
The Unexplored Side of the Controversy Over Qasim Shasho's Statement: Sinjar's Disputes

14-08-2024

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Summary : In April 2017, I visited Sinjar for research and met Shasho at the Sharaf Adin Temple. His proud demeanor revealed the mindset of a courageous Peshmerga, eager to declare, "I defended and stayed here when Sinjar was under ISIS's control." However, he is now being portrayed as an anti-Islamic figure who has offended the sentiments of the majority of Kurdish Muslims. When I met him, he spoke cautiously, carefully choosing his words to ensure that his criticisms of ISIS were not misconstrued as anti-Islamic.

Recently, a controversy erupted following a statement made by Qasim Shasho, a Peshmerga commander of the Yazidi community, regarding the religion of Islam. Although the initial tension has somewhat subsided, it's clear that this issue goes beyond simple disputes and divisions between religions and societies. Instead, it reflects deeper concerns tied to the widening gap in the internal geopolitics of Iraq and Kurdistan.

Shasho was one of the Peshmerga commanders who remained on Sinjar (Shingal) Mountain and fought until Sinjar was liberated on November 13, 2015, after ISIS captured the area in August 2014. In April 2017, I visited Sinjar for research and met Shasho at the Sharaf Adin Temple. His proud demeanor revealed the mindset of a courageous Peshmerga, eager to declare, "I defended and stayed here when Sinjar was under ISIS's control." However, he is now being portrayed as an anti-Islamic figure who has offended the sentiments of the majority of Kurdish Muslims. When I met him, he spoke cautiously, carefully choosing his words to ensure that his criticisms of ISIS were not misconstrued as anti-Islamic. I also reviewed the video that sparked the recent controversy, recorded on August 3rd, the anniversary of Sinjar's tragedy in 2014. In the video, Shasho discusses the ongoing threat posed by ISIS militants and urges Yazidis to acquire heavy weapons for self-defense, warning of the possibility of further attacks and tragedies. When considering his speech in its entirety, it becomes clear that the Kurdish dialect spoken in Sinjar has remained crude and not developed like other parts of the Kurdistan Region where the expressions are more straightforward. As a result, the reactions—fueled in part by irresponsible media reporting—might have been less severe.

The Yazidis have long felt threatened by remnants of past atrocities, a fear rooted in both historical and contemporary events. This year alone, around 9,535 relatives of Iraqi ISIS fighters, initially transferred to a temporary camp in Jad'a village in Gayara from the Al-Hol refugee camp, were repatriated. Though this location is over 140 km away from Sinjar, the Yazidis are increasingly fearful due to the ongoing repatriation process, which could potentially impact another 18,000 Iraqis from the [Al-Hol camp](#). The general amnesty law sought by Sunnis, along with the recent release of nearly 200 ISIS fighters in Syria, has further heightened their anxiety. The Yazidi community's fear of extinction is deeply rooted in history. Most of the decisions affecting Yazidis have historically been made by Kurdish Sunni Muslims, Turks, and Arabs. As Lazarev noted, nearly 20 raids occurred in Sinjar during the Ottoman period. These events remain fresh in the collective memory of the Yazidis, resurfacing with each new incident. Consequently, for some Yazidis, the term "Kurd" does not signify a shared ethnic identity with their Muslim counterparts, despite speaking the same language. Some Yazidis believe that fellow Muslims have played a role in many decisions that led to their suffering and even assisted Turks and Sunni Arabs in Yazidi massacres. This has created a significant divide in their ethnic and religious identities, with a strong emphasis on their religious identity. As a result, some Yazidis commonly say, "We are neither Arabs nor Kurds; we are Yazidis," reflecting this historical background.

The dismantling of the Yazidi people's ethnic identity and the emphasis on their religious identity are not only linked to their fear of extinction but also tied to internal political tensions within both Kurdistan and Iraq. At the Kurdish domestic level, the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK) have differing views on the Yazidi identity, with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) taking a less pronounced stance. The PDK, by highlighting the Yazidis' ethnic origins, seeks to maintain its influence in Sinjar. For the Kurdistan Region, Sinjar represents the upper corner of a geographical arc that plays a critical role in countering any anti-Kurdish expansion from the north of Rojava. Conversely, the PKK prefers to depict the Yazidis as a religious minority, using this narrative to counter the PDK and gain influence within the Yazidi community. From a geo-strategic perspective, Sinjar serves as a corridor for the PKK to access Rojava, while Turkey views it as a "Qandil the Second" threat from a security standpoint.

Sinjar can also be a strategic military base for Iraq, enabling control of the border crossing between Syria and Iraq as well as ISIS and the security of the route development project. Located between the Tigris and Euphrates, Sinjar is a strategically significant area in the northwest of the Kurdistan Region. It connects Mosul and Hasaka in the north, borders Sunni-majority lands in the southwest, and ends at Tala'afar in the southeast. Its fertile plains, bordering the Tigris, are

ideal for agriculture and livestock rearing, and it is nearly 120 kilometers from Mosul. Furthermore, by emphasizing the Yazidis' religious identity over their ethnic identity, Baghdad gains a unique opportunity to establish a significant presence in this geostrategic location, where Sunni populations predominate. The northern section of Sinjar Mountain (Shimal) includes Snune town and its surrounding communities, while the southern section (Qblate) includes Sinjar and its neighboring villages, and the Gir Uzer sub-district (Qahtanya) in Al-Ba'aj are home to most Kurdish Yazidis. The presence of a Kurdish Yazidi population in Mosul holds great significance for Baghdad and could be a primary driver for the government's current focus on and concern for the Yazidi situation.

Sinjar is an important military base for "resistant front" fractions, offering control over corridors, roads, drones, and potential future clashes. The plains stretch as far as the eye can see from Sinjar's southern region (Qblate), while Sinjar Mountain, rising to a height of about 1,400 meters, separates this area's topography from its surroundings and provides a vantage point over the Syrian and Iraqi deserts. This mountain extends into Syria and Rojava for 75 km and is deeply embedded in the region. The mountain's width exceeds 17 kilometers in some areas, forming a vast expanse known locally as "Sardasht." These features are highly valuable from a military perspective, enabling various entities in the region to monitor and control drones, as well as launch missiles for both defense and offensive operations. The fate of Sinjar is of concern to most regional and international actors, as well as internal players, because, for instance, missiles and drones fired at Israel from a location like Sinjar, some 700-800 km away, reach their target in half the time it would take from places like Iran and Yemen. Furthermore, the 2020 agreement between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region to administer and regulate this area remains largely unimplemented, illustrating the complexities at play. Given these facts, it is evident that the increasing tensions between Yazidis and Kurdish Muslims are part of broader geopolitical rivalries and hostilities in the region.