

What's behind the recent deployment of PMF forces in Sinjar?

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Introduction

After that three brigades of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) have been deployed to Sinjar in the past week, the issue of Sinjar have become a hot topic of the day once again. On the contrary to the Baghdad-Erbil deal over Sinjar thousands of soldiers and armed men been deployed there. And this is following that the Iraqi government already deployed two army divisions and two federal police brigades! Excuses to send more forces to the area are based on the likely Turkish military incursion and to protect stability of Sinjar. There are many questions what's really happening in Sinjar now. In this analysis along with assessing PMF excuses, will try to explain the real factors behind these new developments.

Is Turkey going to attack Sinjar?

Hadi al-Amri head of the Fatih coalition and Asaib ahl al-Haq both mentioned that have information that Turkey will attack Sinjar. In 2017 Turkey carried out airstrikes and in 2021 have conducted the intelligence operation in Sinjar. There are many political and military challenges for Turkey to launch air and ground military operation in Sinjar.

If Turkey make incursion from Sirnak province border (southeast of Turkey) then from Silopi-Zaxo to Sinjar need to cross 100km. And if make incursion from northern side in Mardin province border from Nusaybin town to Sinjar at least need to cross 90km. Prior 1990s Turkey had launched three operations 5km deep inside Iraq and during the 1990s made 42 large and small military operations where mostly took place on the edge of borders. In 2000s its operations were more airstrikes and carried out in 2007, 2008 and 2011. And in the second half of 2000s Turkey at least conducted 4 large operations in Syria with 30-40km deep inside Syria. We can say that Ankara militarily did not launch any ground operation within Iraq that crossed 40km. Therefore if its going to launch the Sinjar operation that means since 1983 unprecedented event is going to take place, because Sinjar's distance from Turkey is 100-120km.

Turkey's biggest operation against Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) was in 1992 which estimated that 30,000-40,000 Turkish soldiers participated in the operation this was at time that PKK did not have members and organs as today. Therefore if Turkey going to go ahead with such operation then will need to deploy high number of its troops on the border and so far we do not see such deployment on the border.

The Mardin-Sinjar line is border of three states as there are Russian, American and Syrian Forces in that line, at least to avoid any military clashes Ankara prior any attack has to inform these countries, as for the airstrikes in 2017 Erdogan said that had informed US and Russia about it. In addition Ankara has to prepare for a big war with many thousands members of People's Protection Units (YPG) and if wins then can reach Sinjar. And of course in order to avoid clashes with PMF groups Turkey need to get approval from Iraq and Iran as well!

The Sirnak-Sinjar line is border of two states, therefore Turkey at least need to get approval from Baghdad and Erbil. Baghdad said that its forces can conduct operation anywhere in Iraq. And no government in Baghdad will accept that Turkish army enter its territory with 100km deep inside Iraq. And if Kurdistan region approves Turkey's demand then practically will lay ground to weaken itself. Because then Turkish Ovakoy border gate will open with Iraq without any respect to KRG. In addition this will create lots of pressure on KRG internally. It's been for two decades that the Iraqi Kurdish forces have avoided and rejected to fight PKK.

In this line (Sirnak-Sinjar) Turkey also will need US and Iran's approval and it will be impossible without their greenlight launch such operation. The Sinjar operation is not an easy one and the internal and external position of Turkey at this stage does not allow it to do so. If Turkey could launch the Sinjar operation, would have done it back in 2017. And is impossible Turkey get approval from all sides on Sinjar. The best likely scenario is that Turkey is seeking for triple mechanism between Baghdad, Ankara and Erbil to increase its operations against PKK and not start military incursion unilaterally. And if eventually make such unilateral operation then is likely will have more disadvantages for Turkey.

Other pretexts behind PMF deployment

The likely ISIS's infiltration [1] from Syria to Iraq [2] is another pretext to deploy PMF forces in Sinjar. But in reality ISIS's activity is more in Al-ba'aj-Aazar line, Hauran valley in Anbar and then in Saladin, Dyala and south of Kirkuk. Also in 2020 ISIS made more attacks towards south of Iraq rather than northern parts. According to the DoD Inspector General report in the last quarter of 2020 %5.8 attacks were in Baghdad province [3]. But in previous quarters were less attacks in Baghdad and its surroundings.

Some of the media mentioned that the goal to send the PMF brigades to Sinjar was to provide security and facilitate the return of IDPs [4]. But in the Erbil-Baghdad agreement on Sinjar clearly stated that providing security and facilitate the return of IDPs is joint work and the police, army and national security will be responsible unilaterally for Sinjar security not PMF!

Conclusion

The pretexts behind send more forces to Sinjar are not satisfactory, therefore we can talk about other reasons behind recent deployment of PMF brigades in Sinjar as below:

First: This is to prevent any Iraqi military movement and operation in Sinjar. The Iraqi government from the beginning of signing Sinjar agreement through deployment of two Iraqi army divisions and two police brigades and control about 80km in borders between Rojava and Sinjar has stated that there might be a time that need to impose its military authority there. Although there is no official statement on that yet but when Turkish defense minister was in Baghdad to discuss Sinjar, Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi said that its army can conduct operation anywhere in the country and this was interpreted as Iraqi government going to impose its military power there. But by sending large number of PMF forces to Sinjar, will complicate government position more.

Second: The coalition forces in 2020 handed over 6 military bases to the Iraqi forces and now most of their forces are in Anbar and Kurdistan region. One of the bases that was handed over to the Iraqi army was the Nineveh operations center. And Nineveh is in between Anbar and Kurdistan region, therefore the province become more important for the pro-Iran PMF groups that are demanding US forces to leave Iraq. After that NATO decided to expand its mission in Iraq seems that these PMF groups want to strengthen their positions ahead of NATO send more forces to Iraq.

Third: After the Saraya al-Salam (armed brigade of Muqtada al-Sadr) have deployed in droves to the streets of Baghdad, Najaf and Karbala as in show of force as claimed that received information on threats on the holy sites from ISIS and Baathists. Then is likely the recent movement of pro-Iran PMF groups in Sinjar in show of force to stress on the political and military polarity (PMF of Shrines (Hashd al-Atabat, Hashd al-Sadri and Hashd al-Wal'ai) that exist in the current structure of PMF commission. However sending more forces to Sinjar will complicate the situation there and this will damage positions of governments in Baghdad and Erbil.

[1] <https://www.nasnews.com/view.php?cat=52541>

[2] <https://ninanews.com/Website/News/Details?Key=888844>

[3] <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Feb/09/2002578750/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OPERATION%20INHERENT%20RESOLVE.PDF>