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The Politics of the Turkish Military Presence near Mosul

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Kurdish media outlets in Iraqi Kurdistan announced in early December that an unprecedentedly large number of Turkish ground troops and heavy weapons had been deployed to a military base in Bashik (alt. Bashiqa), approximately 15 kilometers northwest of Mosul, outside the official borders of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Although Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish authorities refrained from revealing the number of Turkish troops in Bashik, Iraqi and Turkish news agencies speculated that the covert overnight deployment included 600-1,200 soldiers, dozens of tanks, and heavy artillery pieces.¹ Initial statements by Ankara further revealed that the deployment was meant to remain undisclosed, but had been leaked to the media by local informants, one of which turned out to be an Iraqi Kurdish commander of a Sunni volunteer force in Nineveh known as *Hashd al-Watani* (“The National Mobilization Forces”).² The Turkish government initially insisted that the deployment was reinforcement for the military advisers that have been training *Hashd al-Watani* since late 2014. These claims were dismissed by Iraq’s central government in Baghdad, which claimed the deployment was an invasion of Iraqi territory and an attack on its sovereignty.³ Consequently, it lodged an official complaint with the United States and the UN Security Council, and called for an immediate Turkish withdrawal from Iraqi territory.⁴ More radical elements, particularly Iraq’s Shi’i militias, organized anti-Turkish demonstrations in Baghdad in which Turkey’s Ottoman past was invoked and threats to fight the Turkish military were aired.⁵ While blessing the partial withdrawal of Turkish troops from Bashik on December 20,

¹ Fehim Tastekin, “[Ankara’s Mosul Miscalculation](#)”, *Al-Monitor*, December 9, 2015.

² Barzan Sadiq, [Twitter post](#), December 23, 2015, 9:23a.m.

³ “[Iraqi PM says no solution to crisis without Turkish troops’ withdrawal](#),” *Hurriyet*, December 11, 2015.

⁴ “[Speech by the Prime Minister and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces Dr. Haider Al-Abadi on the Turkish intervention](#),” Office of the Prime Minister of Iraq.

⁵ “[Anger in Baghdad over Turkish Troops in Iraq](#)” *Al Jazeera*, December 13, 2015; Ahmed Saad, “[Thousands of Demonstrators in Baghdad, Basra Protest Turkish Deployment in North](#)” *Reuters*, December 13, 2015.

following a statement by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the crisis between the two governments was a result of a miscommunication,⁶ the Shi'i militias reiterated that Turkey's aims in Iraq were still unclear and repeated the allegation that Turkey supports the Islamic State (IS). Furthermore, the spokesman for the Iraqi Shi'i militia *Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada'a* ("The Sayyid of the Martyrs Battalion") continued to threaten Turkish economic targets in Iraq.⁷

The presence of Turkish military battalions in the regions controlled by the KRG is not a new phenomenon. Based upon agreements with the Iraqi government and the KRG, Turkey has military bases near the Iraq-Turkey border in the provinces of Dohuk and Erbil. Until to 2008, these bases were used by Turkey in dozens of operations against the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the separatist Kurdish militant organization that used northern Iraq as a base of operations against the Turkish authorities. Nevertheless, Bashik has been the only Turkish military base in northern Iraq established for a purpose other than containing the PKK. The base falls outside the KRG's official borders, in an area populated predominantly by Christians and Yazidis, and it is an area being prepared for use in a planned operation to wrest control of the city of Mosul from the Islamic State, which occupied it in the summer of 2014.



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⁶ ["Turkey to withdraw more troops from Iraq, citing 'miscommunication.'" Rudaw, December 20, 2015.](#)

⁷ ["Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada'a Turahib bil-Insihab al-Turki"](#) ["Kataib Sayyid of the Martyrs is blessing the Turkish Withdrawal"], *Azzaman*, December 23, 2015.

Turkey's recent deployment to Iraq should be seen as part of its attempt to preserve its influence in the region as a whole, and in Iraq and Syria in particular. Turkey has supported various Syrian rebel groups trying to oust the Asad regime, and at the same time build strong economic ties with the KRG government in Erbil as a means of maintaining its influence in Iraq. Nonetheless, Ankara perceives Russia's increased involvement in the Syrian conflict, and the growing tensions between the KRG and Shi'i militias supporting Baghdad, as posing a threat to Turkey's Sunni and Kurdish allies in the region. Turkey's decisions to down a Russian jet that was targeting rebel positions in Syria and to convert the Bashik military base from a training site into a tactical base for operations, may be the most recent manifestations of Turkey's determination to protect its interests in the regional conflicts raging along its borders. Meanwhile, the absence of a large U.S. military presence in Iraq, which had served as the main point of coordination for most of the regional actors until 2010-2011, seems to have led Turkey to bypass Baghdad in favor of direct coordination with the KRG.

Ankara and Erbil have been the only regional governments that supported forming a Sunni volunteer force to fight against the Islamic State (IS). *Hashd al-Watani* is commanded by the former governor of Nineveh, Atheel al-Nujaifi. Nujaifi's militia has approximately 2,000 fighters, comprised of former Iraqi police units from Mosul and local volunteers, and uses the same military base in Bashik that is home to the Turkish army battalion. In November 2015, Nujaifi was deposed from his nominal position as governor of the province by Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-'Abadi, who started working with Nujaifi's successor on the preparations for retaking Mosul. The Nujaifis are prominent in Sunni politics: Atheel's brother, Osama, is a former speaker of parliament and the head of the biggest Sunni parliamentary faction. Atheel al-Nujaifi was embarrassed, and his image tainted, by the claim that he invited the Turkish force into Iraqi territory. In his own defense, he tried to implicate other senior Sunni politicians who allegedly knew of the Turkish deployment in northern Iraq. He published pictures of Minister of Defense Khalid al-'Ubaidi visiting the Bashik camp just four days prior to the deployment of additional Turkish troops and heavy armor.⁸ Yet no other senior Sunni politician was tarnished by Nujaifi's claim, and the affair has further weakened Nujaifi's chances of winning back a place at the forefront of Sunni politics in Iraq.

The Iraqi government has never backed Nujaifi's Sunni militia. Instead, it insists that priority should be given to the Iraqi security forces and other local militias, primarily, the local tribal militias (*al-Hashd al-'Asha'iri*). This is because the

⁸ ["Al-'Ubaidi met with Turkish trainers in Bashik military base,"](#) *Rudaw*, December 15, 2015.

battle to retake Mosul is expected to begin in the tribal areas outside of Mosul.⁹ The ‘Ubaid and Jabur tribes, which form the backbone of these militias, are the major tribes in the area. Ongoing territorial gains by a predominantly Shi’i force in Baiji and in Diyala Province have fueled Kurdish concerns that the promised Iraqi offensive to recapture Mosul, the largest Sunni city in Iraq, might be solely a Shi’i initiative, rather than a joint operation by the Iraqi security forces, the Kurds, and al-Nujaifi’s Sunni militia.

Turkey’s military, located 15 kilometers from Mosul, is now the closest that a large military force has been to the capital of the Islamic State. Hence, on December 15, IS units attacked the forces in Bashik, but were easily repulsed.¹⁰ As it loses territory elsewhere in Iraq, the Islamic State is preparing for the battle of Mosul. IS combatants are reinforcing the battlefronts around Baiji, Makhul, and Hamrin. The latter two sites serve as important logistic centers for the Islamic State, as they are located in territory with elevation (hills) that provide natural cover. The IS has also been engaging in small scale offensives against the rear of the Iraqi army from the desert west of Samara’a and against the Kurdish Peshmerga along the fronts facing Mosul, with little success thus far.

The president of the KRG, Massoud Barzani, visited Ankara two days after Turkey’s deployment to Bashik on December 9, an act that confirmed the KRG’s support for the Turkish troops in the disputed territories of Nineveh, which are partially controlled by Kurdish Peshmerga forces. The KRG’s official position regarding the Turkish deployment, articulated by Barzani, was to support any international force that would participate in containing the IS threat to the Kurdish region.¹¹

Slow but steady territorial gains by KRG and joint Iraqi forces (the Iraqi state security forces and supporting Shi’i militias) against the Islamic State have raised concerns for both sides. The semi-autonomous KRG has been receiving direct military support from the U.S.-led coalition, as it has expanded into the disputed territories of Nineveh and Kirkuk. The KRG’s Peshmerga forces now control the areas extending from Sinjar in Nineveh to Tuz Khourmatu to the south of Kirkuk, in addition to the three provinces that make up the KRG’s territory. The implicit but ongoing support by the U.S. for KRG forces to extend their area of control to the furthest edges of the disputed territories has been at the expense of both the IS and the central Iraqi government. Almost immediately following the IS’s conquest of Mosul in June 2014, the Islamic State has lost some of its vital supply

⁹ Nur al-Din Hameed, “[Khabir li al-Zaman: Tasrihat al-Baghdadi da lil hazimat Da’esh](#)” [Zaman’s expert: al-Baghdadi’s sectarian remarks are leading to Daesh’s defeat], *Azzaman*, December 27, 2015.

¹⁰ “[Daesh Terrorists attack Baashika Camp in Northern Iraq Injure 4 Turkish Soldiers](#),” *Daily Sabah*, December 16, 2015.

¹¹ “[Barzani plays mediator between Baghdad-Ankara](#),” *Gulan*, December 10, 2015.

routes in Nineveh and has failed to make good on its declaration that it would seize control of oil-rich Kirkuk. On the other hand, Kurdish gains in these regions have further antagonized the relations between Erbil and Baghdad, as KRG commanders continue to vow that their forces will never abandon the disputed territories,¹² a position that the U.S. has yet to endorse.



Nineveh Province/©Google Maps

The KRG is concerned that Shi'i militias will roll back Kurdish gains in Nineveh. In November 2015, *Hashd al-Sha'abi* expanded its attacks on the IS-controlled al-Shirqat to the north of Baiji, an important gateway to Nineveh from the Iraqi-controlled regions of Salah al-Din Province. The Shi'i control over Baiji, and the potential for a sustained Shi'i militia advance north into Nineveh, increases the chances of a future confrontation between the Iranian-backed Shi'i militias and the Kurdish Peshmerga. The KRG views a Shi'i incursion into Nineveh as not only endangering the de facto KRG control of most of this province, but also as an existential threat to the KRG.¹³ In the event of a conflict with Iraqi forces the KRG's Peshmerga is not likely to receive the same U.S. military support it receives to fight the IS. More to the point, the U.S. government's commitment to

¹² "[Peşmargedên olay aqıklama: Kürdistan'ın sınırını çizdik](#)" [Radical announcement by Peshmerga: We have drawn the borders of Kurdistan], *Milliyet*, November 8, 2014.

¹³ "Masrour Barzani: Hashd-i Sha'abi matirsiy haya bo Kurd" [Masrour Barzani: Hashd Al-Sha'abi pose a threat to Kurds], *Lvin Press*, March 17, 2015.

preserve Iraq's unity increases the KRG's doubts about U.S. support should the KRG find itself in a conflict with the Shi'i militias.

Nevertheless, the deployment of Turkish troops 15 kilometers northwest of Mosul in the center of Nineveh Province does not provide a solution to the dispute between Erbil and Baghdad, nor does it guarantee that the KRG will be able to maintain control over the newly acquired disputed territories. However, the Erbil government seems to have calculated that the power vacuum left by the U.S. military can be filled with regional alliances, especially in the disputed territories, that will allow the Kurds to continue their de facto control there. Turkey's Sunni-oriented interventionist policies in Syria and Iraq, therefore, are laying the groundwork for Erbil to lean on Turkey's military power to contain threats to its expansion in Nineveh. In other words, each party in Iraq appears to be maneuvering to secure its gains in a post-IS Iraq.

The recent military developments in Iraq show that a post-IS period, at least in Iraq, is indeed within sight. However, the recent tensions between Baghdad, Erbil, and Ankara over the Turkish intervention illustrates why it has taken so long to bring about an end to the IS in Iraq. In this affair, Turkey, with the support of Massoud Barzani, sent troops to help a tiny Arab Sunni militia, choosing to ignore Haidar al-'Abadi's Baghdad government. Barzani, for his part, appears to have been acting on Kurdish fears that a large Shi'i offensive into Kurdish controlled territory is in the offing. Yet these fears may be exaggerated, as the Shi'i militias are still quite a distance from Mosul, despite occasional clashes with the Kurdish Peshmerga in disputed areas. In sum, the state-of-play in northern Iraq is one where trust is in short supply, notwithstanding a shared enemy in the IS.

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