

Gawlat stranded report II

22 Feb, 2016

Meeting with senior command in Sinjar (Sinjar)

From the outset it was made very clear that there would be no more Arabs in Sinjar ever again and that they were responsible for what happened here. Anyone the other side of the Peshmerga front line was considered to be working for ISIS. This was the attitude before the subject of the Gawlat stranded was even mentioned.

It was claimed there was proof that the group was affiliated with ISIS. Their involvement in the mass killing of Yazidis and mass graves in the area of Hardan was mentioned. We heard from a different source that the Yazidi victims of Hardan had sent messages to their relatives saying that it was their Arab neighbours who were killing them. It was claimed that the stranded people are simply waiting for ISIS to return in force and are trying to infiltrate Peshmerga-held territory in the meantime. There was also the mention of the fierce resistance Peshmerga had faced during the battle for Gawlat, and that nine suicide bombers had come from the village population. The losses sustained by Peshmerga during this battle seem to have added further emotion to the issue of the stranded people.

It was claimed that there had been no attacks by ISIS on the stranded people (they had reported being mortared) and the photos of trenches dug for children were completely fabricated for the purpose of drumming up support. Further, they were being directly supported by ISIS and it was impossible for them to live under ISIS for 15 months without being with them.

The example of Qabusiya was given – when the Peshmerga went to liberate that area, some families did not withdraw with ISIS. When the Peshmerga left and ISIS took it back, they killed anyone who did not withdraw with them. Why, it was said, should it have been any different with Gawlat? The feeling was that if these people were not with ISIS, they would not be alive.

It was made very clear that the stranded people in Gawlat were not civilians but ISIS. There was anger at the attention that this case had received, and negative comments were made regarding the US involvement. There was an effort to describe the Peshmerga as a fair, humanitarian force, apparently for reasons of reassurance. However, the stranded people were clearly regarded as the enemy with absolutely no right to assistance.

23 Feb, 2016

Meeting with commander of Gawlat Peshmerga (Gawlat)

Gawlat is an Arab village (Jaesh Tribe) located on the eastern tip of Sinjar mountain. It is now empty and significantly destroyed with reported heavy IED contamination. The Peshmerga frontline is on the eastern edge of the village with ISIS 500m beyond that.

The commander was more reasonable, highlighting that there were cases of ISIS keeping people trapped in villages close to the Peshmerga to use as human shields. He claimed that the people were ISIS sympathisers but not necessarily ‘full ISIS’.

His biggest concern was perception. He referred to any aid given to the stranded population as a ‘spark’ that would ignite Yazidi anger/retaliation. Furthermore, if they were to let any through the Peshmerga line, Yazidis would undoubtedly kill them. *Reading between the lines there is a clear KRG fear of losing control of their newly acquired Yazidi demographic.*

He spoke of the Peshmerga as a humanitarian force and that if they could help innocent people, they would, but this was not the time as there is no mechanism in place to vet and secure the stranded population. As reasonable as he was, however, he still considered the majority of the group as being with ISIS in one way or another.

A secondary fear was that the group consisted of infiltrators on two levels. Firstly, that they were close enough to the Peshmerga line to report back to ISIS on movements etc. from where they are. Secondly, that if they are let through the line, they might act as spies and report back to ISIS. (ISIS has apparently often tried to send innocent looking families through to collect information.)

He said that perhaps, further down the line, with the liberation of Mosul, they could decide through the court who was innocent and then help them.

23 Feb, 2016

Meeting with ICRC (Zummar)

The previous background and above issues were shared with ICRC and their delegate was in agreement. They had also met similar challenges and were looking for ways to proceed. It was stressed that the above difficulties represent a significant challenge to resettlement, so the provision of critical aid is the immediate goal.

Security concerns must be treated seriously and more information on the group is required. Questions to be asked included: How have they survived so far? – Where has their food and water been coming from? How are their phones charged? – If by generators, where does the fuel come from? Have they really been attacked by ISIS? - Is there any proof of this?

Advocacy at the senior political level is required but clear goals need to be set.

Conclusions & Recommendations

The recent attack on a Peshmerga convoy behind Peshmerga lines has heightened KRG/Peshmerga mistrust of Arabs and this was evident on ground. Roads were closed after sundown and movement in Arab areas heavily restricted. One soldier stated that he had been working in the area for years and he was witnessing increasing Arab violence and attacks against Peshmerga/Asayesh.

Although there were varying levels of anti-Arab sentiment (there are even reports of front line Peshmerga soldiers giving bread and water to the stranded out of sympathy), it is clear that the general feeling is that anyone beyond the line is, in one way or another, ISIS.

As agreed with ICRC, the only mid-long term solution is to advocate at the highest levels, but it must be clear what is being advocated for. If the concerns and reports of the Peshmerga/KRG are all genuine, it makes the provision of humanitarian aid difficult and perhaps the only point of negotiation can be for the provision of support to children for life saving medical attention (as was permitted a few days ago to three family members).

When the security concerns and the issues of perception for the Peshmerga are taken into account, it might be advisable to pursue support through other channels – such as other tribes (as was done last week when tribal leaders delivered flour to the group). Working with the Shammar tribe, for example, may be a means of keeping certain Peshmerga/KRG fears at bay while minimising the security risks involved.

- *Further understanding of the security risks required (access to KRG 'proof' of ISIS affiliation?)*
- *Resettlement unlikely due to Yezidi threat and perception for KRG.*
- *Restraint of humanitarian community wanting to assist without clear understanding of complexities.*
- *Negotiation of mechanism through tribes such as Shammar who have a relationship with KRG.*
- *Advocacy at senior political level for reasonable, achievable goals.*