qatari connections to Iran and to Sunni political Islamist groups spanning from Libya to Yemen. According to the Saudi-led bloc, over the past several years, Qatar has fostered relations with Sunni and Shi'i adversaries of the GCC and its allies, including the US. The Al Thani leadership was accused of paying \$1 billion ransom to an Iranian proxy group in southern Iraq in order to release a Qatari falconry party abducted in 2015.²⁹ As concrete evidence of allegations, Saudi and UAE outlets' media campaign against Qatar referenced a report on an official Qatari news agency's website that portrays the Al Thani monarchy as sympathetic to Iran and Hezbollah. Although Qatar claimed that the report was published on its website by hackers, Iran was the first country to speak out against the ongoing blockade of Qatar, followed by Turkey. Notably, a few days after the outbreak of the Gulf crisis, Hezbollah-linked media outlets published statements by the Yemen-based Houthis announcing that the Iran-backed group was ready to cooperate with Qatar.³⁰ While many groups in the Iran-linked Shi'i camp expressed support for Qatar against the Saudi-led bloc's aggression, the Muslim Brotherhood's stance was almost singlehandedly represented by Turkey and its president, Erdoğan.

Turkey and the Gulf: Explaining Erdoğan's Qatar Game

International and Turkish media have put forward several theories attempting to explain Turkey's support for Qatar in the Gulf crisis. Most of these theories agree that Turkey's leadership is fearful of corresponding Arab coalition action against Turkey, considering that both Turkey and Qatar have supported the same Sunni groups in Syria and Egypt. However, this explanation fails to address Iran's role, which is central to the Saudi-led bloc's allegations against Qatar. Turkey's unprecedented expedited deployment of forces to Qatar represents a Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East that is far more sophisticated than simple preemptive measures intended to prevent possible corresponding actions against Turkey. Although some accuse Qatar of financially sponsoring AKP in order to ensure Turkish military and diplomatic protection, Qatar's significance to Turkey has more to do with the fact that Qatar is one of the few arenas in which Turkey has successfully expanded its Middle East influence. This is emphasized by the failure of Turkish projects in Syria, Egypt, Israel-Palestine, and the Gulf.

Turkey's foreign policy towards the Middle East has undergone a major shift, transitioning from the isolationism of the previous Kemalist regime to various modes of interventionism during the second half of AKP's single-party rule. Western press and academia often associated the new Turkish foreign policy doctrine, largely attributed to former Prime Minister Ahmed Davutoğlu, with the theory of neo-Ottomanism. This theory was primarily based on the optimistic perspective that Ankara could utilize cultural and religious ties with Sunni-Muslim societies in order to exert a postmodern Ottomanist influence on the region. AKP's anti-isolationist theory - once adopted as Turkey's official foreign policy doctrine, with the slogan, "zero problems with neighbors"- faced collapse due to Ankara's intervention in the Syrian civil war. As Turkey became one of the proud sponsors of the rebellion against Bashar al-Assad's regime, Ankara's initial vision of expanding its political influence through cultural and religious ties was replaced with the enactment of indirect military intervention in a neighboring state from 2011-2015. In August 2016, with the start of the Euphrates Shield operation in northern Syria, Turkey converted its off-site support for Syrian rebels into a direct military intervention. The same year marked the construction of a Turkish military base in Qatar, the purpose of which has not been clarified by either Turkish authorities or the Al Thani monarchy.

After the collapse of the so-called neo-Ottomanist project, Turkey rapidly resorted to military power in its struggle to preserve political influence over the Middle East. In 2015, Turkey established military bases in Somalia and Qatar, and established permanent bases in northern Syria soon after.³¹ As Ankara continued to lose the influence it exerted over Iraqi politics via its allies in the country (the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and a small force of Sunni militias led by Atheel al-Nujaifi), Erdoğan's regime started to prepare for the Tigris Shield military intervention in northeastern Iraq.³²

In light of Turkey's modified foreign policy towards the Middle East, one could argue that Ankara fears losing its planned military deployment to Qatar as much as it fears corresponding sanctions by the Saudi-led bloc. Therefore, the recent expedited military deployment may not be intended to serve as immediate operational protection against the Saudi-led bloc, but rather to guarantee the continuation of Turkey's current Middle East policy doctrine. If this is the case, the expedited deployment supports Qatar's goals, but may fall short of securing the tiny Gulf emirate against the Saudi-led Arab coalition's diplomatic, economic, and possible military measures.

However, it must be noted that for the Arab coalition, the Sunni related allegations against Qatar represent the most tolerable part of Qatar's policies in the region. For example, in Yemen, the Saudi-led Arab coalition has turned a blind eye towards Muslim Brotherhood faction *al-Islah*. The risk of losing Yemen to an Iran-backed Shi'i force supersedes the Sunni threat - notwithstanding the threat posed by the Muslim Brotherhood to all Arab regimes, including the UAE, the second most active member of the Arab coalition. Therefore, the Saudi-led bloc's anti-Qatar campaign might well

be defined as part of a project to unify Arab ranks against Iran, as supported by the Trump administration. In this case, although denunciations of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Sunni entities serve to expand the Arab coalition to include Egypt, the coalition's primary objective is reversing the alleged rapprochement between Iran and Qatar.

Turkey's decision to back Qatar despite its possible connections with Iran is elucidated by Turkey's Syria policies, which focus on countering the US-led international coalition. The Turkish military intervention of August 2016, which marked a major shift in Turkey's Middle East policy, came in response to territorial gains by the US-backed Syrian Kurds in northern Syria. Turkey's rapprochement with Russia and, later that year, with Iran, attempted to counter the US project in Syria.³³ Ankara's compromises with Russia even included the abandonment of Sunni rebels in Aleppo, a city of symbolic importance to the Syrian rebellion of six years. Ankara was the first to voice opposition to advances by Iran-backed Shi'i militias in northern Iraqi territory, such as the Turkmen town of Tel Afar. However, Turkey's practical measures (including limited-scale airstrikes) targeted only the US-allied Kurdish factions in Sinjar, while Shi'i militias continued to advance in the same region. If the current Saudi-led campaign against Qatar is perceived by Turkey to be another US project further diminishing Turkey's role, especially in Syria, where Qatar and Turkey-backed factions have been blacklisted, Ankara may maintain its backing of Qatar despite Iran's alleged involvement with the country.

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