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‘They Are in Control’:
The rise of paramilitary forces and the security of minorities in Iraq’s disputed territories

Cover photo:
Members of the Ninewa Plains Protection Units (NPU), an Assyrian Christian paramilitary force, stand guard in Qaraqosh, Hamdaniya District, March 2017.
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Abbreviations

AAH	Asa'ib Ahl ul-Haqq faction
IDP	internally displaced persons
ISF	Iraqi Security Forces
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KH	Kata'ib Hezbollah faction
KRG	Kurdish Regional Government
NGO	non-governmental organizations
NPU	Ninewa Plains Protection Units
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
YPG	People's Protection Units

1 Introduction

The existence of armed actors outside the control of the state has a long history in Iraq, but militias have expanded and multiplied with time to become a major feature of the security landscape. The presence of competing and unaccountable armed actors was responsible for widespread violence against civilians in the post-invasion period. Ethnoreligious minorities, which did not have armed groups protecting them, were particularly vulnerable to attack. In Iraq's diverse disputed territories, the threat of violence added to the general sense of insecurity felt by minorities due to the ambiguous and unresolved political status of their homelands.

However, the conflict with ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) from 2014 to 2017 brought major changes. The conflict spurred the consolidation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an umbrella of new and existing armed factions which now receive government funding and benefit from official status but effectively operate outside of state control. The ISIS period also saw unprecedented militarization of minorities, many of whom took up arms and formed militias in response to the failure of either the Iraqi federal government or the Kurdish Regional Government to protect their areas. Many of these minority militias were later subsumed into the PMF, fighting alongside Iraqi forces in military operations against ISIS and gaining control of checkpoints and security functions in retaken areas.

As a result, the security landscape in the disputed territories, including large parts of Ninewa, Kirkuk, Diyala and Salahaddin, is even more complex in the post-ISIS context. The presence of minority factions offers a sense of protection for some, who feel reassured by the presence of locally recruited forces after the trauma of being abandoned to ISIS by the dominant powers. However, some of these forces are seen to be exploiting their position at the expense of other groups, privileging their own networks with access to jobs, land and other resources. As result, the presence of minority factions has in some cases fuelled and exacerbated pre-existing tensions between groups.

Moreover, while the factions operating in the disputed areas may be formed of minorities, the extent to which they truly represent the long-term interests of minority communities is debatable. Since most of these groups receive backing and support from more powerful actors, especially the PMF, many view them as proxies for larger domestic and

regional agendas. From this perspective, the cooptation of minorities within these formations enhances their political marginalization, while allowing the dominant powers to present an image of diverse composition and support. While the political status of the disputed territories remains unsettled, the presence of multiple armed groups with competing agendas adds a new ingredient to the power struggle between Baghdad and Erbil, further weakening central control and enhancing insecurity. This acts as a major barrier to the return of minorities displaced by ISIS, who fear another conflict will inevitably arise between armed actors in their areas at their expense.

The report examines the rise of paramilitary groups in post-ISIS Iraq and its consequences for the human rights and security of minorities, focusing primarily on the ethnically and religiously diverse disputed territories in northern Iraq. It interrogates not only how these newly empowered armed actors have affected minorities in the daily exercise of their rights and their outlook for the future, but also how minorities themselves have played roles within these changing configurations. The report draws on published sources as well as key informant interviews conducted in the districts of Hamdaniya, Sinjar (Shingal), Tal Afar and Kirkuk in October 2021. Due to the sensitivity of the subject matter, the identity of all interviewees has been concealed to protect their privacy and safety.

2 The rise of the PMF: from militias to politico-economic powerhouses

Since the dissolution of the Iraqi army in 2003, which was a major trigger for the formation of paramilitary groups, the Iraqi state has struggled to exert a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Paramilitary groups have expanded and grown in influence, not only because of their coercive power, but also their political and economic capital. Nowhere is this clearer than the rise and evolution of the groups that have come to be known as the Popular Mobilization Forces.

While the term 'Popular Mobilization' (*al-Hashd al-Shaabi*) was coined in the context of the ISIS advance, many groups that fall under this designation today have a long history in Iraq. Once secretive and operating at the edges of the state, these groups have expanded in strength, size and status to become an officially sanctioned institution and a major force in Iraqi politics. Today, the PMF are a powerful but highly diverse formation, consisting of many groups which vary in their ideology, capacity, means of power, and bases of support.

PMF groups can be loosely divided into three categories. The first category consists of the Iran-aligned factions, which follow the doctrine of *wilayet al-faqih*[1] and answer to the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Several of the units in this category have a long history in the Iraqi scene. For example, the Badr Organization dates to the early 1980s in the Iran-Iraq war, while Asa'ib Ahl ul-Haqq (AAH) was formed in response to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The second group is composed of a number of Iraqi-led factions, which include the atabat (shrine) groups loyal to Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani (such as the Abbas Combat Division, Saraya al-Ataba al-Hussainiya and Liwa Ali Al-Akbar), but also the ideologically distinct Saraya Al-Salam, which answers to the populist cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr. The third category comprises localized units drawn from different communities across northern Iraq, though in practice many of these factions are linked to larger Iran-aligned PMF units (more about these groups Chapter 3).

The PMF in its current form was birthed in response to the ISIS conflict. On 13 June 2014, in the wake of the collapse of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in Mosul and the massacre of Shi'a air cadets at Camp Speicher, Ayatollah Sistani issued a religious decree (*fatwa*) calling on able-bodied men to help defend their country. Notably, Sistani's fatwa called on Iraqis to join the state security forces, not paramilitary groups.[2] In practice, however, the low legitimacy of the armed forces, as well as the sectarian nature of the threat posed by ISIS, meant that most recruits joined new and existing Shi'a-led militias. More than 50 militias sprang up in response to the fatwa, with tens of thousands of men vol-

unteering to fight. An official decree by then-Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki created the PMF, despite the fact that the creation of military formations outside the framework of the armed forces is constitutionally prohibited.[3]

The PMF quickly became an essential partner in the war against ISIS, fighting alongside the regular ISF and playing a decisive role in recapturing occupied territories. However, many PMF units also drew criticism for serious human rights abuses. In operations to liberate cities from ISIS control, PMF units subjected Sunni civilians to arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, torture and summary executions as a form of retaliation for ISIS abuses.[4] Many of the worst allegations implicated the Iran-backed factions, which have long been notorious for sectarian abuse.[5] Nevertheless, these factions and the PMF as a whole gained widespread popular legitimacy for their role in the conflict and were largely seen as heroes for having saved the country from ISIS.

Since the end of the ISIS conflict, the influence of the PMF has only grown, helped by a series of reforms that have solidified its status as a state institution. In 2016, a law passed in Iraq's parliament formalized the structure of the Popular Mobilization Forces Commission, bringing it under the direct command of the Prime Minister's Office.[6] Another reform, in March 2018, gave the PMF equivalent salaries and ranks to the ISF, while a further series of decrees led to PMF units being categorized by brigade numbers instead of faction names.[7] Today, the PMF Commission receives an annual budget of $2.6 billion from the Iraqi state[8] and has administrative offices in every province outside the Kurdistan region.[9] It has an estimated 164,000 members, which includes 110,000 Shi'a members, 45,000 Sunni members, and 10,0000 members from minority groups.[10] The incorporation of Sunnis and minorities into the fold of the PMF has been recognized as a deliberate strategy of the organization, especially under the leadership of former deputy chairman Abdul Mahdi Al-Muhandis, to enhance its own legitimacy and offset accusations of sectarianism.[11]

> ' There is no place for someone independent to be a political leader or a member of parliament representing the rights of Christians'[15]

However, despite the increasing centralization of the PMF, the state's control over the factions remains more a matter of a theory than a reality. Major PMF factions have repeatedly refused to follow orders from successive prime ministers, and often pursued agendas contrary to the interests of the state. For example, in July 2019, former prime minister Adel Abdul Mahdi ordered the PMF factions to integrate into the Iraqi army or disband, as part of a larger effort to crack down on the factions and prevent the stockpiling of weapons outside the authority of the Ministry of Defence. This order was largely ignored, with factions like Kata'ib Hizbollah publicly rejecting the instructions. After coming to power in 2020, Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi also tried to rein in the factions, reiterating Abdul Mahdi's order and carrying out arrests of high-profile leaders.[12] However, these efforts have also seen little success, and Al-Kadhimi himself was the target of an assassination attempt in November 2021.

Despite the fact that Iraqi law prohibits armed groups from forming political parties, the PMF translated their popularity on the battlefield into significant electoral success in the post-ISIS period.[13] In the 2018 parliamentary elections, the two largest blocs to emerge from the polls were linked to armed groups under the PMF umbrella: Muqtada Al-Sadr's Sa'iroon Alliance won 54 seats, while Hadi Al-Ameri's Fateh Alliance won 48 seats. Large numbers of votes also went to Haider Al-Abadi's Victory Alliance and Nouri Al-Maliki's State of Law Alliance. In total, around 500 candidates linked to the PMF ran in the elections.[14] In the 2021 elections, the Sai'roon Alliance emerged first again, but Fatah lost a large number of their seats, leading their supporters to contest the election results.

In both the 2018 and 2021 elections, PMF-linked candidates managed to win many of the parliamentary seats allocated to minorities. Iraqi electoral law reserves five seats in parliament for the Christian minority, and one seat for each of the Yazidi, Shabak, Sabean-Mandaean, and Fayli Kurd minorities. In the 2018 elections, the Babylon

Movement, a nominally Christian PMF group led by Rayan Al-Kaldani and backed by the Badr Organization, won 2 out of the 5 Christian quota seats. Likewise, the Shabak quota seat went to Qusay Abbas, a candidate who was also backed by Hadi Al-Ameri of the Badr Organization. These patterns were repeated and sharpened in the 2021 elections, which saw Babylon increase its share of the Christian quota to 4 out of 5 seats. Meanwhile, the Shabak quota seat went to Wa'ad Al-Qaddo, the former commander of PMF Brigade 30, who was sanctioned by the US Treasury Department for human rights abuses in 2019.[16]

The PMF's encroachment on the minority quota is strongly resented by some members of those minority communities, who maintain that the winning candidates lack real ties to the communities they supposedly represent. In this vein, the success of the Babylon Movement has been attributed to its ability to mobilize supporters from Shi'a Arab voters from the south of Iraq.[17] Since the minority quota system does not restrict voting for those seats to members of the minorities themselves, the PMF factions are able to overpower Christian voters based on the superior demographic power of their Shi'a bases of support. Similarly, the Shabak candidates with connections to the Badr Organization were able to win the quota seats by successfully leveraging their connections to the Iranian clerical establishment and appealing to Shi'a religious sentiments.[18] In other words, in both the Christian and Shabak examples, PMF-linked groups were able to mobilize greater material and ideological capital and easily overpower independent candidates for the quota seats.

The political influence of the PMF, however, is not limited to parliament. Over the years, the PMF has permeated many institutions of the state. One of the most long-standing examples of this is the Badr Organization's control of the Ministry of the Interior, which has helped ensure that the faction evades accountability for abuses.[19] This pattern has crept into other ministries as well, as the factions have competed with other political blocs for senior appointments (*al-darajat al-khassa*) inside the bureaucracy of key ministries in the aftermath of elections. These positions allow them to control state resources, run extensive patronage networks and ensure that ministerial decisions and contracts issued are favourable to their interests.[20]

> 'In addition to being a security force, they also became a social force'[21]

The PMF has also taken on increasingly prominent roles in public service delivery and reconstruction. For example, PMF engineers have been prominently involved in public works campaigns in southern Iraq.[22] Similarly, in northern Iraq, the factions have been involved in social projects including road works, humanitarian aid, repairing houses, and providing medical assistance.[23] These instances are frequently celebrated by supporters of the PMF, to show that the factions are a force for good in society and to counteract negative reports about their conduct. More recently, the PMF played a major role in the response to the coronavirus pandemic, mobilizing their personnel to 'disinfect streets, create isolation facilities, manage burials of the deceased, deploy field hospitals, distribute food baskets and enforce curfews'.[24]

Lastly, the PMF has also transformed itself into a major economic actor. The PMF has acquired significant land holdings throughout Iraq, allowing it to extract taxes from real estate transactions and business activity.[25] This has come about despite the fact that the Military Penal Code prohibits 'Iraqi armed forces from involvement in moneymaking businesses and diverting military capabilities to private interests'.[26] In early 2019 the PMF attempted to transfer the ownership of Mutasim, a state-owned

> 'What is this, that a guy on a motorcycle would come and kill someone? And no one would know anything? Like Hisham Al-Hashimi, where is he? God have mercy on his soul. They do everything in front of the police and everything. They are in control, and all the cases are buried'[30]

construction company tied to the Ministry of Construction, Housing, and Municipalities, to itself.[27]

In short, the PMF's growing political and economic roles have bolstered their power, given them favourable access to the state's coffers, and enabled them to act as a major source of income and employment for normal Iraqis. At the same time, the PMF's fusion with the state has given the factions a vested interest in maintaining the status quo and opposing reform of the corrupt politics that have plagued Iraqis for years. The PMF's role as a 'counter-revolutionary' force can be seen in the way they have targeted voices calling for change over the years. They played a major role in suppressing the protest movements in 2018 and 2019, carrying out violent attacks and enforced disappearances.[28] They have also been behind assassinations and enforced disappearances of critics, activists and researchers – such as Hisham Al-Hashimi and others.[29]

Table 1: Main PMF factions in Iraq

Badr Organization	The Badr Organization (formerly known as the Badr Corps), led by Hadi Al-Ameri, is one of the most long-standing paramilitary organizations in Iraq. It was established in 1983 as the armed wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and its members were Iraqi Shi'a volunteers who fought for Iran in the Iran-Iraq war. Since 2003, many Badr members have held positions in the Iraqi army, the police force, and the Ministry of the Interior.
Kata'ib Hizbollah	Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) is one of the most staunchly pro-Iran factions under the PMF umbrella. The group was founded in 2003 and fought against US Coalition forces. KH leaders generally maintain low public profiles and avoid participation in electoral politics, but the group was commanded by Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis until he was assassinated by the US in January 2020. Its current leader is Ahmed al Hamidawi. KH answers to Khameini and subscribes to the ideology of wilayat al-faqih. The group receives training and funding from the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. KH regularly threatens US targets and refuses to integrate with the Iraqi security apparatus.
Asa'ib Ahl ul-Haqq	Asa'ib Ahl ul-Haqq (AAH) was formed in 2006 to resist the US-led invasion of Iraq, carrying out widespread attacks on coalition targets. It also fought alongside Hezbollah during the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The group turned to politics after the US military's withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. Led by Qais Al-Khazali, the faction is sometimes called the Khazali Network and is pro-Iran in its orientation. In January 2020, the US Department of State labelled AAH as a foreign terrorist organization.
Saraya Al-Salam	Saraya Al-Salam (the Peace Brigades) is the current name for the armed faction led by the Iraqi Shi'a cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr. It has its origins in the Mahdi Army, which was established by Sadr in 2003 to fight the US occupation in Iraq. In the period of violence that followed the US invasion, the Mahdi Army's death squads became notorious for sectarian abuses against Sunnis, particularly in 2006–7. The Mahdi Army was disbanded by Al-Sadr in 2008 but the group was revived in 2014 under a new name to fight the ISIS advance. Saraya Al-Salam opposes both US and Iranian intervention in Iraq, and rejects the concept of wilayat al-faqih; their focus is on strengthening the institutions of the Iraqi state.

3 The disputed territories: a precarious security landscape

The disputed territories, and the diverse communities who live there, have long been caught in a precarious political and security balance. Since the conflict with ISIS, the security landscape in the disputed territories has become even more complex, with a newly empowered role for the PMF and the many minority factions it now commands.

What are the disputed areas?

The disputed territories consist of 14 administrative districts spread across the 4 governorates of Ninewa, Kirkuk, Salahaddin and Diyala in northern Iraq. Rich in natural resources and strategically located, many of these territories are also ethnically and religiously diverse, forming the historical home for different communities including Chaldo-Assyrian Christians, Yazidis, Shabak, Turkmen, Arabs, Kurds, Kaka'is and others. In the Ba'ath era, many of these communities were subjected to Arabization campaigns, which attempted to change the demographic composition of the area. These injustices continue to have an effect on relations between communities today.

In post-invasion Iraq, these territories turned into the primary site of competition between the Federal Government of Iraq and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), both of which lay claim to the areas. The KRG has regularly advanced arguments that the disputed territories are home to significant Kurdish populations or were 'historically Kurdish' in an effort to include them within the boundaries of a future independent Kurdish state.[32] Iraq's Constitution, enacted in 2005, included a provision requiring the federal government to conduct a census and referendum in the disputed territories 'to determine the will of their citizens' by 31 December 2007.[33] However, the federal government never held such a referendum. Instead, an informal division of power between the two governments took shape on the ground without real input from local communities.

In this arrangement, the territories remained part of federal Iraq on paper, but KRG security forces effectively controlled many districts, including Sinjar, Tel Keif, and parts of Hamdaniya. The KRG also exerted political influence in the disputed territories, ensuring that members of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) were appointed to local governance positions. This was deeply unsatisfactory for minorities, who had little ability to influence local affairs

'Every party tries to dominate the area with the excuse that they are trying to protect minorities'[31]

outside of KDP party politics.[34] The unsettled administrative status of the areas also created a gap in public service provision, with neither government investing resources into long-term development.[35] Ultimately, it also created a security vacuum, which ISIS was able to exploit in the summer of 2014.

The war with ISIS

The collapse of the ISF at Mosul on 10 June 2014 and the expulsion of minorities from the city sent shockwaves through the disputed territories. Seeing the weakened federal forces, the KRG deployed its forces to Kirkuk and much of the disputed areas. Minorities in these areas were relying on the KRG's Peshmerga forces to prevent their towns from falling to ISIS. However, as ISIS advanced into Sinjar and the Ninewa Plains in August 2014, the KRG withdrew without warning, paving the way for atrocities against local communities.

> 'I was saying the other day that God did not make us either Arabs or Kurds. We are nobodies…we have no officers, not in the special security agency nor in other agencies'[5]

In light of the existential threat caused by the ISIS advance, many minority communities called people to take up arms and form their own forces. Yazidi spiritual leader Baba Sheikh called on the international community to arm Yazidis fighting on Sinjar Mountain, while the Iraqi Turkman Front called for the formation of a volunteer Turkman force to confront ISIS.[37] At the same time, several Christian, Shabak, and Kaka'i forces were formed. This period also saw the emergence of Sunni military formations, such as the Ninewa Guard, the Salaheddin Brigade and the Tribal Mobilization Forces. These new factions filled a legitimacy gap caused by the failure of the ISF and the Peshmerga and allowed minorities to participate directly in defending their communities.

However, as many of these new formations were too small to stand on their own, they sought support from larger forces. Later, many of them were incorporated into the PMF. For example, the Shabak Brigade in Ninewa became known as PMF Brigade 30, and Yazidi factions on Sinjar Mountain also established relationships with the PMF. The inclusion of minority factions helped the PMF's own position in the disputed areas because it allowed them to put a local face on their forces, increasing their legitimacy.[38] Other minority factions allied themselves with the KRG, such as a newly formed Kaka'i brigade which joined the KRG's Ministry of Peshmerga.[39]

In liberation operations, minority PMF factions fought alongside the ISF in the disputed areas. Although there were attempts to prevent the PMF from participating in the operations in Ninewa due to their history of abuses, this decree ultimately did not pass in the governorate council.[40] Factions that participated in the operations were often given control over areas they helped liberate. This led to a new patchwork of control in the disputed territories, with some areas liberated by the Peshmerga falling under Kurdish control and other areas falling under the control of the Iraqi federal government and an array of new armed groups.

The Kurdish independence referendum

By 2017, as a result of the Peshmerga's role in the liberation operations, Kurdish-controlled territory had expanded by 40 per cent.[42] This left the KRG in a position of confidence, with President Masoud Barzani stating that Kurdish forces would never withdraw from areas they liberated from ISIS.[43] The KRG leadership decided the time was right to realize their long-promised project of an independent Kurdish state.

On 25 September 2017, the KRG scheduled a referendum on Kurdish independence. Controversially, the decision was made to conduct polling in many parts of the disputed territories, including Kirkuk. The results of the referendum showed that 93% voted yes to Kurdish independence, provoking the ire of Baghdad and several other re-

gional powers. On 5 October, the ISF and the PMF launched a coordinated military offensive against the Kurdish Peshmerga, rapidly driving them out of most of the disputed areas. By 17 October 2017, Kurdish-controlled territories had been reduced to the 2003 boundaries and the KRG was forced to suspend the results of the referendum.

The PMF consolidates power

With KRG forces gone, the PMF was newly empowered in the disputed areas. PMF factions had been handed responsibility for holding and policing territory, but many of these groups were newly formed, unprofessional, and unaccountable. Some of them had quickly gained a reputation for abuses after the liberation and were associated with a lack of IDP (internally displaced person) returns. As one informant interviewed for this report explained,

> *The violations that happened during the liberation of the city of Mosul and the rest of the areas definitely left a negative impact on the reputation of the PMF … the actions that we saw gave the impression that they came for revenge and to punish some people, a certain category of people, contrary to what they were saying – that they were coming to liberate those areas from Daesh.*[44]

In July 2019, the leaders of the Babylon Brigades and the Shabak Brigade, Rayan Al-Kildani and Waad Al-Qaddo respectively, were sanctioned by the US Treasury Department under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act for serious human rights abuses and corruption. The accusations against the two leaders and the factions they commanded included looting homes, stealing agricultural land, intimidation, extortion, and harassment of women, and in Al-Qaddo's case also included illegal arrests, kidnappings and rape.[45]

Nevertheless, these and other PMF factions continue to wield significant power in the disputed areas. One way this takes place is through manning checkpoints, allowing them to control the movement of people and goods. Since many conflict-affected areas are dependent on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide reconstruction support and essential services, the ability of the PMF to control access can have a serious impact on the ability of local communities to survive.[46] As one interviewee explained:

> *When you are at the checkpoint and you find a group of people – the police, Iraqi army, the PMF – you do not know who you are dealing with. Especially if you have a media person with you, or someone from an international organization. When you go to the checkpoint you might obtain the approval of the police and the army easily, but the approval of the PMF is very difficult – maybe they want to ban this delegation or that group. This complicates our work, whether it is administrative or security in those areas, so it is preferred that they do not interfere in those aspects.*[47]

> 'We demanded that all the forces including the PMF participate in the liberation of Ninewa and kick Daesh out so that the displaced population could return'[41]

Control of checkpoints is also a major source of revenue and is one way in which the PMF has begun building an economic empire in the disputed areas. The Shabak Brigade (Brigade 30) controls the main highway between Mosul and Erbil, where it imposes levies on trucks moving between the cities. Members of the faction have also been accused of detaining displaced persons at the checkpoint and demanding payment for their release.[48] Their position outside of Mosul has also enabled them to dominate the scrap metal industry, allowing them to amass profits from the sale of material salvaged from destroyed buildings in the city.

PMF factions also derive income from a slew of other informal and criminal activities in the disputed regions, such as drug and arms trafficking, smuggling, looting of archaeological sites, and aid diversion. The commander of the 30th Brigade, Waad Al-Qaddo, has been implicated in smuggling drugs and crude oil from Ninewa oilfields.[49]

Like their Baghdad-based counterparts, the PMF factions in the disputed areas have resisted attempts by the government to impose central control over their security functions and economic activities. The government has repeatedly ordered the PMF to hand over control of the checkpoints in Mosul and submit their forces to the authority of the Ninewa Operations Command. Both the 30th and 50th brigades have defied these orders, even clashing with the Iraqi army to prevent it from taking control of the checkpoints.[50]

Table 2: Selection of minority armed factions operating in the disputed territories

Shabak Brigade	The Shabak Brigade (Liwa al-Shabak), also known as Brigade 30, is a PMF unit closely linked to the Badr Organization. Formed in November 2014, the unit comprises around 1,000 Shi'a Shabak and Shi'a Arab fighters. Based in Bartella, the unit operates across the Ninewa Plains and controls checkpoints around Mosul. It also controls the Mosul–Erbil highway. Until 2021 it was commanded by Waad Al-Qaddo (also known as Abu Ja'afar Al-Shabaki).
Babylon Brigades	The Babylon Brigades (Brigade 50) are a PMF unit linked to the Badr Organization. Currently, the faction's sphere of control is centred in Tel Keppe. While Babylon presents itself as a Christian force, in practice its estimated 1,000 fighters are primarily Shi'a Shabak as well as Shi'a Arab men from the south of Iraq. The faction is led by Rayan Al-Kaldani, who is a Chaldean Christian from the town of Alqosh, but ideologically aligned with the Iran-loyal Shi'a armed factions and close to Hadi Al-Ameri. In 2019, video footage showed Al-Kaldani cutting off the ear of a detainee in the town of Batnaya.
Ninewa Plains Protection Units (NPU)	The Ninewa Plains Protection Unit (NPU) were formed in 2014 in response to the advance of ISIS. Their members are Assyrian Christians from the Ninewa Plains, and the force is linked to the Assyrian Democratic Union, a political party. While nominally under the PMF umbrella, the NPU exercises a significant degree of independence and has received training and support from the US-led Combined Joint Task Force. Estimates of the size of the force vary, but it is probably in the region of several hundred. The NPU's base of control is Qaraqosh in Hamdaniya district.
Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ)	The Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ) are a Yazidi force based in Sinjar. Following the ISIS advance into Sinjar in August 2014, YBŞ worked with the Syrian-based People's Protection Units (YPG) to create a corridor to evacuate stranded Yazidis. YBŞ is generally considered to be affiliated to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) based in Turkey, although it has often downplayed the extent to which it takes orders from the PKK. Along with its all-female counterpart, the Êzîdxan Women's Units, it is now part of the Sinjar Joint Command and receives funding from the PMF.
Protection Force of Êzîdxan (HPÊ)	The Protection Force of Êzîdxan (Hêzen Parastina Êzîdxanê, HPÊ), formerly known as the Sinjar Protection Forces (HPŞ), was set up by Heydar Shesho in 2014 and numbers at least 2,500 Yazidi fighters. The force has frequently changed allegiances; it has received funding from the Iraqi government as part of the PMF but has also allied with the Kurdish Peshmerga and the PKK.
The Turkman Brigades	There are several Turkman-majority factions in the PMF, including brigades 16, 52 and 53. Brigades 16 and 52 (Liwa al-Turkman) operate in Kirkuk and Tuz Khurmatu, while Brigade 53 (Liwa al-Hussein) was set up in Tal Afar. These factions are composed mostly of Shi'a Turkman fighters who joined to fight ISIS after 2014. Brigade 16 maintains links with a number of the Iran-aligned PMF factions, while brigades 52 and 53 are tied more closely to the Badr Organization. Shi'a Turkman factions have been associated with a range of human rights abuses against civilians in retaken areas, including ethnically motivated abuses.

4 Hamdaniya: carving out spheres of influence

Hamdaniya is considered a heartland for many of Iraq's Christians, but it has always been contested ground. The militarization of minorities in the district after 2014 gave them a way to participate in the defence of their communities, but it also exacerbated conflicts between groups. Hamdaniya is a place where one can see the post-ISIS change in security dynamics most clearly: it is a complex landscape of new security actors, with each major town controlled by a different set of forces, which have been shifting and changing with time.

Hamdaniya district is located in the Ninewa Plain, east of Mosul. It includes the towns of Qaraqosh (Bakhdida), Bartella and Baashiqa. The area is strongly associated with Assyrian identity and history, with Qaraqosh being the largest Christian-majority town in Iraq. However, the district as a whole is demographically mixed, also being home to Shabak, Yazidi, Arab, Turkman, Kurdish and Kaka'i communities. The area was subjected to Arabization and demographic engineering policies during the Ba'ath era, when plots of land were given to incoming families who were willing to register as Arabs. This turbulent history remains a source of grievance and continues to affect relationships between communities today.

Like much of the disputed territories, Hamdaniya was caught in an administrative limbo between the Iraqi federal government and the KRG before 2014, which left it neglected in terms of service provision and vulnerable in terms of security. ISIS invaded and occupied the district from 2014 to 2016, displacing most of the population and causing enormous destruction to homes, properties, and religious and cultural heritage sites.

The new security landscape

When military operations to retake the Ninewa Plains from ISIS commenced, the Iraqi federal government and the KRG divided responsibility for different parts of Hamdaniya district. The ISF, supported by PMF factions, took control of Bartella and Qaraqosh between 16 and 22 October 2016, while the Peshmerga took control of Baashiqa between 7 and 11 November 2016. The resulting security landscape was fractured and complex, with multiple armed groups who had participated in the operations vying for control over retaken areas.

The initial post-liberation period was a time of opportunism and predatory behaviours by newly empowered faction members, as recalled by several interviewees. As

Insignia of the Babylon Brigades. ©*Mark Lattimer 2017*

one described it: 'They put pressure on people, saying that they were the ones liberating those areas and that people owe them … and that no one should stop them even if they are practising illegal things.'[51] This period also saw multiple power shuffles, with the Peshmerga ejected from the district after 2017 and confrontations over control of towns and districts taking place between different factions, including the NPU, the Babylon Brigade and the Shabak Brigade.

Most interviewees in Hamdaniya agreed that things were more orderly now, with each armed faction having settled into their own sphere of influence. Certain violations that were committed in the immediate aftermath of liberation appear to have been curbed with better discipline.[52] For example, several interviewees mentioned that there had been cases of sexual harassment of Christian women by members of Brigade 30 early on, but these had been dealt with by the leadership of the brigade.[53]

Many interviewees also credited the PMF with contributing to the defeat of ISIS, thereby creating the conditions that enabled people to return. 'The PMF was like a security guarantee to the people, because it meant that Daesh is not coming back as long as the PMF is there,' as one explained.[54] The PMF was also credited with maintaining strong defences in the post-ISIS period. 'Since the liberation of the areas from Daesh in 2016–2017 there have never been security breaches,' said one interviewee. 'No issues were recorded in the Ninewa Plain.'[55]

Nevertheless, many people were clearly uneasy about this new power configuration, especially given the very recent and traumatic experience of being left unprotected to the ISIS advance. Many were afraid something like this could happen again: 'There is a fear of having [another] military confrontation, which will threaten the existence of the minorities if it happens,'[56] in the words of one interviewee. Another interviewee expressed a similar sentiment: 'We have anxiety that some clashes would happen between the forces, especially between the PMF and the Peshmerga. And that would make us the victims like we were before.'[57]

On the other hand, one interviewee felt that the presence of the PMF helped defuse the conflict between Baghdad and Erbil, a main source of insecurity in the area: 'The PMF have maybe created an element of balance between both parties in these areas. So it relieved some tension and eased up the conflict between the federal armed forces and the Kurdish armed forces.'[59] However, others were sceptical that the PMF would be any more likely to protect them, given that they were seen as implementing the agendas of larger groups. 'All the military factions that were created are political formations and expressed narrow political and partisan interests that cannot reflect the minorities,' as one interviewee put it.[60]

The presence of multiple security actors across the Ninewa Plain was also, in and of itself, identified as a source of insecurity. 'When it comes to the security aspect, you don't know who the decision maker is. And that creates confusion and fear in people's life.'[61] This sentiment was echoed by another interviewee:

> *The more forces out there, the less security you feel. The investigations, the security clearances are multiple. Before, someone would go to one security agency, and you could find him [i.e. a missing or detained person]. Now you don't know who took him.*[62]

> ' There are opinions that all the forces present are proxies to outsider forces'[58]

There were fears that the security vacuum caused by overlapping mandates could be exploited again: 'we don't know who would bear the responsibility in case there was a security breach, especially if it was against someone from the minorities.'[63]

However, beyond these general points of agreement, opinions on the behaviour of the factions tended to vary significantly by area and sect. The configuration of active factions in each area of Hamdaniya is very different, as are the demographics of each town, both of which have an impact on how locals perceive the factions. Qaraqosh, Bartella and Baashiqa each offer a unique instance of the way that these factions have impacted and shaped local dynamics.

Qaraqosh: steady returns, but for how long?

> *We delivered stability, services and many things.*[64]

Qaraqosh is the largest Christian town in Iraq. Since the end of the conflict with ISIS, it has been under the control of the Ninewa Plains Protection Units (NPU), a small force formed of local Assyrian Christians that now falls under the PMF umbrella and takes orders from the Ninewa Operations Command. It also coordinates with the local police and national security forces present in the sub-district, which are tied to the federal government.[65]

Qaraqosh has seen a relatively high rate of returns and supporters of the NPU claim that that is because of the force's presence. They argue that

the force is legitimate and accepted by the local community, protects the people and commits few human rights violations. However, the high rate of return could also be impacted by other factors, such as donor support for reconstruction in the district.[66] There is also reportedly an effective ban on property sales to individuals from outside the town, which has helped to preserve the demographic homogeneity of the district.[67]

Nevertheless, Qaraqosh is a reassuring example of survival and return, given that many feared the ISIS occupation could permanently erase the Christian presence from the map. The NPU could also be an example of how a locally recruited force can operate in coordination with federal forces. As a commander in the force described its members, 'Because they are coming from this area and belong to the people and they are defending their lands, they are aware of the area's needs.'[68]

However, not everyone sees the NPU as a positive model for the security of minorities in Ninewa. According to one interviewee, since the NPU and all other non-regular factions answer to the PMF, 'they do not reflect Christian interests as much as they reflect the powers supporting them'.[69] Another Christian interviewee expressed criticism of the NPU due to its affiliation with the Assyrian Democratic Movement:

> *This force is not for defence, it is political, and it is not accepted by everybody and does not represent all the Christian components. There are some individuals and families or figures who do not approve of these groups politically, nor their ideas.*[70]

Many have also expressed scepticism about the NPU's ability to act as real defence force for the district, due to its small size and limited capabilities.

NPU graffiti on a wall in Qaraqosh. ©*Miriam Puttick 2017*

That being said, the force has already managed to fend off several advances by Iran-backed factions, including by leveraging higher authorities. In July 2017, the Babylon Brigades attacked Qaraqosh and clashed with the NPU, but were subsequently expelled from the town after Archbishop Boutros Moushi asked for the prime minister's intervention.[71] The Shabak Brigade has also been prevented from establishing a presence in the town.[72]

Nevertheless, the NPU is unlikely to be able to withstand a major invasion, especially when compared with the superior force of the Iran-backed factions. As assessed by one interviewee:

> *The Christian component today has only 400 to 500 or maybe 600 fighters, while the Shabak have more than 3,000 fighters. There is a new police force that has been formed and that will increase the numerical power of Shabak.... the Christian force that exists in Hamdaniya is a weak force. They do not have enough weapons to balance the other forces and their number is not even 5% of the total of other forces.*[73]

Bartella: the militarization of Christian–Shabak conflict

> *Even the Directorate of the Shi'a Endowment in Ninewa opened its headquarters in Bartella and not elsewhere, as if it was a message that the town of Bartella is Shi'a and not Christian.*[74]

Bartella has a mixed Christian and Shabak population. Before the arrival of ISIS, it was an Assyrian Christian-majority town, the population boosted by the settlement of Christian IDPs who had fled Baghdad and other cities in 2006–7. However, in the post-ISIS period, Bartella has seen higher rates of return of Shabak than Christians, with some claiming that Shabak now form the majority of the town. This is clearly connected to the fact that Brigade 30, a Shabak faction, has established firm control, using the town as a headquarters for its operations in the rest of Ninewa. As previously mentioned, Brigade 30 has a reputation for abuses against civilians and their hold over the town appears to have deterred many Assyrian Christians from returning.

From the perspective of many Shabak, however, the presence of Brigade 30 has offered them security and stability in the post-ISIS context. Long economically marginalized, Shabak also suffered persecution and destruction of their areas under ISIS, driven by the extremist group's virulent anti-Shi'a ideology. In this light, seeing Bartella controlled by a Shabak-majority force for the first time was a relief. As one interviewee said, 'Following the liberation and the presence of the PMF, who are a security force composed of people from the region, people felt secure and returned.'[75]

Aligning with the PMF can be seen as a strategic choice for Shabak that offers them protection and leverage, which neither Baghdad nor the KRG had guaranteed them in the past. Recalling the unsatisfactory situation in the disputed areas before the rise ISIS, one interviewee explained, 'prior to 2014, these areas had joint security forces from the Kurdistan region and Baghdad, and they would exert pressure on the citizens'.[76] Another explained that the relative stability achieved in the post-ISIS period gave people greater faith in the PMF than governmental forces: 'There was a perception that if we have the local police and the federal police it will not achieve this stability that was established under the PMF.'[77] When the Iraq government tried to disband Brigade 30 in 2019, many ordinary Shabak took the streets in protest.

However, Shabak acceptance of PMF patronage means they risk being resented by other groups, especially Christians, who see them as proxies for larger agendas. Brigade 30 is affiliated with the Badr Organization, one of the Iran-aligned factions in the PMF. Some analysts posit that Iran wants to create a Shi'a belt running through the Ninewa Plain, by means of Shabak factions.[78] In Bartella, the increasing emphasis on Shi'a religious practice in the town following the entry of Brigade 30 was described by one Christian interviewee as part of a 'coordinated and systematic' agenda:

> *The city of Bartella is known to be a Syriac Christian city, but on the 10th of Muharram it turns into Karbala due to the presence of the*

> *mourning convoys, which are a provocation for Christians. These convoys are supported politically and security-wise by the PMF, and the local government provides cover for them.*[79]

Christians have long suspected the influx of Shabak families into Bartella as being externally driven by Iran. Since the mid-2000s, Shabak families have been buying land and property in the district at prices which would ordinarily be beyond their economic means, leading many to suspect that they were receiving money from Shi'a factions.[80] These patterns appear to have been accelerated by the Brigade's presence in the district. One interviewee described the construction of housing complexes near Christian areas and encroachments on agricultural lands for building projects. He explained that 'when we ask for the reasons for these encroachments, they claim that the lands belong to the PMF.'[81]

However, not all interviewees agreed on the extent to which the PMF had caused the demographic change in Bartella. One Christian interviewee thought that most of the demographic change in the district had happened earlier, prior to the entry of the PMF.[82] Another Shabak interviewee claimed that the changing demographics were due to the fact that Christians were selling their houses cheaply in order to emigrate, houses which were then purchased by neighbouring Shabak:

> *It became a topic that the Shabak presence in Bartella was exceeding the Christian one, as if the Shabak came with intimidation or with pressure and force.... I don't think that those who wanted to stay in Iraq experienced coercion or intimidation to leave or sell their houses.*[83]

However, regardless of the extent or causes of the demographic changes, what is clear is that Brigade 30's domination of Bartella has given them access to disproportionate political and economic power, which they have been using to benefit Shabak loyal to the faction. This has made the sub-district an insecure and undesirable place for Christians to return to. 'The PMF interferes with all aspects of life, in state appointments and decisions,' according to one interviewee. 'That is what we felt after 2014.'[84] As an example, he mentioned that the PMF had intervened to stop a Christian candidate from being appointed as president of University of Hamdaniya. They were able to do this despite instructions from the prime minister to appoint the Christian candidate, since the Ministry of Education is controlled by AAH.

Another interviewee explained how the PMF influences the conduct of state security institutions: 'if a problem occurs between a Christian and a Shi'a Shabak, and if the local police try to perform their role, the PMF will intervene in the course of the investigation and put pressure on the police station.'[86] The PMF was also accused of intervening to cancel a decision issued by the Ministry of Planning to alter the boundaries of administrative units in Hamdaniya district, which would have helped alleviate the housing conflict between Christians and Shabak.[87] The PMF also reportedly manipulates housing titles and intervenes in real estate transactions.[88]

Ultimately, the PMF's hold on public life in Bartella also harms Shabak, who are being increasingly resented by their neighbours due to their association with the faction's politics and perceptions that they are being unjustly favoured. It also gives Shabak few opportunities to advance themselves outside of the politics of the Iran-aligned factions. During the 2018 elections, Brigade 30 prevented members of the Free Shabak Movement, a competing political party aligned with the KDP, from setting up an office and campaigning, despite their having authorization from the Iraqi government.[89]

'The existence of the PMF has led to a greater emigration of minorities than the extremists caused'[85]

Baashiqa: keeping the PMF at bay

Baashiqa and its surrounding villages are home to an extremely diverse set of communities, including Yazidis, Muslim Kurds, Shabak, Christians, and Sunni and Shi'a Arabs. The town of

Baashiqa itself is has a Yazidi majority. Since the end of the conflict with ISIS, control of the sub-district has shifted between several different security forces. The Peshmerga held the area from 2016 to 2017, while Brigade 50 (the Babylon Brigades) had a presence there until 2019.[90] Currently, Brigade 30 (the Shabak Brigade) is the main PMF faction present in the sub-district, which is under the overall control of the Iraqi army.

Despite the presence of Brigade 30, the experience of Baashiqa has differed significantly from Bartella's. Interviewees did not report any disproportionate influx of Shabak communities into the sub-district caused by the influence of the faction. Baashiqa has in fact seen significant returns among its Yazidi and Christian residents, although their numbers are still far below their what they were before the ISIS invasion. However, people associated with Kurdish institutions – the KDP, the Asayish or the Peshmerga – reportedly face problems in the district. According to one interviewee: 'Some people left after the PMF arrived because they were scared of killings and assassinations. Some returned, but the majority did not.'[91] Another stated that he heard the PMF had 'banned' members of the Peshmerga, which affected Shabak recruits.[92]

The lack of large-scale demographic change in Baashiqa has been attributed to the fact that locals were able to prevent the PMF from establishing a base inside the city itself. As one interviewee explained:

> *The people of the area are shoulder to shoulder in that aspect. The first thing that religious figures and public figures from all sects did was to prevent any faction of the PMF, whether it was Yazidi or Christian or Muslim, from entering the city. They limited them to the outskirts of the city, and the military affairs stayed exclusively with the police, national security and intelligence. That's why they were not able to interfere in that way.*[93]

The same interviewee also stated that there was a recommendation from the Marja'iya in Najaf (the highest Shi'a authority in the country) and the Iraqi government to take care of religious minorities, whether they were Yazidis or Christians. 'That's why you see that they more or less avoid escalations with those components.'[94] Nevertheless, fears that demographic change could occur in the future were present among interviewees, especially given the experience of nearby Bartella. One interviewee referred to Bartella as having been 'lost' and feared the same would happen elsewhere in the district:

> *In Bartella there has been a lot of change and there is a lot of anger there. Qaraqosh is now experiencing the same. In Tal Keif it happened too. And they want Baashiqa! But we are head-to-head with them. We do not allow it.*[95]

Furthermore, despite the fact that its security role is limited the perimeter of the city, Brigade 30 was reportedly exerting a corrupt influence on local governance and economy in Baashiqa through other means. According to one interviewee, one way in which this takes place is by seeking to dominate public appointments:

> *In Baashiqa, the PMF tries to force its control over the public administrations and to put managers from certain components in those administrations while removing other components. For example, Brigade 30, and Waad Al-Qaddo specifically, takes every opportunity to replace managers who are Yazidis or Christians with Shabak managers, although there are differences in their quality of work and administrative experience and even the balance that exists in the city.*[96]

Reportedly, most tenders issued in Baashiqa are given to Shi'a-owned firms with links to the PMF.[97] One interviewee referred to new urban planning projects and expansions taking place in the countryside, which he believed would result in Shi'a Shabak obtaining more lands in the sub-district.[98] The PMF has also sought to influence national electoral politics through its presence in the city, as illustrated by an incident that took place in the context of the October 2021 parliamentary elections:

> *A few days ago, a female candidate for the elections was on a list that is associated with the PMF, and members of AAH attended. It was a hidden message, that we are present, we are the ones in control, and we could do this and*

that … it wasn't a political campaign as much as it was a threatening message for the people.[99]

Presence of Turkish forces

The Turks are on the mountains, so we do not know what is happening, who brought them, or why. You can't climb up that mountain, so we do not know what is up there. All Iraq's roads are open, but not the mountain of Baashiqa. Why are we banned from going to that mountain?[100]

A prominent cause of insecurity and uncertainty among interviewees in Baashiqa was the presence of Turkish forces in the sub-district, and the fear that this could embroil the local population in larger conflicts. The presence of these forces goes back to 2015, when Turkey established a military base to train local forces in preparation for the offensive against ISIS in Mosul. However, since the defeat of ISIS, Turkey has not shown any intention to withdraw its troops from Iraq. Many PMF groups, particularly the Iran-backed factions, are hostile to the Turkish presence, which they consider an occupation.

In April 2021, a rocket attack was launched on the Turkish base in Baashiqa, killing a Turkish soldier and injuring a local civilian. Turkish authorities immediately blamed the attack on the PMF, given that it appeared to have been launched from an area controlled by Brigade 30. Since then, there have been several other rocket attacks on the base, including in August and September 2021.[101]

Incidents like this point to growing hostility and increasingly aggressive threats by the PMF against Turkey, raising fears of a potential military escalation. As expressed by one interviewee: 'This is the biggest challenge and it creates fears for the people living there – fear of a major international conflict in those areas from the regional powers.'[102]

5 Sinjar: eight forces, no security

Sinjar's strategic location has long made it a site for competition between regional powers, which has often come at the expense of the area's inhabitants. Given this history, the formation of several all-Yazidi forces in Sinjar after 2014 was significant as a move towards greater local autonomy in defence. However, Sinjar is also one of the clearest places where the presence of competing armed groups has presented an obstacle to the return of displaced civilians, exacerbated by ongoing regional tensions.

Located west of Mosul, and close to the Syrian and Turkish borders, Sinjar (Shingal) is a historical homeland of much of Iraq's Yazidi community. The district is also home to Sunni Arabs and a small Christian population. Prior to the ISIS advance, Sinjar was under the de facto control of the KRG, with the Peshmerga providing security. Local officials, including the mayor, the district managers, and most of the district council members, were picked for their loyalty to the KDP.[103] Sinjar's residents had few avenues for legitimate political participation, while the district was severely neglected in terms of public service provision.

When ISIS forces advanced on Sinjar in August 2014, the Peshmerga forces that were supposed to be defending the area fled without warning, leaving the local population defenceless. Almost the entire civilian population was forced to flee. At least 50,000 Yazidis headed up Sinjar Mountain, where they were trapped in the heat for days without assistance.[104] Yazidis who could not escape were subjected to atrocities at the hands of ISIS, which later came to be recognized as constituting genocide.

In response to this crisis, some locals chose to stay behind to defend their areas. Many Yazidi men joined the newly formed Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ), aligned with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Together with the Syria-based People's Protection Units (YPG), members of these forces carved out a corridor to evacuate Yazidis stranded on Sinjar Mountain via Syrian territory, from where they crossed back over the border into Iraqi Kurdistan. Thus, paramilitary forces played a primary role alleviating the humanitarian catastrophe caused by the advance of ISIS. One interviewee described his recollection of the events as follows:

> *When we were surrounded on the mountain there were no forces at all, no Iraqi forces, no Peshmerga, nothing … except a few members of the PKK, and there was a group of YBŞ, the Sinjar Resistance Units. They defended Sinjar Mountain and the areas around it.*[105]

By November 2015, YPG/YBŞ and KDP forces separately took control of different parts of Sinjar from ISIS. In the period that followed the expulsion of ISIS, there was fre-

quent fighting between the two sides over control of the district. The KDP imposed a blockade on the district with the ostensible aim of stopping the flow of reinforcements to YBŞ, but which also stopped humanitarian aid. At this time, the Iraqi federal government was funding YBŞ, while the KDP was funding its own Yazidi force.

The balance of power dramatically shifted in October 2017. Following the Kurdish independence referendum, the PMF, backed by the Iraqi federal government, drove the KDP-led Peshmerga out of Sinjar. At the same time, members of the KDP-appointed political administration in the district were forced to abandon their posts.

Subsequently, a new mayor and local administration was unofficially appointed through a meeting of local security actors and political parties, tribal leaders, and religious figures. This new administration is backed by the PKK and the PMF, though not officially recognized by the Iraqi government or the KRG. The entry of PMF into the district and their backing of the new administration opened the way for more formal cooperation between the PKK/YBŞ and PMF, with the YBŞ becoming an official brigade of the PMF in 2019.[106]

Yazidi forces: a bulwark against larger powers?

Several interviewees, despite their different political affiliations, recognized the significance of the formation of Yazidi forces in Sinjar. The formation of local forces was especially important given Yazidis' sense of betrayal by the larger powers and armed forces. Many residents of Sinjar are resentful towards the KDP-led Peshmerga in particular for their withdrawal in the face of the ISIS advance. The events of 3 August 2014 were expressed by one interviewee as follows:

> *When the massacre took place, there were 12,000 Peshmerga. They were in Sinjar and other areas, on that black day that we consider to be the greatest betrayal that happened to us. Thousands of our youths and elders lost their lives, and our sisters and daughters all fell in the hands of ISIS.*[107]

In addition to playing a prominent role in countering ISIS, YBŞ and other groups are now acting as a counterweight to larger forces such as the KDP, opposing their attempts to reassert hegemony over the district. In this way, aligning themselves with the PKK, and later the PMF, can be interpreted as strategic choices that increased their standing against the KDP. For the first time, the KDP presence has been largely eliminated from the district, and these groups are determined to ensure they do not return.

However, the presence of the PKK-aligned forces in Sinjar was heavily criticized by some interviewees, who drew attention to their legally unrecognized status as well as their human rights violations. One interviewee stated that the forces carried out arbitrary detentions, assassinations, harassment and extortion of political opponents and people who defected from their forces.[109]

The same interviewee criticized the PKK for blocking Kurdish parties from campaigning in Sinjar district, which he condemned as a violation of civil and political expression. Another interviewee categorized the PKK as 'outsider force' alongside the PMF and the Peshmerga, explaining that 'the foreign element is harmful to the body'.[110]

Interviewees tended to agree that a Yazidi force tied to the Iraqi armed forces was the best model for security in the district. This was considered preferable to the current situation, in which Yazidi groups are tied to the PMF or the PKK, whose priorities lie outside of Sinjar:

> *The PMF is made up of our brothers from the south, but even if they are here by the thousands, if something happens in Basra or Najaf, they will all withdraw with one phone call. But if they were Yazidis in Sinjar, no, then the enemy would have to cross over our dead bodies and no one would leave.*[111]

> 'There are eight different forces, and everyone says that they are protecting, but no one is'[108]

The factions and the ongoing political dispute

> *The Yazidi cause is a local, regional and international cause and despite what happened to us, the Iraqi government still does not care about us. Our case until now is up for sale, especially between Al-Kadhimi and Barzani. It is like we are in an auction, they trade with our blood and the blood of our families.*[112]

A major contributor to insecurity in Sinjar is the fact that the political status of the area has still not been settled between Baghdad and Erbil. The presence of multiple armed groups in the district, with agendas that differ from either government, further complicates the situation.

On 1 October 2020, the Iraqi and Kurdish governments made some progress towards resolving the political deadlock in the district by signing the Sinjar Agreement, which was negotiated in the presence of UNAMI (UN Assistance Mission in Iraq). The Sinjar Agreement was heavily criticized by members of the Yazidi community because it was negotiated without any meaningful consultation with Yazidi groups, and is silent on transitional justice issues. That being said, the agreement does respond to several other important demands. It addresses the issue of the two competing administrations in the district by setting out a framework for electing a new mayor and provides for the recruitment of a local security force formed of displaced Yezidis. It also calls for the removal of all other armed groups from the district and the establishment of a Baghdad–Erbil reconstruction partnership.

Yet, despite high-level political concord, the Sinjar Agreement has remained largely unimplemented. The agreement is naturally opposed by the PKK and its affiliates, who view it as an opening for the KDP to make its way back into the district. Supporters of the PKK-aligned Shingal Autonomous Administrative Council protested the deadline set by the Iraqi army for pro-PKK forces to evacuate the district. It is also unclear to many Yazidis what the removal of YBŞ would look like in practice, given that large numbers of local Yazidis are members of the force. The PMF has also been instrumental in blocking implementation of the agreement and preventing the reinstatement of the KDP-aligned administration. This follows the PMF's general strategy of opposing political normalisation and stabilisation in the disputed territories, which would lead to a constriction of its own role.[113]

As a result, the ongoing lack of clarity over the future administration of Sinjar means that the district remains neglected and underserviced, with minimal progress towards reconstruction. According to one interviewee, most public offices remain closed, including important services necessary for the return of displaced persons.[114] In the meantime, the PMF has been attempting to fill this gap, thereby cementing its role as an economic and development actor. In April 2021, the PMF began carrying out a works campaign to remove war debris from the district, offering to rebuild destroyed houses for locals at no cost. However, many refused to let the PMF rebuild their houses, wary of their political motives.[115]

Armed groups and regional tensions

A major theme that emerged from the interviews is that the presence of armed groups in Sinjar is making the area a hotspot in which regional tensions are played out. The presence of PKK-aligned armed groups in the district is a problem for Turkey, which fears that it will enable the PKK to establish a second operating base, augmenting their existing stronghold in the Qandil mountains in northern Iraq.[116] The US, which also considers the PKK a terrorist organization, has called for them to leave Sinjar as well. This geopolitical volatility is another factor discouraging the displaced population of the district from returning.

Turkey has been periodically targeting Sinjar with airstrikes, one of which killed YBŞ commander Zardasht Shingali.[117] In January 2021, President Erdoğan insinuated that he was preparing for a military offensive in Sinjar: 'We may come there overnight, all of a sudden,' he threatened.[118] The PMF pre-emptively deployed an additional 10,000 fighters to Sinjar in February, though the Turkish offensive never materialized.[119]

As in Baashiqa, the PMF is aggressively asserting itself against Turkey's advances in Sinjar in order to justify a continuing local role for itself. Leading PMF factions, including AAH, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, and the Badr Organization, all made threats against Turkey in response to the hinted offensive in Sinjar, with AAH leader Qais Al-Khazali stating that the Turkish presence in Iraq is 'more dangerous than the US [presence]'.[120] The PMF's hostility to Turkey is also bringing it into an alliance with PKK, which makes it increasingly unlikely that either group will abandon its foothold in Sinjar.

Returns to Sinjar

> *There are eight different military powers in Sinjar and the surrounding areas. At the moment those are the known ones. All of this is putting stress on wounds that are still bleeding. And until now the people have not come back home.*[121]

Sinjar has one of the lowest rates of return of IDPs in all of Iraq. 'Returns up to now are barely happening,' said one interviewee.[123] While there are many reasons for the lack of returns, the proliferation of armed groups and the volatile security situation was clearly one of the dominant ones. Given that the multiple armed groups present have competing political motives, confrontations and skirmishes could occur and civilians fear that the absence of an official, unified security force would leave them unprotected. Another factor mentioned was the building of military bases inside the city of Sinjar itself and on the mountain, which one interviewee described as 'a very negative factor that does not support stability and security in those areas'.[124]

> 'The non-return of the people is a political investment'[122]

According to another interviewee, the armed groups themselves also create 'pressure, provocations, harassment' for ordinary people who return:

> *They do not deny us our religious rights, but they harass us and try to provoke us for any reason. For example, with farmers the militias would occupy their lands and refuse to leave. Those who have elders, women at home – the forces occupy their property.*[125]

Families that have returned to Sinjar often do not find the situation preferable to life in displacement. In the aftermath of the Turkish threats against the district, Iraqi and KRG government authorities received hundreds of applications from families in Sinjar requesting to return to Dohuk displacement camps.[126]

Given that Sinjar is considered the homeland of Yazidis in Iraq, the prolonged displacement of the district's population is symbolic, as it represents a continuation of the uprooting the community experienced during the genocide and a failure of political actors to create the conditions needed to ensure the community's safety and survival. Sunni Arabs, for their part, face their own set of barriers to return to Sinjar due to the complete breakdown of trust that occurred as a result of the ISIS atrocities and the control of armed groups that are hostile to their return. According to one interviewee, cleavages between Yazidis and Sunni Arabs have been exploited for political gain:

> *What they do is that they create strife, especially between Yazidis and the Arab component. In the name of the Yazidis, they do something that creates strife among us.*[127]

6

Tal Afar: a fragile peace

Tal Afar is often viewed as a microcosm for Shi'a–Sunni tensions in Iraq. The ISIS occupation saw the exodus of the city's Shi'a population while many Sunnis stayed. Subsequently, the liberation of the city by Shi'a Turkman PMF factions turned the tables again. As both Sunni and Shi'a civilians return to the city, the question is what role the PMF will play with respect to these communities' wishes for a less divided future.

Tal Afar is a Turkman-majority city located approximately 63 km west of Mosul. Sunni Turkmen account for approximately three-quarters of the population while Shi'a Turkmen make up the remaining quarter.

In the years after the US-led invasion of Iraq, Tal Afar became a focal point for sectarian violence. It became a recruitment base for Al-Qaeda in Iraq and other insurgent organizations, which attracted many discontented Sunni Turkmen who were disadvantaged by the fall of the Saddam Hussein government. Meanwhile, the state security institutions in the city almost exclusively recruited Shi'a Turkmen, further exacerbating sectarian divisions. This caused segregation in the city, with many Shi'a Turkmen moving into Shi'a-dominated neighbourhoods protected by blast walls. However, the situation eased in later years, with more Sunnis recruited into the police force after 2009.[128]

ISIS captured Tal Afar on 16 June 2014, shortly after the fall of Mosul, and occupied the city for over three years. The ISIS advance caused the displacement of approximately 200,000 people from the city.[129] However, a significant part of the Sunni population – 50,000 people by some estimates[130] – remained in the city throughout the ISIS occupation. The city played an important and gruesome role in ISIS operations, serving as a launchpad for the attack on Sinjar and as a central slave market for captured Yazidis.

Military operations to retake Tal Afar from ISIS took place from 20 to 31 August 2017 and were conducted by a mix of federal, coalition and PMF forces. The role of Shi'a PMF factions in the Tal Afar operations was a contentious issue from the beginning, with Turkey initially refusing to accept their participation. Ultimately, the main pro-Iran PMF factions including Badr, AAH, and Kata'ib Hezbollah all fought in the operations, as well as the non-Iran affiliated Al-Abbas Brigade.

Current issues

In general, the situation is better now, if we compare it to before ISIS, because people of all sects realized that ISIS is

> *not in their interest, it does not work to serve the country.*[131]

The prominent role played by the PMF in the liberation of Tal Afar initially raised fears that Shi'a fighters would commit revenge attacks against Sunnis. Although there were reports of looting and property destruction as the factions entered the city, the scale of abuses overall seems to have been less than was feared. While Shi'a Turkman civilians were the first to return to Tal Afar, probably encouraged by the presence of the Shi'a-led factions, others soon followed. Interviewees attributed this to the fact that the PMF included both Sunni and Shi'a factions: 'All the sides of the city participated in the liberation,' as one put it.[132] Another noted that the PMF, as well as the other security forces operating in Tal Afar, are formed of people from the region, which had a positive impact on security in the city.[133]

In terms of sectarian tensions, the general perception is that relationships between Sunnis and Shi'a in Tal Afar have improved. 'The dark image that made Tal Afar infamous doesn't exist any more,' according to one interviewee.[134] Interviewees also reported that mixed marriages were on the rise, and people of both sects were participating in each other's religious occasions, pointing to Muharram and the Prophet's birthday as examples. 'There are visits between the people, even business partnerships are flourishing,' said another interviewee.[135]

However, what this story leaves out is that a significant part of Tal Afar's Sunni population is not actually in the city. The latest available estimates indicate that only 60% of Tal Afar residents have returned.[136] Most of the remaining 40% who have not returned are Sunni, who remain displaced within Iraq, or in Syria and Turkey.[137] Because many Sunnis lived in the city under ISIS rule, they can easily be accused by the PMF of ISIS affiliation, regardless of their degree of actual involvement with the group. Suspicions of guilt are enhanced when Sunnis fail to return to Tal Afar for a long time after the liberation.[138]

Even interviewees who emphasized the positive relationships between sects in Tal Afar acknowledged that this tolerance did not extend to families associated with ISIS. 'The problem is that some families have terrorists,' as one interviewee put it.[139] The collective responsibility placed on families for individual ISIS affiliation remains a major barrier to the return of Sunnis to Tal Afar, despite stated progress towards reconciliation. The 2018 Al-Ayadhiya agreement, for example, signed by Shi'a and Sunni tribal leaders in the southern Tal Afar sub-district of Al-Ayadhiya, was heralded as a reconciliation success story that enabled returns from both sects.[140] However, the agreement contained a provision preventing the return of any person implicated in terrorist acts and his first-degree relatives, unless they underwent a process of declaring their innocence before the courts (*tabree'a*).[141]

The requirement to undergo special procedures to prove one's innocence has far-reaching implications for Sunnis wishing to return to Tal Afar. Since many Tal Afar residents worked in the government sector, the requirement to obtain a security clearance stands in the way of resuming their employment.[142] It also affects their freedom of movement, since the PMF controls checkpoints leading into the city, where they are known to harass Sunnis perceived to be associated with ISIS.[143] Women are particularly vulnerable to harassment at checkpoints, as Sunni women travelling without a male companion are often assumed to be ISIS wives or affiliates.[144] Some are reluctant to visit the security agencies to obtain a *tabree'a* out of fear that they will be sexually harassed there too.[145] Moreover, the hundreds of Shi'a Turkman women enslaved by ISIS – estimated to be as many as 600 – have been unable to return due to stigma, and most are still missing.[146]

Given that there is a history of Shi'a Turkmen having disproportionate access to power in the city, some Sunni Turkmen from Tal Afar are wary that the rise of the PMF could lead to a repetition of the same pattern. They also fear the long-term political goals of the PMF. While populated by local Turkman fighters, PMF factions are seen by some as helping to advance Iran's agenda in Tal Afar.[147] Other groups are resentful of the PMF's influence too. While the city of Tal Afar is majority Turkman, the subdistricts of Al-Ayadhiya, Rabia and Zummar are home to Sunni Arab and Kurdish communities, who feel marginalized by the dominance of Turkman-majority PMF factions.[148]

The PMF's role is supposedly limited to the outskirts of Tal Afar, while the local police are the main point of contact for all security-related issues in the city.[149] However, PMF offices are reportedly located throughout the city.[150] They also exert influence over local governance. One interviewee explained that people go to the PMF to solve all their problems, suggesting that their influence extends far beyond security:

> *All the components in the city praise the PMF, and if they need something, they ask the PMF. The PMF has done other things than security. They contribute to cleaning the city, they run campaigns, they removed the debris … even with giving water, there are some areas that suffer from a water shortage and the PMF donated water.*[151]

7 Kirkuk: changing hands again

Oil-rich Kirkuk is perhaps Iraq's most contested city, holding enormous symbolic importance for several communities and their political aspirations. Control over the city has changed hands several times over the years, and whichever security actor was in power always had implications for community security and political advancement. The entry of PMF factions into the city in 2017 symbolized the downfall of Kurdish power in Kirkuk, but also opened questions about the factions' long-term goals and what they mean for the different communities living in the city.

Kirkuk is a mixed city contested between three main groups: Kurds, Turkmen and Arabs. During the Ba'ath era, Kirkuk was the target of extensive Arabization policies. Kurdish families were deprived of their properties and forced out of the city, only to be replaced by Arab families who moved in from other parts of Iraq. After the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, a property claims process enabled many Kurds to regain ownership of their properties and move back into Kirkuk, creating friction with other groups. The following period was marked by frequent violence and insecurity, with each group attempting to shift the demographic and power balance in the city in its favour. The referendum on the status of Kirkuk mandated by Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution was never held, and the city remained under the de facto control of the federal government.

When federal forces collapsed in the face of the ISIS advance in 2014, the KRG deployed its forces to Kirkuk and took control of the city. Kurdish forces managed to defend the city from ISIS occupation, although ISIS forces reached the surrounding areas. The period of Kurdish control was unpopular with many of Kirkuk's Arab and Turkman residents, however, who were subjected to various forms of politically motivated violence and forced displacement. In October 2017, following the results of the Kurdish independence referendum, the ISF and the PMF launched a military assault, causing Kurdish forces to flee and reasserting control over the city.

Current issues

The entry of the PMF into Kirkuk has led to a new reconfiguration power. The main PMF factions active in the governorate are composed of Shi'a Turkman fighters (Brigades 16 and 52). Shi'a Turkmen were victimized by ISIS and marginalized during the period of Kurdish control over the city, so this newfound power is a positive development for them. However, this has come at the expense of other groups.

Kurds are the most disadvantaged by the presence of the PMF. At least 150,000 people were displaced when the PMF entered Kirkuk, most of whom were Kurds.[152] There were reports of PMF factions expelling Kurds and burning down and destroying their properties.[153] While some of those displaced have returned, many cannot, especially those who are affiliated with Kurdish political parties.[154] Many Kurds still in Kirkuk are selling their houses and leaving.[155]

Arabs have also been affected by the PMF's entry into Kirkuk, although to a lesser extent. The control of Shi'a Turkman PMF factions in the villages around Bashir, south of Kirkuk, was associated with a lack of return of Sunni Arab civilians to those areas, against a comparatively high rate of Shi'a Turkman returns.[156] PMF factions have also forcibly displaced and destroyed the properties of families suspected to be ISIS affiliates in Hawija[157] and carried out assassinations of Arabs in Tuz district.[158]

Smaller minorities, who feel their interests are not represented by any of the forces present in Kirkuk, are also vulnerable in the current configuration. For example, Kirkuk is home to several Kaka'i villages. Historically, Kakai's have usually aligned their interests with the Kurdish cause, but the departure of Kurdish forces left them without protectors. One interviewee explained how after the change in control in Kirkuk, the new security forces did not do anything to stop a Kaka'i village from being attacked by ISIS remnants:

> *A group of 50 ISIS members were preparing to come and attack the village of Zanqar and kidnap people. But we didn't know who they were, so we reported it to the security forces, but they did not respond. At night, ISIS came and they kidnapped them. The next day at 10 a.m., the local police came and investigated, but in the end, they didn't do anything.*[159]

As a result, he stated that out of an original total of 15 Kaka'i villages in the governorate, only 5 remain now. He attributed this development the change in power: 'If the Peshmerga did not withdraw, the people might have stayed in their villages. But when the Peshmerga left, our areas were emptied.'[160]

Other minorities who do not benefit from the protection of armed factions in Kirkuk are also feeling a sense of insecurity. A Christian interviewee explained that the Chaldean Church leadership in Iraq opposed the formation of Christian armed groups based on biblical ethics. 'So we don't have the concept of forming militias,' he explained.[161] Sabaean-Mandaeans are another religious minority who are outside the framework of armed factions in Kirkuk. Not only are they unprotected by the Shi'a factions, but they also feel stigmatized by the dominant factions' religious ideology:

> *We feel harassed when our Shi'a brothers perform their Husseini ceremonies, when they are very loud as if a DJ is playing. I can't relax in my house because of these sounds. When I hear the sermons from the mosques that are close to us and I hear him saying that all the non-Muslim components are* kuffar *(disbelievers), this makes me feel uncomfortable and worried. This is what we also miss, not having tolerant religious discourse that respects human rights.*[162]

Political, economic and cultural influence

> *What we see is that they (the PMF) have economic offices and they can influence political decision making.*[163]

While the PMF factions have been ordered to withdraw to the outskirts of Kirkuk, they still have political influence

throughout the city. The Badr Organization has political offices inside Kirkuk, headed by Turkman Muhammed Al-Bayati. The acting governor of Kirkuk, Rakan Al-Jabouri, is also loyal to the Badr Organization and a staunch supporter of a continued role for the PMF in the province.[164] The influence of the Badr Organization has meant that Turkman and Shi'a Arabs enjoy privileged access to employment, contracts and services in Kirkuk.[165] For smaller minorities, denial of access to jobs and livelihoods impacts their sense of belonging, as explained by one interviewee:

> *Every armed group tries to pursue their own political and personal interests, and that is at the expense of the minorities. As a minority member I consider myself to be the weakest link in society. So that is harmful in terms of services, security, and job opportunities. Jobs are an important factor that affects one's feeling of security and belonging to a homeland.*[166]

In addition to favouring their own groups in the awarding of jobs and contracts, the PMF is accused by minorities of extorting money from the local population through their control of checkpoints:

> *Every time a new force comes, they take money from the people, the farmers. They buy thermal cameras, they want this, they want to build that. They change the location of the checkpoint. And this money comes from bribes collected by force. Because the Iraqi government has allocated a budget for security matters. This extortion stops displaced people from returning. Until now unemployment in the cities is high, and the farmers want to come back, but when they come back, they take their money, leaving them bankrupt. They take fish from them, they don't let them have fertilizers.*[167]

The PMF has also reportedly acquired public land in Kirkuk, which it rents out and taxes.[168] Recently, the chairman of the Popular Mobilization Commission, Falih Al-Fayyadh, announced that families of PMF 'martyrs' would be allocated plots of residential land in Kirkuk.[169] The PMF is also accused of deriving income from illicit activities, such as levying taxes on truck drivers at illegal checkpoints. They also reportedly pressure shop owners to pay them protection money.[170] One interviewee accused PMF members of forcibly displacing Sabean-Mandaeans to get rid of the financial debts they owed to them.[171]

Another part of the reason the PMF has been able to acquire so much power and influence is because of popular discontent with the bureaucracy and inefficiency of the central government, which drives people to seek out PMF assistance to solve their issues expediently. 'The people are tired of hearing "come and bring your security papers." These procedures make people desperate,' one interviewee explained, in reference to the familiar refrain heard from government officials.[172]

In addition to its political and economic influence, the PMF is also reportedly exerting cultural influence in Kirkuk, manifested in increasing pressure on non-Shi'a groups to conform to Shi'a religious ideology. One interviewee, noting the increasing trend of Kaka'is participating in Shi'a religious rituals, warned about the underlying political motivations of these developments:

> *This year, for the first time, we saw Kaka'is making convoys in Ashura. Before, maybe they would pay their respects during Ashura to their Shi'a brothers, but they did not form convoys. This is a cultural change that is more dangerous than demographic change, because whoever joins these wala'i (Iranian loyalist) politics, the first year they form a convoy, and the year after they start making visits to the holy sites, and the third year they are given weapons and told, 'Go fight for your ideology, Hussein was martyred and you must be too.' This is not for Hussein. If it was, then they would bring their sons to fight … not live happily in Tehran while we die here.*[173]

New forces, old problems

For many Kirkuk residents, the current configuration of security actors is only a temporary and tenuous equilibrium, given the unresolved political dispute. In this light, the expulsion of Kurdish forces from the district in 2017 did not signal the end of Kurdish claims to the city, but only a mo-

mentary setback. Many fear that the next round of conflict is not far away:

> *And until today this conflict exists, these Kurdish forces want to come back to Kirkuk. And this problem is a big one when there is more than one security agency in the city. Whether we like it or not they will have a conflict – political, partisan, economic – and usually the political parties and the militias do not consider the consequences on the people living here. They only think about protecting their interests.*[174]

There are already indications that Kurdish forces are preparing to reassume some functions in the city, despite strong objections from Arab and Turkman political blocs. In May 2021, Peshmerga officers entered Kirkuk for the first time since 2017 to participate in a joint operations meeting at the K1 military base.[175] Fears of another reconfiguration of power must be understood in the context of Kirkuk's repeated experience of changing political control, with the entry of each new force causing upheaval and demographic change. The impact of these waves of displacement on smaller minorities was described by one interviewee, who noted that the Christian population in the governorate was declining with time:

> *In Kirkuk we had a lot of Christians. The Chaldeans alone, who are the biggest sect in Kirkuk, were 1,200 to 1,300 families. And the other sects were as big as we are or less. Let's say there were 2,000 Christian families in Kirkuk. Today, if we count the Christian families that stayed in Kirkuk from all the sects there are 500 to 600 families left. So this emigration that happened in Kirkuk says a lot.*[176]

Given the ongoing political dispute over the status of Kirkuk, the existence of multiple armed groups with competing agendas could further escalate future cycles of conflict. This is once again causing minorities to contemplate their future in the city:

> *This makes us worried, and makes us think about leaving the country and emigrating. For many years we learned that the police should be the ones in control, and one armed force that belongs to the state is the one that represents the rule of law … but the presence of militias and multiple forces certainly makes us worry, and then we think of emigration to protect our families.*[177]

Many believe the only solution to these endless episodes of political violence lies in an inclusive, unified security force that does not represent the interests of only one group:

> *The Sahawat*[178] *and the PMF do not make us happy … let the force be controlled by the Ministry of Defence or the Ministry of Interior – that would make us happy.*[179]

8 Conclusion and Recommendations

The creation of the PMF was seen in Iraq as a necessary step at a time of national crisis and collapse, and was instrumental in contributing to the defeat of ISIS. Given the existential threat faced by minorities during this time, the formation of minority armed factions was also an important development in their struggle for survival, especially given the inability of the existing armed forces to protect them from attack.

In the post-ISIS period, however, the continued presence of armed factions outside the control of the state is having a destructive impact on governance, the economy, and community relations. While the factions have brought benefits to some, much of this corrupt influence has come at the expense of other groups. Moreover, since not all minorities have armed factions representing their interests, the factions do not present a viable long-term model for the security and advancement of minorities as a whole.

Most interviewees consulted for this report viewed the participation of minorities in local security forces positively; as one put it, 'The people of the region have the right to be in charge of their security.'[180] Almost unanimously they also agreed that this should take place within the framework of a unified and accountable national force. In the words of one interviewee:

> *The inclusion of minorities in the state agencies, like the police, the army, national security and intelligence, would increase the power of minorities and enforce security in those areas. That would be a good message that this is indeed a state-controlled power that is official and should prosper, contrary to the other factions that are far from being official or under the control of the state.*[181]

While the PMF started as a security actor, the factions are now behaving as social, economic and political actors while remaining exempt from civilian oversight. This is exacerbating existing problems of corruption, clientelism and sectarianism, and weakening the already fragile authority of the state. It also means that the factions are amassing more power and influence which will make them even more difficult to bring under control.

Several interviewees were of the opinion that if the PMF were to be continued, its responsibilities should be clearly delineated and limited to security:

> *PMF forces can be a support, if they are located far away from the cities and stop interfering in administrative and political matters. They can maybe be a part of the Iraqi armed forces and support it in defending the country and its sovereignty and the security of the people. Not like what we hear, that this armed faction has an economic office and that one is interfering in the work of the local administration, the municipalities or public services.*[182]

Finally, in the context of the unresolved political status of the disputed territories, the presence of competing armed factions is a source of continuing insecurity, volatility and fear for local populations. These factions are suspected of serving as instruments to advance political agendas that may be detrimental to the best interests of minority communities in the long term. In the absence of meaningful avenues for participation in local governance, minorities are also vulnerable to being recruited into armed groups which offer a stable source of income and social advancement. Minorities need the political status of their areas to be resolved in order to feel safe, and to meaningfully consulted in discussions about their future:

> *During all the debates about the future of this land, the minorities are not included. And the people who attend these debates are normally the people affiliated to the*

authorities' parties that have their own interests in the area. This is why we always see that all the solutions that come do not serve the area. They should keep the political conflict between Baghdad and Erbil away from this land.[183]

Recommendations

To the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government:

- Ensure civilian oversight of all armed forces operating in Iraq;
- Ensure that all armed actors in Iraq are acting in compliance with human rights law and international humanitarian law; conduct prompt, impartial, independent and effective investigations into suspected violations; and where appropriate prosecute the individuals responsible;
- Amend the Iraqi legal framework to enable the prosecution of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and other international crimes when committed by any forces, including the Iraqi Security Forces, Popular Mobilization Forces or armed opposition groups;
- Oversee the transfer of security checkpoints on public highways to government control;
- Enforce relevant legal restrictions prohibiting the involvement of security forces in profit-making activities;
- Include minority representatives in the discussion of all measures concerning the security of minority populations and the territories they inhabit;
- Enact a comprehensive anti-discrimination law;
- Promote the recruitment of minorities and increase their participation in all federal, regional and local security forces, including military and police forces;
- Expedite progress towards implementation of the Sinjar Agreement and advance resolution of the issue of the disputed territories by promoting agreement on administrative arrangements in consultation with local populations;
- Ensure the removal of arbitrary barriers on political campaigning and freedom of expression in the disputed territories;
- Invest in reconstruction, public services and employment creation in the disputed territories to enable the return of displaced communities.

Notes

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‘They Are in Control’:
The rise of paramilitary forces and the security of minorities in Iraq’s disputed territories

In brief

The existence of paramilitary groups has a long history in Iraq, but the conflict with ISIS from 2014-2017 accelerated their growth and rise to power. The conflict saw the creation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an umbrella of new and existing armed factions which quickly became an essential partner in the military operations against ISIS, gaining official recognition and state funding along the way. The conflict also saw an unprecedented militarization of minorities, with many communities taking up weapons in response to attacks on their areas, forming militias which in most cases went on to become part of the PMF.

Since the end of the ISIS conflict, the influence of the PMF has only grown, helped by a series of reforms that have solidified its status as a state institution. Today, the PMF Commission receives an annual budget of $2.6 billion from the Iraqi state and has administrative offices in every province outside the Kurdistan region. The factions have translated their success on the battlefield into significant electoral gains, with PMF-linked candidates forming large parliamentary blocs in both the 2018 and 2021 elections and managing to win many of the parliamentary seats allocated to minorities. The PMF has also transformed itself into an economic actor, acquiring significant land holdings throughout Iraq and extracting taxes from real estate transactions and business activity.

In Iraq’s disputed territories, the newly empowered role of the PMF is having a destructive impact on governance, the economy, and community relations. The disputed territories are ethnically and religiously diverse, forming the historical home for different communities including Chaldo-Assyrian Christians, Yazidis, Shabak, Turkmen, Arabs, Kurds, Kaka’is and others. Many minority PMF factions who participated in military operations to liberate the disputed areas from ISIS control were handed responsibility over security, policing, and other functions in retaken areas. While the presence of minority factions offers a sense of reassurance for some community members after the trauma of being abandoned by Iraqi and Kurdish forces, some of these factions are exploiting their newfound control, privileging their own networks with access to jobs, land and other resources.

While the PMF started as a security actor, the factions are now behaving as social, economic and political actors while remaining exempt from civilian oversight. This is exacerbating existing problems of corruption, clientelism and sectarianism, weakening the already fragile authority of the state and fuelling tensions between groups. In the context of the ongoing political conflict between Baghdad and Erbil over the status of the disputed territories, the presence of competing armed groups is also source of insecurity, volatility and fear for local communities. Since most of these armed groups receive backing and support from more powerful blocs in the PMF, especially the Iran-aligned factions, many suspect them of serving as instruments to advance larger political and regional agendas. This uncertainty acts as a major barrier to the return of minorities displaced by ISIS, who fear another conflict will inevitably arise between armed actors in their areas.

With a focus on the four districts of Hamdaniya, Sinjar, Tal Afar and Kirkuk, this report examines the complex and shifting roles played by armed factions in the disputed territories since the end of the conflict with ISIS, and the implications of this new balance of power for the future of minorities living in those areas.

This report recommends:

- Ensuring civilian oversight of all armed forces operating in Iraq;
- Including minority representatives in the discussion of all security and political arrangements in the territories they inhabit;
- Amending the Iraqi legal framework to enable the prosecution of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and other international crimes when committed by any forces;
- Investing in reconstruction, public services and employment creation in the disputed territories to enable the return of displaced communities.

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