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## THE EFFECTS OF THE ISIS OPERATIONS ON THE TURKMENS

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**T**he Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS)<sup>1</sup>, which has dominated headlines, has been continuing its offensive, causing a crisis among the people in areas in the northern part of Iraq, where it has captured. Especially the Sunni Arabs and Turkmens are facing hard times in the cities under the ISIS, rule such as Mosul, Tel Afar, Salahaddin and Diyala, in which they constitute the majority. The Sunni Arabs, while being under risks due to the ISIS operations, are not under a direct threat. However, for the Turkmens, who live in the same region as the Sunni Arabs, the ISIS advance constitutes both direct and indirect threats to their survival.

<sup>1</sup> ISIS declared the Caliphate on 29 June 2014 and changed its name to "the Islamic State." However, this report prefers "ISIS," which is more popularly used.

### The Characteristics of the ISIS Operations

Currently, the areas under the ISIS rule are mainly Sunni Arab territories. For this reason, the security situation and living conditions in these areas are worsening, while the Iraqi government's operations against ISIS inflict damages to the civilian population. Even though it appears to enjoy the support of some segments of the Sunni population, ISIS is intimidating the local Sunni communities, based on its previous actions in Syria. ISIS has started to look for dialogue opportunities with people and avoided harsh actions although it stated "Caliphate Regulations". However, once ISIS reinforces its rule, it is highly likely that it will adopt

a harsher stance. Therefore, there is a threat and conflict potential for the Sunni Arabs and the Turkmens.

The ISIS did not move its forces to Iraq all of a sudden. It fights against the PYD for the control of the territories, where the Kurds live, and against the Assad regime and the Free Syrian Army. Its actions in Syria evoked reactions by both the people and local groups. ISIS used to move to Syria when it is under pressure in Iraq and move to Iraq when it faced pressure in Syria. However, ISIS acted in a more systematical way during its offensive in June 2014. It gathered support from anti-Maliki groups, former Baathists, the Naqshbandis, tribes and local people during its advance.



Furthermore, it stimulated the Ansar al Sunna, and the Iraqi al Qaeda to action in order to bolster its forces and reach a considerable amount of fighting potential. Besides, there had been some social and political developments in Iraq, which paved the way for ISIS's advance. The Sunnis started opting for radical measures due to several factors, such as the lack of an all-encompassing political organization for the Sunnis, the disagreements about the leadership of the Sunnis, and the government pressure on the Sunni politicians. For this reason, ISIS was not able to control its captured territories on its own. It had to leave the control of these territories to local groups. Therefore, it would be more precise to speak of a growing coalition under the leadership of ISIS. ISIS, as a mobile offensive force, moved on after relinquishing the control of the conquered territories to local groups. These groups are mostly influential groups in their territory and accept cooperation with ISIS. As of the current situation, ISIS remains in the outer rim of Baghdad, Tikrit and Diyala, which are governed by tribes, local groups

and communities. For the period ahead, if these groups have disagreements among themselves or with ISIS, it is highly likely there will be armed clashes, which will cause important problems.

### The Situation of the Turkmens

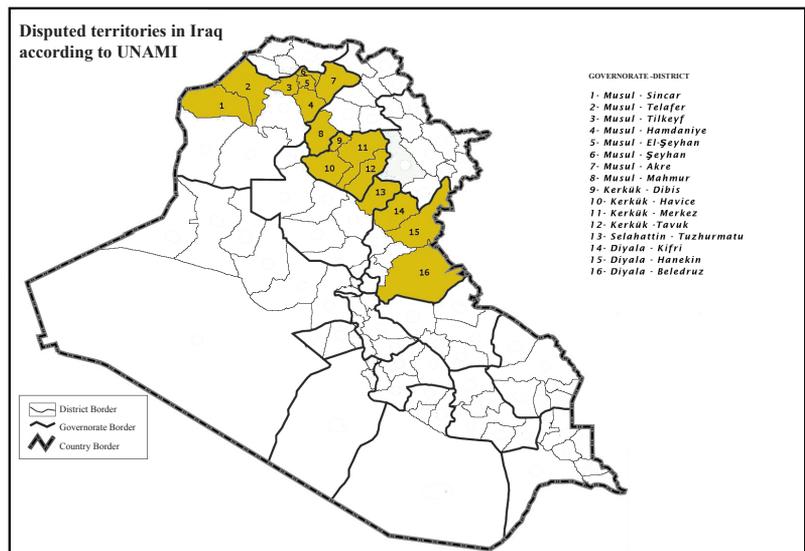
The ISIS rule in the territories, where the Sunnis constitute the majority, form a direct and indirect threat for all other communities in the region. The Turkmens are under the most serious threat. They mostly live in or around the Sunni dwellings, which makes them vulnerable during the ISIS offensive. The scattered Turkmen dwellings across Iraq do not form a consistent territory, nor are they fit for protection and sheltering. Therefore, they face a multi-pronged threat against themselves. Mosul, Kirkuk, Salahaddin and Diyala, the cities under the ISIS rule, house a considerable Turkmen population. Since many Turkmens in the north of Iraq are Shiites, they are primary targets for ISIS. The threat is even greater, because the Turkmens are unarmed and unguarded, devoid of an armed group and be-

The Sunni Arabs and Turkmens are facing hard times in the cities under the ISIS rule such as Mosul, Tel Afar, Salahaddin and Diyala, in which they constitute the majority

ing geographically segregated.

In addition, the areas that the Turkmen live have great potential for conflict. First, despite the fact that these areas have the Sunni majority, they also have a great diversity in terms of ethnic and sectarian groups, which live together. Second, the oil reserves in the north of Iraq are inside the Turkmen areas. Third, these areas are the main subject of dispute between the Kurdish Regional Government and the Iraqi government. The disputed territories encompass the cities and districts, where the Turkmen live. The Turkmen live in the four (out of seven) districts of Mosul, in entire Kirkuk, Tuz-

khourmatou of the Salahaddin province, Beledruz, Haneqin and Kifri townships of the Diyala province. These regions were captured by either ISIS or the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) after the Iraqi government's withdrawal in the face of the ISIS offensive. The Kurds captured most of the disputed territories in this period; therefore the ISIS offensive has been advantageous for them. In the following period, if the Kurds transform the de facto situation to a de jure form, the Turkmen areas will be under the KRG rule. It is known that the Turkmen are displeased with such a prospect.



Moreover, the Peshmarga and ISIS did not have a major fight, except for some minor skirmishes as of today. That is because their respective interests do not clash yet. It is likely that ISIS will move to those areas under the Peshmarga control such as Kirkuk after it has consolidated its current territorial gains. For example, Tuzkhurmatou is under the Peshmarga control, where mostly Shiite Turkmen used to live. If ISIS moves against the Turkmen in Tuzkhurmatou, it will be a test for power and good will for the Peshmarga about protecting the Turkmen. The Turkmen, who fled from Tal Afar, are not admitted by the KRG on the grounds that the KRG does not have adequate capacity. Some Turkmen are sheltered in the three temporary camps just outside the KRG borders. Turkmen do not receive substantive aid from the KRG and the Iraqi government, and they try to survive on the limited aid provided by Turkey and the UN.

ISIS moved to Tal Afar after Mosul and attacked the Shiite areas multiple times. Almost all of the Shiite Turkmen had to flee

their homes. ISIS oppressed the Sunni Turkmen as well. Therefore, almost all the Turkmen population of Tal Afar, which amounted to almost 230,000, had to flee, except for the old, sick and disabled people.

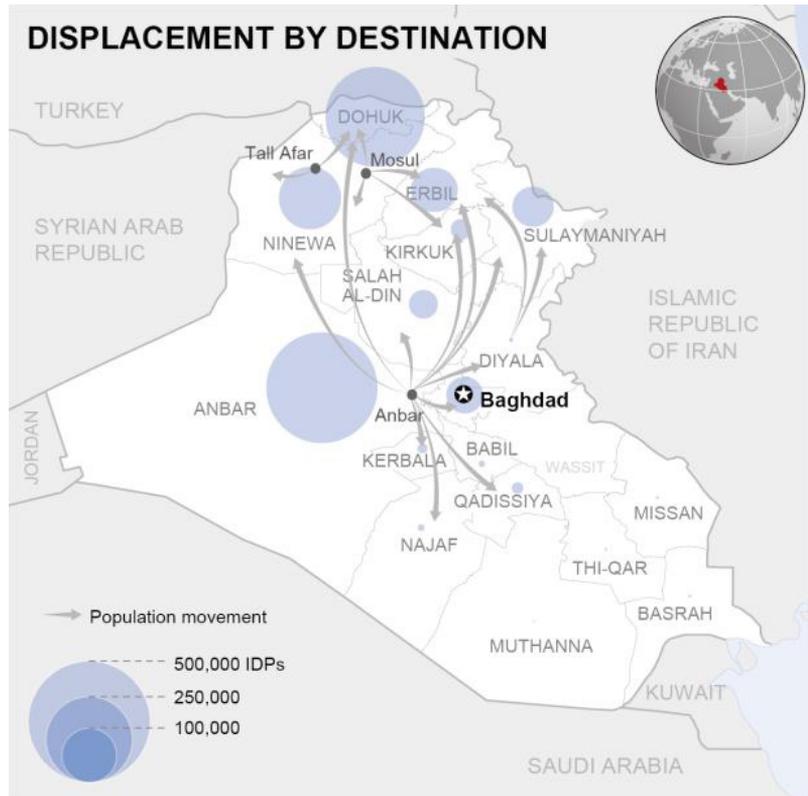
Besides, the Shiite Turkmen in the central Mosul are under the oppression of ISIS. ISIS threatens the villages of Şerihan, Karakoyun and Kubbük in the rural Mosul, where the Turkmen live. Moreover, the Iraqi government's aerial operations against ISIS in Tal Afar caused civilian casualties among the Turkmen. Thus, the Turkmen are vulnerable to almost all kinds of developments in Iraq.

Tuzkhurmatou, since 2011, has been the site of bombings, shootings and fighting. Even though the Peshmarga controls the city, it is vulnerable to the ISIS threat. Therefore the Turkmen villages of Yengice, Biravcılı, Çardaklı, Karanaz, Köküz and Bastamlı are invaded by ISIS. And also the Amirli district, which houses a Turkmen majority, is under a blockade by ISIS.

Thus, the Turkmen are besieged by several threats. On

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Internal Displacement in Iraq after ISIS Operations

**Source:** The Mission of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)

the one hand, ISIS openly targets the Turkmens and their dwellings. On the other hand, the Peshmarga has acquired the control of the Turkmen dwellings. Even though the Peshmarga does not directly threaten the Turkmens, the Kurdish pressure on the Turkmens is increased by the capture of Kirkuk by the Peshmarga. The Turkmens, who are already being harmed by the government operations against

ISIS, will be more vulnerable if ISIS and the KRG or the KRG and the Iraqi government start fighting.

### The Situation of Kirkuk

The lack of balance in Kirkuk increases the possibility for a conflict as discussed above. Kirkuk has been under the Kurdish and Peshmarga threat since 2003 and its demo-

graphic and political structure has undergone a transformation. Its population, which was 830,000 in 2003, has risen to 1,169,171 in 2014 in official numbers, and with the unregistered people it surpasses 1.5 million. The increase in the population of Kirkuk is in favor of the Kurds, which upsets the social, political and economic balance in the city. The Turkmen and the local Arabs are displeased and worried about this situation. Barzani's recent statements such as "Kirkuk is a Kurdish territory, it will remain in Kurdistan" create discontent and disquiet among the Turkmen.

While the center of Kirkuk under the Peshmarga control is relatively safe for Turkmen, the surrounding villages are under the ISIS threat. As ISIS moved against Tazekhurmatou and the village of Beşir, it killed all the men there and treated the women in most inhumane ways. Beşir remains under the ISIS control and ISIS destroyed the Turkmen's graveyards and their holy places. The villages of Yayçı and Türkalan are under the ISIS threat as well.

If the KRG annexes Kirkuk

with a fait-accompli, the Turkmen will face additional problems. There will be new dynamics for conflicts. If the Iraqi government gains the upper hand against the ISIS, it is possible that the Peshmarga control in Kirkuk will be challenged. In addition, the Arabs of Kirkuk oppose the Kurdish control in Kirkuk as well. Kirkuk, which is located in the heart of the north-south direction in Iraq, is unlikely to be abandoned as a result of a unilateral action of one side, which distorts its administrative, social, political and economic structure. It might cause a multilateral conflict. In addition to the Peshmarga, the security in Kirkuk is maintained by the local Kirkuk police as well, which mostly consists of Kurdish people. A unilateral act against Kirkuk might cause a major upheaval. The Turkmen state that they are going to fight for Kirkuk in the case of a Kurdish unilateral annexation.

Another problem is the possibility that a clash in Kirkuk will spread to other Turkmen areas. If it happens, the Turkmen will be facing a greater threat. Therefore the KRG is expected to act responsibly and

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pay attention to the other groups in Kirkuk. The KRG, which maintains good relations with Turkey, has to act more carefully about the protection of the Turkmen's rights.

The developments in Kirkuk after 2003 and the effect of the sectarian rift on the Turkmen have hindered the real potential of the Turkmen. In Iraq, there is an important Turkmen population, who defends its territory and wants to have a say in the future of their country.

### The Turkmen and Turkey after the ISIS Offensive

The Turkmen have never severed their ties with Turkey. Turkey has always maintained its attention on the Turkmen.

Turkey has undergone a lot of difficulties concerning politics and method, while reaching out to the Turkmen. The Iraqi government considered Turkey's attention towards the Turkmen as interfering in its domestic affairs. In Iraq, Turkey's each move in favor of the Turkmen has run the risk of creating additional costs for them. Therefore, after 2010, when Turkey's relations with Iraq were strained, there was extra pressure against the Turkmen. Not only the government, but also the Arabs and Kurds pressure the Turkmen because of Turkey's aid. However, Turkey continues sending aid to the Turkmen after the ISIS offensive. Turkey's Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) and



Red Crescent send humanitarian aid to the Turkmens, though it is not sufficient for almost 350,000 displaced Turkmens. Some Turkish non-governmental organizations provide aid to the Turkmens as well. However, the Turkmens need political support and protection, besides humanitarian aid. They are left unguarded, since they do not have an armed militia. Under these circumstances, they seek to achieve protection through their own limited capacities and guard their houses and neighborhoods. Neither the KRG nor the Iraqi government is able to protect them.

## Conclusion and Evaluation

The ISIS offensive in June 2014 started a new process in Iraq, while at the same time increasing the pressure on the Turkmens. In Iraq, nothing will be as it was before the ISIS offensive. Iraq may adopt a loose federal structure or a confederation. For the Kurds, the current situation is advantageous. They strongly state their historical ideal of “independence.” In addition, as long as the ISIS remains an active force, the

Sunnis may establish a federal political structure in their own regions. In this respect, it is possible for both Sunnis and Shiites to establish federal units. It is known that al Hakim sought to establish a “Shiiteistan” consisting of nine provinces in the south of Iraq back in 2004-2006. The majority of the oil reserves in Iraq remain in the south, where the Shiites live. Since they do not have an economic disadvantage, the Shiites may be comfortable about autonomy.

Therefore, the major problem is about the Sunni Arabs and the Turkmens. Since the Turkmen dwellings overlap with the disputed territories, they will be further segregated in the case of a federal or confederate Iraq. Some Turkmens will remain in the Kurdish region, while others will remain in the Shiite or Sunni regions. Such a rift will directly influence Syria, Turkey and Iran.

This situation shows the importance of Turkey’s policy towards Iraq, which stands for its territorial integrity and political unity. This stance is important for the Iraqi government. Turkey has always advised the

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Turkmens to defend their social, political, cultural, legal and economic rights in accordance with the territorial integrity and political unity of Iraq. After Turkey developed good relations with the KRG after 2009, the Turkmen-Kurdish relations developed and the Turkmens found space to operate within the KRG's political system. Turkey may achieve a similar result with the Iraqi government as well. If Iraq achieves stability, it is possible that the

Turkmens will be more active in the central Iraqi politics. For the period ahead, Turkey may spend efforts for making Kirkuk a province with a special status. Turkey may also push for making Tel Afar a province; however the precondition for that is stability and consensus within Iraq. A consensus in the domestic politics of Iraq alone will not be sufficient to achieve these results. It will be essential to reach regional and international consensus on Iraq.

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