

Yet Another Complication in Nineveh: Retaking Tal Afar

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Hashd al-Shaabi launched an offensive on Tal Afar on 29 October; the looming recapture of Tal Afar prompted a strong reaction from Turkey, which maintains ties to the Turkmen population there. Tal Afar is thus yet another flashpoint of competing interests between Ankara, Erbil, Baghdad, and Tehran and can possibly further destabilise the situation in Nineveh.

Background

On 29 October, the Iraqi state-sponsored forces the Hashd al-Shaabi (HS) [opened](#) another front against the Islamic State (IS) in Nineveh. Advancing to the [northwest](#) through desert areas, its ultimate goal is to defeat IS in Tal Afar. The move provoked a strong reaction from Turkey, including their move to [amass additional troops](#) along the Iraqi border on 01 November. Turkey maintains strong ties with Sunni Turkmen and cited fears over possible sectarian violence against them incited by HS. Additionally, Turkey [has been voicing concerns](#) over the presence of Kurdistan Workers' Party-linked forces (PKK) in Nineveh, namely in Shingal. There have been [various unconfirmed reports](#) regarding the possibility of the PKK entering Tal Afar along with the HS. Containing the PKK in the region is one of Turkey's core interests. Moreover, given the already deteriorated relations between Ankara and Baghdad and competition between Iran and Turkey, Tal Afar is another flashpoint that adds to the complex situation. The question is why Tal Afar is strategically and symbolically important for Turkey, Baghdad and Tehran, and to what extent a looming struggle over its fate can lead to further destabilisation?

Tal Afar's Strategic Importance and Symbolism

Pre-IS, the sub-district of Markaz Tal Afar was inhabited mainly by Turkmen, with a minority of Sunni Arabs and Kurds. The Turkmen population is divided into a Sunni majority ([70-80 %](#)) and a Shiite minority (20-30 %). Tal Afar has traditionally been a [hotbed](#) for various Sunni insurgency groups in the post-2003 era given the fact that Sunni Turkmen enjoyed a [favourable position](#) during Saddam's regime and that many of the Tal Afar Turkmen held high posts in Saddam's security apparatus. It is one of the reasons why Sunni revisionism has found considerably fertile ground in Tal Afar. [By 2005](#), the area itself became one of the strongholds of

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Sunni insurgencies against the US forces and Baghdad government, including the previously named al-Qaeda in Iraq of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi. This trend has continued with other incarnations of Sunni extremist groups resurfacing after 2011. For IS, Tal Afar has similar importance as it did for its predecessors: it oversees the main route between Mosul and Raqqa and other IS-held territories in Syria, and serves as an important recruitment pool for its forces.

In post-Saddam Iraq, Turkmen Shiites have been favoured by Baghdad. However, most of the Turkmen Shiites and Kurdish population [left Tal Afar in 2014](#), adding to the many that left previously due to heightened sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shiites. Not only is Tal Afar one of the few areas with a significant and compact Shiite population in the Nineveh governorate, of which Baghdad can rely on, but it is also a symbolic prize for the HS and Baghdad government considering its strong Sunni revisionist tradition.

To add to the equation, Tal Afar district is considered a [disputed territory](#) between the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and Baghdad. However, the KRI only has a strong presence in its [northern parts](#) such as the sub-districts of Rabi'a and Zummar. Turkey also has a stake in Tal Afar given its long-standing policy of backing Turkmen in the region and interest in containing Iranian involvement. Ankara also wants to maintain its standing in post-IS Iraq and limit Iranian influence in its vicinity.

Iraqi and Iranian Interest and Hashd al-Shaabi Engagement

The advance from the south of Mosul along the northwestern axis is dominated by the HS elements, which have also cooperated with [Iraqi police](#) units. The [leading role](#) falls to hard-line Iran-backed elements of the HS, such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AHH) under the command of Qais Khazali. The other militias playing a prominent role in the operation are also mostly pro-Iranian, such as [Badr Corps](#), [Kata'ib Hezbollah](#) and [Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada](#). These armed actors employ a strong sectarian rhetoric. Leaders of the HS [have begun to claim](#) that after Tal Afar their next target will be IS in Syria, which may suggest that they acknowledge the fact that their direct participation in the Mosul liberation is unlikely.

The HS advance on Tal Afar does not seem to be the result of a sudden change of plans during the course of the Mosul operation but is more likely caused by a prior compromise between the HS, the Iraqi government, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and the US. Tal Afar is an important stronghold for Baghdad (and Tehran), with a 'loyal' Shiite Turkmen population. Thus, it could be seen as part of [Iran's wider effort](#) to create a corridor overseen by friendly forces stretching from Iran to Syria and Lebanon. This would create an uninterrupted land bridge to the Mediterranean, which would also serve as a barrier for Turkish influence in the region. Needless to say, predominantly-Sunni Nineveh is a problematic piece of this puzzle. [Reports](#) of the prominent al-Quds Commander, Qassim Souleimani, coordinating and overseeing the advance on Tal Afar also hint at the importance of the area for Tehran.

Baghdad has repeatedly expressed outcry against Turkish engagement in Nineveh. On 01 November, the [Iraqi Prime Minister \(PM\), Haidar Abadi](#), strongly reacted to Turkey's warmongering rhetoric and troop deployment at the border and warned against war with Turkey. For Baghdad, which has arguably only a limited capacity to undermine Turkish influence, supporting the PKK-linked forces in the region is a viable way to retaliate against Turkey. The PKK-linked forces in Shingal are [already backed by Baghdad](#) and are registered under the [HS umbrella](#). Lately, there have been [discussions](#) about the [possibility](#) of PKK-linked forces taking part in the Tal Afar offensive. [The Turkish pro-government media](#) has claimed that the pro-PKK forces are working actively to encourage Yazidis to take revenge on Turkmen. Sunni Turkmen leaders, who are considered to be pro-Turkey, themselves have concerns about the prospect of the PKK and the HS entering Tal Afar, which they [voiced](#) during a meeting with PM Abadi on 02 November.

From interactions with Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) officials, it seems that the KDP is also worried that further empowerment of the PKK and Iranian influence in Nineveh could provoke a Turkish intervention. The

KRG may also be worried about the proximity of hostile hard-line HS elements, such as AHH, whose leader Qais Khazali voiced his [enmity towards the Kurds](#) on numerous occasions.

The Turkish Reaction

On 24 October, president [Erdoğan warned](#) that he will not allow for Shingal to become “another Qandil”, referring to the PKK base in northern Iraq. Following this, on 29 October he cautioned in relation to Tal Afar that “if Hashd al-Shaabi terrorizes the region, our response would be different”. Following this caution, Turkey bolstered its military presence in Silopi with the [elite 28th Mechanized Brigade](#) from Ankara, as well as [other units](#) from across Turkey. This was in addition to the military build-up that Silopi had already experienced on the eve of the Mosul operation on 17 October. Importantly, Turkish defence minister [Fikri Işık asserted](#) that Ankara has “no obligation” to wait behind its borders and will do what is necessary if the PKK gains a foothold in Shingal. Such reactions are not surprising given that, for Ankara, its primary objective is to curb the PKK’s presence in the region and limit Iranian influence in Nineveh.

Adding to the Powder Keg

Tal Afar has become yet another flashpoint for the incompatible interests of Ankara and Baghdad/Tehran in Nineveh. The risk of a spark igniting a regional confrontation between Iran and Turkey in Nineveh should not be dismissed as it would endanger any hopes for post-IS stabilisation. The inflammable atmosphere once again highlights a need for a political agreement on the post-IS fate of Nineveh not only between Iraqi actors but also between regional players, namely Turkey and Iran. If actors continue to pursue their conflicting visions, there is an augmenting danger of further destabilisation of not only Nineveh but also the KRI. Whether through proxies or directly, it does not seem that Iran or Turkey are interested in engaging in an open confrontation on the ground in Iraq. On the other hand, post-coup Turkey is becoming an increasingly unpredictable and hard-to-read actor. Moreover, heated rhetoric between these actors drawing numerous ‘red lines’ for each other provides only a limited space for compromise. This combined with the proximity of hostile forces on the ground heightens risk of escalation and invites instability. It is thus imperative that an over-arching deal is reached for the post-IS governance of Nineveh, before regional actors take advantage of the uncertainty to pursue their own goals.

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