



Sinjar After ISIS: What The Peshmerga's All-Female Unit Can Do

February 8, 2017 **Christine Balling** *Foreign Affairs*

Related Categories: Iraq

When I first met Captain Khatoon Ali Krdr, at a peshmerga military base near Dohuk, in Iraqi Kurdistan, last June, her all-female Yazidi peshmerga unit, the Hezi Roj, or "Sun Force," was weeks away from graduating from its first basic infantry training course, which involved military discipline, physical conditioning, and the handling of weaponry such as selective-fire rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers. Khatoon had formed the Sun Force, the only all-female, all- Yazidi unit in the Kurdish peshmerga, in response to the horrors that the Islamic State (or ISIS) had inflicted on Sinjar, a majority-Yazidi district of Iraqi Kurdistan. In August 2014, ISIS had slaughtered over 5,000 Yazidi men in the district. And in Snuny, a town at the base of Mount Sinjar, where the Sun Force is currently deployed, ISIS had killed unknown numbers of Yazidi residents, dumping their bodies into mass graves before the peshmerga retook the town in 2015.

When I returned to Iraq seven months later, I met the Sun Force in Snuny, which is close to the Syrian border. The road there from Dohuk is broken up by peshmerga checkpoints. To the east, I saw the Syrian oil wells, whose smooth, rhythmic motions made it hard for me to believe that the ravaged city of Aleppo lay but a few hundred miles beyond. To the west, I saw an abandoned village where fresh mounds of dirt lay in the graveyard - the only sign that people still lived there. In Snuny, fewer than ten percent of the original population of approximately 150,000 have returned. Although the peshmerga provides security and has restored electricity by bringing in power generators, devastation is everywhere. The police station is a pile of rubble. A large school funded by the Kurdistan Regional Government - newly built when ISIS destroyed it - is but a pile of rubble and scattered desks. And what remains of the local clinic could be mistaken for an abandoned building, even though it is still operational, with a handful of doctors and nurses seeing hundreds of patients per day.

The Sun Force's makeshift base is a two-story building in front of which are parked a few transport vehicles. On the roof are a few soldiers who are on rotation for a 24-hour watch. The women's living quarters are on the second floor. The sparsely furnished rooms are heated only by portable kerosene heaters, and there are no modern bathrooms or showers.

The unit is composed of 123 soldiers, but there are only 20 to 40 on the base at any given time, since the fighters take ten-day rotations. The unit is part of the Sinjar Regiment, comprising 8,000 men and women. Khatoon reports directly to the regimental commander, Qasim Shesho, and the regiment protects the entire Sinjar district, including the towns north and south of Mount Sinjar, and the mountain itself. Although the regiment has retaken 100 percent of the area north of the mountain, 20 percent of the area to the south remains under ISIS' control.

As the regiment's senior intelligence official told me, reclaiming the last 20 percent from ISIS is just a matter of time, as ISIS is on the retreat and has not attempted to retake towns cleared by the peshmerga. The regiment's greatest challenge will be ridding the area of "illegal armed groups," such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK. He claims that in late 2014, the PKK, a Kurdish separatist group in Turkey, crossed into the Sinjar district "uninvited" - ostensibly to fight ISIS. Now, the PKK has become an occupying force, taking over government buildings and aggressively recruiting minors. A senior representative for the Kurdistan Region Security Council confirmed that this was true. He told me that there is growing concern about the PKK's presence in the region. The authorities, he said, have received complaints from parents about their children joining the PKK and from residents about the group's intimidation tactics. Despite a formal request by the Nineveh Governorate, the PKK refuses to leave. As a result, Yazidis and other former residents who fled the area and are currently living in camps for the internally displaced are too afraid to return. KRG officials claim that the PKK fighters - backed by Iran and Shiite militant groups - are interested in keeping the region unstable, so as to ensure safe passage for Shiite militants traveling between Iran and Syria.

The Sun Force's current mission is to defend territory retaken from ISIS. Although Khatoon's women are trained for combat, for now they patrol and man checkpoints. Regardless of whether they eventually engage ISIS directly, these women may play a key role in rehabilitating the region when ISIS is finally driven out, such as through the gradual repopulation of towns such as Snuny. In addition to combating emerging security threats, Khatoon's unit could serve as a reassuring presence in towns where citizens hope to return.

During my visit, I saw that the effect of the Sun Force's presence in Snuny. When I went out into the town accompanied by Khatoon and members of her unit, the few civilians we passed waved and smiled at them. When we stopped to survey the school destroyed by ISIS, a little girl appeared out of nowhere, offering us water from a plastic pitcher and cup. This bodes well for building the confidence of Yazidi citizens in the ability of the Kurdistan Regional Government to protect them. In spite of how limited the peshmerga's funding is, the Sun Force could engage directly with Snuny's residents by working with them on low-cost, small-scale community improvement projects, such as refurbishing the local clinic, building playgrounds, or repainting houses. Through this, it could instill a sense of hope and purpose, especially among the youngest citizens.

One evening at the base, when Khatoon and I sat in the lone guard post out of earshot from her troops, I asked her about her past as a Yazidi folksinger. She was well known and beloved in Kurdistan, performing frequently until ISIS invaded Sinjar. She shook her head dismissively and refused to elaborate on her past, simply saying, "The day ISIS started killing my people, I swore I would never sing again. My life now is as a peshmerga." Although Khatoon may never again inspire an audience with her artistry, her unit, whose very existence is a symbolic triumph over ISIS' reign of terror, could very well inspire a people who never thought they would see home again.

CHRISTINE BALLING is Senior Fellow for Latin American Affairs at the American Foreign Policy Council, in Washington, D.C.