



# PKK THREATS TO THE SECURITY OF TURKMEN IN IRAQ

SELÇUK BACALAN

## INTRODUCTION

**T**fter the terrorist attack of the PKK against Turkish soldiers in Northern Iraq in 2019 and then the dangerous terrorist attack that took place at the entrance of the General Directorate of Security in the capital Ankara on the opening day of the new legislative year of the Turkish Grand National Assembly on October 1, 2023, An-

kara's fight against terrorism has gained a new dimension with Operation Claw. In this context, security meetings between Turkish and Iraqi officials have increased. The first security meeting between Türkiye and Iraq took place in Ankara on December 19, 2023, after the local elections in Iraq. Minister of Foreign Affairs Hakan Fidan, Minister of National Defense Yařar Güler, Director of

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Previous terrorist attack on Turkmen Front office in Kifri district

the National Intelligence Organization İbrahim Kalın, and their Iraqi counterparts attended the meeting. One of the most important results of this meeting was the Türkiye-Iraq Security Summit held in Baghdad on March 14, 2024. At the summit, important issues such as the economy and energy, especially the issue of terrorism, were discussed. The most important item in the final declaration of the meeting was the Iraqi National Security Council's declaration of the PKK as a "Banned" organization in Iraq. Although Iraq did not explicitly declare the PKK as a

"terrorist organization," Türkiye welcomed Iraq's approach. It should be noted that the PKK, whose presence and influence in the remote areas of Northern Iraq have been greatly diminished following Türkiye's Operation Claw in the fight against terrorism, has recently been active in the residential areas in Northern Iraq. The disputed territories between the Iraqi central government and the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), where Turkmen populations are densely populated, are among the enclaves that the PKK has been trying to penetrate.

## **PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE PATRIOTIC UNION OF KURDISTAN PARTY AND THE PKK**

Türkiye's new doctrine in the fight against terrorism has shifted to "eliminating the threat at its source." In his speech following the Presidential Cabinet meeting held on March 4, 2024, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said, "In the summer, we will have completed our control in the area of Operation Claw to a significant extent, so we will have the opportunity to take much more effective measures." This statement indicates that the military operation against the PKK will be on the agenda in the summer. Turkish operations are expected to be concentrated in the Qandil, Gara, Hakurk, and Martina areas, with plans to penetrate about 40 kilometers deep into Northern Iraq to ensure security in these areas. Mount Qandil, the terrorist organization's stronghold, is geographically very close to the city of Sulaymaniyah, which Pavel Talabani, the leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan Party (PUK), controls. The organization has taken control of Sulaymaniyah. Recently, with the partnership of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the PKK, many developments

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The most prominent examples of this are Bafel Talabani's visit to Syria within arrangements by the United States forces present in northern Syria, to meet with terrorist leader Mazlum Abdi, Abdi's visit to Sulaymaniyah on another US arrangements, the PUK's training of members of the PKK, which came to light during the targeting of the Arbat airport in Sulaymaniyah, and finally Talabani's speech at the Mesopotamia Forum in Baghdad on March 3, 2024, in which he stated that "We do not consider the PKK to be our enemy, we consider it to be another Kurdish party". In this context, Türkiye's Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan demanded sanctions against the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Sulaymaniyah Governorate administration for their support of the PKK.

### **PKK'S NEW CORRIDOR**

The terrorist organization tried to show its presence in Kirkuk by exploiting the lack of authority and chaos Iraq witnessed in the post-2003 period. The PKK has established several headquarters in some residential areas in Kirkuk, such as Tak Tak, Koy Sancak, and Kara Hancir on the Kirkuk-Su-

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After the results of the recent local elections in Kirkuk province, the PUK believes that it is entitled to one of the top positions in the province, given the number of votes and seats it has recently won in Kirkuk. The PUK may nominate a candidate from the New Generation Movement to obtain one of these positions. This is because this movement is very close to the PKK, although the New Generation Movement did not win any seats in the Kirkuk Provincial Council in the last local elections.

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part of Diyala province and politically part of Sulaymaniyah province. The PKK, which is trying to escape from the mountains due to Türkiye's military operations, is trying to create a new terror corridor to Syria with the help of Bafel Talabani. This corridor consists of Sulaymaniyah, Chamchamal (which contains significant reserves of energy resources and is therefore considered one of the most important places in Iraq's energy geopolitics), Kirkuk, Qayyarah, Makhmur, and Sinjar. This corridor will be a new zone for the organization's terrorist activities. The Turkmen-majority province of Kirkuk, which Türkiye closely monitors, is at the center of the PKK's new corridor in Iraq. According to the statements of some politicians in the region, the organization engages in drug trafficking and human trafficking through this corridor to provide financial resources for itself.

## TARGETING TURKMENS

Due to Türkiye's military operation in Northern Iraq as part of the fight against terrorism, the PKK occasionally targets members of the Iraqi Turkmen Front, which has close ties with Türkiye. In this context, on September 3, 2022, the PKK



The funeral of Taher, the former security chief of ITF who was killed in a bomb attack

targeted the Iraqi Turkmen Front's office in Sulaymaniyah and seriously wounded one of its members. In addition, on March 3, 2023, Ahmed Taher, one of the former heads of the security department of the Iraqi Turkmen Front, was killed as a result of the remote detonation of a bomb planted in his vehicle. Considering the timing of the attacks against the Iraqi Turkmen Front, it can be said that the PKK, which suffered heavy losses in the operations launched by Türkiye against them in Northern Iraq as part of the fight against terrorism, wants to send a message to Türkiye through attacks against Turkmens. Considering the operations carried out by Turkish security forces in Northern Iraq, it is possible to conclude that the organization, whose area of operation in the region has shrunk, sees Turkmens as a new target to respond to

Türkiye. Therefore, it is of great importance that the Iraqi Turkmen Front officials discuss possible threats against Turkmens with Iraqi security forces. It should not be overlooked that the organization may open a wider area for itself in Kirkuk. Within the framework of this possibility, if the Iraqi security forces do not take the necessary measures to protect Turkmens, which are one of the founding elements of Iraq, a situation of uncertainty and security instability may await Kirkuk, which is called the miniature of Iraq.

The Turkish military operations planned for the summer months are expected to put great pressure on the terrorist organization and contribute to its loss of large areas of control in the mountains. Perhaps this could lead the organization to become more ag-



Some elements of the PKK fought central government forces when they wanted to regain control of Kirkuk in October 2017

gressive and thus seek to increase its influence and presence in Turkmen areas, Kirkuk, and Mosul (especially in and around Tal Afar) and gain new territories in these areas. In this context, it would not be wrong to say that a similar danger may arise in Turkmen regions such as Tuz Khurmatu and Kafri, where the PKK is trying to expand its area of activity and influence. It is worth mentioning that Hussein Alloush, the leader of the Turkmen Bayat tribe in the Kafri region, was killed in a drone attack on March 31, 2024. Arshad al-Salhi, the MP representing the Iraqi Turkmen Front in Kirkuk, confirmed that

the attack was carried out by the terrorist organization. The last activity of the terrorist organization in Kirkuk to show its continued presence in Kirkuk was on March 8, 2024. On the occasion of International Women's Day celebrations, supporters of the terrorist organization hung banners and pictures of the dead women of the organization in the center of Kirkuk city.

### IS THIS A NEW SCENARIO SIMILAR TO SINJAR?

Other areas where the PKK's presence and affiliation are considered controversial



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are Makhmur and Sinjar. The Sinjar region of Nineveh province and Mount Karachok to its east is known as the route used by PKK/People's Protection Units terrorists (YPG) to cross from Syria to Iraq and from Iraq to Syria. The Ovakoy region (northwest of Nineveh), which forms the link between Iraq and Türkiye, is of great geopolitical importance. It constitutes a strategic region that will control the Tel Afar-Mosul-Baghdad highway and the railways on the same road within the scope of the development road project planned to be built between Türkiye and Iraq. There are also some Turkmen villages in Sinjar. Sinjar

also borders the Turkmen city of Tal Afar in Nineveh province.

The Sinjar Resistance Units were formed after the ISIS attack on Sinjar in 2014. The PKK / YPG supported the Sinjar Resistance Units by allowing PKK/YPG elements to operate in Sinjar. Thus, the Sinjar Resistance Units established in Sinjar City, like the YPG, became one of the regional organizations of the PKK. Therefore, Türkiye conveyed its concerns to the governments in Baghdad and Erbil regarding the presence of terrorist organizations in Sinjar. To end the presence

of the PKK in Sinjar, the Sinjar Agreement was signed on October 9, 2020, between the Iraqi central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq with the support of Türkiye. The agreement included the establishment of security in Sinjar, the reconstruction of the area, the cessation of the presence of all foreign forces in and around Sinjar, including the PKK and its affiliates, and the repatriation of the population displaced by ISIS attacks. To date, however, no concrete and effective steps have been taken to implement this agreement. There are even some proposals to reach a new agreement commensurate with the current circumstances.

It is noteworthy that there are some contradictions in the content of the agreement that impose changes regarding the groups. The Popular Mobilization Forces, which were established with Iranian support to fight against ISIS, were later institutionalized under the Iraqi Ministry of Defense. It is known that the Popular Mobilization Forces, which entered Sinjar to eliminate the presence of ISIS, worked together with the Iranian-led Sinjar Resistance Units, and that members of the Sinjar Resistance Units changed their positions and entered the city as part of the Popular Mobilization Forces to break the Sinjar Agreement. The Popular Mobilization Forces are also present in Kirkuk, a predominantly Turkmen city. It is likely that the organization, which will be under pressure as a result of Türkiye's planned military operations against the PKK in the summer, will try to create a basis for its legitimacy by applying the same Sinjar scenario in Kirkuk. The PKK can do this by establishing a new militia under any name in Kirkuk and then incorporating it into the Popular Mobilization Forces.

It is worth noting that "Tawgera Azadi," which is considered the political extension of the PKK, organized the first regional conference in Kirkuk in January 2016, intending to establish autonomy in Kirkuk.

Information from the region indicates that there are allegations that the organization, through its presence and activities in Sinjar, is recruiting young Turkmen from Tal Afar in exchange for money. Therefore, the Turkmen presence in Tal Afar may benefit from the possibility of Türkiye including Sinjar in its operations expected to take place next summer.

## **CONCLUSION: TÜRKİYE'S ANTICIPATED OPERATION WILL PROVIDE STABILITY**

The joint consultation meetings between Türkiye and Iraq on the upcoming military operation indicate that Baghdad is leaning towards this agreement. Indeed, Baghdad sees the PKK as a threat to Baghdad and Erbil. The PKK has evacuated more than 800 villages in northern Iraq and forced their inhabitants to flee. It is also worth mentioning that there are a considerable number of ISIS camps in Sinjar. It would not be wrong to say that Türkiye's operation will also serve the security of Iraq.

The declaration of the PKK as a banned organization in Iraq made them feel the importance of the threat it faced. Iraq's decision paved the way for Türkiye to cooperate with Iraq in the field of security. Türkiye's operation is expected to turn northern Iraq into a safe zone.

The Iraqi central government should work to remove the PKK from Iraqi territory, especially from Turkmen areas, to ensure security



and stability and to keep Turkmen areas free from the threat of terrorist organizations. At the same time, the removal of PKK from Iraqi territory will ensure the security of the region and facilitate Iraq to develop good relations with neighboring countries. When we look at Iraqi politics, we see that most of the political parties participating in the government have armed forces. It may be possible to increase the number of Turkmen in the Iraqi security forces or even create and support a special Turkmen force. If the PKK increases its influence here, Iraq's internal dynamics and Türkiye-Iraq relations will also be affected. The

presence of the terrorist organization will lead to a new security vacuum, especially in the disputed regions. Perhaps this situation could undermine the relative stability Iraq has achieved. Considering the energy resources in the Turkmen regions and their importance for Iraq, we can say that this situation will not only affect political and security stability but will also have negative repercussions on the Iraqi economy. Therefore, it is very necessary and appropriate to take concrete and effective steps towards a solution before the PKK expands its presence in these regions.

## About the Author

### Dr. Selçuk Bacalan

He completed his undergraduate studies at the Department of Social Studies at Gazi University in Ankara in 2008. He obtained a master's degree in social sciences in 2010 from Gazi University. His studies in the bachelor's and master's programs were within a scholarship provided by the Republic of Türkiye. He worked as a lecturer at Salahuddin University in Erbil from 2010-2011 and at the Faculty of Education at Kirkuk University from 2011-2015. In 2019, he completed his doctoral studies in the field of national identity at the Institute of Educational Sciences at Gazi University. Between 2020-2021, he served as vice president of the Turkmen Eli Cultural Center in Ankara, which is affiliated with the Turkmen Eli Cooperation and Culture Foundation. Selçuk Bacalan has academic and research experience in the field of Turkmen national identity and culture, migration and migrants. Currently, Selçuk Bacalan continues to work as an expert in Turkmen studies at the ORSAM Center in Ankara.



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### Center for Middle Eastern Studies

**Address** : Mustafa Kemal Mah. 2128 Sk. No: 3 Çankaya, ANKARA  
**Phone** : +90 850 888 15 20  
**Email** : info@orsam.org.tr  
**Photo** : Anadolu Ajansı (AA), Shutterstock