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# Living Among the Hashd:

## Relations Between Citizens and Security Actors in Five Iraqi Provinces

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## INTRODUCTION

Several recent studies, in addition to numerous media reports, have pointed to the extensive efforts of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMFs – al-Hashd al-Shaabi) to build the loyalties of local communities, not only in their traditional base of support in southern Iraq but also in the so-called “liberated” areas of the center and north of Iraq.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the PMFs have widely touted their role in service provision, reconstruction, and more recently, in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 Dylan O’Driscoll and Dave van Zoonen, “The Future of Iraq: Is Reintegration Possible?” *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 3 (September 7, 2017): 34-47. <https://doi.org/10.1017/mepo.12285>; Sadiq Hassaan, “Iraq’s PMF: An Entity Beyond Suspicion or a Mirage of Deception?” *Washington Institute Fikra Forum*. January 28, 2021; <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pdf/view/16472/en>; Nancy Ezzeddine, Erwin van Veen, and Matthias Sulz, “The Hashd Is Dead, Long Live The Hashd!” *Clingendael*. July 25, 2019; <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/hashd-dead-long-live-hashd/>; Nancy Ezzeddine, Edwin van Veen, and Matthias Sulz, “Iraq’s Al-Hashd Al-Sha’abi ‘On The March,’” *Clingendael*. November 22, 2018; <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/iraqs-al-hashd-al-shaabi-march/>; Inna Rudolf, “The Future of the Popular Mobilization Forces after the Assassination of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*. April 15, 2020. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/04/the-future-of-the-popular-mobilization-forces-after-the-assassination-of-abu-mahdi-al-muhandis/>; Inna Rudolf, “The Sunnis of Iraq’s Shia’ Paramilitary Powerhouse,” *The Century Foundation*. February 13, 2020. <https://tcf.org/content/report/sunnis-iraqs-shia-paramilitary-powerhouse/?session=1>.
- 2 Jessica Watkins and Mustafa Hasan, “Iraq’s Popular Mobilisation Forces and the COVID-19 Pandemic: A New Raison d’Être?” *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*. April 29, 2020. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/04/29/iraqs-popular-mobilisation-forces-and-the-covid-19-pandemic-a-new-raison-detre/>.



Analysts have viewed these efforts both as a high-stakes struggle for the PMFs to substantively compete with the “state” for local legitimacy, and to rebuild trust with local communities in the aftermath of the October 2019 protests.<sup>3</sup> Missing from the analysis of heightened PMF engagement with local communities is an examination of the perspectives and daily practices of communities themselves. To date, research has focused on the perspectives of PMF fighters and leaders, making only passing reference to local community views. Based on interviews and focus groups in five provinces, this study seeks to close this lacuna in the literature. Importantly, the study examines not only how communities perceive the PMFs but also how they act towards the PMFs, focusing specifically on how they negotiate interactions with the PMFs in the pursuit of services, protection, and assistance. This research approach tests the hypothesis that declining public ideological support for the PMFs in the aftermath of the infamous protest crackdown may not translate substantially into a weakening of dependencies and social ties between the PMFs and local communities. The research team hypothesized that community actors who now disapprove strongly of the PMFs may simultaneously rely upon them for key services, objectives, and needs. The results generally aligned with the hypothesis but must be seen through the lenses of social class and geography. Indeed, access to services often requires the assistance of PMF contacts acting as middlemen with the government and/or private entities – a key reason why community members, particularly in poor areas, must develop and maintain close contacts with the PMFs. Where government functioning is low, and people’s lives and livelihoods are at stake, community actors have no choice but to rely upon the PMFs regardless of whether or not they support them ideologically. The study gathered data from five provinces (Baghdad, Basrah, Ninewa, Thi Qar, and Kirkuk) but focuses primarily on three in-depth case studies (Baghdad, Basrah, and Ninewa) which highlight local nuances and complexities.

## BACKGROUND

In the waning days of the anti-ISIS campaign in 2016 and 2017, Iraqi and international stakeholders who invested in security sector reform (SSR) studied the relationship between PMFs and local communities and believed that a better understanding of that relationship would aid in demobilization and reintegration. Stakeholders predicted that PMF members would lay down arms and return to areas of Baghdad and the south to re-establish lives and careers—ideally not in the security sector.<sup>4</sup> When it became clear that significant demobilization was not in the cards, and that the PMF presence would endure, supported by public salaries, interest in PMF-community relations took a new tack. Now policymakers and analysts understood that PMFs were invested in long-term public relations (PR) campaigns that competed with the “state”; PMFs commanded sufficient resources and popular appeal to present themselves as integral to ongoing Iraqi security, stabilization, and even reconstruction.

The PMFs engaged in high profile service-provision initiatives, renovating roads in Najaf and cleaning streets in Basrah; they distributed jobs to young adult males across their core support base in the south as well as in select Sunni Arab communities through tribal intermediaries;<sup>5</sup> they provided specific communities with access to funding and avenues to pursue hyper-local interests;<sup>6</sup> finally, they made efforts to “sanctify” themselves via strategic media programming, relying upon endorsements from a wide range of popular Iraqi figures.<sup>7</sup> The PMF leadership explicitly made the case that they could out-perform the central government in the provision of services more typically within the state’s domain.

Such PMF-led efforts have raised alarm among analysts concerned about the legitimacy of the Iraqi state. Some have gone so far as to say that the Iraqi Security Force (ISF) should more convincingly “market” themselves to the general population, to counteract the “mass

3 Hassaan, “Iraq’s PMF: an Entity Beyond Suspicion.”

4 Jacqueline Parry and Emily Burlinghaus, “Reintegration of Combatants in Iraq after ISIL,” *IRIS Policy Report*. American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, Institute of Regional and International Studies. April 10, 2019.

5 Ezzeddine, van Veen, and Sulz, “Iraq’s Al-Hashd Al-Sha’abi.”

6 Rudolf, “The Future of the Popular Mobilization Forces.”

7 Hassaan, “Iraq’s PMF: An Entity.”

indoctrination project”<sup>8</sup> that currently depicts PMFs as essential.<sup>9</sup> Despite widespread concerns about “indoctrination” among analysts, there has been scant empirical attention to the question of whether these efforts are actually effective at the local level. In other words, the voices and opinions of community members are largely lacking in the analysis of PMF-community relations.

Exceptions include a 2019 study by the Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS) drawing from focus groups in Basrah,<sup>10</sup> and another study by the International Organization for Migration (IOM)<sup>11</sup> in which specific local communities in Ninewa were asked to rate levels of trust and approval of a wide variety of actors, including the PMFs. The results of these studies were mixed. Community members in Basrah participating in the IRIS study expressed gratitude for employment opportunities granted to youth but simultaneously complained of the “disruptive behavior, corruption, and preferential treatment given to current or former [PMF] members.”<sup>12</sup> Likewise, IOM data indicate that community members in one Ninewa locality were “divided as to the perceived role... the PMF have in the community (whether it is positive or negative).”<sup>13</sup> In short, instead of clear-cut support or opposition, earlier studies suggest that community members expressed ambivalence in their assessment of the PMF.

While these two prior studies open important areas of inquiry, neither one engages deeply with qualitative data representing diverse community-level voices across multiple localities. As a result, the understanding of the PMF-community relations excludes class and geography, two variables worthy of further examination. Furthermore, the studies do not distinguish between community-level attitudes and practices. While community approval or disapproval of the PMFs is one data point of community-PMF relations, it reveals little about the ways in which communities pragmatically negotiate with PMFs. Put

differently, attitudes towards the PMFs—whether positive, negative, or ambivalent—do not necessarily indicate the degree to which a community interacts with, or depends upon, PMFs in the pursuit of everyday needs and objectives. Thus, the aim of this research project has been to assess not only community-level perceptions of PMFs, but also to explore pragmatic community engagement with the PMFs. We took this approach to test the hypothesis that declining public support for the PMF—resulting from PMF involvement in the 2019-2020 crackdown against protestors—may not weaken dependencies and social ties between PMFs and communities.

## METHODS

Study data includes qualitative key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted in five Iraqi provinces—Baghdad, Basrah, Ninewa, Thi Qar, and Kirkuk—between May 2020 and May 2021. In Phase 1 of the research, 50 qualitative KIIs (26 men, and 24 women) were conducted across five provinces. Age distribution was balanced, with 16 respondents aged 18-34; 19 respondents aged 35-49; and 15 respondents who were 50 or older. In Phase 2 of the research, eight FGDs were conducted across three provinces (Baghdad, Ninewa, and Kirkuk), with 101 FGD participants in total (55 women, 46 men). By design, at least one FGD per province was exclusively for women, and facilitated by a woman. Baghdad featured one FGD dedicated entirely to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs). Among the FGDs, 51 participants were aged 18-34; 18 participants were aged 34-49; 11 participants were older than 50; and 21 participants were of unknown age. Due to heightened security concerns, the research team was not able to convene FGDs in Thi Qar and Basrah. Accordingly, in Phase 3, these were replaced with 39 additional KIIs (20 women, 19 men) across the two provinces. Nine participants in the interviews from

8 Ibid.

9 O’Driscoll and van Zoonen, “The Future of Iraq.”

10 Zmkan Ali Saleem and Mac Skelton, “Basra’s Political Marketplace: Understanding Government Failure After the Protests,” *IRIS Policy Report*. American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, Institute of Regional and International Studies. April 29, 2019.

11 Mara Redlich Revkin, Olga Aymerich, and Kate Elizabeth Albers, “Perceptions of Security and Police in Iraq: Baseline Survey Findings,” IOM Iraq. [https://iraq.iom.int/files/IOM%20Iraq%20Perceptions%20of%20Security%20and%20Police%20in%20Iraq-%20Baseline%20Survey%20Findings\\_o.pdf](https://iraq.iom.int/files/IOM%20Iraq%20Perceptions%20of%20Security%20and%20Police%20in%20Iraq-%20Baseline%20Survey%20Findings_o.pdf).

12 Parry and Burlinghaus, “Reintegration of Combatants.”

13 Revkin, Aymerich, and Albers, “Perceptions of Security and Police.”

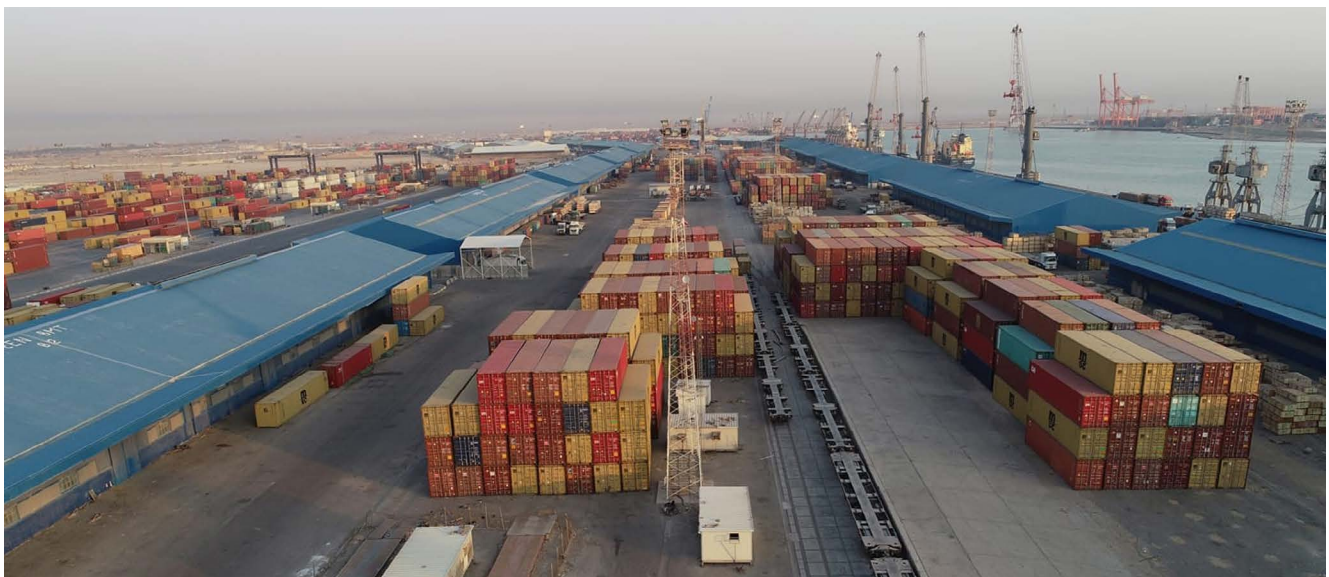
Thi Qar and Basrah were aged 18–34; 26 were aged 35–49; and four were older than 50. The sample did not include prominent local government officials (e.g., mayor, directors general, etc.), and did not include security actors (e.g., PMF members, soldiers, and police). The researchers worked through existing local contacts to identify community leaders that fit the stakeholder roles as outlined above (i.e., “snowball sampling” recruitment).

#### KIIs and FGDs examined:

- Community attitudes and ideological affinity with PMFs (i.e., the extent to which the local community agrees with PMF activities); and
- The community’s pragmatic engagement with PMFs (i.e., how the community navigates daily interactions with PMFs). Within this second topic, the focus of this study, questions and prompts examined community-level strategies—with PMF aid or hinderance—to meet needs related to:
  - Protection and security;
  - Services, aid, and assistance; and
  - Travel and mobility.

One challenge in studying community-level attitudes and practices towards the PMFs is how to define “PMF” as an

entity. Previous research has shown that the PMF is not a singular or consolidated security force but a network of institutions and actors cutting across a variety of governmental, commercial, civil society, and political domains.<sup>14</sup> Short of being a military umbrella organization composed of discrete brigades and units, the PMFs and their affiliates occupy different roles, which may or may not be in the security arena. The crossover between military and non-military arenas is particularly evident in that specific political parties are directly associated with specific PMFs, and there is little (if any) meaningful daylight between the two. Parties such as the Sadiqun Movement, the Badr Organization, and Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq are directly tied to the PMF armed groups Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), Badr Brigades, and Saraya al-Jihad, respectively. This network-based understanding of PMFs helps us understand why local communities are themselves often perplexed as to what constitutes the PMFs, and why many citizens use the terms the “parties” (ahzab), and the “militias” (milishiyat) interchangeably. Conceptualizing the PMFs as a network is particularly important when studying urban areas, where PMFs are often “invisible” (i.e., security is formally provided by the ISF) but active in the military, economic, and political domains. To capture this complexity, the following case studies focus on each province’s urban center.



*Umm Qasr Port, largest port in Iraq.*

<sup>14</sup> Renad Mansour, “Networks of power: The Popular Mobilization Forces and the state in Iraq,” *Research Paper*, Chatham House Middle East and North Africa Programme. February 25, 2021. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/2021-02-25-networks-of-power-mansour.pdf>.

## OVERVIEW OF RESULTS

### BAGHDAD

*Communities have a pragmatic relationship with the PMFs and engage with them when necessary. This trend varies by social class and geography.*

There is a significant correlation between social class and the degree of a given community's interaction with the PMFs, particularly in Baghdad. Middle- and upper-class residents of central Baghdad tend to rely less on the PMFs in their daily lives because they have broad social/political networks that help them navigate bureaucracy. In poorer areas of eastern and southern Baghdad, where Saraya al-Salam (SS) and the AAH are dominant, local residents have no choice but to resort to these groups for help as SS/AAH are enmeshed with local governance and security. (See "Case Study: Baghdad" below for details.)

### BASRAH

*Despite being the original support base for the Hashd, respondents in Basrah expressed a range of views on PMFs but mostly adopted a critical and cautious posture.*

Respondents in Basrah generally fell into one of three categories: those who rely on PMFs when necessary but nonetheless express a preference for the government and usually only engage the PMF indirectly through their tribes; respondents who mostly criticize the Hashd but soften these criticisms by distinguishing the "current" PMFs from the "real" PMFs who fought against ISIS; and finally, respondents who fully denounce the PMFs entirely as extensions of a corrupt political order. These respondents tend to talk about the "parties" and the "Hashd" as one and the same. (See "Case Study: Basrah" below for details.)

### NINEWA

*Community views on the PMFs were different in the province center, relative to the peripheries.*

In the peripheries, a patchwork of locally-recruited PMFs secure areas occupied by minorities (Shebak Brigade 30; Ninewa Protection Units). In these areas, support of—or opposition to—any given PMF depends largely on the ethno-sectarian and political alignment of the community in question. In the urban center of the province, the PMFs are not active as a military force. Yet urban community members nonetheless have an extremely fraught relationship with the PMFs. This is due to the PMFs' disproportionate influence over Mosul City's economy and politics, which contrasts with the pervasive sense of political disempowerment among the local Sunni Arabs residing in the city. Moreover, while internal security in Mosul is provided by the police and army, the PMFs are stationed in all directions outside the city. Sunni Arab residents of the city describe being entirely powerless at checkpoints exiting the city and they fear being "labeled as ISIS" at any moment. (See "Case Study: Ninewa" below for details.)

### NASRIYA (THI QAR)

*The highest concentration of respondents strongly denouncing the Hashd (and refusing to seek their help/assistance) were in Nasriya; women respondents were especially strident in expressing these views.*

The predominant majority of the Nasriya respondents expressed this lack of trust by stating that they neither relied upon, nor sought protection from, the PMFs because of mistrust. They thought PMFs were a source of insecurity, and they believed that it was wrong to seek protection from a force that did not have legal mandate to operate within cities and intervene in civil affairs. They generally see the PMFs as indistinguishable from the corrupt "parties" ruling Iraq. While the sample is limited, the strength of the anti-PMF sentiment in Nasriya indicates that the post-protest crackdown and violence has made a lasting impact.



Though a case study of Nasriya is not included in the study due to the difficulty of accessing the province (raising questions about reliability of the data), select quotes from the interviews follow:

“ Regarding the PMF factions, no civilian relies on them [for protection] because they are part of the problem and requesting protection from them means generating chaos.

–Woman, aged 23, English literature student

“ In respect to the PMF, we do not resort to it and frankly the PMF is an armed wing formed by [Grand Ayatollah] Sistani for the purpose of liberating cities from Daesh. But if the PMF is allowed to have roles in the cities [roles in civil life during peace] then it is a disaster in itself because weapons out of control of the government—even if this weapon is not used—would be a ticking bomb.

–Woman, aged 61, retiree

“ Yes, I heard that some PMF factions—which I do not know who they belong to—have carried out a campaign of repairing school desks in some schools which is appreciated. However, in my opinion these works are the responsibility of the government and not the factions that are tied to the parties and because this [ceding quasi-government functions to PMFs] would consolidate the parties and would enable Muhassasa [sectarian quota-based system] to endure.

–Woman, aged 47, PhD student

## KIRKUK

*The relationship between community members and the PMFs is mediated by political figures tied to specific ethno-sectarian groups.*

The major communities (Kurds, Turkmen, and Sunni Arabs) have political backers and allies in the security forces that allow them to mediate interactions with the PMFs. However, these backers are of varying power and authority. When the Kurds need help or assistance in interacting with the PMFs, they generally turn to the

Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) as a conduit. Due to longstanding PUK-Badr ties, they triangulate access by way of the PUK Asayish and other PUK party affiliates on the ground, who can take Kurdish concerns to their Badr and PMF counterparts. For Shia Turkmen, ties to the PMFs are more direct as the force is locally recruited. The head of the Badr political office prominently located in central Kirkuk is a Shia Turkman known as Muhammed al-Bayati, granting both the Turkman and Shia Arab communities in Kirkuk privileged access to a powerful advocate in accessing services, jobs, contracts, and protection. For Sunni Arabs, the situation is more complex as Rakan al-Jabouri does not specifically advocate on behalf of the Sunni Arabs. While Rakan al-Jebouri is a Sunni Arab from Hawija, his political and economic fortunes have been tied to two main concerns: appeasing Badr/PMFs and the PUK/KDP on the one hand, and granting contracts and benefits to his relatives on the other. In this equation, the Sunni Arabs of central Kirkuk have largely been de-prioritized, reducing the extent to which Rakan al-Jebouri might mediate on their behalf with the Hashd when concerns arise. However, the Sunni Arabs of Hawija have a powerful Member of Parliament (MP) as well as a locally-recruited Hashd through whom they engage with the broader PMFs. Trust levels between the local community and Hashd Hawija are particularly high. The quotes below exemplify this community-PMF relationship in Hawija:

“ I seek assistance directly from Mulla Majeed, the commander of the Brigade 56 of the PMF because he has a wide network of relationships in different government offices, and he can make things happen. Mulla Majeed has been supportive each time I have been asking him for help.

– Male, age aged 50s, Sunni Arab

“ In case I face troubles while I am on the road, I first contact my connections in the PMF [Brigade 56 which is tribal Hashd and called by locals “Hashd Hawija”] who are quicker in terms of response and more effective because they are from al-Abbasi [District] and they know the people of the area, unlike the federal police.

– Sunni tribal leader, aged 40, from al-Abbasi District



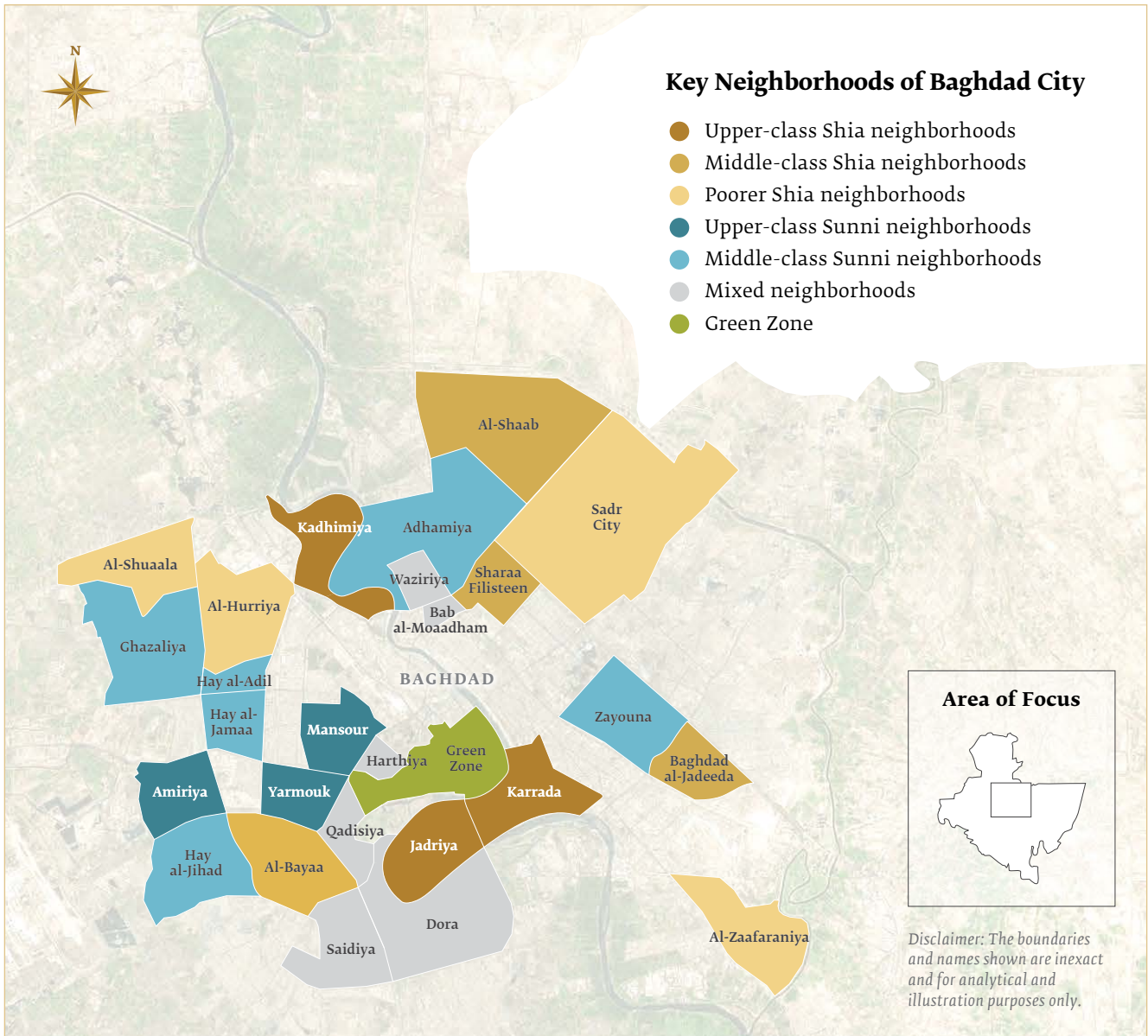
# CASE STUDY: BAGHDAD

## SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION OF THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Baghdad has a population of approximately 7.3 million. Prior to 2003, Baghdad boasted a multicultural population of Shia and Sunni Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, Chaldeans, and other smaller minority communities, such as Mandeans and Armenians. Between 2003 and 2008, almost 600,000 people left Baghdad, which had consequential effect on its multicultural identity. Currently, Baghdad remains a mixed city comprised primarily of the major ethno-sectarian groups, the Shia and Sunni Arabs, in addition to decreasing pockets of the ethnic groups listed above. A 2008 IOM study estimated that the Shia population of Baghdad constituted approximately 80% of the total; however, this number is probably too high. Election results from 2018 indicate that the Shia population would make up no more than 70% of the total, with Sunni Arabs constituting approximately 25% and the remainder distributed across various minorities and Kurds. These ethno-religious groups are concentrated in particular areas of the city, and they are divided along class lines.

The eastern and southern portions of the city are both Shia Arab and relatively poor (e.g., Sadr City, and the outskirts of Rasafa). The central areas of the city (e.g., Jadriya, Karrada, and Kadhimiya) are predominantly Shia Arab, but these areas are middle- and upper-class and thus share little in common socially and politically with the population in eastern Baghdad. Al-Yarmouk, al-Mansour, and Adhamiya are Sunni Arab zones. In terms of class, they are mostly middle- and upper-class families who possessed the social and political capital to avoid the mass forced displacements of poorer Sunni Arabs during the 2006-2008 sectarian war. Because of these displacements, there are very few lower-class Sunni Arabs in Baghdad. (See Figure 1 for more on the socio-demographic composition in Baghdad. The map reflects changes in population dynamics due to the years of sectarian strife between 2005-2007).

Figure 1: Socio-demographic Composition of Key Neighborhoods in Baghdad City



**DISTRIBUTION AND INFLUENCE OF PMF MILITARY, POLITICAL, AND ECONOMIC ASSETS**

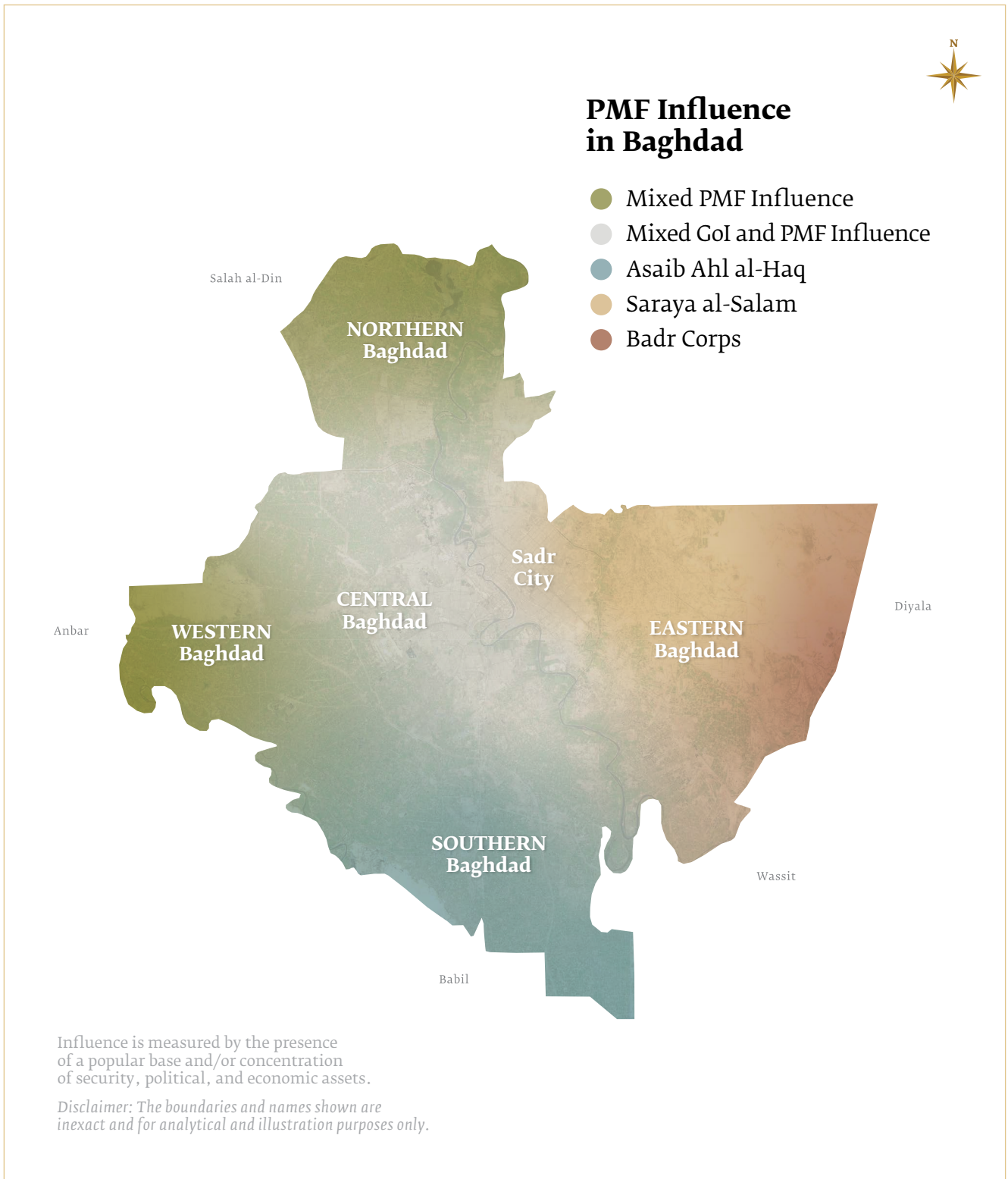
Even though the PMFs do not maintain a major visible military presence in central Baghdad, their networks and offices extend throughout the city to varying degrees according to neighborhood/social class. Saraya al-Salam (SS) – the PMF associated with the Sadrist Movement – is generally considered to be the most influential PMF group in Baghdad, with a mixture of economic, military, and commercial assets across the city. SS’s influence is most prominent in eastern Baghdad, where the Sadrist Movement has long held a vast support base. SS’s massive

stronghold in the east grants the group a foothold into the rest of the city. Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), an offshoot of the Sadrist Movement, is widely perceived to be the second most influential PMF group in Baghdad. AAH’s political and economic assets are concentrated in the southern portion of the city. The Badr Organization is the third most influential group due to its stronghold in Diyala, which extends into the easternmost portions of Baghdad province. In the central areas of Baghdad, all of the major PMFs have political offices and economic assets. Routine

security is controlled by the ISF on a day-to-day basis, but the various PMF units have not hesitated to make an overt show of force at critical moments. Finally, the western and northern areas of the Baghdad belt are controlled by

a mixture of PMF forces. The various PMFs and the major Shia Arab-majority political blocks have a shared interest in protecting Baghdad from Anbar and Salah al-Din, which they regard as volatile Sunni Arab-majority areas.

Figure 2: PMF Influence in Baghdad. GoI = Government of Iraq





## A BRIEF HISTORY OF COMMUNITY-PMF RELATIONS

The *fatwa* issued by Grand Ayatollah Sistani in 2014 led to a significant mobilization of conscripts from Baghdad, particularly the easternmost and southernmost portions of the city, which are Shia majority and economically disadvantaged. Though the initial support base for the PMFs was concentrated in the east and south, middle-class Baghdadis in the center also regarded the PMFs favorably at the beginning of the anti-ISIS war, as they generally felt threatened by the prospect of an ISIS incursion into the city. However, these generally positive sentiments at the center did not lead to a significant mobilization of conscripts among the youth, as these young men already had access to public or public-sector employment and therefore little to no economic incentive to join the PMFs. The 2017 victory over ISIS and allocation of state salaries to the PMFs granted the Sadrists and their affiliated PMF SS increased influence over eastern Baghdad, and likewise accelerated the Qais Khalazi's capacity to build a support

base for the AAH in southern Baghdad. Furthermore, AAH's significant electoral gains (in part, due to its military role in the ISIS fight) granted the party control over the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. Control over the Ministry allowed AAH to consolidate and expand its support base through the extension of welfare benefits to supporters. Communities residing in eastern and southern Baghdad were increasingly resigned to the fact that accomplishing bureaucratic tasks, opening businesses, and obtaining permissions would often require the help of SS and the AAH. While SS and the AAH cultivated strong support bases in the east and south, respectively, no single PMF successfully built ties with the population in central Baghdad where middle- and upper-class families are concentrated. These Baghdadi families generally do not need to rely on any single security/political group for help as they enjoy wide-ranging access to political and commercial actors, including but not exclusive to, the PMFs.



*Al-Kadhimiya Market with the Shrine in the background, Baghdad.*

Figure 3: Key structural/demographic factors impacting community-PMF relations in Baghdad

FACTOR	IMPLICATIONS
Concentration of economically disadvantaged Shia population in eastern and southern Baghdad.	Saraya Salam (SS) and AAH have been able to cultivate strong support bases in the eastern and southern portions of the city, respectively. Outside of mass protests, individual members of these populations have little political agency without SS or AAH support.
Concentration of upper- and middle-class Shia Arab population in central Baghdad near the Green Zone.	Because these community members have wide access to high-level political and commercial contacts, they are generally not as dependent on PMFs for help and assistance. And thus, an asymmetrical dependency relationship between the community members and the PMF is less commonplace.
The demographic composition of the Sunni Arab community in Baghdad city is heavily skewed towards the middle and upper classes, with little to no remaining lower-class Sunnis (due to the expulsions of the sectarian war).	Unlike Salah al-Din and Diyala where a predominantly rural lower class Sunni Arab population is frequently subjected to arbitrary arrests and harassment by various PMF groups, in Baghdad the Sunni Arab population has the social and political capital to prevent PMF entities from interfering in their daily affairs and movement across the city.
Proximity of provinces with large Sunni Arab populations such as Anbar and Salah al-Din to the west and north, which the parties affiliated with the PMFs view as a security threat.	The PMFs tend to have a more direct military presence to the western and northern border areas of the province, putting them into daily contact with local communities residing in those zones.
Presence of the international community (IC), particularly the United States Embassy, in central Baghdad in close proximity to the upper middle class Shia neighborhoods of Karrada and Jadiriya.	The proximity of key IC diplomatic assets to densely populated upper middle-class neighborhoods of Jadiriya and Karrada has drawn the residents into the crosshairs of the ongoing tensions between the PMF and US. As for tangible impacts, PMF rocket attacks on diplomatic missions often lead to security barriers and movement restrictions. As these are expensive and important commercial areas dependent upon the stability of the area, the continuation of PMF attacks on IC interests has eroded support for the PMF among Jadiriya and Karrada residents.

## COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF THE PMFS (ATTITUDES)

### 1. Middle- and upper-class Baghdadis from central areas of the city expressed a general attitude of skepticism about the PMFs.

Middle- and upper-class residents did not speak of the PMFs as a “savior” or the “holy crowd,” but instead they saw the PMFs in a negative light. As some FGD participants noted:

“ [The PMF] failed to sustain the trust and popularity they gained during the war against ISIS.

– FGD Participants, Baghdad, October 2020

“ I believe in a civil state for all, and I work towards that goal in the hope that we will end up living in a democratic country and under the rule of law...and those who hold these values in our community are targeted and watched by security actors, armed factions, and political parties.

– Civil society activist, female, aged 37

### 2. Middle- and upper-class Baghdad residents prefer the “state” over the PMFs, but simultaneously acknowledge that the state is not necessarily less corrupt, or more efficient, than the PMFs.

These residents have a strong ideological commitment to the idea of the state and believe that it should be responsible for service provision and protection instead of the PMFs. They simultaneously view the performance of the “state” as extremely weak. One resident noted:

“ We want the state, the government, to enforce the law and provide services, but we did not witness any tangible change in service provision or state functions under [Prime Minister] Kadhimi.

Respondents noted that state services have struggled during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in economic hardships, and declining oil revenues.

A respondent succinctly added that:

“ The need for the state is much bigger now, but its capacity is much smaller.

### 3. Residents of southern and eastern Baghdad, though still a strong support base for the PMFs, are showing signs of ambivalence due to the PMFs’ role in the violent crackdown against protestors.

Residents of south and east Baghdad constituted most of the protestors in 2019 and 2020, and many held the expectation that the PMFs would lend protection and support in efforts to express discontent with the Iraqi state. When the opposite happened, and the PMFs quickly became associated with the violent crackdown against demonstrators, the first major fissures between the lower-class Baghdad Shia population and the PMFs started to appear. Today, the extent of support for, and daily reliance upon, the PMFs remains high among this subsection of the population, but these sentiments are mixed with lingering disappointment and a sense of betrayal from the protest period. A resident from Zaafaraniya, a low-income Shia neighborhood in southeastern Baghdad, praised PMF sacrifices in the anti-ISIS campaign but also explained that “political parties and PMF factions are the obstacles and the rival” for those who desire a return to the rule of law.

## COMMUNITY-PMF INTERACTIONS (RULES OF THE GAME)

### 1. In the east and south of Baghdad, the relatively poor citizens rely upon PMFs, such as the SS, to serve as mediator between the community and local government when other options fail.

Community members in east Baghdad do not necessarily turn to the SS as a first point of contact when obtaining approvals and engaging with the government bureaucracy. On the contrary, they generally reach out to the relevant government authority first. But the ubiquity of SS members and Sadrist support in the east of the city makes them readily accessible when obstacles arise.

One FGD participant from eastern Baghdad noted:

“ After many failed attempts to prevent the municipality from building a mosque on a community-curated green space that was previously wasteland, one of us reached out to a Saraya al-Salam (SS) contact. SS placed a portrait of Muqtada al-Sadr in the park and this act effectively put the mosque’s construction on hold.

This anecdote indicates the extent to which community members and the municipality perceive the SS as having direct access to Muqtada al-Sadr, and by extension, having the symbolic and coercive authority to mediate between citizens and government. As the municipality in the east is largely staffed by Sadrists, the mutual recognition of Sadr’s political power is the common factor tying together the community, government, and PMFs.



View of al-Harhiya, Baghdad.

## 2. Local CSOs operating in east and south Baghdad distribute aid according to SS’ terms.

The SS does not block or micromanage the activities of local CSOs; however, unofficial rules dictate how CSOs should approach their work in zones of the city dominated by the Sadrists.

One respondent working with a local CSO operating in east Baghdad explained:

“ We notice that while distributing food baskets to lower-income families during lockdowns in certain neighborhoods, a person known as the ‘Hajji’ [from Saraya al-Salam], comes and requests we prioritize certain families. Whatever remains is then given to other families. If we agree to these conditions, they will welcome us with open hands.



Importantly, the SS-aligned “Hajji” does not resort to explicit coercive force to ensure the CSO’s compliance. The request is specific and direct, but violence or threats do not come into play so long as the CSO assents to the terms. The fact that CSOs must abide by unofficial rules shows that institutional affiliation and social class do not change the asymmetric relationship between SS and the community in east Baghdad. (The respondent above, and CSO employees more broadly, are predominantly upper-class persons from central Baghdad.)

### 3. High social class and political connections correlate with less frequent interaction with, and reliance upon, the PMFs, with the notable exception of those involved in commerce and high-value investments.

Shia Baghdadis living in upper- and middle-class neighborhoods (e.g., al-Kadhimiya and elite neighborhoods around the Green Zone such as al-Jadriya and Karrada) can access services and bureaucratic approvals through reliance upon a wide range of economic, socio-religious, and governmental networks. They do not have to rely on the PMFs because they enjoy the luxury of options. Several respondents noted how they could simply call up “officials” or a “contact in the Army” if they ran into bureaucratic or service-related problems. They assert a preference for relying upon non-PMF state actors, such as the National Security Services or prominent politicians, to resolve their problems and access services. While these middle- and upper-class residents generally prefer avoiding the PMFs, they will turn to the PMFs when necessary, particularly when large commercial investments require their support.

One respondent explained:

“ [As a businessman] I do need the support of government institutions, local councils, (and) political parties, as well as armed factions like the PMF in my field of work.... I offer gifts and services to these actors to be able to do business.... Most businesspeople are either members of political parties or close to them, and work closely with their economic fronts to win bids and tenders. This is the only way to do business in Iraq. And remember, of course, that as the values of business

*projects increase, dependence on family and tribe becomes worthless. To continue to engage in commerce and private sector activities, businesspeople require good relations with political parties and armed factions.*

– Businessman, aged 53, Baghdad

The businessman added that higher-value investments require reliance upon increasingly powerful actors, including, but not exclusive to, the PMFs. A part of this reliance on the PMFs has to do with the need for commercial actors to move across provinces.

The businessman added:

“ I even coordinate with political parties and armed factions, or even ask for them to protect me, as I move between areas under their control.

### 4. Sunni Arab elites in Baghdad living in Adhamiya and Harthiya are less vulnerable vis-à-vis the PMFs (as compared to Sunni Arabs in other provinces) due to the backing of ascendent Sunni Arab political actors.

The Sunni Arab elite long boycotted the political system as a rejection of the post-2003 order. Gradually, as Sunni political elites have accepted the fact of Shia dominance and Iranian influence (i.e., they are playing by the new rules), they have become powerful advocates for the Baghdad Sunni Arab community in their engagements with the PMFs. Community members in Baghdad can call upon these political bloc leaders to engage with the PMFs when problems or obstacles arise. (The same is not true for the Sunni Arabs of Mosul, Salah al-Din, and Diyala where local Sunni Arabs still lack political agency and are collectively blamed for Daesh.)



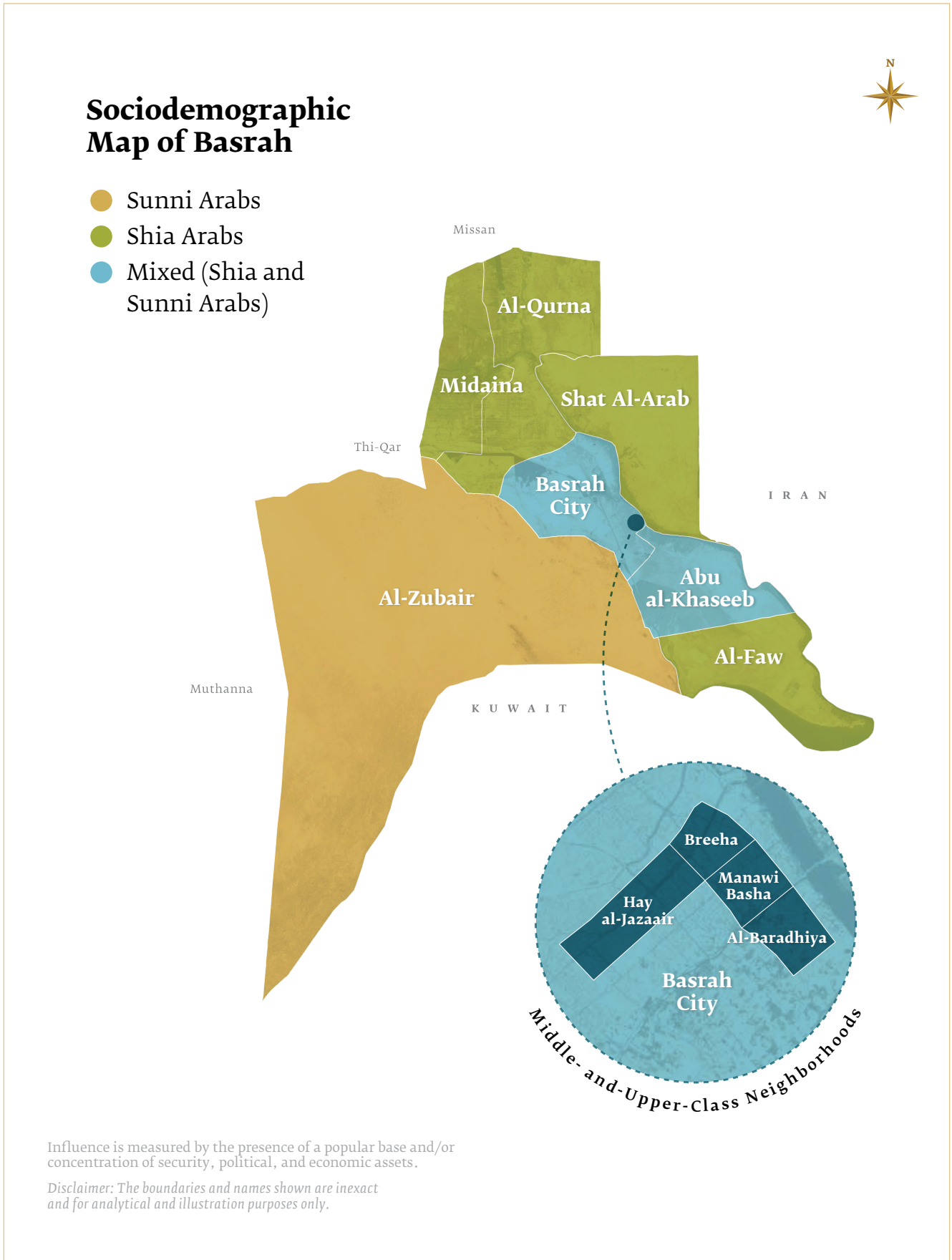
# CASE STUDY: BASRAH

## SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION OF THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

With its large oil reserves and access to the Persian Gulf, Basrah is considered the economic capital of Iraq. Basrah's population is estimated between 3.5-4.5 million people with around 2.6 million people in Basrah City. Most of the population is Shia Arab (75-80%); Sunni Arabs are the second largest group (25-20%) and they are mostly concentrated in al-Zubair, Abu al-Khaseeb, and Basrah City. Small pockets of Mandaeans continue to live in Basrah but the once vibrant Christian community mostly fled the province after the 2003 invasion. Despite being rich in resources, Basrah has a poverty rate of more than 30% of its population. Poverty and inequality are the defining issues in the city and province. Starting in 2010, expectations around the expansion of the oil sector led to an influx of populations from neighboring provinces, which resulted in the rapid expansion of illegal settlements. This not only created problems for Basrah City's already dilapidated infrastructure, but also reduced the number of available jobs for local citizens. The middle-class population in the center of the city perceives themselves as particularly deprived due to both the

siphoning of local jobs to newcomers, and the distribution of the province's oil wealth countrywide at a time of inadequate infrastructure investment and sluggish commercial growth in Basrah itself. In some respects, the local perceptions of deprivation are exaggerated. Many key brigades within the security forces and the PMFs are staffed by residents of the city. But the presence of an enormous oil infrastructure in such close proximity to the city that creates a constant reminder of the gap between local wealth and local benefits. It is important to note that the societal organization and structure in Basrah, as well as in neighboring provinces, is heavily tribal. Yet tribal power is strongest and most consolidated in the areas around the city in proximity to oil fields, conditions which shape PMF relations with the local population because these tribal groups are often preferred in the doling out of fighter salaries.

Figure 4: Sociodemographic Map of Basrah



## DISTRIBUTION AND INFLUENCE OF PMF MILITARY, POLITICAL, AND ECONOMIC ASSETS

The province of Basrah has long been a site of competition between the main Shia political parties (Hikma, Sadrist, Da'wa, Badr, etc.), which all have a major interest in securing a piece of the local oil-based economy. Because each of these parties has an existential stake in securing its portion, no single actor has been able to consolidate power for any extended period since 2003. The anti-ISIS campaign has however tipped the scales in favor of the political parties and armed groups tied to the PMF, particularly Badr. Currently, the governor of the province is aligned with Badr/Fatah, which significantly strengthens the access of the PMFs to contracting opportunities related to the oil sector. This is not to say that the other groups have been shut out, however.

Hikma currently is in control of northern Rumaylah oil fields, the Safwan border crossing with Kuwait, and the port of al-Maaqal in Shat al-Arab. [Nouri al-] Maliki's branch of the Da'wa party controls (60%) of the port of Umm Qasr, the southern Rumaylah oil fields, the Barjisia oil fields, Basrah airport, and a petrochemical factory, in addition to gas fields in Barjisia. The Sadrists control the sport city, the ministry of electricity departments and stations, Al-Jumhuriya hospital, and Shalamcha border crossing with Iran. Badr and the AAH control the western Qurna oil fields, the Abu Flous port, and the companies in charge of screening goods passing through the Shalamche border crossing. Fadhillah party controls government factories in northern Basra, and a fertilizer plant in the district of Abi Khasib. The party also wields large political and security influence over Basra.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike Baghdad, the various parties including the PMFs are less concerned with controlling neighborhoods and ministries and more bent upon asset appropriation, as this is the lifeblood of their political and military operations.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF COMMUNITY-PMF RELATIONS

When the PMF was formed in 2014 following the fatwa of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the initial recruitment drew largely from the southern Shia majority regions of the country such as Basrah. It is common for residents in the south to comment that the "fighters" are their "sons", a reflection of the kinship and tribal ties that link the population in the southern areas to the PMF. Though previous studies have indicated that many of these recruits were motivated to join the PMF in part by economic desperation, one should not underestimate the role of ideological support. Support in the south for the campaign was high among fighters and their communities of origin. The original mission of the PMF was widely regarded as a noble cause: to defeat ISIS in the occupied areas and protect Baghdad and the south from attack. Attitudes towards the PMFs grew ambivalent, however, as the local population started to grapple with the reality that PMF groups had both an external and internal function. Many PMF conscripts never left for the anti-ISIS campaign and instead filled the security vacuum created by the movement of the ISF to the northern front. These fighters, as well as those who returned from the anti-ISIS fight, gradually started to impose themselves upon the internal security, politics, and commerce of the province. PMF fighters soon became notorious for exacting rents from local businesses. But the key inflection point in reshaping PMF-community relations was the 2018 protest movement in Basrah. During the mass protests advocating for employment and electricity, both state and PMF forces violently cracked down on dissenters. Assassinations of activists and protest leaders became a daily event.

The violent suppression of the protest movement has produced a groundswell of distrust against the PMFs in the south; however, interview data shows that this distrust is complicated by the fact that local communities across Basrah and Thi Qar remain deeply interconnected with, and dependent upon, the PMFs for access to employment. The PMFs proactively sought to recruit more conscripts from the local Basrah community after the 2018 protests to recover from the reputational damage associated with the crackdown. The south was, and still remains, the main base of recruitment for the PMFs.

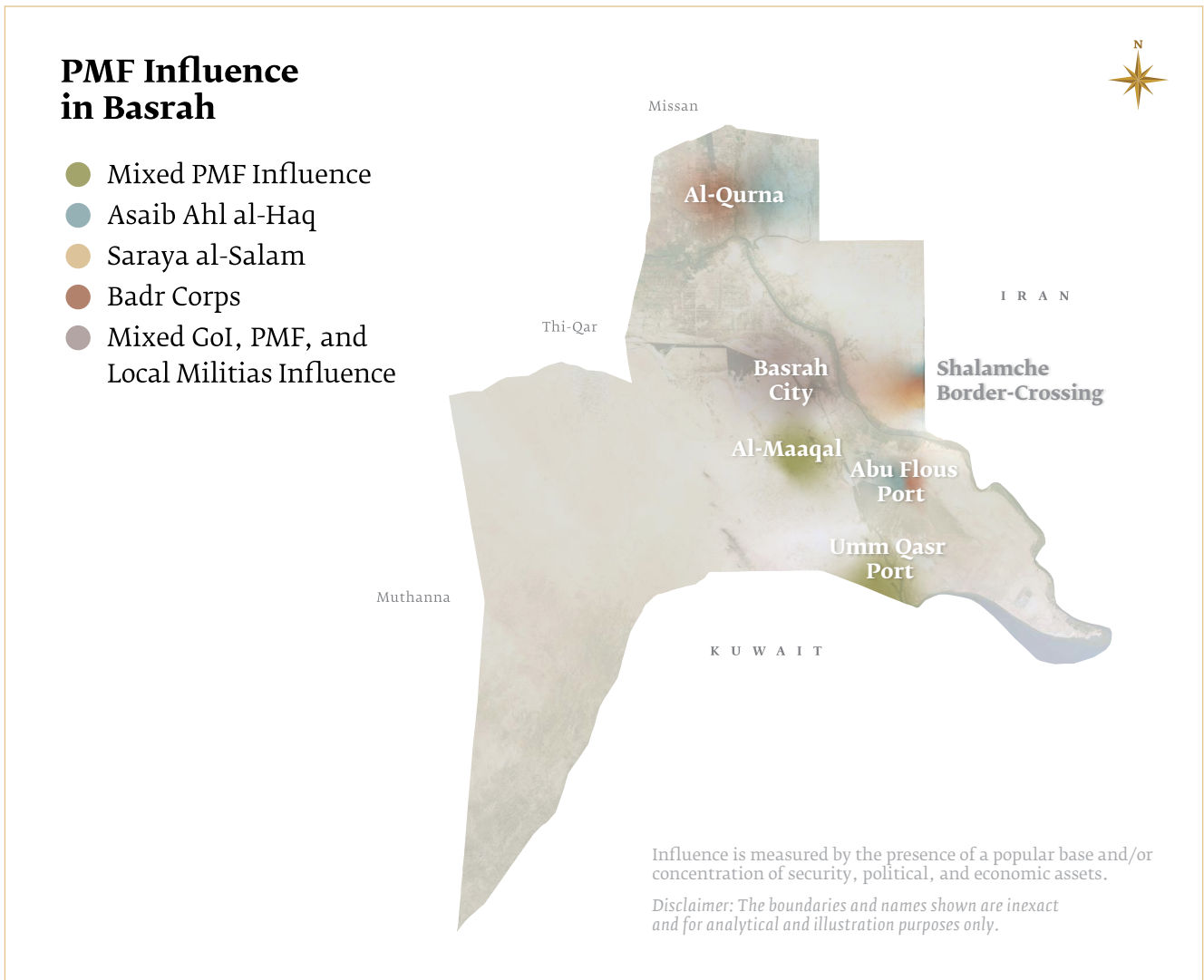
<sup>15</sup> Zmkhan Ali Saleem and Mac Skelton, "Mosul and Basra After the Protests: The Roots of Government Failure & Popular Discontent," IRIS Policy Report. American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, Institute of Regional and International Studies, October 2019.



Figure 5: Key structural/demographic factors impacting community-PMF relations in Basrah

FACTOR	IMPLICATIONS
Presence and vested interests of all major Shia political parties, most of which have present or historical ties to different PMF brigades.	The local population tends to look at the “parties” and the “PMF” as overlapping entities. And thus they tend to levy critiques against the political system and the PMF in a single breath.
Concentration of Iraq’s richest oil assets and presence of major port.	All major parties and PMFs are heavily invested in Basrah for the purpose of asset appropriating and inter-party competition. The parties view any protest as a threat to these assets and treat them very harshly with crackdowns, violence, etc.
Lack of employment and poor infrastructure, compounded by the influx of non-Basrawis from surrounding provinces looking for security and work.	The local population views the parties and the PMF as corrupt and ineffective, which has fueled a local protest movement.
The presence and proximity of Iran.	A significant subsection of the population has come to see the parties and the PMF as under the thumb of Iranian pressure, reducing their local credibility.
Tribes are important mechanisms of social organization and security in the south.	PMF forces have drawn upon tribal leadership structures and have co-opted them into the ranks. When the PMF was mobilized in 2014, this effectively exploded the number of forces and overall capacity of the Shia political parties to absorb young males into their ranks.

Figure 6: PMF Influence in Basrah



## COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF THE PMFS (ATTITUDES)

### 1. Most respondents critiqued the PMFs carefully and diplomatically, focusing on the importance of limiting the PMF to specific military roles.

In articulating this hesitation to rely upon the PMFs for help and assistance, many respondents voiced a particular vision for what the PMFs are (and are not). Several respondents opined that the original mission of the PMFs had been definitively accomplished in fighting ISIS, and consequently, the current PMFs had no business dealing with internal security and instead should be limited to military duties such as protecting borders.

One respondent noted:

“Despite the lack of governmental services, we do not consider seeking [help from] any other actors. CSOs, for example, would not respond if we seek them. PMF, on the other hand, is not a service-provider, but a military authority that I am unlikely to seek for help. It usually takes us days to solve emergency cases.... PMF is a military arm, and although some people consider it a part of the state, its role should be purely military, otherwise, we will not be free of the militarization of society.

– Female, aged 21, unemployed

According to several respondents, relying on the PMFs for a set of tasks that fell outside their mandate created “chaos” and defiled the purity of the PMFs. This discourse about separating the legitimate from illegitimate duties of the PMFs allowed respondents to simultaneously critique the PMFs for overreach into community affairs, while also honoring them for their sacrifice in fighting ISIS. This double-edged discourse reflects the contradictions within southern communities vis-à-vis the PMFs. As the majority of PMF members were recruited from the south, a significant number of southerners seek to avoid distancing themselves from their PMF “sons”, and yet they seek to maintain space to demand a return to security and governance frameworks under the rule of law. Another respondent captured this sentiment:

“ Regarding the PMF, we distinguish between the PMF who fights and liberates cities, and its leaders who exploit its name. The suffering of many martyrs and injured fighters remains unheard while factions take credit for their sacrifices. The real victims are those who fought for these factions, many of them were martyrs who left homeless children behind or injured and did not receive treatment or food for their children.

– Female, aged 36, school and institute principal

## 2. Other respondents critiqued the PMFs directly and forcefully, associating them with the lawlessness and self-interested corruption undermining the state.

This group of respondents tended to depict the PMFs as a force of chaos in the city: PMFs use cars with shaded windows and without a registration number; they do not bother to obtain official IDs as they are above the law; they intimidate and blackmail contractors to funnel contracts to the parties they represent; they are first in line for government investment as they are tied to key political figures; they set up checkpoints on the highway between the port and the city to extract rents. These respondents readily identified various entities they regard as corrupt and problematic: the PMFs, the parties, Iran, and in some cases, also the tribes. All of these entities are viewed to be involved in the predation of local assets and in the undermining of public authority.

## 3. Many middle- and upper-class residents saw the PMFs as preying upon the poor and especially non-Basrawis.

These respondents highlighted the relationship between poverty and PMF conscription. It would be extremely unusual for the son of a middle-class person to enlist in the PMFs, they noted. Instead, the PMFs have focused recruitment efforts in the shanty towns and poor neighborhoods where unemployment is high and advancement opportunities are few.

“ My area hosts many families whose sons serve at PMF, but they fall under the category of those who are poor and keep making sacrifices without any compensation from the government or even [from] the factions they work for.... PMF was formed at a time where Iraq was under threat without support from anyone. PMF was born from within the people to protect the country from external attacks. It was able to defeat ISIS and is mostly composed of tribal members and poor people. I think that the presence of PMF in areas that are not under external threat is unjustified. It should operate at the borders, and no one has the right to involve it in the city's internal affairs.

– Female, aged 48, media professional

These illegal settlements are largely home to residents of other surrounding provinces who have moved to the city out of desperation for work. This tactic has created both tensions with the PMFs and tensions within the community, as the elites of the city are increasingly fed up with the shantytown populations they perceive as benefiting from the new political order.

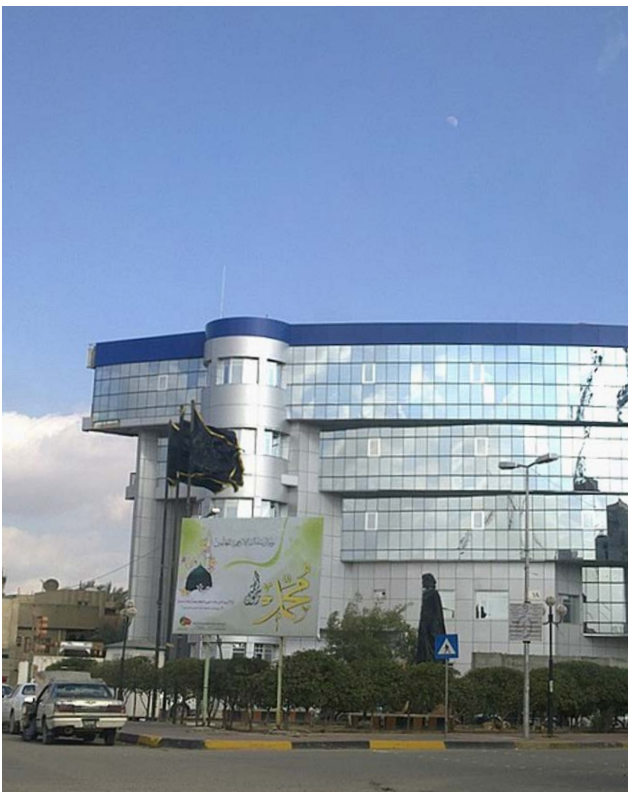
## COMMUNITY-PMF INTERACTIONS (RULES OF THE GAME)

### 1. Communities in the south generally do not turn to Hashd as a first resort when in need of help.

When asked about “to whom they turn” for assistance and/or protection, most respondents from the south expressed a strong preference for resolving matters through engagement with the tribe and/or government instead of the PMFs or political parties. One respondent explained:

“ If a problem happens to me or my family, I will trust the government and security forces more than other parties or Hashd; I will also seek my family who is responsible for protecting me. Thankfully, I have not been in a dangerous situation. A friend of mine who owns a beauty center was threatened by the neighbors, so she sought her family and tribe, and the problem was solved amicably through the tribe without intervention from the security forces because it was a simple issue that did not require a governmental action.

– Female, aged 40, journalist and civil society activist



Entrance to al-Jazaair neighborhood, Basrah.

### 2. Tribes often mediate the relationship between communities and the PMFs.

A 53-year-old businessman from Basrah noted: “When in need, I resort to the tribe which offers channels of communication with the powerful actors. I never considered directly resorting to any security, state, or PMF actors.” As this quote suggests, the tribe often becomes a conduit for interactions with the PMFs, in addition to other powerful actors. Another respondent noted:

“ When the security apparatus fails to provide protection, some people would surely resort to tribes, or to PMF. The parties in Basrah have their own armed factions and are somewhat dominant in the security landscape. I trust my own tribe when I need protection, and I tell my father—who is a tribal leader—if I feel threatened. If someone else was threatened and did not have anyone to resort to because their tribe says that they are not responsible for protecting them, they would seek PMF or Saraya al-Salam [Peace Brigades]. PMF usually gives support and assistance when it comes to protection, although I think that this is the responsibility of the security apparatus and local government.

– Male, aged 33, private sector

This is not to say that tribes are thought of more positively than the other actors. For many Basrawis, the dominance of tribes and the PMFs has led to the breakdown of the state and the deterioration of order. Several respondents complained about the violence and disorder propagated by the tribes, the PMFs, and political parties all in one breath. Yet of all these powerful actors, everyday Basrawis generally have the easiest access to the tribes and reach out to them as an initial source of help and, ultimately, as a mediator with the PMFs when necessary. In Basrah, violence is the key currency of power. Without a backer of some kind, ordinary people lack the agency needed to survive and obtain core needs.





# CASE STUDY: NINEWA

## SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION OF THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Before the ISIS takeover in 2014, Ninewa had the second largest population in Iraq, behind Baghdad. The majority are Sunni Arabs with sizable Yezidi, Turkman, Shebak, and Christian communities. Accurate population figures do not currently exist for Ninewa, but estimates place the province's population at 3.8 million people with approximately 1.7 million residing in Mosul City. Ninewa's population is diverse and distributed geographically according to distinct pockets of various ethno-sectarian groups. The capital city of Mosul, the focus of this case study, is composed predominantly of Sunni Arab citizens, the majority of whom have historically been middle class. The ISIS period deprived subsections of the city's population of income, livelihood, and properties, which has reduced the cohesion of the middle class. Mosul is surrounded by towns connected to specific ethnic minorities. On the road east towards Erbil, the Shebak community is largely based in the town of Bartella and generally holds outsized influence over the roadway due to the community's strong connection to PMF Brigade 30. As they are religiously Shia, the Shebak enjoy the

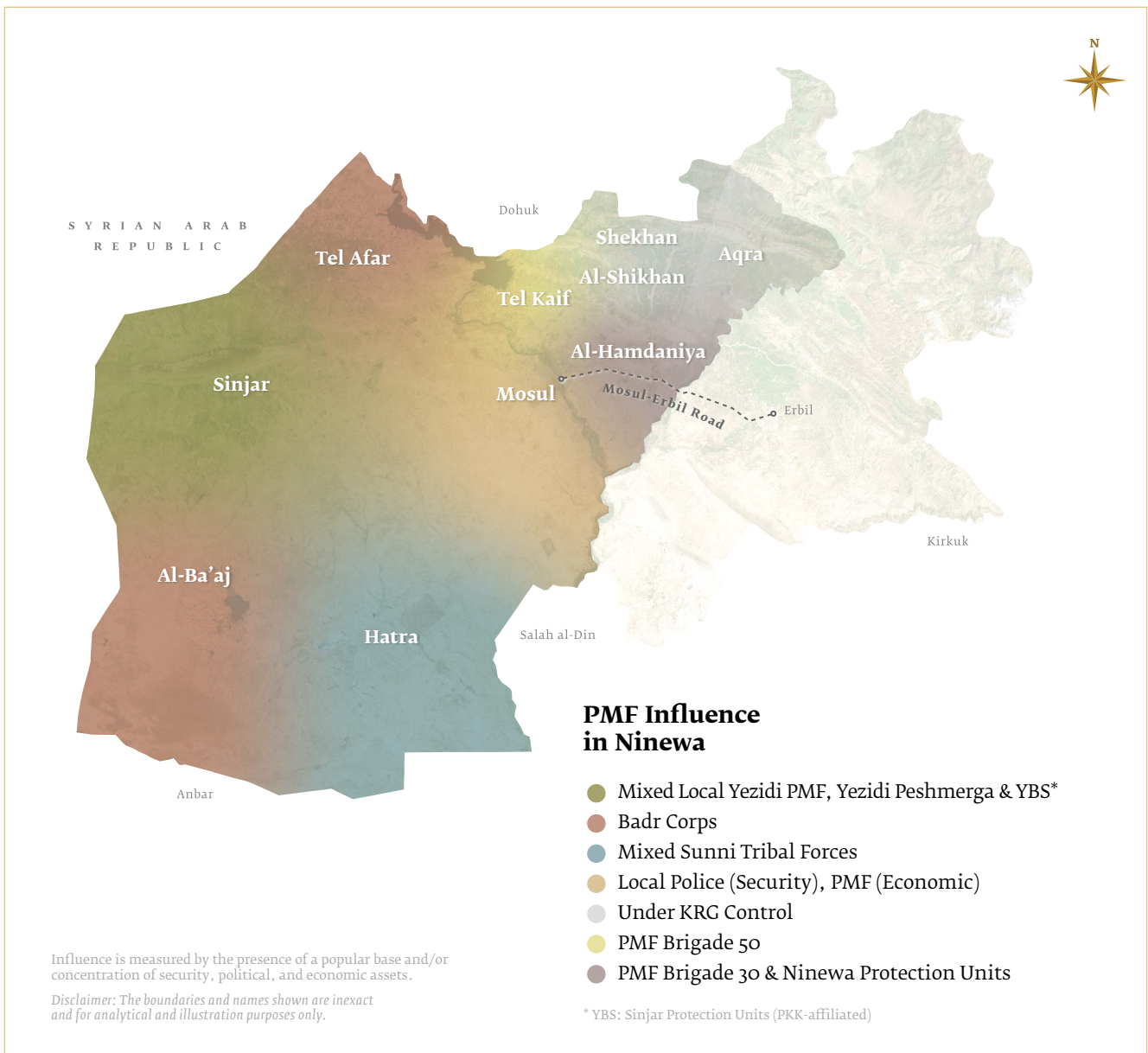
political backing of Baghdad political parties as co-religionists. A large community of Yezidis also resides to the east of Mosul, in the town of Bashiqa, along with a concentration of Christians in the towns of Qaraqosh and Karamles. To the west of Mosul, Shia Turkmen dominate the town of Tel Afar, Christians control the town of Tel Kaif, and pockets of Sunni Arabs reside in smaller towns and villages. To the northwest, along the border with Syria, the town of Sinjar has historically been a stronghold for the Yezidi community. Finally, south of Mosul there remain communities of tribal Sunni Arabs. As will be explained in subsequent sections, these non-urban peripheral populations surrounding Mosul all have more or less direct relationships of patronage and co-optation with the PMFs, whereas in the center, the PMF presence is less direct and the relationship with the population is based on antagonism and avoidance, rather than on co-optation and patronage.

## DISTRIBUTION AND INFLUENCE OF PMF MILITARY, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC ASSETS

The security configuration in the city, and across the province, reflects the ethnic and class dynamics described above. PMF Brigade 30 is composed almost exclusively of Shebak members and is positioned along the road to Erbil where the Shebak population is present. Brigade 50 is predominantly Christian and corresponds to the Christian population of Tel Kaif. Brigade 36 is composed of members of the Yezidi community in Sinjar. In addition to the areas where the PMF holds territory, other PMF groups have focused on setting up economic and political offices, particularly in the capital city of Mosul. In

other words, one does not often encounter PMF fighters from AAH Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), Badr, and other groups inside Mosul, in part due to the presence of the international community and intense scrutiny on the city. But in the absence of a strong military presence, the PMFs have focused on expanding economic offices and political activities in the city. This is not to say, however, that PMF fighters are entirely absent from the urban capital. The fact that PMF locations exist in towns on the periphery of the city allows them the proximity to carry out targeted strategic tasks within city limits when necessary.

Figure 7: PMF Influence in Ninewa

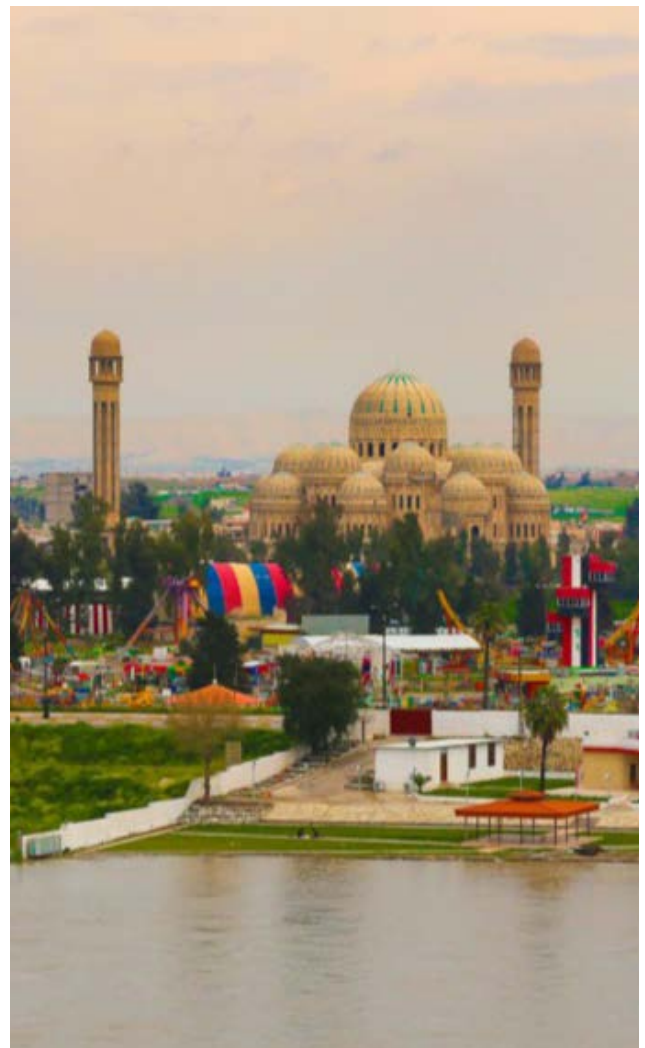


## A BRIEF HISTORY OF COMMUNITY-PMF RELATIONS

The relationship between the population of Mosul and the PMFs can only be understood through an historical lens that highlights the long-standing rift between the community and the security apparatus. In the aftermath of the 2003 invasion, the local security apparatus was heavily under the influence of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP). The majority Sunni Arab local population in the city perceived this force as external and hostile (with the exception of the Kurdish community in the city, which generally welcomed the KDP's new role). Starting in 2010, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki sought to compete with Kurdish security forces for influence over the city. He sent commanders closely allied to Mosul to lead the Iraqi army's extension across the urban landscape. These forces developed a reputation for treating the population harshly. Local Sunni Arab political figures seized upon these widespread allegations to recast the ISF as motivated by sectarian (Shia) motivations. The ISF was then dubbed "Maliki's Army" and was seen as even more toxic to the Sunni Arab population than the Kurds. This growing disjuncture between the local population and security forces was one reason why subsections of the population supported—at least initially—the arrival of ISIS into the city in 2014, which effectively expelled and humiliated the ISF.

After the liberation of Mosul from ISIS in 2017, as the PMFs gained power and dominated Mosul's politics and security, the local population viewed the PMFs as yet another version of "Maliki's Army" i.e., a collection of Shia forces bent upon enforcing the submission of the Sunni Arab population. Therefore, the Sunni Arab community in Mosul City largely considers the PMFs as an external force with little to no social connections in the city itself. The PMFs, aware of this fraught history, consequently decided against placing fighters within the city. Moreover, the PMFs exerted little effort to endear themselves to the community, focusing instead on co-opting individual officials within the local government. This strategy allowed the PMFs to establish economic and political offices in the capital, thereby securing great political influence, even in the absence of a single weapon carrying fighter on the ground. Residents found themselves living in an environment where political and economic relationships were informally and effectively controlled by the PMFs, with the ISF maintaining formal control over the security apparatus.

This thin veneer of ISF security control quickly cracks as one travels west or east of the city. Starting in 2017, Mosul's urban elite found themselves stuck at checkpoints arguing with Shebak PMF members, whom they considered socially inferior, over the right of passage between Mosul and Erbil. As such experiences became commonplace, the Mosul population felt humiliated by what they perceived to be a major reversal of fortune. Prior to 2014, Sunni Arabs were unquestionably the main political and cultural force in the province, alongside Kurds. But after the rise and fall of ISIS, and the subsequent entrance of the PMFs, they found themselves surrounded by minority communities newly empowered by PMF groups. This center-periphery dynamic has defined, and will continue to define, the relationship between Mosul City residents and the PMFs in the province.



*Grand Mosque, Mosul.*

Figure 8: Key structural/demographic factors impacting community-PMF relations in Mosul

FACTOR	IMPLICATIONS
<p>The PMF has taken a particular strategy towards the city center. Instead of placing troops in the urban area, the PMF left control of security to the Iraqi Army and Police, focusing instead on co-opting government officials in the local and provincial government. In turn, this allows PMF affiliates to control the local economy.</p>	<p>This strategy strips political agency away from the local population in the city of Mosul, leaving them with the sense that they have no true advocate, even among their own Sunni Arab political representatives. They perceive themselves as vulnerable to the whims of PMF allies.</p>
<p>Leading up to 2014, successive security arrangements (e.g., Kurdish forces and the ISF “Maliki Army”) treated the population of the urban center with little to no respect or care.</p>	<p>This sedimented a local understanding of the security sector as “external,” which has now been extended to the Hashd.</p>
<p>While the military forces on the ground in Mosul city are ISF, PMF military presence encircles the city in all directions.</p>	<p>Mosul residents sense a lack of security as they move out of the city and travel to Erbil or elsewhere. They also live with the anxiety that PMF can enter the city at any time.</p>

## COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF THE PMFS (ATTITUDES)

### 1. Generally, residents of Mosul view the security forces with distrust and therefore rarely resort to seeking them for help and assistance.

One FGD participant, a 43-year-old man whose work was in social research, stated:

“ I depend on my father for solving personal problems. I do not trust the security forces because the security personnel have been employed through party-quotas and Muhassasa-based distribution of positions. Security personnel lack professional skills.

### 2. Mosul's urban community sees the PMFs as yet another part of the political parties that intervene in government institutions and contribute to local government paralysis and lack of reconstruction efforts.

Several participants expressed concern about lack of reconstruction and weak services in Mosul. They largely attributed these conditions to party and militia capture of state institutions and funds. This theme particularly emerged when participants expressed opinions on how to improve government performance and services.



Key solutions proposed by some FGD participants in Mosul included:

“ Preventing popular and tribal mobilization forces from intervening in the workings of the government institutions” and “reducing the influence in government offices of the parties that own militias”.

### 3. The community in Mosul is concerned about the PMF involvement in local economic capture and extortion which prevents a greater level of domestic and international investment in the city.

Most participants clearly state that the PMFs are involved in local economic extortion. While participants shared that local economy, businesses, and investment have suffered due to corruption, most participants asserted that the PMFs continue to use their dominant position in Mosul to monopolize the local economy and to seek profit through coercion. One FGD participant, a 48-year-old man, stated:

“ The PMF constitutes the strongest impediment to investment and business projects. The PMF intervened to prevent a business project inside Mosul University.

Another FGD participant explained PMF local rent-seeking practices by saying:

“ I know of a group of people who opened a car park in front of a government office, but another group tied to Saraya al-Salam [SS] came and wanted to take over the car park. The owners of the car park refused to abandon their property to the SS members or even to partner with them (pay them a share of profit). In response, the SS members put a banner on the wall of the car park saying that the property belonged to the Shia Endowment; but yet the owners of the property refused to give in to SS members' pressure. But the situation deteriorated, and the SS arrested the owners of the car park and asked them to choose between surrendering the entire car park or the whole profit/income of the business to them. The owners kept resisting the SS pressures and they were released. The SS, however, kept the banner on the property eventually forcing the owners to shut it down. Ultimately, the owners lost their source of income.

– Female FGD participant, Mosul, October 2020

In a similar vein, another FGD participant stated:

“ There are negative interferences by the economic offices of the parties in the governorate. They threaten investors and extract shares of profits from available investment projects.

Participants stated that the PMFs (and other security forces) were more challenging to local investment projects since they had the ability to completely halt projects from progressing in case they (the PMFs) were denied shares of profits. Corrupt officials seeking bribes were only able to create obstacles for to slow projects whereas PMFs were powerful enough to block projects altogether.

## COMMUNITY-PMF INTERACTIONS (RULES OF THE GAME)

### 1. Lack of ideological affinity with, and fear of, the PMFs compels Moslawis to keep their distance from the PMFs.

The majority of Sunni Arab residents of Mosul refuse to interact with the PMFs, not only because of the ideological disconnect with the force, but also because Moslawis believe that the PMFs operate above the law. Residents of Mosul often choose to avoid PMFs, even when it requires great personal cost.

One FGD participant stated:

“ There was a fault in the structure of one of the schools near my house that resulted in the destruction of the road in our neighborhood. I went to complain to a relevant government official who told me to keep quiet and to not even speak a word because the cars and construction equipment in our neighborhood belonged to Brigade 30 of the PMF. Because of this problem, I had to sell my house and leave the area. The power of the PMF is above the law.

– Male FGD participant, aged 44, university professor

## 2. Some members of Mosul's community are willing to pragmatically take advantage of the fractured security terrain, particularly when they face problems with another security force.

Some Sunni Arab residents of Mosul might resort to interacting with one type of security force operating within the city (i.e., ISF, the police, even a PMF) in order to protect themselves from threats from another security force. One FGD participant, stated:

“ I accept offers of support from any security side/force; I might seek help from higher authorities/sides if I have problems with the security forces themselves. I see dealing with the authorities as a way to ensure protection for myself and my family from dangers and risks.

## 3. Mosul's community accesses local state institutions via influential individuals and intermediaries.

Not all members of the Sunni Arab community refuse to collaborate with the Shia militia parties who became politically prominent after the defeat of ISIS in the city in 2017, particularly local government elites. Some members of the local political elite were co-opted by Shia parties, militia leaders, and commanders to preserve their positions within state institutions in Mosul. These are often referred to as influential individuals that some members of the local community will rely on to access these government institutions indirectly and achieve their interests. Along these lines, a 38-year-old male university professor stated:

“ I first rely on the law, and then personal relations. Going to a government office without knowing someone there through personal relations is close to madness. I always try to find an influential individual in each office so that he helps me in completing my paperwork there.

## 4. The PMFs are a key impediment to the free movement of Sunni Arab residents of Mosul.

While Sunni Arab Moslawis face few restrictions moving within their city, the same is not true outside Mosul. Both men and women participants asserted that movement outside of Mosul, for the wider Moslawi population, was often impeded by PMF forces simply because they were Moslawi. One participant stated:

“ I fear traveling to the south and the west of Mosul, or even to Makhmur, because of the multiplicity of the security forces present in those areas.

The participant stated that just being from Mosul raised questions by the security forces staffing checkpoints between the city and the districts/sub-districts, and between Ninewa and other Iraqi provinces. They added that car plate numbers and identification cards indicating that the person was from Mosul were already suspicious to the security forces. One participant stated:

“ The problem is in the checkpoints, particularly if the car plate number indicates Ninewa. I work in Tikrit and I pass through the checkpoints easily because I have formal permits. Others, however, suffer from being stopped and checked. At the al-Aqwas checkpoint, for instance, there are long queues of cars waiting to be checked just because the cars are from Mosul.

– Male FGD participant, aged 32, university professor

To avoid encountering issues related to mobility, some residents of Mosul travel outside their city only when it is necessary for them to do so. A 55-year-old male university professor FGD participant stated:

“ Traveling inside Iraq is always a risk. I calculate costs and benefits when I need to travel. If I don't find it too necessary to travel, I cancel the trip.

Moreover, the PMFs presents restrictions on the movement of women and their work-related activities at checkpoints that they control, imposing religious and ideological beliefs that women should not travel alone, but should have a companion with them (*murafiq*). The following quotes from women FGD participants in Mosul exemplify PMF-imposed restrictions on women:

“ I work with an NGO in Hamdaniya and therefore I am obliged to travel to my work site every day and pass through [the] Dominz or Kukjili checkpoints are controlled by Brigade 30 of the PMF. I face difficulties passing through those checkpoints where the elements [armed fighters staffing the checkpoint] in charge ask me to sign in and out every day. This happens to me on a daily basis at the Kukjili checkpoint, even though I am originally from, and was born in, Hamdaniya. I tried to avoid these daily procedures by explaining to the checkpoint elements through intermediaries that I had work commitments in Hamdaniya, but I failed to change the procedures at the checkpoints.

– Female FGD participant, Mosul, October 2020

“ I have an agricultural team and I accompany the team to field visits in Bashiqa and Qaraqosh, but the checkpoints there prevent me from entering those places despite the fact that I have permits. They prevent me based on absurd reasons, including saying that the letter is not clear.

– Female FGD participant, Mosul, October 2020

“ I have a relative from Baghdad who came to Mosul in 2019 with her son and mother and wanted to stay in one of Mosul’s hotels but no hotel accepted her based on the justification that she did not have a companion with her. Even the tourist village, which is controlled by the PMF, did not allow her to stay for the same reason—lack of a companion.

– Female FGD participant, Mosul, October 2020



View of the Tigris in Mosul



## CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

When the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) arose in 2014, they enjoyed widespread support at the local level, particularly in Baghdad and the South. Though many of the PMF brigades were formed out of existing armed groups tied to powerful political parties, at the time the importance of countering ISIS granted the PMF a special and for many citizens a symbolically sacred status.

In interviews across five provinces, the data revealed a gradual blurring or total erasure of the dividing line between the “parties” and the “militias,” including in the South — the area of the PMF’s original support base. Almost as soon as the PMF was formed in 2014, portions of brigades remained in the South and started to fill the security vacuum left by ISF that had travelled north for the ISIS battlefield. PMF groups became deeply embedded in the local security and administrative structures, contributing to the already eroded sense of public authority.

Consequently, local attitudes started to turn, but the most important critical juncture was the violence against protesters in Basra in 2018 and subsequently across the south in 2019 — violence for which the PMF, ISF, and the political parties were all allegedly culpable. The PMF had effectively lost the argument that they stood apart from the political order, even among their original supporters. And yet, pragmatism still defines the relationship between local communities and the PMF. As a fact of life in the chaos of post-2003 Iraq, informality reigns, and local citizens have grown accustomed to utilizing whatever connections and relationships they can muster in order to get by. Since 2014, the PMF has become an unavoidable part of the local power structures one must navigate to make life possible in a situation of weak public administration. A counter-terrorism approach to the PMF — making high profile killings and arrests — may settle scores between Washington and Tehran, but it will do nothing to solve the more fundamental crisis of governance local communities are facing. Targeted strategic diplomacy supporting solutions to specific governance/security problems at the subnational and

local levels can be an effective way forward for the international community, but such a strategy must be crafted within the acknowledgement that PMF groups present in a given locality and/or their political affiliates are key stakeholders in need of sustained engagement.

### GENERAL POLICY IMPLICATIONS

◆ **Despite declining support and frayed community-PMF relations, the PMF is deeply entrenched at the local level and is here to stay.** The data clearly indicates that support for the PMF has become shaky, even in the south where the PMF’s support base is situated. However, community-level distrust (or even antipathy towards the PMFs in some communities) does not necessarily translate to low levels of practical engagement with the PMFs as a point of contact in accessing services, securing protection, and meeting other basic needs. The extent of community-level engagement with PMF actors has less to do with trust/distrust and more to do with the degree to which the PMF mediates access to local services and approvals in a particular area. Access to service often requires the assistance of PMF contacts acting as middlemen with the government and/or private entities – a key reason why community members, particularly in poor areas, must develop and maintain close contacts with the PMFs. Many respondents expressed preference for reliance upon family or government officials, but simultaneously noted that for certain kinds of activities, contact with the PMFs is essential for security protection, approvals, etc. In sum, the PMFs are deeply



entrenched in the details of everyday life even in areas of the country where support levels have waned. The GoI and international community (IC) would be unwise to imagine a future in which declining public support translates into a major reduction of PMF influence.

- ◆ **The GoI and IC should prioritize interventions that promote accountability of the PMF and limit PMF overreach into governance/service delivery.** Most middle and upper-class community members interviewed – particularly those in Baghdad and the South – are clear that the PMF should be limited to specific military roles (outside of cities) and duties and held accountable when they exceed those roles. But where government functioning is low, and people's lives and livelihoods are at stake, community actors have no choice but to rely upon the PMFs. International organizations should support critical governance functions such as access to civil documentation, housing, land and property (HLP) documentation, criminal justice and rule of law issues, and ensuring that appropriate legal infrastructure is in place so that community-level actors do not have to rely upon informal processes and contacts. Crucially, this effort should also include support for accountability mechanisms within the Ministry of Finance, parliament, and local councils that ensure oversight and compliance.
- ◆ **A community-centered policy to the PMF would require contextualized and localized approaches – not a 'one-size-fits-all' strategy.** Community relations with the PMF vary significantly according to province, and major variations can also be observed among neighborhoods within a given province. These regional and subregional differences simultaneously correspond to distinctions in social class, ethno-religious background, and political affiliation, all of which influence the nature of the engagement between a given community and the PMF. For this reason, the bulk of the recommendations are formulated according to specific local dynamics.

## BAGHDAD RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ **Capitalize upon community-led accountability of the PMF in central Baghdad.** Avoid drawing central Baghdad neighborhoods into military standoffs with the PMF. The fact that middle and upper-class Baghdadis in the central neighborhoods close to the Green Zone possess social and political capital is of major strategic advantage to elements within the GoI and international community that seek to limit the PMF. The political agency of middle-class Baghdadis in Jadriya, Kadhimiya, etc. means that powerful PMF groups such as SS, AAH and Badr have limited opportunities to render themselves indispensable to these communities. And it means that the community itself has the capacity to provide bottom-up accountability. A continuation of regular military standoffs will only grant the PMF further justification to impose themselves on the Green Zone and surrounding strategic neighborhoods, and may eventually drive an exodus from these areas.
- ◆ **Prioritize socio-economic development and service delivery in east and south Baghdad to prevent PMF overreach:** Middle-class residents residing in the center of the city have the political connections and backing to navigate daily life without excessive reliance upon the PMF. The same cannot be said for residents of eastern and southern Baghdad, where poverty and structural inequality limit their agency and create disproportionate dependence upon SS and AAH for jobs, access to services, and bureaucratic approval. This dependency relationship between the community and SS will only deepen with a continuation of the longstanding governmental neglect of these neighborhoods. Importantly, a long-term socio-economic development strategy in eastern/southern Baghdad will only work if the poor of neighboring provinces (Diyala, Babylon, and Wasit) are also included. Eastern Baghdad has become a reservoir for poor labor migrants from these areas, giving SS and AAH an endless source of new recruits and dependencies.

## BASRAH RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ **Urgently support governance and service delivery across Basrah and the south.** As the data clearly indicates, southerners are expressing extreme dissatisfaction with not only the PMF but also all organs of the government and ISF for a failure to provide basic security and services. The data points to a clear preference for “state” institutions and security forces when it comes to governance matters. Basrah residents generally only rely on the PMFs when absolutely necessary, but they indicate that pervasive dysfunction and lack of performance in national/local government forces them to rely upon informal networks, tribal actors, and the PMFs to achieve services and protection.

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- ◆ **Re-engage public diplomacy.** Because of the proximity of international oil companies (IOCs) to the city center, the broader international community has often become a target of grassroots blame for Basrah’s pitiful infrastructure, poor services, and low employment since 2003. Media analysis suggests that rhetoric against the international community (IC) is on the rise, and that the IC is commonly accused of neglecting the southern region – the very region from which the IC has profited the most. This growing sentiment at the grassroots level is not inevitable and is symptomatic of the broader IC disengagement with Basrah and the South. The IC’s provision of financial and technical assistance in service delivery – coupled with effective public diplomacy – is of particular importance in the short and medium term.

## NINEWA RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ **Continue support for transitional and restorative justice approaches across the province, but ensure that this support extends to Mosul City.** The relationship between local communities and the government/security apparatus in Ninewa has been so severely eroded over the past two decades that no package of reforms can succeed without taking this gradual accumulation of distrust into account. The PMF’s harsh treatment of the population is the latest iteration of a string of security forces that have treated the community with disdain since 2003. Organizations dealing with transitional and restorative justice have, to date, focused on the Ninewa Plains and other areas where minorities are situated. The Mosul City population is similarly vulnerable and requires long-term support.

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- ◆ **Work with the GoI, ISF and Hashd Commission to fix the mobility problem.** The economy of Mosul city is inextricably linked with the Nineveh Plains, Erbil, Kirkuk and the South. Mosul city residents and businesspeople currently fear traveling outside the city for fear of PMF harassment and detention. This is an untenable situation and relates to the remaining ambiguities of who can and cannot be categorized as ISIS. The IC must urgently work with relevant stakeholders to develop solutions to this problem.

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- ◆ **Develop local political agency and inclusion.** While much of Mosul City’s population is middle class, these residents lack meaningful political power and thus have little agency vis a vis the PMF. (The Sunni Arabs of Ninewa, Salah al-Din, and Diyala are structurally vulnerable and often blamed for ISIS, and are heavily disadvantaged in Iraqi politics. Almost all major Sunni Arab posts in government are granted to Anbaris and Baghdadis, particularly those Sunni Arab elites tied with Iran.). Hadbaa (2009-2013) was the last local political party that received broad local support. Supporting local political actors who can effectively mobilize Mosul City’s population is a long-term strategy, but ultimately it may be the only way to generate power at the local level capable of providing community-led accountability for the PMF and other state security actors.

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