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## THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE WAR ON ISIS IN KURDISTAN

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### ABSTRACT

The war which the Islamic state in Iraq and Sham (ISIS) has started in northern Iraq, the subsequent human tragedy in Sinjar, and threat to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) have alarmed the West the United States in particular, to introduce an overall change in policy towards Iraq and the KRG. This war is likely to have several consequences. Firstly, we can anticipate a reversal in ISIS's efforts to reduce Shiite hegemony in Baghdad and its retreat to the Syrian theatre. Secondly, the Kurds will be emboldened to ask for independence and there will be a more sympathetic stand by the Obama administration and the EU to support it. Thirdly, the escalated tension between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and PKK to the level of an intra-Kurdish war will continue to destabilize political processes in Northern Iraq.

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**T**he KRG was taken by surprise in early August 2014, when forces loyal to ISIS overran the Kurdish regions of Mosul which have been under Kurdish control since 2003. The Islamic State's fighters routed a once-proud Kurdish army and forced an exodus of 300,000 Kurds, Turkmens, Christians, Yazidis and Shabaks. Calling the situation a 'humanitarian tragedy,' a top U.N. envoy to Iraq said in a statement that the case of the refugees was 'dire.' It was obvious that, unless checked by combined efforts of the Kurds, local authorities, and the international community, the events in Western parts of Mosul will have grave consequences for Iraq and the region. These de-

velopments, thus, have alarmed the US State Department which said that it is monitoring the situation closely, while the UN Security Council condemned the campaign against the religious minorities.

ISIS forced a debacle on KDP forces and established a firm control on religiously mixed towns of Zumar and Sinjar in the self-ruled Kurdish region in the north. The area has also two oilfields (Ain zalah and Batmah) which have combined capacity to export 50,000 barrels a day. The strategic Mosul Dam had also fallen to the control of ISIS militia for two weeks until it was taken back by combined operations of the Iraqi army and the Peshmerga, supported



by US airstrikes. This is Iraq's biggest dam and the capture of the electricity-generating Mosul Dam gave the forces of the ISIS for two weeks the ability to flood Iraqi cities or withhold water from farms, raising the stakes in their bid to topple the government in Baghdad.

The move against the Kurds has been the latest step in the ISIS's regional expansion efforts. ISIS has now turned into a transnational, fully-militarized formidable force which controls more than one-third of Syria's territory and 30-35 % of Iraq's territory. As one expert underlines it "now controls a volume of resources and territory unmatched in the history of extremist organizations." She went on to warn about the consolidation and expansion of ISIS, which at one point might come to exert a destabilizing impact in areas far from the region.<sup>1</sup> Similar alarming statements about the expansion of ISIS have been uttered by senior US leaders, including the Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.<sup>2</sup>

### **ISIS's miscalculation: New Kurdish and Baghdad alliance in the making**

As Tariq Hashmi, the former Iraqi deputy president, has rightly put it, ISIS's move to open a second front with Kurds was an unjustified aggression, and will weaken the Sunni front in its war against the Shi'ite-dominated government in Baghdad.<sup>3</sup> In fact, in the past, the Shi'ite-dominated Baghdad, Iran and the US have urged the KRG to assist the war against ISIS, but Masud Barzani, who was a key figure in the opposition camp to the outgoing Prime Minister Nouri Maliki's government, sought to resist that pressure. Previously, Barzani used to argue that he was not ready to assist Maliki find his way out of his mess.

Against this background, the unexpected ISIS attack on western Mosul where Barzani forces were forced to flee has changed the whole calculations. Barzani realized that unless the debacle in western Mosul is reversed immediately, his status among the Kurds would suffer greatly. Moreover, the fight in Sinjar, which will be remembered for the threat of

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an imminent genocide against Yezidi Kurds, displacement of 100,000 ethnic and religious minorities from Mosul plain, and ISIS forces approaching Erbil 20 miles have resulted in immense pressure on Masud Barzani to reverse his neutral stand in the war. For these reasons, he ordered the KRG forces to move from defensive to offensive posture. This was a clear victory for the pro-Iranian camp, represented by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which had been advocating that the Kurds should join Baghdad government's war against the ISIS-led rebellion.

The Kurds have managed during the last two weeks of August to expel ISIS forces from the 70% of the Kurdish territories and they are expected to liberate the remaining areas within only days. It is

apparent that ISIS has suffered greatly in its war with the US-backed Kurdish forces. The US backing, especially war planning, intelligence exchange, and air support to the ground forces were decisive factors in reversing the earlier Kurdish losses.

The ISIS has also forced Baghdad and Erbil to put their differences aside and work together. One of the fruits of the co-operation between the Iraqi forces and the Peshmerga was the expulsion of ISIS forces from the Mosul Dam and the surrounding villages, as well as cities and towns in the west of Mosul. About 200 of the US-trained Iraqi commandos played a decisive role in the fight, while the United States provided air support. Moreover, the United States planned the operation and coordinated



the operations of the Iraqi Army's special unit with the Peshmerga from a joint operations center in Erbil. One US official called the operation 'historically pretty significant,' given the past frictions between the Kurds and the Baghdad government.<sup>4</sup> The combined Iraqi and Kurdish Peshmerga forces have been attacking ISIS forces in more than 100 miles long front lines. In opening the two fronts in Iraq, ISIS obviously overstretched itself and its forces have been in retreat. Iraqi forces have availed themselves of this new situation and managed to regain the initiative on several fronts.

In addition, Barzani seems to have finally bowed to the Iranian pressure either out of desperation or being under the pressure of a wing within the KDP. He asked and received direct involvement by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in order to expell the ISIS forces from Makhmour which is a town 30 miles away from Erbil. The Iranian revolutionary guards manned the artilleries which were used in the decisive battle of Makhmour.<sup>5</sup>

## The implications for Turkey and the YPG

One of the more probable consequences of this new front of ISIS in Kurdistan is the strengthened PKK foot-hold in northern Iraq and increased likelihood of an intra-Kurdish war. It appears that the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which has been locked in fierce competition and rivalry with the KDP for influence over the Syrian Kurds, was quick to jump in and fill the vacuum left by the demoralized KDP forces. The Syrian Kurdish forces of the People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of (PYD), have been arguing that they entered the Mosul area and assisted Peshmerga forces in their fight against ISIS militants.

PYD seems to be alarmed by ISIS's new offensive and view it as targeting itself. Sinjar is close to the Iraq-Syria border. In the event of ISIS taking over the whole of Sinjar, ISIS would have had control over a broad area from Mosul through Tal Afar, reaching as far as Rojava. The spokesperson of YPG emphasized their concern about

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such a development by arguing that “this would mean ISIS gangs being able to step up their attacks on Rojava by conveying arms, ammunition and fighters through this corridor.”<sup>6</sup>

YPG also presented itself as the true defender of 200,000 Yezidi Kurds, the great majority of whom have been forced to take refuge in Sinjar mountain near Syrian border. The fighters of YPG crossed the frontier region and established control on Rabia frontier crossing point with Syria. There are confirmed reports that hundreds of threatened Yezidis were recruited and armed by YPG and are heading towards Sinjar to liberate the area.<sup>7</sup> There are several training camps for Yazidi men who have volunteered to join YPG forces. On top of the Sinjar mountains, the Yazidis have established what

they call the Sinjar Resistance Units, in cooperation with locals and the YPG. Currently, the pro-YPG militia controls about 30-kilometer-long area where pro-Barzani forces could not operate.<sup>8</sup> Although PYD persistently denies such allegations, all indications point to the fact that it is planning to establish a fourth canton in Sinjar and Zumar regions, which will mean grabbing around 25% of the areas, which used to be Barzani’s domain.

Besides, Murat Karayılan from PKK stated clearly that pro-PKK forces of YPG did not enter Mosul upon Barzani’s approval and they would be there to stay.<sup>9</sup> Taking into consideration the organizational nature and the leadership structure of both the KDP and PYD and the failure of attempts by many, including that of Leyla Zana,

to create a *modus vivendi* between them, one should not exclude the possibility of an intra-Kurdish war. This will hurt Turkey's interests the most. In fact, the media war has already started between the two sides. Recently, Cemil Bayık, the co-chair of the pro-PKK Kurdish Freedom Movement (KCK)'s executive committee, has told a western reporter that Barzani forces' debacle in Sinjar was due to their commanders being involved in the corruption, and preoccupation with commercial deals.<sup>10</sup> This statement drew the wrath of Barzani's KDP which issued statement accusing Bayık of being drug-dealer and human trafficker.<sup>11</sup>

Given the destabilizing effects of such developments, Turkey cannot afford to be inactive towards the course of events in Western Mosul. It could start to help pro-KDP forces regain the initiative in the area, invite Yezidi leaders to Ankara, and increase its assistance, including in the form of airlift, to the thousands of refugees stranded in the Sinjar Mountain.

## ISIS war and independence of Kurdistan

The ISIS war in Kurdistan has also reignited the debate on the call for independence by KRG government and Barzani who began to espouse it forcefully since the fall of Mosul. Many Kurdish source points to conspiracy theory that ISIS war on Kurds was a part of regional powers' pressure on the Kurds to preoccupy them in a war with ISIS. Regardless of the actual motivations for the war, it has temporarily achieved that purpose, as it has revealed the vulnerability of the Peshmerga forces. Critics argue that Peshmerga debacle in confronting ISIS was no less in significance than the debacle of Maliki's forces in Mosul. Besides, the war has uncovered that Kurdish leadership had no common vision and there are deep divisions even within the Peshmerga forces. The forces loyal to Barzani were suspicious of those of PUK, and they could not trust each other on the battlefronts.

Others maintain that the war has revealed the extent of Kurdish strength, specially the external support, and the

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Kurds are utilizing their newly gained strength to put forward demands which amounts to independence. It is noteworthy that on 24 August 2014 KRG's negotiating team in Baghdad asked for sovereign rights over its airspace and an external power such as UN or US to act as guarantor for Kurds' rights within Iraq. Some political observers believe that the Kurds are amassing weapons, which were sent to them by the US and the EU to fight ISIS, for eventual confrontation with Baghdad. In addition, recently, a pro-Kurdish lobby, which consists of ex-US officials in Iraq such as Paul Bremer, Gen. David Petraeus, Lieutenant-General Jay Garner, and former US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad

were on record pushing for an immediate and unlimited arming of KRG as the only democratic ally of the west in Iraq. In the United Kingdom as well the government's decision to arm the Kurds was received warmly.<sup>12</sup>

The UK and Western aid to the KRG was justified on humanitarian grounds. The plight of the Dohuk region in northern Iraq where 450,000 displaced people are taking shelter – a 50 per cent increase in the area's population – is a case in point. Farhad Atrushi, the governor of the province, warned of the threat of 'genocide,' adding that 'We have hundreds of thousands [of refugees]. We're going to face an international

humanitarian catastrophe because many of these children will die.”<sup>13</sup> Such calls for assistance echoed in the Western capitals. Moreover, in the last few years the links between the UK and Kurdistan have been developing fast, with the first ministerial delegation from London arriving in Erbil two years ago and many companies investing there. Furthermore, the fact that Kurdistan has the sixth largest oil deposits in the world also works to their favor. At the same time, the perception that the KRG is “an oasis of stability and tolerance” and upholds women’s rights and other freedoms helps Kurds gain the sympathy of the West.<sup>14</sup>

The KRG has recently received a lot of heavy and light weapons from a variety of sources including Iran. Iraqi Ministry of Defense spokesman Maj. Gen. Mohammed al-Askari told Mawtani website that “the ministry equipped the Peshmerga forces with combat equipment and weapons to support their combat positions in the face of ISIL.”<sup>15</sup> The US is now said to deliver directly heavy weapons to the Kurds. The move follows a change of

heart by the Baghdad government, which had previously objected to arms being sent to Kurdish forces. France and the UK are set to provide weapons to Kurdish forces battling ISIS.<sup>16</sup>

### **A Change of US stand on ISIS**

One of the spillovers of the ISIS war in Kurdistan was to further drag Kurdistan into the Iraqi civil war and escalate ISIS’s confrontation with the Obama administration. The US bombing of ISIS positions in Kurdistan led to the ISIS losing the initiative and caused the deaths of many of its top commanders. Consequently, ISIS threatened to take war into US territories. This is a change from ISIS’s original strategy of focusing on toppling of regimes in the Middle East and delaying the confrontation with the US to the later stages. This was one of the issues in which ISIL disagreed with al-Zawahiri-led al-Qaida. The latter considers attacking US as the priority number one. ISIS said its execution of James Foley, who was kidnapped in Syria in 2012, came in retaliation

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for Obama authorizing the air strikes against them. President Obama's reaction to this execution by saying that ISIS is a "cancer... [that] doesn't belong in the 21st century" is likely to increase the escalation.<sup>17</sup>

Although the US increasingly spoke about targeting the ISIS elements both in Iraq and Syria, this does not mean that American troops will be dispatched to Iraq or Syria to fight. The policy against ISIS will be implemented by arming the Sunni Arab tribes and reviving the general Petraisi's 2007 "Sahawat" units which successfully forced al-Qaida out of Sunni regions of Iraq. The US will continue to believe that it could defeat ISIS in Syria only by arming the moderate Syrian rebel groups.

At the same time, some analysts foresee the probability of US and Iranian cooperation in Syria as they did in Iraq to get rid of Maliki. So far, Iranian and US officials have, through intermediaries, expressed different views on this issue. Whereas the US wants President Bashar Asad out of power as a precondition for cooperation, Iranian side maintains

that ISIS is the more immediate threat to the regional peace and needs to be addressed first.<sup>18</sup>

### Conclusion

To sum up, the ISIS war against Kurds, like most of its policies, has no sound rationale and the KRG was taken by surprise in this war. The war has served as a wake-up call for the Iraqi Kurds that they are not ready for independence. It was only the US airstrikes which averted a total collapse of the army, which they had built for decades. The confrontation with ISIS has also revealed the disunity among the Kurdish groups to an alarming extent, and the crisis has escalated the tension between the KDP and PKK to the extent that an intra-Kurdish war is imminent. Iran and pro-Iranian forces in Iraq have so far benefited the most from this war. The war served as a reminder for Obama administration that the ISIS threat to US interest could not be ignored and needs to be treated decisively and urgently, for which cooperation with Iran will be essential.

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