

Report: Hegemonies and Alliances: Rojava and Sinjar as Security Challenges for the Region and Beyond

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On January 31st the Kreisky-Forum, the Candid-Foundation and the Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management at the National Defence Academy in Vienna co-organised a hybrid seminar entitled "Rojava and Sinjar as security challenges for the region and beyond." The Austrian Ministry of Defence supported the event. Participants (online and in loco) were internationally renowned experts on various aspects relating to the topic and Austrian civil servants. In the up-run to the conference, organisers sent some background information in the program to participants. (See attachment). Participants (online and in loco) came from Turkey, the USA, Iraq, Russia and Europe.

Main Findings

- The Biden administration's focus is less on the Middle East than on other theatres such as Ukraine. This is because Biden is a believer in the post-WWII world order.
- The US will not abandon the Middle East but judge the degree of their engagement more from a realistic cost-benefit analysis point of view.

- The Biden administration is agnostic about ethnic separation as long as it helps preventing civil war. Russia too looks favourable towards autonomy as a matter of principle. In the case of Rojava Moscow insists on administrative ties with Damascus. Even so, Damascus is not willing to discuss autonomy within Syria at all.
- Rojava/AANES is as much an administrative unit as it is an ideological project of the PKK, a banned organisation. The Rojava/AANES leadership's position pends between fidelity towards the mother organisation and a clear "Rojava-First" policy. Western countries prefer the latter position.
- Rojava/AANES is a net contributor for European security as has been proven in the last ISIS prison brake; however, the European's non-position on said entity becomes increasingly untenable and benefits ideologues from the radical left.
- Its security forces rely heavily on Arab-Kurdish cooperation, with the Kurds dominating command and control; tensions exist but as long as salaries are paid, a brake of this alliance is unlikely.
- Turkey willingly aggravates the economic situation in Rojava/AANES by controlling the water flow to Syria. Ankara views the existence of Rojava/AANES as an existential threat as it does not want to see a second successful US-sponsored Kurdish entity to emerge and thus opposes any legally binding autonomy arrangement for Rojava/AANES.
- Sinjar's strategic position puts it in crosshairs of many national, regional and international interests: it is part of inner-Iraqi (Bagdad-Erbil), inner-Kurdish (PKK-KDP), Turkish-Iranian, US-Iranian, Turkish-PKK and Iraqi-Turkey tensions.
- The Yazidid community does not speak for itself but has to rely on bigger players, whose political-military outlets it joins. Thus, Yazidis embrace pro-KDP, pro-PKK, pro-Bagdad etc. positions as Yazidi positions.
- The economic and social situation is still extremely bad this is why many Yazidi-Kurds are reluctant to return. Yet both groups, Sunni Arabs and Yazidi Kurds return to some places. Tensions between the two groups will not abate anytime soon given the horrors the Yazidis have suffered from ISIS.
- The setup-of party militias on and around Mount Sinjar leads regularly to tensions. Yet one can observe a clear pattern of de-confliction, where Iraqi security forces steadily strengthen their position.
- The presence of the PKK and its clones (HPG, YPG, YBŞ) increases tensions with the KDP and gives Turkey an excuse to interfere in Sinjar militarily. Ankara uses the fact that the Iraqis integrated PKK affiliated YBŞ in the PMU as an excuse to justify its actions as part of broader effort to check Iran's influence in the region.
- The Iraqi PMU became the bogeyman of Western analysts, who read them simply as Iranian stooges. Such a reading disregards the social and political realities on the ground and ultimately leads to a wrong analysis of ongoing developments.

US Restraint is not Dis-Engagement

The main aim of the conference was to look into the interrelationship between the Kurdish areas of Rojava/AANES and Sinjar. Introductory speakers gave a cursory view on either region when setting the scene. It is still helpful though to start this report with a point on US Middle East policies

The important questions on this topic are how diffused power relationships are, who can make a difference on the ground and who can influence it. The US is no stranger to the realities and intransigencies of dealing with sub-national actors and the Biden administration has no deep philosophical opposition to self-governance in Iraq or in Syria. Biden is comfortable with the idea of ethnic separation in order to avoid a civil war. The premise is that there are suboptimal conditions on the ground. In any case, the administration does not want to over-commit itself. Because for decades the US has overpromised in the Middle East, now it is time for more realistic engagement in the region.

Vital factors are whether a peculiar situation on the ground does affect the security in the American homeland and whether it is in the wider security interest of the USA. Not every issue in the Middle East applies to this. There is need for a larger consensus within the other stakeholders on the ground, for now the focus is counter-terrorism, although the administration tries to put terrorism back into perspective as well as humanitarianism. Regarding the question of other stakeholders and the issue of US interests, some commented that in case the USA told the Kurds (AANES) to sort out their problems with the regime, all Arab nations will follow suit, in order to come back to Syria.

Some people think Biden is a much more constrained international leader than other democrats of the past, but he still is a deep believer in alliances and partnerships and much about shared international project and responsibilities with allies and partners. He still believes in post WW2 liberal order. However, the inconvenient reality is that Trump's approach and disinterest in international politics and relations resulted in America losing credibility. Biden inherited USA weaker than it could have been and was working with a weaker base. He has emphasized democratic value and human rights as America's response to rising authoritarianism as well as to the question when military force is appropriate and effective and when it becomes part of the problem.

In addition, the geopolitical frame has changed since 2014, in the grand strategy of the USA, the preeminent arena where geopolitical conflicts take place is in the Middle East but the US' interest has decreased. Now Ukraine is dominating the diplomatic arena between the US and Russia.

Rojava/AANES

On "Rojava" (West) a speaker pointed out that even the name of the region reflects nationalist sentiment rather than geographic or historic reality, after all, for centuries Kurdistan was understood to be divided between "Bakur" the North (in nowadays Turkey) and "Bashur" the South (in modern Iraq). It was only after the WW1 and with the creation of the Syrian mandate that Kurdish nationalists started to call parts of Northern Syria "Rojava". Geographically speaking the region is a continuation of the Bashur Kurdish region from Iraq westwards and the Bakur Kurdish region from Turkey southwards. There is no clear ethnic demarcation line between the Turkish and the Syrian sides, as Kurdish, Arab and, to a lesser degree Turkish/Türkmen groups live intertwined on both sides along the border, Christians though live predominantly in Syria. Yet given circumstances nowadays "Rojava" became a reality in its own right.

Throughout the 20th century, Kurdish elites have answered to the call of Kurdish national aspirations differently: nationalist, left-wing revolutionary and Islamist tendencies are strongest. Until this day, only nationalists (like KDP and PUK in Bashur/Iraq) and revolutionaries (the PKK, in Syria/Rojava) have managed to hold territory and to govern over a population. The establishment of de-facto PKK rule over parts of Northern (“Rojava”) and North-Western Syria is due to several factors. To begin with: it mirrors changes within the PKK such as the creation of the Union of Societies of Kurdistan (KCK) and within that framework, the foundation of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and People’s Defence Forces (YPG plus Women’s Defence Forces YPJ) for Syria. Secondly, the high amount of legitimacy gained by PYD and YPG/YPJ within the broader Kurdish movement, tensions with other Kurdish organisations notwithstanding. This legitimacy originates with the fact that, thirdly, the PYD and YPG/YPJ were able to fill the administrative void the Syrian regime left behind and finally that they have proven their value on the battlefield against the Islamic State in 2014 and ever since.

Autonomy between Turkish Fears and Russia’s interests

“Rojava” is not entirely the same as the “Autonomous Administration of North-Eastern Syria” AANES. For instance, Turkey has occupied Kurdish-inhabited Afrin in 2018 and other areas of Rojava in 2019 whereas purely Arab regions such as Raqqa are part of AANES. Yet, Turkey could not “solve” the Rojava/AANES reality to its liking (i.e., by dissolving it). The sheer existence of Rojava/AANES poses a serious challenge for Turkey: From a strategic point of view, Ankara fears a development in Syria akin to the KRG in Iraq, i.e. another self-confident US-sponsored autonomous Kurdish region in its neighborhood inspiring Turkey’s Kurds. Therefore, Ankara opposes any step of international recognition or any autonomy agreement between the Syrian government and AANES. A federal Syria with a recognized and substantial Kurdish autonomy is anathema and opposition to it yields political gain for RecepTayyip Erdoğan. Turkey’s president and his AKP uses the “Rojava threat” to isolate the HDP within the Turkish opposition and to consolidate his leadership within the political right, because only a coalition between CHP, Good Party and the HDP could end their decades-long rule over Turkey. As of now, Erdoğan is quite successfully exploiting Rojava/AANES, with the exception of the HDP the opposition parties cannot move too far from the understanding that Rojava/AANES is a threat and therefore Turkish action in Rojava/AANES is justified. Thus, Turkish military action has not only a strategic rationale but also one dictated by domestic politics.

On the other hand, Russia tries to prevent another Turkish offensive and to keep Turkey at bay and abiding by the Russian-Turkish agreement of 2019. This is why Russian troops control strategic roads in the area, which is its main rationale – and justification – to stay in the region. Russian relations with the PYD predate Russian intervention in Syria and are in general cordial. However, most Kurds think that Russia betrayed Kurdish interests when Moscow allowed Turkish troops to enter Afrin. This reading of events apparently outweighs Russia’s successful settling of problems caused by the Turkish intervention in Kobane. As a matter of principle, Russia does not oppose the idea of Kurdish autonomy in Syria but insists on an understanding with Damascus notably the establishment of viable administrative links, and opposes secession. Until now, Russian mediation between the autonomous region and Damascus did not yield tangible results because Asad does not want to change the structure of the country, which would be the case, if he formally recognized autonomy.

Turkey’s lackluster behavior regarding the fight against ISIS and proven importance of Kurdish Forces will further aggravate already strained relations between the US and Turkey and could allow Russia to interfere. All depends on how good American diplomacy is and how effective the Americans can

be in terms of approaching these issues. Strategically speaking Russia puts the US presence in the region into the framework of a broader Russian-American confrontation. It views the US presence in Syria as illegal even if the Kurdish authorities agreed to it. Furthermore, Russia regards American strengthening of the Kurds as support for a specific ethnic and confessional group, which could provoke internal tensions and pose a threat to regional stability.

Internal Aspects: administration and security

Turkey puts much pressure on Rojava/AANES. One of its most important tools is water, because Ankara controls the water supplies to Syria. This led to major electricity outages affecting most of the population. Furthermore, the general lack of water and the destruction of distributional systems add further pressure on affected communities in the area, aggravating tensions. Even so, AANES is functioning, the administration is quite big (or bloated) but relatively functioning as salaries were doubled. Thus, civil servants are much more content than in Iraqi Kurdistan. It remains a Kurdish (meaning one party) dominated, highly securitized administration. There is widespread critique on the administration in general and on the education system in particular: education is ideologically biased and academic degrees are nowhere recognised. According to participants, neither of these shortcomings will change for the better anytime soon. A remarkable step is the increasing visibility of women in the broader public and in leadership and decision-making positions.

Both AANES and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are Kurdish (PYD and YPG/J) dominated, but they include Arabs and others. Although Arabs provide for about half of the SDF's fighting force, they are clearly underrepresented in command and leadership positions. The Arab-Kurdish alliance depends on relations with various Arab tribes, which have their own internal divisions regarding politics. Thus, tensions between Arabs and Kurds within the SDF do exist, but as long as SDF fighters can be paid, they will stay united. However many Kurds share the Arabs' resentment against the AANES leadership (i.e. the PKK). Tensions between Kurdish factions – rather than between Arabs and Kurds – may increase further, perhaps leading to an inner Kurdish conflict. In general, the wider populace is concerned about the future of AANES, which is still very dependent on the USA, whose commitment to AANES is anyone's guess as the US neither has established a transparent local government, nor promised any kind of nation building in Syria but is obviously content with the current situation.

A dominant view prevailed that the future of AANES/Rojava depends on a meaningful solution for Syria. As of now, there are multiple stalemates in the country blocking any development. Further on the possibility of elections was debated a common view emerged according to which ideally this should take place when a democratic process in Syria could be initiated. Yet one should not disregard elections in Rojava/AANES only, even if they may lack international legitimacy. As one participant put it: one should remain realistic and focus on creating a democratic experience/memory regarding the electoral process. This is necessary because the implementation of an electoral process is delicate enough, given the politicized role of security forces in elections in the region and highly politicized administrations. Someone also cautioned that elections might raise false hopes and result in a backlash.

Friends with benefits but the wrong ideology?

When discussing Rojava, participants underscored the importance of the al-Hasaka Prison battle or al-Hasaka battle, which lasted from January 20 until 31, 2022. In this campaign, ISIS managed to liberate up to 600 fighters from the facility. Kurdish forces could only with great sacrifices hold their

ground and subdue the uprising. Because of the break, ISIS gained a battalion of trained and committed forces. Militarily speaking this will change the security dynamics because until recently ISIS only controlled some isolated pockets in the desert. At the time of the presentation it was not yet clear where they way it will go. However, one speaker suspected that the fighters would not integrate themselves in either Iraqi or Syrian battlespaces but will be transferred to Idlib for rest and recuperation for a period of 2-3 months. Most of the ISIS leadership is also located there. Someone hinted at negative effect of the ISIS breakout on Kurdish-Arab relations, as many sympathizers find this audacious operation impressive.

Three main conclusions were to be drawn: First ISIS is not a spent force; second, the Kurdish forces (i.e. SDF) are net contributors for European security but overburdened with guarding and managing the penitentiary facilities. Attempts of the Rojava authorities to sending back ISIS fighters to their countries of origin (i.e. European and Arab countries) in order to alleviate pressure on the overcrowded prison system have thus far remained unanswered by the countries of origin. This, third, necessitates continued US-presence in the region (meaning AANES); hence, American presence in Northern Syria will continue for a while, reassuring AANES to be a key partner in the fight against ISIS. The YPG/YPJ battlefield prowess and their commitment fighting ISIS devaluated the role of Turkey because Ankara declined to fight against ISIS when the US asked them. In fact, Turkey treats the YPG as a bigger threat than ISIS. Yet one speaker viewed the cooling of relations between the US and Turkey, was largely due to the elevation of the PYD's status by the US. This said there is no change in the overall pattern of US-Turkish cooperation in other fields, as an example, the US remained silent when Turkey bombed Sinjar (Shingal).

One surprising factor is the silence of the Europeans. Home to millions of Kurds and under direct threat from ISIS they committed ground troops only after the US and YPG had already stopped ISIS expansion in Kobane. Yet there are legal and ideological issues for the Europeans to consider. One factor is the support the "Rojava revolution" enjoys with part of the (well-connected) political public in the EU, where the PKK – referred to as the mother organisation of both PYD and YPG/YPJ – is a banned. As a matter of fact, the Europeans who until now avoided any open and substantial debate on the Kurdish issue may find in "Rojava" the final proof that the Kurdish issue writ large is a "footnote topic" no longer but has become an issue of international (and in many EU countries also: national) relevance.

Cooperation with banned organisations is complicated, even if it can be mutually beneficial. This is especially the case when one branch of state authority bans an organisation whilst another branch needs to cooperate with it. This holds true for the USA where the PKK is a proscribed as a "Narco-Terrorist" organisation but then deems cooperation with the YPG a necessity. Therefore, Western Powers put pressure on the Syrian Kurds to distance themselves from the PKK and the Öcalan-cult and keep their distance to Iran. One result was the creation of the SDF as a military outlet allowing the US and YPG to cooperate without being officially in cahoots. As a result, two political discourses emerged, whereas some of Rojava's political elites embrace a "Rojava first" narrative, others would keep themselves committed to the PKK's overall strategy in the region. The PKK leadership in Iraq is still critical of getting too close to the USA. Apparently, the "Rojava-First" camp enjoys more support because more and more Kurds frustrated with the influence of the PKK in Syrian affairs.

Sinjar

Tiny Sinjar is a mountain range in northwestern Iraq, south of Kurdistan proper along the main transversal route from Tell-Afar in Iraq to Haseke in Syria/Rojava. It is widely seen as a key element for Iran's "Shiite Crescent" stretching from Iran – Erbil – Sinjar to Syrian and to the Mediterranean. Sinjar's strategic value clearly outshines its economic role. Its inhabitants are mostly Kurdish-speakers of the Yazidi sect or religion. The Yazidi identity generally trumps their Kurdish one. Yazidis and Arabs live relatively close together around Sinjar Mountain and there are many mixed villages. In this regard it is vital how Yazidis see themselves; there is some ambiguity about their origins, some claim Arab, other Kurdish or ancient Iraqi origins. These interpretations reflect political affiliations: some Yazidi groups were close to the Iraqi government, some affiliated to the KDP. For centuries, Yazidis were victims of Sunni Islamic fanaticism: the tragic events of 2014 add just another link to an age-old sordid chain of massacres, pillaging and enslavement.

Overall Situation

The barren, tiny and poor villages of Sinjar are in a strategic position that makes them a preferable target for anyone who attempts to establish his rule in this area. Sinjar was (is?) part of the so-called disputed areas claimed by the KRG and until 2014 held by the KDP. It is therefore part of wider set of Erbil – Baghdad tensions. The- direct or indirect - presence of other outside actors adds further layers of conflict to an already complicated situation as they give a further geopolitical dimension.

Life somehow returned to the villages of Sinjar but returnees face severe hardship. ISIS intentionally left explosive devices behind some of them very well hidden and time to blow up years later in order to make the area inhabitable for the future. Help came from Bagdad and authorities were able to secure the main roads and facilities but individual citizens without expertise of their own or special connections to authorities able to commandeer experts for them are hardly capable to detect UXOs (unexploded ordnance). People fear these hidden devices because for them they are impossible to detect. There is also a lack of water and food creating problems for agriculture and cause a dire hygienic situation. Fuel is another issue, as temperatures in the mountain can become very low and houses are mostly broken and hardly weatherproof. Kerosene, the main fuel for heating and cooking, is often provided by NGOs and by the Japanese government. Even so, kerosene is a financial burden for all families. Furthermore, there is no cultural life other than the local taking care of themselves. It is therefore not surprising that many Yazidis living abroad do not plan to come back to the old Yazidi settlements in Sinjar Mountain at all.

Half of the population of Sinjar, around 200.000 people, have disappeared. One main issue is the demographic security. Tensions between the Yazidis and some of the Arab tribes are very high, because the Yazidis accuse them of cooperation with ISIS. What people had experienced with the onset war against ISIS was so traumatizing that it is going to take a long time to forgive and forget and reestablish a situation regarding security, democracy and demographics as it was pre 2014. Still, the return of displaced Sunni communities is going on.

Power holders: regular forces and militias

Political control of the area is highly militarized since armed groups pose as authority and security providers likewise. Until the ISIS onslaught in 2014, the KDP was de facto in power in Sinjar, after the KDP pulled out its Peshmerga Forces some of the PKK forces (mostly YPJ, YPG and HPG) secured the main escape routes for the Yazidis. They later came back and established bases on Sinjar Mountain.

Hence, the presence of YPG and YPJ forces. The two together sponsored the creation of a PKK affiliated Yazidi force, the YBŞ (Sinjar Resistance Units). The YBŞ consists of three layers: (a) a small *noyau dur* of convinced PKK supporters, (b) teenagers, whose parents were killed or disappeared during ISIS rule and who want revenge (c) other recruits. The KDP and even the PUK are present too with “their” Yazidi units. The majority of security forces are Iraqi though, and consists of mainly of the 15.th Division and the PMU (People’s Mobilisation Units, often referred to with their Arabic name al-Hashd al-Sha’abi, *Hashed*). PMUs in the region draw their troops mostly from Shiite militias like Kata’ib Hizbullah, Nujaba and Asa’ib Ahl al-Haqq. There is an interesting development with the Hashed, first the YBŞ joined them, which means Bagdad pays (and equips?) a PKK affiliated militia.

The 2020 “Sinjar Agreement” between Bagdad and Erbil opened the way for de-confliction. Following the signing of the agreement, the situation changed already, from a domination of militias to a massive Iraqi security presence on the main road. Thus most Hashed moved south of Sinjar Mountain others remain reflagged as part of the Federal Police. Right now, negotiations concerning a transfer of former YPG military personnel in in the Iraqi federal police or local police or Iraqi army are ongoing. Meanwhile, there are only Iraqi security checkpoints around Mount Sinjar. Iraqi security forces have assumed command and control over most of the border posts and main roads around Mount Sinjar. Border crossings/checkpoints are a major source of revenue. Tankers with Syrian oil are coming from Syria, cement trucks are going to Syria. The traffic is impressive usually dozens of trucks are waiting for processing whenever one passes by. The economic effect is considerable: revenues from checkpoints finance headquarters of the groups in charge and even turn in profit. The actual sums may vary from a minimum of a couple hundred of dollars a day up to several thousand. The Iraqi-Syrian border north of Sinjar is the most attractive point because it provides also an easy passage for goods reaching Turkey as well as for the movement of people.

Iraqi security forces do not yet control all important checkpoints and positions in the area. There is an ongoing presence – if not domination - of non-Iraqi security forces on the mountain proper, namely PKK-forces mostly YPG and YBŞ. The presence of the PKK and its affiliates in Sinjar provokes Turkey, which wages its own war against the PKK and its affiliates in Northern Iraq. Ankara conducts regular drone strikes against their positions in Sinjar. That is why international organizations in the region communicate their movement to Turkey in advance, and therefore *nolens volens* accept Ankara’s *droit de regard* in the region. Ankara puts its own military action in a broader context. According to a view proposed by Ankara, by cooperating with the Hashd the PKK supports Iran’s regional designs in Sinjar – namely the establishment of a Shiite land corridor from Iran to Syria. Turkey’s intervention – and its anti-Iranian framing – invites Iran on the scene, making Sinjar a scene of confrontation of regional powers.

Some questioned why there no official Yazidi signature under the Sinjar agreement. The problem is there is not one Yazidi position. The Yazidi know they are no big force and part of their survival strategy is to join stronger groups, and thus have hardly a unified position. They also feel that said agreement does not serve them enough. The Iraqi government’s weakness acerbates this problem. Bagdad should reconsider some of its approaches to the agreement and put a stronger focus on the Sinjar issue and it should mediate between all the Yazidi groups, but that has not happened yet.

More on the PMUs

Paramilitaries and militias dominate both Rojava/AANES and Sinjar their role oscillates between that of a regular army and an armed community group. Yet they apparently play different roles in

Rojava/AANES and Sinjar. Narratives and discourse on these groups are heavily loaded and distorted for ideological and political reasons. Thus, one expert found the results of her fieldwork in contradiction to publicly held views, originating mostly from US think tanks. One such point is recruitment on behalf of the so-called “Shiite” militias or PMU/Hashd ash-Shaa’bi. Contrary to the recruitment of Sunni jihadi groups in Syria, members and cadres of Iraqi PMU are always trying to mobilize civilians on the ground from different religious or ethnic groups. This image maybe a public design and serve for political campaigning. Still, they have done their homework diligently by studying the field carefully and identifying personalities in the Iraqi disputed areas that can conduct bottom-up mobilization. They also focus on groups of former Iraqi army soldiers who fought together. They spend much time for trust building beforehand. Thus, whenever such a group joins the whole unit benefits from their camaraderie. Groups like these are hard to penetrate which contributes to the overall cohesion of the unit. The PMU managed to get a foothold in the Iraqi society outside their traditional Shiite comfort zone. This is partially because the government cannot control the periphery enabling PMU to embed themselves in local structures, which in turn allows them to engage in the (informal) economy, different industries and control of checkpoints. For local civilians this is also an opportunity for livelihood.

Over a short time, the PMU became social and political actors in their own right. Yet, the international community addresses the reality of militias in the region almost exclusively through the prism of counter-terrorism. This may help for Washington and Teheran to settle some accounts but it would not really affect the influence of the PMU on the ground, specifically for local communities in the periphery. The second miscalculation has been that after the role they played in the violent suppression of the protest movement in Iraq (2019-21) the PMU had lost credibility and appeal within the wider population. However, having mistrust or being disappointed with the PMUs does not necessarily de-legitimize them, as it does not affect the inclination or willingness to turn to them when it comes to solving certain issues. This also shows not to overemphasize ideology or religiously derived loyalty; similar to the PYD/YPG it is much more about who gets a job done – i.e. providing security – rather than ideological or religious affiliation. In either case, it seems less a sectarian than a class issue: People with access to decision makers in Bagdad are less likely to contact those groups. If one is in no such position, contacting the PMU maybe the only pathway to go, regardless of alleged human rights violations.