

# Turkish and Iranian Interests Cross Paths in Mosul

**Muhanad Seloom**

**ABSTRACT:** The possibility of a direct Turkish military intervention in Iraq illustrates how ethno-sectarian conflict is spreading ever faster across the Middle East. At the moment, a heterogeneous force made up of the Iraqi army, Peshmerga Kurdish fighters, Sunni Nineveh Guards, the International Coalition, and al-Hashd al-Sha’abi is leading the fight to defeat ISIL in Mosul, the capital of Nineveh province. The Iraqi government has reiterated that al-Hashd al-Sha’abi, which is mainly composed of Shia militias, will not participate in the battle to retake Mosul. Yet, reports<sup>1</sup> show that al-Hashd al-Sha’abi forces are nonetheless taking part in military operations near Mosul.

EACH OF THE FORCES PARTICIPATING IN THE BATTLE TO retake Mosul has its own agenda in the fight against ISIL. What Iran-backed Shia militias want to achieve in Nineveh is certainly different from the goals of the Turkish-backed Sunni “Nineveh Guards” or the Peshmerga Kurdish forces. Although the armies of Iran and Turkey are not directly present in Iraq, both countries have military advisors on the ground assisting Iraqi factions in the fight against ‘terrorism’. Both Turkey and Iran have political and economic interests in Iraq. This article will examine the main motives driving Turkey and Iran in their competition for influence in northern Iraq.

## TAL AFAR

The case of Tal Afar, which is currently still under the control of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), showcases why the Turkish government has insisted on keeping its small military force at the Ba’shika base in northern Iraq despite Iraqi government objections. There is a possibility that the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK<sup>2</sup>), encouraged by the Iran-backed Iraqi al-Hashd al-Sha’abi, might participate in the assault to retake Tal Afar,<sup>3</sup> a former Ottoman garrison town, is an Iraqi city 60 km to the west of Mosul and home to approximately 100,000 people, most of them Sunni Turkmen.



Iran-backed Shi'a militias in Iraq view Prime Minister Erdoğan as part of a larger Sunni nexus in the Middle East. To these militias, inviting PKK to help retake Tal Afar serves two purposes: firstly, it challenges Erdoğan's critical statements<sup>5</sup> regarding the participation of al-Hashd al-Sha'abi in military operations to retake Mosul and secondly, it challenges the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Masoud Barzani's growing power in the north of Iraq.<sup>6</sup> For the PKK, whose fighters are mostly Kurds from Turkey, to take a leading role in the liberation of Tal Afar, which is currently an ISIL stronghold, would boost their standing among Kurds in Iraq, but also antagonise Turkey.

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At the same time, Iran-backed al-Hashd al-Sha'abi militias are preparing to storm Tal Afar as part of a larger military campaign to liberate Mosul from ISIL. The main route from Mosul to Raqqa, the two principal cities of ISIL's 'Caliphate', runs through Tal Afar. This route not only represents a vital supply line for ISIL but also a possible retreat route for ISIL fighters.<sup>7</sup> Other than the obvious sectarian drive, Iran-backed Shia militias under the umbrella of al-Hashd al-Sha'abi have a vested interest in controlling Tal Afar. Controlling Tal Afar will contribute to weakening ISIL in Raqqa, boosting the efforts of thousands of Iranian advisors and Iranian proxy militia forces fighting alongside Assad's regime to keep him in power.<sup>8</sup>

In late October 2016, the leader of one of the Iranian-backed militias which make up al-Hashd al-Sha'abi addressed his fighters: "We are coming to Tal Afar to avenge Hussein".<sup>9</sup> Tal Afar has a bloody history of sectarian

violence between Shia and Sunni Turkmen. Reports<sup>10</sup> claim that the al-Hashd al-Sha'abi force tasked with storming Tal Afar is led by recruits from the Shia minority of Turkmen in Tal Afar – raising concerns of sectarian revenge attacks against Sunni Turkmen in the city. The Turkish government has warned Shia militias (al-Hashd al-Sha'abi) and the Iraqi government that it will act if atrocities are committed against the Sunni Turkmen of Tal Afar<sup>11</sup> or Arab Sunnis in Mosul. Shia militias and the Iraqi government have responded by threatening<sup>12</sup> Turkey with military action against its base in Ba'shika if Turkish troops are not withdrawn. On November 1, 2016, Prime Minister Abadi held a press conference in which he hinted that Shia militias might be banned from participating in the military operation to retake Tal Afar,<sup>13</sup> a clear attempt at calming down the Turkish side. However, he warned in the same press conference: "If Turkey intervenes militarily in Iraq, this will lead to the disintegration of Turkey as a state"<sup>14</sup> – an indirect threat to use the PKK to destabilise Turkey.

It is foreseen that the fight to retake Tal Afar will be tough. Tal Afar showcases the extent to which the Middle East's security, political, economic, and ethno-sectarian issues are interlinked. ISIL needs to defend Tal Afar to maintain an escape route to Raqqa in case it loses Mosul. Furthermore, Tal Afar not only highlights the implications and motives behind the Turkish military presence in Iraq, but also sheds light on the Turkish-Iranian rivalry for influence in northern Iraq.

### **IRANIAN INTERESTS IN IRAQ**

The Iranian government views the north of Iraq as a challenge to its ally, the central government in Baghdad, because neither the Iraqi nor the Iranian government have sufficient influence there to exert control over the region. Although Iran enjoys good relations with the main Iraqi Kurdish parties, these relationships have not been always



straightforward. Kurds in the Middle East seek self-determination, and both Iran and Turkey share concerns that Kurdish political success in Iraq might inspire their own Kurds to seek autonomy and eventually independence. In addition, Iran is already engaged in military operations<sup>15</sup> against Kurdish armed insurgent groups such as the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK)<sup>16</sup> and the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDP-I). Just as the PKK has camps on the Turkish-Iraqi border, PJAK and KDP-I have camps on both sides of the Iranian-Iraqi border.<sup>17</sup> Iran fears<sup>18</sup> that the PJAK could be used by its enemies to target Iranian interests inside and outside Iran. At the same time, Turkey<sup>19</sup> accuses its adversaries of using the PKK as a tool to force the Turkish government to accept certain policies. Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) commander General Qassim Solaimani is even said to have met with the PKK's commander Cemil Bayik in October 2016.<sup>20</sup> General Solaimani reportedly offered the PKK the opportunity to participate in the battle to retake Mosul in exchange for Iranian support. While these reports are unverifiable, Iranian-Turkish rivalry is increasingly evident.

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The Iranian government perceives any Turkish military presence in Iraq as a threat because of its extensive political, security, and economic concerns in Iraq. The Turkish military presence in Iraq, however, does not give Turkey the upper hand in terms of influence. Iran's skilful use of Shia militias gives it an edge over Turkey's direct military intervention, which is unwelcomed by the Iraqi government in Baghdad. Iraqi government officials have been very critical of the 'illegal' Turkish military presence in Northern Iraq.<sup>21</sup>

On November 7, 2016, the prominent Shia cleric Ayatollah Mohammed Isehaq al-Fayadh said, "The Iraqi government should tackle those [Turkey] who trespass on Iraqi land...an eye for an eye ...aggressors have to learn a lesson."<sup>22</sup> The Shia militias and the Iraqi government's aggressive anti-Turkish rhetoric echoed this message. On October 24, 2016, Iranian President Rouhani implicitly criticised Turkey, stating "We regard as very dangerous [acts of] intervention by foreign countries without any coordination with the host country and believe that [for any foreign measure] the Syrian and Iraqi governments must request help and demand that another country act against terrorism inside their territories ..."<sup>23</sup> It is important to mention here that Iran has a significant military presence in Iraq, and that it was invited into the country by the Shia-led Iraqi government in Baghdad.<sup>24</sup> For Iran, Iraq is strategically<sup>25</sup> more important than any other Arab country. Iran shares more than 1400 km of its borders with Iraq. In addition, Iran played a significant role in shaping Iraq's new political system, to the point that the present Iraqi government is often described as an Iranian puppet government.<sup>26</sup>

Following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran was able to win the biggest share of influence in Iraq. The Islamic Republic of Iran, a historical enemy of Iraq, harbored the lion's share of the Iraqi Shia dissident parties and armed groups who fled Iraq during the rule of the late president Saddam Hussein, who ruled from 1979-2003. These very same parties<sup>27</sup> are ruling Iraq again today after 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq toppled Saddam's regime. Consequently, Iranian influence in Baghdad and the southern cities<sup>28</sup> where Arab Shia are a majority, has reached significant levels. In contrast Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq and the biggest Arab Sunni-majority city in Iraq, was never entirely under the Iraqi government's complete control nor under Iranian influence. Therefore, Iran views the



operation to retake Mosul as an opportunity to extend its influence into the north of Iraq. The liberation of Mosul by the Iraqi forces and al-Hashd al-Sha'abi, supported by Iran, would help Tehran establish a foothold in Mosul.

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The Iranian government's quest for influence in Iraq is part of the ideology on which the Iranian state was built in 1979 by late president Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini's ideology seeks to export<sup>29</sup> the 'Islamic Revolution' to the world. Iraq, which is home to Shia Muslims' holiest shrines in Najaf and Karbala, was the first target of the Iranian revolution.<sup>30</sup> From 1980 to 1988, millions of Iraqis and Iranians were killed in a protracted costly war. Today, the ambitions of the Iranian revolution go beyond even the borders of Iraq. Iran is currently engaged in conflicts in Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, utilizing local militias like Hezbollah in Lebanon, Asaib Ahl al-Haq in Iraq, and Alawi militias in Syria to establish its influence. Iran is accused<sup>31</sup> by its adversaries of expanding its influence in the Middle East with the intention of exporting 'the Islamic Revolution' to form a so-called "Shia Crescent"<sup>32</sup> stretching over Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.

#### **TURKEY'S INTERESTS IN IRAQ**

The Turkish government, under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), enjoys a special relationship with the political, tribal, and religious leaders in the Nineveh province. It capitalizes on its heritage from the Ottoman era, ethnic links

with the Turkmen population, and the Islamic identity of Turkey as an influential Sunni state in the Middle East. Unlike Iran, Turkey has not been overly aggressive about its influence in Iraq. It has pursued its economic and strategic interests to develop a unique relationship with the Kurds in Iraq and has maintained balanced diplomatic relations with the central government in Baghdad. Both Iraqi Kurdish parties, the KDP and PUK, have acted as intermediaries in keeping channels of dialogue open between the Turkish government and Kurdish insurgent groups. Cooperation between the Turkish government and the KRG contributed to the withdrawal of PKK fighters from Turkey to the Qandil mountains on the Iraqi border in 2013.<sup>33</sup>

Today, the PKK represents a serious national security threat to Turkey. The Turkish military presence in northern Iraq is mainly intended to prevent the PKK from creating a stronghold in northern Iraq which could threaten Turkey's national security and regional economic interests. The Turkish military presence in Iraq has two major goals: firstly, to deny any insurgent group from within Turkey a safe haven in northern Iraq, and secondly, to minimize the contagion effect on Turkey's Kurds that may emanate from the Iraqi Kurds' political ambitions of independence. It is important to mention that Turkish military operations in Iraq predate ISIL. Over the last three decades, the PKK has been Turkey's main national threat. Per agreements with the Iraqi government under Saddam,<sup>34</sup> Turkish troops were allowed to cross the border into Iraq to pursue PKK fighters during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. After the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, Turkish cross-border incursions continued in coordination with the new Iraqi central government in Baghdad and the KRG.

Turkey would prefer to see the return of Iraqi central government authority and



control over the entire territory of Iraq. As in the past, it wants the government in Baghdad to be able to overcome the ethnic, regional, and sectarian divisions that have plagued the country over the course of its history. It also wants Iraq to become a stable and prosperous nation with which it can resume its lucrative trade relationship. This includes the security of the pipelines that carry oil from the northern Iraqi fields to the Turkish terminals at the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. Furthermore, Turkey represents Iraq's most direct gateway to European markets, with a great deal of its exports crossing the border post at Habur by truck.<sup>35</sup> The central government in Baghdad, however, was unable to retain full authority after 2003. The Iraqi government has not been able to protect all of Iraq's borders, including its borders with Turkey. Consequently, the PKK grew in size and power inside Iraq – not only in the Qandil mountains, but also in other parts of northern Iraq.

***Turkey's concerns in Iraq go beyond security threats and economic interests. Turkey's presence in northern Iraq is not only meant to prevent insurgent groups from threatening Turkey's national security but also to counter-balance the influence of Iran in Iraq. There are regional fears that Iran is using Iraqi Shia militias to force the demographic re-engineering of certain areas in Iraq.***

The economic and strategic significance of Mosul transcends the Iranian-Turkish spheres of influence. According to H. Akin Ünver,<sup>36</sup> the most rational pipeline trajectory to connect Iraqi oil and gas fields to Europe goes through Turkey. Consequently, the question of Mosul may be of significant interest to Russia, which might support an Iran-bound pipeline and an export option for the gas fields of the KRG. There will be an inevitable clash between the European Union and Russia over these

resources in the future.

Turkey's concerns in Iraq go beyond security threats and economic interests. Turkey's presence in northern Iraq is not only meant to prevent insurgent groups from threatening Turkey's national security but also to counter-balance the influence of Iran in Iraq. There are regional fears that Iran is using Iraqi Shia militias to force the demographic re-engineering of certain areas in Iraq. Cities like Diyala, Jurf al-Sakhar, Samara, Kirkuk, and large neighbourhoods of Baghdad have witnessed considerable demographic change in recent years. In the coming weeks and months, Tal Afar and Mosul will reveal the extent to which Iran and Turkey have influence in northern Iraq and how far each country is willing to go to protect its interests.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The Turkish military presence at Ba'shika base northeast of Mosul shows that Turkey has long anticipated the course of events unfolding in Iraq. Mosul stands where Iranian and Turkish interests collide. For Turkey, the growing presence of the PKK near Mosul represents a strategic threat to Turkey's national security. In addition, the possibility of Nineveh and Kirkuk falling into the hands of the Iran-backed al-Hashd al-Sha'abi threatens Turkey's economic and geopolitical interests in Iraq. Turkey enjoys a lucrative economic relationship with Iraq, and especially with the KRG. This includes but is not limited to oil pipelines linked to Turkey's ports, Iraqi imports from Europe going through Turkey, Turkish exports to Iraq, and Turkish investments in Iraq. Therefore, Turkey will attempt to safeguard its interests in northern Iraq by making sure that its Kurdish allies in the KRG, Arab Sunnis in Nineveh, and Turkmen in Tal Afar and Kirkuk are not intimidated by the presence of Iranian proxies. The Turkish government might seek to establish a long-term military presence in northern Iraq in order to protect its interests.



For Iran, the Turkish military presence in northern Iraq threatens its monopoly of influence over Iraq and interrupts its so-called Shia Crescent in the region – represented by Shia armed groups loyal to Iran with considerable influence in parts of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Ironically, Iran shares similar concerns with Turkey about the political aspirations of Kurds in Iraq. Iranian Kurdish militant groups like PJAK and KDP-I are growing in power inside the Iraqi Kurdistan region. Iran fears that its enemies might use these Kurdish militant groups to harm Iranian stability. Unlike the Turkish quest for influence in Iraq, which is driven by security concerns and economic interests, the Iranian government views its role in Iraq through the lens of its state ideology and positions itself as the guardian of Shia Muslims throughout the world. For Iran, Iraq represents a success story in terms of exporting the Islamic Revolution pioneered by the late founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini. Iran uses the self-proclaimed title of ‘the guardian of Shia across the world’ to expand its influence vis a vis Saudi Arabia and Turkey in the Middle East.

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This paper demonstrates that both the interests of Turkey and Iran in Iraq are complex, multi-layered and long-term. This leads to the conclusion that it is unlikely that either of the two countries will renounce its influence in Iraq in the near future. It is therefore suggested that their role in Iraq should be accounted for and factored into any future political settlement in Iraq.



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