Kurds, With U.S. Help, Join Forces to Take Mosul Dam

By Joe Parkinson

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DERIK, Syria—U.S. jets, drones and bombers pounded Sunni insurgent positions on Sunday to ease the siege of the strategically vital Mosul Dam, as Washington and its Kurdish allies turned up pressure on the radical group Islamic State.

The militants retreated from some of their positions around the dam, the latest front across Iraq where Kurds have gained in recent days with the aid of stepped-up U.S. air attacks, advisers and weapons, and a controversial new ally: fighters from a Kurdish guerrilla force that Washington considers a terror organization.
Hundreds of guerrillas linked to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or PKK, have this weekend fought in a broader Kurdish offensive against the insurgents under U.S. air cover. They joined the semiautonomous Iraqi Kurdish region’s Peshmerga forces around the regional capital of Erbil and the Sinjar mountains, where thousands from the Yazidi religious minority have been trapped by the rapid advance of Islamic State fighters.

It wasn’t immediately clear whether PKK guerrillas were assisting in the Kurdish ground offensive launched Sunday in conjunction with U.S. air attacks to retake the Mosul Dam.

Nevertheless, the emergence of the PKK—an umbrella organization that fights under different names in Syria, Turkey and Iraq—as a key player in the battle against the Sunni radicals is another stark example of how the rise of the Islamic State is scrambling diplomatic and battlefield alliances.

Last week, PKK commanders said they met U.S. advisers dropped on Mount Sinjar to assess the humanitarian crisis there and had "constructive discussions."

A U.S. defense official couldn’t confirm whether the meeting took place and stressed in response to reports that the PKK was fighting alongside the Peshmerga that "it's hard to tell from Washington who’s on the front line in a Kurdish-Iraqi fight."

The U.S. has designated the PKK a terrorist organization, and the U.S. "doesn't do business with them," the official added.

Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga fighters on Sunday head to the Mosul Dam, which they retook from Islamic State militants. Kurds have gained ground in recent days with the help of U.S. airstrikes and guerrillas linked to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or PKK, a controversial ally. Ahmad al-Rubaye/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images
"The bottom line is that our support is to the Iraqi security forces and the Kurdish forces," State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf said Sunday.

Battle-hardened after two years fighting Islamic State and other Islamist rebel groups in the multi-sided Syrian civil war, Kurdish guerrillas linked to the PKK have in recent weeks made a series of military gains that have spotlighted their growing sway.

The Kurdish region of Syria was largely left to its own devices by the army of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, drawing accusations the PKK's Syrian branch was in league with Damascus. PKK officials in Syria have denied those accusations.

Last week, the PKK's Syrian-based units advanced into Iraq and punctured Islamic State lines to help tens of thousands of Yazidis escape an encircled Mount Sinjar.

That followed a request from Iraqi Kurdish authorities—long a PKK rival for regional influence that the U.S. has begun arming to counter the Sunni insurgents—for PKK fighters to bolster beleaguered Peshmerga forces after humiliating losses to Islamists in several cities.

Yazidi refugees demonstrate training exercises at a YPG military base near Derek City, Syria, on Aug. 16, 2014. Erin Trieb for The Wall Street Journal

Now the fast-growing guerrilla force—which its leaders say has more than 20,000 fighters in Syria and at least double that in Iraq and Turkey—is engaged in a two-front battle against the Islamic State that has brought it closer to working in parallel with the U.S. military.

At a PKK training camp close to the Syrian town of Derik this weekend, the commander who led the PKK's Sinjar operation said his forces were growing in power and confidence.
"The Iraqi army collapsed and the Peshmerga failed. We are the only force who has repeatedly defeated jihadists," said Kawar Singali, who carries a U.S.-made M16 rifle he said he captured from a dead Islamic State fighter. "They fear us, and although no one is helping us, we are getting bigger and more experienced."

The PKK faces huge challenges. Besides the terror designation, it remains poorly financed and equipped and its rivalry with the Peshmerga could complicate the nascent battlefield alliance.

But its record of military success against jihadists—which contrasts with other, larger regional forces—is the latest example of how long-opposing interests are partially melding in the crucible of Iraq's conflict.

In another example, Iran and the U.S., on opposing sides in the Syrian civil war, have both sent advisers to the Kurdish region in recent weeks, putting them on the same side against Islamic State.

The U.S. and its Western allies are prohibited by law from providing weapons or training to designated terrorist organizations, but now find themselves fighting on the same side as the PKK and its affiliates to counter the Islamic State threat.

"The Iraqi Peshmerga have had tough times in the last two weeks, and the PKK guys seem to be on their game," said Michael Knights of the Washington Institute for Near East Affairs, a think tank. "The U.S. doesn't do business with terrorist organizations...but there's a lot they could turn a blind eye to."

Yazidi refugees watch a weapon demonstration at a YPG military base near Derek City, Syria, on Aug. 16, 2014. Erin Trieb for The Wall Street Journal
Scattered across Syria, Iraq, Tukey and Iran, the region's estimated 40 million Kurds are one of the world's largest stateless groups.

The PKK—which enjoys broad support among Kurdish communities in Syria, Turkey and among diaspora groups in Europe—has fought a 30-year war for autonomy against the Turkish state.

The group is detested by millions of Turks for its campaign against the conscript army and police that has included placing roadside bombs that have killed civilians and executing unarmed recruits.

But peace talks beginning in 2012 have greatly reduced violence. Last year the group's jailed leader, Abdullah Ocalan, announced an end to armed struggle against Turkey and on Sunday said in a statement that peace negotiations were "almost complete."

The shaky cease-fire with Turkey has allowed the PKK to focus its operations on the Kurdish region of Syria, where it has quietly expanded its local force—the People's Protection Units, or YPG—and successfully beaten back Islamist offensives on several strategic towns.

A journey through the Syrian Kurdish enclave of around 2 million reveals the PKK's Syrian branch firmly in control of security, with signs of its military force proudly on show. Billboards with pictures of "martyrs" who have died fighting Islamists can be seen at checkpoints and on public buildings.

Syrian commanders say the security and quality of life is improving as their guerrilla forces expand rapidly, propelled by thousands of young volunteers. Recruitment is boosted by the deployment of women soldiers on the front line, often in all-female units.

"The jihadists don't like fighting women, because if they're killed by a female, they think they won't go to heaven," said one female fighter.
Aldar Khalil, a top PKK official in Syria, said the guerrillas don't have vast stocks of heavy weapons but can easily buy lighter arms—mostly guns, ammunition and rocket propelled grenades—on the black market from well-established smuggling networks, using contributions from citizens and donations from Europe.

"Our youth are joining in the thousands. We are developing a serious force and are fighting on the front lines in many Iraqi towns," said Mr. Khalil, as he held meetings in a newly-built refugee camp housing 13,000 Yazidis in Syria's Derik province.

About 12 miles west of the camp, the guerrillas have set up a training facility for members of the Yazidi minority seeking revenge against the Islamists who captured their towns.

Camp commanders say hundreds of Yazidis—aged between 15 and 50—have already been trained and deployed on the front line. Dressed in starched new fatigues, their faces swaddled with scarves, sixty recruits on Saturday listened rapt as a mustachioed commander instructed them on setting up sniper positions or using rocket-propelled grenades against Islamic State militants.
"I came to fight here because everyone else abandoned us, including the Peshmerga," added 26-year old Ali Barkat.

The new military collaboration between the Peshmerga and the PKK comes after years of fraught relations. The Peshmerga which is run collectively by Iraqi Kurdistan’s two dominant parties, the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, rejects the PKK’s Marxist ideology and it is unclear if their improved ties can last. Some local media already reported rising tensions on certain battle lines.

But ties do appear to be improving:

Raw video shows U.S. airstrikes against ISIL targets on Saturday, near the Mosul Dam complex in Iraq. Photo: U.S. Central Command

"We are working together and we want to enhance our relations. Now we are in defensive mode but an advance will come soon," said Zagros Hawa, a PKK spokesman based in the group’s headquarters in Iraq’s Qandil mountains. "Now we are in defensive mode but an advance will come soon," he said.

At the PKK training camp, taking relief from the August heat from the Cyprus trees, PKK recruits—some as young as 15 with minimal training—were waiting to be ordered to the front line close to the Sinjar mountain.

"I joined to fight with PKK because I have nowhere else to go," said 28-year old Fesa Minchu, who said six of his family were killed when Islamic State stormed Sinjar.

Asked if he was scared he shook his head: "I just want revenge," he said.

—Felicia Schwartz contributed to this article.

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