IRIS BOOKLETS | MARCH 2017

POST-ISIS IRAQ

Sinjar, Ninewa

© Patrick Osgood

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF IRAQ SULAIMANI
IRIS
Institute of Regional and International Studies

www.auis.edu.krd/sulaimaniforum

The following is a series of reports and articles by IRIS staff and researchers on post ISIS Iraq and the Kurdistan Region.

The American University of Iraq, Sulaimani
Kirkuk Main Road, Raparin
Sulaimani, Iraq 46001

Tel.: +964 53 511 2000 Ext. 1968

www.auis.edu.krd/iris
Email: iris@auis.edu.krd
Twitter: @IRISmideast
Facebook: facebook.com/IRISmideast/

Photo: Patrick Osgood (Mosul)

Photo: Christine van den Toorn (Bashiqa' Ninewa)

Photo: Patrick Osgood (Mosul, Ninewa)

IRIS Director Christine van den Toorn
in Sinjar, Ninewa

Bashiqa, Ninewa

Tuz Khurmatu, Salahaddin

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

The following is a series of articles and reports on Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) after ISIS, published either by IRIS as IRIS Iraq Reports (IIR) or in other outlets by IRIS staff.

The reports provide insight on issues crucial to "post-ISIS Iraq" -- from return and reconciliation to reconstruction and security effectiveness -- to inform local and international stakeholders and policymakers. One of the central themes running through the reporting is that the lack of political and security settlements post ISIS at both a local and national level is preventing return, reconstruction and stabilization in Iraq.

As a research and policy institute based on the ground, IRIS's mission is to produce such in-depth, field-based and policy-oriented research, offering a unique perspective on issues facing Iraq and its Kurdistan Region.

For more information on the reporting, please email iris@auis.edu.krd.

By Christine van den Toorn
Director, IRIS
The American University of Iraq, Sulaimani

Originally published in War on the Rocks
WAR ON THE ROCKS

The Wars after the War for Sinjar:

How Can Washington Avert a New Civil War

by Christine van den Toorn
June 2016

While the frontline with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) lies only 4.5 kilometers south of Sinjar, a potentially more dangerous threat looms much closer to home. Parts of northern Sinjar — a district separated by the now-infamous 70-kilometer-long mountain — were liberated in December 2014. The district center south of the mountain was cleared of ISIL in November 2015. A mixture of forces — independent Yezidis, Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Peshmerga — took part in both operations, but ISIL still occupies the southern villages of Sinjar.

As I discovered during a number of visits to the town over the last 18 months, Sinjar is rapidly becoming a playground for proxy struggles between regional rivals fighting zero-sum confrontations. Amid these battles, local Yezidis – a religious minority group numbering around 500,000 in Iraq which makes up the large the majority of the population of Sinjar – are being forced to choose sides. These dynamics are common across many of the territories liberated from ISIL, as competing factions push and pull local populations in their struggle for power. Within Sinjar, these forces risk igniting an internecine conflict among Yezidis that could be just as dangerous as the ISIL invasion of their territory in August 2014.

Sinjar's only hope is a compromise on all sides, an outcome that will almost certainly require mediation by an external actor not a party to local proxy struggles — in other words, not Baghdad, Ankara, or any of the various Kurdish factions from across the region. The fate of Sinjar will reverberate far beyond the confines of this small part of Iraq. Whether the worsening tensions there are defused could have a major impact on stability in northern Iraq and the broader fight against ISIL.

PROXY PLAYGOUND

There are very real differences between Yezidi factions about whether Sinjar should be part of Iraq or the Kurdistan Region, if Yezidis are Kurds or a distinct ethnic group, and which parties can best represent Sinjar's interests. Despite these divisions, a "Yezidi first" attitude prevails due to bitterness over the withdrawal of Kurdish forces before the ISIL assault in August 2014. As such, Yezidi factions are reluctant to clash with each other so far. Yezidis universally and vehemently assert that they can only rely on themselves from now on, and therefore want greater autonomy and control of local government and security services.

But the resilience of Yezidi unity is being increasingly tested as rivalry between external forces for the control of Sinjar escalates. To set the scene: The Turkey-supported Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) enjoys a large majority in the Dohuk Governorate in Iraqi Kurdistan and remains the dominant power in Sinjar despite its noncontiguous geography and status as a disputed territory with the federal government of Iraq. Standing against this Turkish-KDP alliance are the rebel Turkish and Syrian Kurds of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and People's Protection Units (YPG), and their local Sinjari surrogate, the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS). The uncompromising faceoff between Turkey and its local adversaries is creating an ever-more volatile situation in Sinjar.

This local battle reflects multiple agendas that are shaping not just Sinjar, but the whole region of northern Iraq, northern Syria, and southeast Turkey where Kurds are concentrated. Renewed violent conflict between Ankara and the PKK in Turkey has led both parties to adopt an uncompromising approach. At the same time, the KDP – the dominant power in the Kurdistan Regional Government occupying offices of president, prime minister as well as all top security and energy posts – has emerged as a strong and willing Kurdish partner for Ankara, which clearly regards the party as a critical counterweight to the PKK. For its part, the KDP sees its alliance with Ankara as a means of bolstering the KRG's autonomy from Baghdad and realizing the goal of eventual independence. On a local level, it is also a way to restore KDP power over Sinjar, which it had controlled until August 2014. On the other side, the PKK has sought to build up the YBS, providing it will military and logistical support after moving into to defend Sinjar when the KDP's Peshmerga withdrew.

The PKK presence in Sinjar since 2014 has clearly been a source of tension, both for Turkey and the KDP. On each trip to Sinjar, an ever-growing number of shrines to and portraits of imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocelan and the Kurdish militants who have died for Sinjar are visible. Similarly, the PKK's wider political agenda is viewed with deep concern by its rivals. The PKK hopes to be removed from the U.S. list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations, seeks to open a new corridor to Baghdad, and aspires to counter the influence of KDP forces in Kurdish-controlled Syria. Both Turkey and the KDP see the YBS as a vehicle for PKK influence in the Kurdish part of Iraq, thereby furthering the rebel group's plans for a united Kurdistan in which they are a leading power.

Other powers complicate and deepen the divide. Baghdad, in an attempt to reassert power in the disputed territory of Sinjar, pays the salaries of 1,000 YBS fighters. Iran sees Sinjar as the last part of its land corridor through Iraq to Syria. The PUK, one of the other ruling parties of the KRG, seeks to challenge KDP authority there. And as one senior KRG official (who also happens to be a Yezidi from Sinjar) put it, "the most important point is that none of the three parties in Kurdistan want the Yezidis to have something, to be strong."

DEADLY IMPACTS

As these rivalries become more confrontational, they are tearing at the fragile social fabric of the Yezidi community. Earlier this month, local leaders told me that for the first time that they expected violence would erupt between their factions. Governor of Dohuk and KDP member Farhad Atrushi told me that the PKK will not be permitted "into our cities and occupy… our government buildings [as they do in Sinjar]." Qassim Shesho, KDP member and commander of the "unofficial" 10,000-strong Yezidi Peshmerga forces in Sinjar, was even more blunt: "If America doesn't intervene, we will fight [the YBS and its PKK patrons]." The YBS are no less militant — as their commander Haval Serhad in Khanasor asserted, "If they [the KDP] don't leave, we will make them leave; we will fight them, not here, but other places."

The determination of rival forces to weaken each other makes the nominal local coalition against ISIL weaker. As both Qassim Shesho and Atrushi told me, the KDP does not give Yezidi Peshmerga the heavy weapons available to Kurdish forces, at least in part because of suspicion that they will join YBS or Hayder Shesho's independent Ezidkhan Protection Forces (HPE, formerly the Shingal Protection Forces (HPS)), though overall weapons shortages were also cited. Local officials and civilians also claim that that KDP security services in Dohuk threaten and arrest families of HPE and YBS fighters in camps. Over the past few months, different forces have erected checkpoints to antagonize each other, prompting near-daily squabbles. Said one senior KRG official and a Yezidi from Sinjar, "The situation in Sinjar for the Yezidis is more dangerous than the day of the genocide."

The rivalry is also inhibiting reconstruction and return efforts. An embargo placed by the Dohuk Governorate on Sinjar, Rabiaa, and Zummar means that goods going into the area are heavily regulated at the Suhaila checkpoint. Civilians, shopkeepers, pharmacists, and local NGOs officials I spoke to report that any significant amount — many say over 10 kilograms — of medicine, baby milk, gas, flour, and sugar are being were blocked, and taxes or tariffs have been put in place were placed on products like cigarettes. "You cannot take a packet of sugar into Sinjar," has become a common phrase to describe the situation.

The resulting scarcity has driven prices up, leaving locals Sinjaris destitute. Civilians talk of not having enough money to pay for milk for their children. Farmers complain that key parts and machines are embargoed. I spoke to a pharmacist who has been trying fruitlessly for over two months to get permission from the Dohuk governorate to transfer around four tons of medicine from the federal government into Sinjar. There is also a major fuel shortage. In places like Khanasor, one of the only towns where a significant number (around 350) of families have returned, the clinic has run out of medicine. The town is perhaps not coincidentally controlled by the YBS.

Atrushi insists that the blockade is intended to block "illegal" armed groups like the PKK that are fighting against KRG forces. He insisted, "Supplies for civilians the KRG clinics are all allowed to go in." But to many Yezidi civilians and officials, the targets and impacts of the

sanctions are far more widespread. First, the blockade serves to discourage people from return, bolstering the perception that the KDP would rather have people stay in camps in Dohuk where they can be controlled, rather than return to Sinjar and possibly support KDP rivals. Many families said that the humiliating process of unloading everything in their vehicle led them to reconsider returning. This suspicion has been reinforced by the timing of the blockade, which began near the end of the school year, when many families had planned to return. There is also a belief that the KDP is seeking to reassert its own control over Sinjar through control the distribution of resources. Multiple sources told me that only certain people from the KDP are allowed to bring things into Sinjar.

The limiting of resources has created more tensions between forces, as well as more lawless and dangerous activities. Smuggling, in particular, is on the rise, leading to more violence. Just last week, I was told, a confrontation between KDP-affiliated forces and local Yezidi smugglers ended in fratricide. The complexities of the ordeal were just the latest indication of how high tension levels have reached.

IN SEARCH OF A SOLUTION IN SINJAR

Resolving this growing crisis is critical not only to ensuring long-term stability and reconstruction in Sinjar, but also to the success of the broader battle against ISIL. The Islamist extremist group feeds on the discontent and security vacuum created by such disputes, not least because these conditions divert attention from the focus on the campaign to defeat it.

Given the regional dynamics at play, a long-term settlement will require the buy-in of all the major regional players. However, both sides — Turkey and the KDP on one hand and the PKK and YBS on the other — appear increasingly unwilling to compromise. Indeed, their continued pursuit of agendas based on narrow self-interest risks heightens local violence further. Any deal that takes into account their rival and often contradictory goals will need to be mediated by external parties, including major international powers such as the United States.

Even if it can be reached, a deal between these regional actors will take time. The risk is that, by the time negotiations begin, an internecine war will have already broken out between Yezidis, creating an even more difficult security and humanitarian challenge.

Consequently, more immediate and more local solutions are required. One potential alternative in the short term would be a local deal that eases intra-Yezidi tension, thereby providing a basis to sustain longer-term regional solutions. Establishing this bottom-up framework would still face obstacles, not least in the form of the KDP's determination to bring Sinjar under exclusive control and the PKK's drive to maintain a foothold there. Nevertheless, there is still a bulwark of Sinjari support for a Yezidi-first political arrangement protected by an independent Yezidi security force that would fall under the umbrella of Erbil or Baghdad. Yezidis are seeking a solution that would allow them to disentangle from the

regional struggles increasingly shaping security and political conditions in Sinjar and instead restore stability to begin resettlement and reconstruction. Such a solution is relevant for other post-ISIL areas, where mediation and deals between rival state and non-state security forces will be key to creating stability and harmony between local populations.

The security foundations for a common Yezidi force already exist, in the shape of Hayder Shesho and his independent HPE. According to my interviews, almost 7,000 Yezidis have signed up to fight with the HPE without salary in just over one month, and 2,500 have been trained at their new base in Sinjar. More than one Sinjari told me that every Yezidi would join this force if they weren't scared of the KDP. Many Yezidis recognize what is at stake. "If Hayder fails, Sinjar fails," said one university lecturer from Sinjar. This sentiment was echoed in different ways by many.

The group appears to enjoy widespread support among the Yezidi population because it is regarded by many Sinjaris as independent of "foreign" control. The HPE has eschewed money or support from Erbil, Baghdad, or the PKK to avoid the perception of following their orders, relying instead on donations of food, supplies, and money from the local population (though HPE did receive temporary aid from Baghdad and the Kurds in the months after the ISIL attack). However, HPE is not politically naive. Shesho and his allies know that they will need to make deals with other forces locally, and are willing to do so, as are their counterparts. What they are not prepared to do is compromise on autonomy.

Thus, the HPE has indicated that is willing to cooperate with the YBS, but only if the latter pursues a Sinjar-first policy independent of the PKK. This is easier said than done, as 3,000 families on the mountain receive support from the PKK and its Syrian affiliate, the YPG. Khider Salih, head of the Autonomous Administrative Council — the political wing of the YBS — and multiple other YBS and Council members assert their quasi-independence from the PKK and stress that they are a "Sinjari" and "Yezidi" force. While they receive support from the PKK and YPG, "Support and command are two different things…we must be honest we get support from them, but we are not under their command," said Salih. Many civilians and officials refute this and say unequivocally that the YBS and the PKK "are the same, there is no difference between them…they are the same 100 percent." But an alternative power source might be able to wean the YBS away from the PKK and vice versa.

Even Haval Serhad the YBS commander in Khanasor told me, "The KDP and the PKK, they will have to sacrifice something for the Yezidis."

Similarly, Shesho has agreed to place his forces under the control of the KRG Minister of Peshmerga, but only if the HPE retains its own flag, name, and command structure while receiving the same weapons as the Kurdish Peshmerga forces. This last demand reflects the HPE's lack of a crucial resource. While Shesho and his troops say they make up for this in

"commitment and passion," the harsh reality is that the HPE will need a regular supply of arms to achieve its objectives.

The HPE's willingness to align with the KRG also underscores its acceptance of political reality in Sinjar. The group's leadership knows that Erbil will never relinquish its efforts to preserve its influence in the town. What the HPE wants, therefore, is an accommodation with the Kurdish group that acknowledges Sinjar's right to manage its affairs autonomously and peacefully.

Thus far, however, the KRG has been reluctant to make an official deal. KRG President (and KDP head) Massoud Barzani has agreed in principle to an arrangement but has refused to formalize it. Meanwhile, local KDP officials insist that while any political party is welcome, no group — HPE included — will be allowed to field armed forces in Sinjar. This stance has convinced Shesho that the KRG is seeking to neutralize him, not support him. The KDP says that Shesho is "not committed," in the words of Atrushi. The result has been a stalemate.

This impasse is unlikely to be broken without external intervention, especially from Washington. The KDP believes that its military alliance with the United States against ISIL allows the KRG to pursue whatever territorial policies it wants locally in northern Iraq without fear of rebuke or resistance. Washington's single-minded pursuit of its narrow military objectives is not intended to have this outcome, but it is a reality nonetheless, not just in Sinjar, but across Iraq.

However, this importance of military support for local forces also gives the United States and the coalition leverage, if they choose to use it. Active U.S. military and logistical support for autonomous Yezidi forces and concomitant pressure on the KDP to reach local compromises that bolster Yezidi political autonomy would shift the local balance of power enough in favor of Yezidis, potentially creating opportunities to dampen local tensions. It would also be an important signal to local forces in other areas in Iraq that have been liberated from ISIL.

The Last Piece of the Puzzle:

Achieving Lasting Stability in Post-ISIS Jalawla

by Christine van den Toorn
22 May 2016

What will it take to restore peace and stability to areas liberated from ISIS? How can Iraq deal with the challenges of disputed territories? These are two of the biggest questions facing authorities in the country at present. Jalawla, a subdistrict of Khanaqin in Diyala province, may provide some important answers for how to handle these challenges in the future. The town is a microcosm of some of the wider political, territorial and economic challenges facing Iraqi authorities, and the measures taken there to restore stability after it was liberated from ISIS in November 2014 offer salutary lessons for Iraqi authorities, both in terms of how to achieve success, and the longer-term obstacles that will need to be overcome in order to consolidate it areas of the country that are disputed between the federal government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

A majority Sunni-Arab town, Jalawla is also home to significant Kurdish and smaller Turkmen minorities, most of whom fled when ISIS attacked in June 2014. Unlike many liberated areas, however, around half of Jalawla's population, 4,000 mostly Sunni Arabs, have returned over the past three months. Local peace has been maintained between the different communities, despite the informal transfer of control over the area from the federal government, which was the dominant force in Jalawla before the ISIS attack, to the KRG. Meanwhile, some basic services, such as water and electricity, have been restored.

A number of factors account for the relative success witnessed in Jalawla, many of which are applicable more broadly in Iraq. However, two in particular stand out: political deal-making between rival factions representing the federal government and the KRG; and, the role of local actors and the emphasis on homegrown solutions that emphasize the peculiar character and ethno-sectarian make-up of Jalawla itself.

On the political front, Jalawla benefited from an early post-liberation deal between the leaders of the Badr Organization and the PUK, which effectively carved out areas of control between the two groups and satisfied federal-government and KRG aspirations, temporarily at least. Badr, and the wider Hashed al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization units) supported by Baghdad, accepted an arrangement that allowed the PUK – and, by extension, the KRG – to retain uncontested control over Jalawla in return for Badr/federal-government authority over Saadiya, Jalawla's sister town to the east. This arrangement defused tension between the competing armed groups, which despite their alliance at senior levels are nonetheless more often rivals at a local level in disputed territories. It also mitigated the impact of national politics.

Jalawla Bazaar, May 2015

Jalawla Bazaar, April 2016

Perhaps more important has been the role that Jalawla sub-district director Sheikh Yacoub Lhebi has played in the return and reconstruction efforts. Lhebi – whose father is Sunni Arab and whose mother is Kurdish – is a member of the PUK and a supporter of KRG control over Jalawla. His dual ethnicity has made him a bridge back for some of the Sunni Arab population, as well as between Kurdish and Arab population. Lhebi's "Jalawla first" message clearly resonates locally, helped by the fact that he is from Jalawla, was the principal at a local school for years, and has deep ties to the local community. Moreover, he has willing partners among the local population; the Jalawla *baazar*, which was destroyed by ISIS, has been thoroughly cleaned and cleared by local volunteers, and many shops are now open.

Lhebi's approach stands in contrast to the policies of Baghdad and Erbil, which emphasize exclusive control over disputed territories. As such, it offers an alternative model for conflict resolution and local reconciliation throughout contested areas. In his view, the town need be neither Kurdish nor Arab, and he seeks to convince the Kurds and Jalawla's Sunni Arabs that it is in their in their interest work together. The two ethnic groups must turn over a new leaf, and he points to a history of cooperation between them during the repression of the Saddam Hussein era. Lheibi is committed to finding local solutions to the town's problems, emphasizing the importance of power-sharing arrangements between Arabs and Kurds, irrespective of sovereign control. As Lhebi himself says, "Jalawla is the key to Iraq."

However, the arrangements that sustain stability in Jalawla remain fragile, and will need to be reinforced though national initiatives if they are to be preserved. The deal between Badr and the PUK remains prey to conflicts between Baghdad and Erbil, and it will need follow through – to be bolstered quickly, and expanded to other areas – in order to sustain it. There is also the "politics of return." While the town has a committee that decides who gets to go back, there are scattered accusations of patronage and tribalism regarding the process. And displaced Sunni Arabs from Jalawla opposed to Lhebi's policies and KRG control over their town also remain a

festering problem for which no workable solutions have been proposed by either Baghdad or Erbil.

At present, however, the omens are not particularly propitious. Rather than building on local successes, both the federal government and the KRG are adopting policies that are punitive at worst, and neglectful at best, which risk reigniting conflict. Because of its KRG-controlled status, the federal government might withhold desperately needed reconstruction funds. Meanwhile, the KRG also has a tendency to ignore disputed territories, especially those with non-Kurdish populations, thereby complicating the process of local reconciliation, and creating ready recruits for groups determined to destabilize these areas.

Ultimately, both governments need to recognize the political value of local compromise arrangements, and to ensure sufficient economic support and reconstruction money to encourage further reconciliation, in Jalawla and elsewhere. Neither the federal nor the regional government has excess funds at present due to the sharp drop in oil prices; nevertheless, bolstering stability in liberated territories where local solutions are being found should be a priority for government spending, rather than being overlooked due to national political disputes. The long-standing dispute over territorial control in Iraq has thus far been a cause for deep hostility and instability, which ISIS among others have benefited from. Jalawla offers an alternative vision, which – with sufficient political wisdom and financial support – could be applied elsewhere, and offer local solutions to hitherto apparently intractable national conflicts.

Originally published in *Forign Policy*

High Noon in Iraq's Wild West

by Christine van den Toorn
22 February 2016

The liberation of towns from the Islamic State has had the surprising effect on my Iraqi friends of making them more despondent than they were before. When they are asked when things will turn around, they shrug and say Allah karim, akin to the English expression "when pigs fly." Just after Sinjar was "liberated," one of my former students from the area sent me pictures of his family's Friday lunch spread before and after they devoured it, labeling them Sinjar "before liberation" and "after liberation."

Iraq is now face to face with the classic "day after" dilemma. Many of its towns are demolished, and there is no money to rebuild. There is no agreement on which groups should secure and govern the areas and who gets to go back. The most visceral and volatile barrier is the newfound distrust among the local populations of liberated areas, who see one another as collaborators, bystanders, or victims of the Islamic State. Left unattended, these "day after" dynamics will — and have already — lead to internecine conflict and political gridlock that will undermine battlefield victories, similar to what happened in 2010 when the military successes of the Sunni Sahwa militias, Arabic for "awakening," against Al Qaeda in Iraq were squandered due to a lack of lasting national and local political deals.

This is evident in Iraq's disputed post-Islamic State territories, where both the Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil and the Iraqi federal government in Baghdad feel they have greater claims than ever before. That leaves them even further from local and national political deals that would produce lasting peace. Meanwhile, local forces with varying degrees of loyalty to Baghdad and Erbil have multiplied and militarized.

To see what happens to disputed areas in the absence of a political compact, one need only look to Tuz Khurmatu, a territory in Salahuddin province, whose hinterlands were liberated from the Islamic State in October and November of 2014. Last November, an amalgam of local Turkmen and Shiite militias fighting under the banner of al-Hashd al-Shaabi — on behalf of the national government — began clashing in the town with local Kurds and Peshmerga forces. The "liberated" zone has now become the scene of regular Wild West-style shootings, with rocket-propelled grenade and sniper attacks, kidnappings, theft, and arson a regular occurrence. The fight is not just between Kurds and Turkmen or between Erbil and Baghdad. There is also intra-Shiite and intra-Kurdish militia competition playing out, as Asaib Ahl al-Haq challenges the power of the Badr brigades and Kurdish Salafists challenge the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the dominant local Kurdish party. In the lawless post-Islamic State context, all of these forces feel free to operate openly, with few holds barred.

It is not hard to imagine a similar scene playing out over the coming months in Sinjar, the Yazidi-majority territory in Ninevah province, and other post-Islamic State territories. After Sinjar was liberated from the Islamic State in November 2015, the number of Yazidis leaving Iraq has actually multiplied. It's not just the utter destruction of their town that has made them increasingly pessimistic about their future in Iraq. It's also their massive distrust of Kurdish and Arab Muslim neighbors, and the insurmountable political gridlock between competing Yazidi and Kurdish groups.

Specifically, Yazidis have completely lost trust in the Kurdistan Democratic Party since its retreat from Sinjar during the Islamic State's original offensive on the city. It doesn't help that the KDP isn't keen on sharing power; indeed, the KDP had originally sought to be the sole liberator of Sinjar in October in order to better ensure that it eventually became the sole political power there. The KDP's "my way or the highway" attitude since the town's liberation has convinced many Yazidis to favor cultivating a relationship with Baghdad over Erbil. It has also given some Yazidi forces, like Hayder Shesho and his Protection Forces of Yazidkhan (HPE), little choice but to demand increased autonomy, as well as to align with Baghdad's military forces. In the absence of negotiated power-sharing deals between the Yazidis, Kurdish authorities, and the national government, these disputes will almost certainly end in violence, as they have in Tuz.

Over in Diyala province, disputed claims over the areas of Jalawla and Saadiya have complicated and delayed reconstruction and the return of local populations. An informal backroom deal last summer between Kurdish and Iraqi representatives (the PUK and Badr or Hashd, respectively) granted control over Saadiya to Baghdad and Jalawla to Erbil. That led to some stability, and allowed some of the area's Sunni Arab populations to return. But if the deal is not solidified into a more formal agreement on both national and local levels, there is little doubt that various groups — Shiite militias, Islamic State remnants, anti-Kurdish or anti-Hashd Sunni Arabs — will soon challenge, and shatter, the current order.

The situation, while complex and layered and riddled with competition and distrust, is not hopeless.

It is clear that U.S. policy is for this to not only be an Iraqi war but more importantly an Iraqi peace. This is a correct decision.

We saw what happened when the United States was a key driver behind Sunni forces in 2007 without buy-in from the Shiite parties in Baghdad. Having learned that foreign powers cannot create lasting political deals, the United States rightly now wants locals — Erbil and Baghdad, Yazidis, Sunnis, Kurds — to take the initiative in dealing with each other.

There are many willing partners. In many post-Islamic State territories, there are local actors who are willing to push up their sleeves and take risks to make deals with former enemies (and former

friends) to repopulate, reconstruct, rebuild and reconcile. Talib Muhammed, the Sunni Arab subdistrict director of Sleiman Beg in Tuz Khormatu, has met repeatedly with Shiite leadership in Baghdad as well as Kurds in Sulaimani. Hayder Shesho, the leader of Yazidkhan Protection Forces, has been in talks with both the Kurds and with Baghdad. In Rabiaa — not a disputed territory prior to the Islamic State's arrival – Shaykh Abdullah al-Yawar, of the Sunni Shammar tribe, has made deals with the Kurds, who liberated the area. Other Shammar shaykhs are reaching out to leadership in Baghdad. In Jalawla, Shaykh Yacoub Lheibi, a Sunni Arab PUK member has been leading efforts to return Sunni Arabs to Jalawla under the banner of Erbil.

But local and national actors cannot make lasting deals on their own. There is simply too much distrust, built up over too long a time. If there is to be peace, they will need a third party — be it the United States, the U.N., or USIP — to assist local Yazidis, Kurds and Sunnis who are willing to make deals with one another and with the federal government of Iraq and the Kurdish regional government. In order to be perceived as honest brokers, these outside actors will need to be present on a sustained basis at negotiations on both national and local levels.

The United States and the World Bank should also tie the international aid that the Iraqi government badly needs to the acceptance of the principle of inclusive governance. Last month, during a visit to Iraq, Deputy Secretary of State Tony Blinken announced $38.7 million in additional economic assistance to Iraq, "which will support government reform initiatives as well as post-conflict stabilization efforts," but there was little mention of who would be responsible for distributing this money in Iraq, and under what guidelines. In mid-December, the World Bank announced a $1.2 billion loan to Iraq, but the conditions attached to it were primarily focused on economic, rather than political, reform.

The United States has done much to enable the military victories in Iraq and Syria. But to prevent that victory from being squandered it needs to do more, in terms of diplomacy and financing, to cement the peace. Washington and other members of the American-led anti-Islamic State coalition need to use their influence to broker a long-term deal between the rival factions and communal groups in post-Islamic State areas.

One big reason the Islamic State moved into Iraq with such ease was the marginalization of local ethnic and sectarian groups by Kurdish authorities in Erbil and national political leaders in Baghdad. If the Islamic State, or its successor, is going to be denied a foothold in the future, this dynamic will need to be remedied. That should be the task for all of the parties that played a role in the recent military triumphs in Iraq, including the United States.

Originally published in *Iraq Oil Report*
IRAQ OIL REPORT

Rivalries Trump Resettlement

in Liberated Territory

by Christine van den Toorn and Mohammed Hussein
17 February 2016

The town of Sulaiman Bek epitomizes a major challenge facing Iraq: IS has been ousted, but ethno-sectarian politics are preventing displaced civilians from returning.

As the Iraqi government seeks to rebuild and resettle areas liberated from the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS), Talib Muhammed would seem to be the prototype of an ideal ally.

He is a Sunni Arab leader with credibility in his community; he has effective working relationships with members of other ethnic and sectarian identity groups in the area; and he is a committed enemy of IS, having lost several members of his own family to the organization's progenitor, al-Qaida.

But more than 14 months after the liberation of Muhammed's city, Sulaiman Bek, it remains a ghost town populated only by militiamen. Its roughly 40,000 former residents have lost their homes and livelihoods. And Muhammed's efforts to stand up a local security force that would allow them to resettle have failed, despite his extensive outreach to Shia militia power brokers and Kurdish security authorities.

"I swear, I am tired," Muhammed said. He utters that Arabic phrase so often – *wallah*, *taban* – it has become something of a mantra.

Muhammed's story illustrates the enormous challenge posed by the prospect of resettling more than 1 million displaced citizens and healing ethno-sectarian divisions ripped open by the IS group. In dozens of towns recaptured from IS militants, various sectarian and ethnic identity groups do not share a vision for political cooperation in post-IS Iraq; as a result, they are trying to win long-standing arguments over demographics and territorial control by force, leaving thousands of homeless residents in limbo.

Before the invasion of IS militants, Sulaiman Bek was a Sunni-majority town in Iraq's so-called "disputed territories" – a heterogeneous belt of land stretching across Diyala, Kirkuk, Salahaddin and Ninewa provinces, which has suffered from a legacy of forced resettlement and ethnic cleansing dating back to the Saddam Hussein regime. Arabs, Kurds, and Turkomen have all laid competing claims to the land, which political leaders never managed to resolve through the legal procedures prescribed in Iraq's 2005 constitution.

Sulaiman Bek, which also had a minority Shia Turkomen population, is currently controlled mainly by the Badr Organization, a powerful Shia militia operating under the government's al-Hashid al-Shabi (Popular Mobilization) program. Hashid militias have been instrumental in retaking territory from IS fighters, but many elements, including Badr, appear to regard many Sunni civilians as IS collaborators without evidence or due process.

Now that Sulaiman Bek has been cleared – of both residents and IS occupiers – some Badr leaders don't seem to want a return to the old status quo. Instead, they see an opportunity to resolve territorial disputes in a way that would likely favor the Shia Turkomen population who, before the invasion of IS, lived as a demographic minority in Sulaiman Bek.

“It is too early to talk about Sunnis returning back to Sulaiman Bek," said a senior member of the Badr Organization in Tuz Khurmatu, of which Sulaiman Bek is a subdistrict. “If we are forced to bring them back, we will let few families to come back. And later they will leave because they won't find peace here.”

Muhammed, who has served as the Sulaiman Bek subdistrict director since 2004, has tried to work through the Hashid program, even meeting with Hadi al-Amiri, the leader of the Badr Organization and the senior official responsible for security in Diyala province, just to the east of Sulaiman Bek. In that meeting, Muhammed said, he expressed willingness to create a Sunni Hashid unit to protect Sulaiman Bek, which would ultimately report to Amiri.
"These are the men who will decide when the population of Sulaiman Bek gets to return," Muhammed said, referring to Amiri and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the head of the Hashid program.

Muhammed said Amiri welcomed the idea of a Sunni Hashid unit to protect Sulaiman Bek, but there has been no progress toward setting it up. He said he has also met with Defense Minister Khalid al-Obeidi, Speaker of Parliament Salim al-Jabouri, and Muhammed Mahdi al-Bayati, the former Human Rights Minister and head of Badr in Tuz Khurmatu.

Many Iraqi security officials have expressed concerns about allowing Sunni civilians to return to liberated cities because some of them collaborated with – or at least tolerated the presence of – the IS organization and, before it, al-Qaida. Muhammed admits there is reason for suspicion.
"I understand why they are worried," he said. "I admit that our town was taken by these groups three times. Our town was a center for ISIS."

Muhammed sees a robust, Sunni-led local security force as an antidote to such problems. In the past, without a security presence that residents could trust, they had little ability to resist coercion by IS and its ilk – including al-Qaida and the Baathist Jaish Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandia (Naqshbandi Army), which was an early ally of IS with a presence in Sulaiman Bek and other areas.

While many Sunni Arabs might be reasonably suspected of IS sympathies, Muhammed himself has ample motivation to work against the group. He lost five brothers in bombings blamed on al-Qaida between 2003 and 2007; 15 of his guards have been killed over the years; and he has been targeted directly by several attacks, including four car bombs and two assaults on his home. But Muhammed has not been able to form the intra-Iraqi alliances necessary to stand up a local security force or secure permission to return home – a failure that apparently stems from the rivalries among the various power centers jockeying for influence and territory in the aftermath of IS. Muhammed has tried to cultivate good relations with all of them, but given that many believe they are locked in a zero-sum competition, they seem to have little use for a man seeking a balance of interests.

In addition to his outreach to leaders in the Hashid program and the Iraqi government, Muhammed has appealed to the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) for help, offering to commit troops to create a new Peshmerga unit composed of Sulaiman Bek locals who would protect the town. Hassan Baram, the deputy head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party in Tuz, praised Muhammed as "the best official you can find in the area. We respect him – he has a balanced relationship with all the parties, including Kurds and Shia militias."
But Baram also voiced concern that Muhammed was seeking help from the KRG only out of desperation, and that he could just as easily side with Baghdad in the future.

Similarly, while Muhammed has a strong enough relationship with Shia Hashid militias to receive an audience with Amiri and Bayati, many Hashid leaders remain suspicious about his ultimate loyalty. His outreach to the Kurds is well known, and he also has kept a residence in the Kurdish city of Sulaimaniya since 2010, after it became clear he could not safely live full-time in Sulaiman Bek.

"Talib was never with the Shia Turkomen and always with the Kurds," a senior Badr officer said. "We cannot totally trust him."

Another complicating factor is the nearby town of Amerli, populated mainly by Shia Turkomen, who suffered for years from attacks by Sunni militants using Sulaiman Bek as a stronghold. Many Hashid militias in the area now have Shia Turkomen in their ranks, and some believe that allowing Sunnis to return to Sulaiman Bek just 7 kilometers away would put Amerli in renewed danger.

Without a security force in Sulaiman Bek capable of both repelling IS and protecting Sunni civilians, residents have scattered, with most finding temporary refuge in nearby Tuz. Control of the city is divided between Hashid militiamen and Kurdish security forces, who have engaged in deadly battles in an attempt to establish dominance.

In the midst of the chaos, many Sunni civilians have gone missing, with some "arrested" without a warrant by Hashid militiamen – including four of Muhammed's uncles. Those who have not been kidnapped try not to go outside, fearful of being branded as IS collaborators.

"They sit and await death," Muhammed said.

Ismael al-Hlub, the deputy governor of Salahaddin province, said that Muhammed has done "a good job for his town and is the best person for the job.... What is preventing the resettlement of Sulaiman Bek is the accumulation of sectarian issues in the area. It cannot be left only to Talib."

Turkish Boots on the Ground

by Christine van den Toorn and Ahmed Ali
15 December 2015

TAKEAWAY

Recent Turkish military deployments in northern Iraq caused political controversy. Iraq's Shi'a majority now views Turkey as a sectarian actor. Turkey may have chosen to deploy its military assets to counter the growing influence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), to bolster its regional standing in the face of the growing Russian role in the Middle East, and to support its political allies in Iraq. Turkey's military deployment is intended as part of the posturing for a post-ISIS Mosul as well. Turkey will have to work closely with the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government in order to position itself as an accepted player in Iraq.

BACKGROUND

On December 4, the Turkish government deployed military assets just outside the town of Bashiqa in northern Iraq's Ninewa province. Bashiqa is a sub-district of Ninewa's provincial capital Mosul, and is approximately 12 miles northeast of the city. Reportedly, the new assets included 20-25 tanks, Armored Personnel Vehicles (APCs), and 150 soldiers. The 150 soldiers are presumably replacing 90 Turkish soldiers who have been training a mixture of Iraqi Police (IP) and new recruits under an umbrella organization known as the "National Mobilization". The members are mostly Iraqi Sunnis and so far the force is limited to Ninewa under the direction of the former provincial governor, Atheel al-Nujaifi. According to Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, these military movements are part of "routine rotation" and that the military equipment is intended to be part of force protection for the trainers. Turkish military is not new to the area: about 10 miles east of Bashiqa is the Zilkan training camp where Turkish troops have been training the Iraqi forces from Mosul since the fall of the city to ISIS on June 10, 2014. Yesterday, December 14, some of the Turkish forces withdrew from the camp and were headed to the Ibrahim Khalil border crossing to Turkey.

These developments have caused uproar in Iraq's political sphere. On December 5, three statements were issued by the federal Government of Iraq (GOI) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Iraq's Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, condemned the deployment, and called these movements a "dangerous violation" of Iraqi sovereignty because they took place without consultation with the Iraqi government. The statement also called on the Turkish government to withdraw the forces in 48 hours. Iraq's president, Fuad Masum, issued a statement on the same day echoing Abadi's condemnation and calling for the withdrawal of Turkish troops. On December 11, the Iraqi government appealed to the United Nations

Security Council (UNSC) when Turkey failed to meet the deadline to withdraw the forces. In a letter to the current president of the Security Council, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power, and Iraqi Ambassador Mohamed Ali al-Hakim wrote, “We call on the Security Council to demand that Turkey withdraw its forces immediately…and not to violate Iraqi sovereignty again.”

In response to the Turkish deployment, predominantly Iraqi Shi’a local governments in southern Iraq such as Maysan, Karbala, and Muthana have voted to boycott Turkish goods and condemned Turkey’s actions. These decisions are not binding for the federal government but do indicate the level of public discontent with Turkey.

In addition to governmental and official response, there were significant religious and popular expressions of discontent with the Turkish government. On December 11 as well, Iraq’s preeminent Shi’a religious authority Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani condemned the Turkish deployment. Sistani’s representative Sheikh Abdul Mahdi al-Karbalai referred to the deployment in his Friday sermon by stating that "the Iraqi government is responsible for protecting Iraq's sovereignty and must not tolerate any side that infringes upon on it, whatever the justifications and necessities.”

On December 12, there were popular reactions in Baghdad and predominantly Iraqi Shi’a provinces in southern Iraq. There were protests reportedly attended by thousands of demonstrators in Baghdad, Najaf, Thi Qar, and Basra. The protests were primarily organized by Popular Mobilization figures including Badr leader, Hadi al-Ameri, and former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki who is a direct competitor to Abadi. These protests have diminished Abadi’s stature given the organizations behind it and the attendance of Maliki who is likely seeking to take advantage of the Turkish deployment to consolidate his own position at Abadi’s expense.

For its part, the KRG issued a statement explaining that the Turkish government, as part of the campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), opened two bases in Iraqi Kurdistan in the end of 2014. The statement added that Turkey has also opened a third to train “other Iraqi forces” in Ninewa as part of the same anti-ISIS effort. This is a reference to Atheel Nujaifi’s camp, which is supposedly being trained as part of the campaign to reclaim Mosul.

LIKELY STRATEGIC RATIONALE FOR TURKEY’S DEPLOYMENT

Turkey’s deployment was likely motivated by several security and political factors. First is the current role of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Iraq within the context of the anti-ISIS war. The Turkish government still views the PKK as its main national security threat. Since the fall of Mosul, the PKK has played an increased role in the fight against ISIS. It is currently fighting or positioned in several areas that are close to Mosul. It is not out of the realm of

possibility that the PKK plans to take part in the Mosul liberation. In the Makhmour area, 70 miles southeast of Mosul, the PKK has had a base in the area since the 1990s. The PKK's role in Makhmour has been more visible and the organization played a role in reclaiming the area after ISIS captured it and advanced towards Erbil in August 2014.

It is worth noting that in addition to the Peshmerga, there is an Iraqi Army presence in the area. Makhmour is now the headquarters of the Ninewa Operations Command (NOC) under the command of Major General Najm al-Juburi, which will have a role in the planning and execution of the campaign to clear Mosul from ISIS.

The PKK also has a presence in Sinjar, and has been fighting ISIS there since August 2014. They played a role in the operation to liberate Sinjar district center last month. While their political viability long term in the area is questionable, their presence and popularity on another mountaintop in close proximity to the Turkish border – about 93 miles – is a concern for Turkey, especially with the YPG, which is backed by the PKK, carving out such a large autonomous area to the west.

Finally, the PKK is currently deployed around the Kirkuk area as well. Traditionally, Kirkuk has been important for Turkey given the presence of Iraqi Turkmen and Turkey's interest in limiting the aspirations of an independent Kurdistan. Turkey still maintains an interest in keeping Kirkuk out of the official borders of the KRG as it considers that scenario to be a significant step toward the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Regionally, the Turkish move concerns its overall posture. Turkey's role in the region has been challenged. Its stated objective of removing Bashar al-Assad from power has not materialized. Turkey's Assad-centric policy was weakened further when Russia deployed military assets to Syria in September of this year to preserve the Assad government. The tensions between Russia and Turkey escalated on November 24 when Turkish fighter jets shot down a Russian plane that entered Turkish air space. Finally, Turkey lost its ally in Egypt with the removal of Mohammed Morsi in 2013 and the ascendance of Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Turkey has also watched Iran grow its regional influence most prominently through supporting Assad and in its neighbor Iraq. Consequently, Turkey perceives its deployment to Iraq as way to regain regional standing.

In the context of Iraqi politics, Turkey most likely decided to deploy its assets in part to shore up its Iraqi Sunni allies in Mosul and its Iraqi Kurdish ally, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Turkey's closest Sunni ally in Iraq has been the Nujaifi family. Since the fall of Mosul, both Nujaifi brothers have seen their positions diminished and have lost their political clout. In May 2015, the Iraqi Council of Representatives (COR) voted to dismiss Atheel al-Nujaifi from his governor position. In August of this year, Atheel's brother, Osama, was dismissed from his vice president position as well, even though he still enjoys the privileges of the vice presidency including the salaries and bodyguards. The Nujaifis have been working to reclaim

their political influence. On November 23, Osama spearheaded an effort to establish a "Higher Coordination Committee" that included 13 major Iraqi Sunni leaders. The purpose of the Committee is to consolidate the political power of the Iraqi Sunnis who have traditionally been politically divided. This political component is now strengthened with the Turkish military deployment.

The Turkish move may also be perceived by some as a demonstration of support for the KDP. The KDP still maintains its position as one of the two leading parties in Iraqi Kurdistan, but last October it saw its domestic standing challenged by public protests over the economic crisis and political gridlock surrounding the presidency issue in the province of Sulaimani, where several KDP offices were attacked. Also, there is still tangible tension between the KDP and the PKK, which was visible during the November Sinjar Operation.

IMPLICATIONS

Turkey's Iraq deployment is about posturing for post-ISIS Iraq. It is likely that Turkey is preparing for a post-ISIS Mosul and creating facts on the ground now that will position it to be more influential in the future. In that sense, Turkey is thinking ahead of other countries, including the United States, in terms of the future of Mosul.

First, the Turkish role may push the Iranian and Russian governments to be more aggressive in their Iraq policy. Russia will likely perceive the Turkish role and may choose to respond by deploying further assets to Syria or ramping up its military operation in northern Syria where Turkey is pushing for a no-fly zone.

Turkey's future position in Iraq will be challenged. It is now seen as a sectarian player in Iraq's politics. The negative reactions among Iraqi Shi'a to its deployment have been consistent. This includes reactions from Sistani's office, Prime Minister Abadi and influential figures in the powerful Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs). The protests, boycotts, and condemnation may not be binding for the federal government in Baghdad but they do indicate the weakening of Turkey's standing within the Iraqi Shi'a community. Moreover, these developments reverse gains that the Turkish government has made in southern Iraq since 2003. Turkey is effectively now seen as an ally of the Iraqi Sunnis and the Nujaifis.

Moving forward, questions will remain about the Turkish military position in Iraq. The Turkish military has now established a new foothold in Iraq and the Bashiqa area is effectively its new strategic depth. The Turkish military has had firm presence in Iraqi Kurdistan since 1990 in the Duhok area of Bamerni and Amedi. Turkish planes have bombed PKK positions in Qandil, and they have sent ground troops in to target the PPK in the past.

The Turkish deployment presents challenges for U.S. policy in Iraq. The U.S. is still Iraq's most influential international partner, and the largest contributor in the war against ISIS. The fact

that Turkey – one of America's most notable Middle Eastern allies – has deployed military assets presumably without coordination with the U.S. creates the perception that the U.S. cannot or does not support the Iraqi government. The perception of lack of support may be the result of the Iraqi reaction that has condemned the Turkish role. At worst, the U.S. appears complicit in a deployment that is seen as a violation of Iraq's sovereignty by the country's Shi'a majority. Therefore, the U.S. has to be prepared to counter any narratives by anti-U.S. Iraqi political forces. The U.S. should also urge Turkey to increase its efforts to counter ISIS and be a more effective partner in the fight against it.

In the post-ISIS context, the deployment takes place in the ever-shifting struggle for control of territory and power. Bashiqa is part of the Disputed Internal Boundaries areas (DIBs) claimed by both the federal Iraqi government and the KRG. The town center is majority Yezidi with Christian and Sunni Muslim minorities and its rural areas are majority Kurd and Shabak. Bashiqa is a sub-district of Mosul, and hence was administratively a part of the Ninewa province and the Iraqi state before 2003. The town was tied to Mosul economically and the majority of its inhabitants speak Arabic. Post-2003, the KRG has made significant political inroads in Bashiqa through economic support and appealing to the area's Yezidi population. The KRG later expanded its influence in Bashiqa when it signed a contract with ExxonMobil in 2012 for oil exploration in the area. In the same year, a political alliance was forged between Governor Atheel Nujaifi and the KDP, former foes. As in the case of Rabiaa, after ISIS leaves, there will be deals made by local actors as well as Baghdad and Erbil with the influence of Turkey as to who will control Bashiqa and its oilfields.

For Abadi, this is his first major foreign policy confrontation. At the same time, the Turkish deployment may present an opportunity. He has been struggling with political, military, and public demands. His August reform package has not progressed and public support for him appears to be eroding due to his slow action. To regain his footing, he may continue to respond to Turkey's deployment by pursuing measures that he perceives to be aggressive. For instance, he ordered reconnaissance flights over the Turkish military's new positions and has consistently used aggressive language to criticize Turkey's actions. It is unclear as of now if he can effectively capitalize on this crisis to burnish his credentials as a commander-in-chief given the hardline positions currently expressed by senior PMU figures and Maliki. Abadi will not be able to take sole credit for the Turkish withdrawal. For the moment, he will have to contend with sharing the credit with the PMUs and local governments. One of his mistakes was not controlling the agenda and orchestrating the popular response even though he is positioned to do so given his position as Prime Minister.

The withdrawal of some Turkish troops does not indicate the end of the crisis between Iraq and Turkey. Turkey has now become part of Iraq's sectarian politics and it will need time to recover from this position. More than time, Turkey will need to show through concrete actions that it supports the war against ISIS and is not biased towards any political group in Iraq.

Five Takeaways

from the Sinjar Operation

by Ahmed Ali
18 November 2015

On November 13th, various Iraqi and non-Iraqi Kurdish and Iraqi Yezidi forces cleared the town of Sinjar, Shingal in Kurdish, of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Sinjar is located in western Ninewa province on the Syrian border, a predominantly Iraqi Yezidi town that fell to ISIS in August 2014. Upon taking control of the town, ISIS committed acts of genocide against the Iraqi Yezidis by executing civilians and enslaving thousands of women. ISIS's actions have destroyed the social fabric among Sinjar's different populations and thus present difficult challenges for the future. For the U.S., the fall of Sinjar triggered its decision to launch an air campaign against ISIS.

The forces to clear Sinjar included Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga, Yezidi Peshmerga led by Qasim Shesho, the Iraqi Yezidi group of Shingal Protection Forces known as the HPS led by Qasim Shesho's nephew Hayder Shesho, the Iraqi Yezidi forces of the Shingal Protection Units known as the YBS that was formed by the YPG, Syrian Kurdish forces represented by the People's Protection Units known as the YPG, and Turkish Kurdish forces represented by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The clearing of Sinjar is a positive military development. It will contribute to cutting off one of ISIS' main supply lines known as highway 47, connects the ISIS-held cities of Mosul and Raqqa in Iraq and Syria, respectively. Nevertheless, the clearing of Sinjar took a long time to develop due to a severe lack of coordination among the various forces in the field. Furthermore, the stabilization of the area will be more challenging than the military campaign.

The Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS) will publish a longer report on the clearing of Sinjar and its various implications. For now, here are five takeaways from the Sinjar operation focused on ISIS' strength, the military and political aspects of the operation, as well as the U.S. role:

1. **The Sinjar operation is indicative of the current posture of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). In Iraq, ISIS is now rolled back tactically and operationally.** Strategically, however, ISIS' position is still intact. Tactically, ISIS does not have offensive momentum and is limited to defense. It currently has to be content with probing attacks in which it dispatches small units to test the holding positions of various anti-ISIS forces. This was evident when ISIS launched low-scale attacks targeting Peshmerga positions in the Gwer area, southwest of Erbil, as the Sinjar operation

was unfolding. ISIS has recently conducted similar attacks against Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), known as the Hashd Shaabi, in Samarra. Operationally, ISIS is not able to launch operations to seize terrain any longer. Rather, ISIS is defeated and losing terrain. In addition to their loss in Sinjar, the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) backed by U.S.-coalition air power cleared ISIS from the strategic area of Baiji in northern Iraq. Baiji has been contested since October of 2014 and is home to Iraq's largest oil refinery. By clearing it, anti-ISIS forces have the opportunity to start planning for a more serious push northward towards the town of Shirqat. Consequently, the clearing of Shirqat will facilitate a push into Mosul and Hawija in Kirkuk province. These are encouraging developments. But strategically, ISIS still enjoys a good military standing. This is due to the fact that ISIS does not face any serious pressure in its capital in Iraq, Mosul, and its capital in Syria, Raqqa. The lack of pressure allows ISIS to maintain the aura that it is entrenched and that its model is successful. The absence of pressure further projects the anti-ISIS strategy as an ineffective campaign and, as a result, this image is likely producing resignation by the population and anti-ISIS forces that ISIS is not going anywhere.

2. **The Sinjar operation offers a military blueprint for clearing ISIS. Future campaigns have to include the deployment of overwhelming manpower on the ground coupled with reliable air cover.** To be sure, every frontline in Iraq is different. In previous clearing operations, ISIS was cleared with limited air power. This was evident in the October 2014 operation to clear the area of Jurf al-Sakhar in Babil province, south of Baghdad. During that operation, it was possible to clear ISIS due to the great concentration of PMUs and ISF. The forest-like terrain of Jurf al-Sakhar also made it difficult to deploy intensive air power. In Sinjar, U.S.-led coalition airpower was crucial as it weakened ISIS long before the commencement of the operation. This was partially possible because Sinjar was not inhabited like other cities ISIS controls like Ramadi and Mosul. That the PKK, PUK Peshmerga, and HPS had been fighting ISIS in Sinjar for nearly a year also prevented them from entrenching themselves in the town. During the operation, air power was essential in neutralizing ISIS' anticipated deployment of armored Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIEDs). For future operations, anti-ISIS forces have to be equipped with anti-armor missiles that have so far played a major role in removing the threat of armored ISIS VBIEDs.

3. **The Sinjar operation illustrates that the challenge to clear ISIS is as political as it is military.** Leading up to the operation, ISIS thrived on the partisan rivalries and disunity among the various Kurdish factions around Sinjar. Eventually, the various groups overcame their differences, possibly due to U.S. mediation. Given the short period of time it took to clear ISIS from Sinjar, it is fair to conclude that the military challenge was minor compared to the political differences that stalled the operation to dislodge ISIS from Sinjar. Now that ISIS is cleared, a major challenge remains: distrust, division and

competition among the Iraqi and non-Iraqi -Kurdish and Iraqi Yezidi factions. The distrust is likely to manifest itself on the battlefield and in Sinjar's post-ISIS governing environment.

4. The Sinjar operation should dispel the view that anti-ISIS forces lack the will to fight. Ground forces in Iraq are available and do want to confront ISIS. These forces need logistical support, air support, strategic planning, intelligence, and coordination. Very importantly, the ground forces will need their political leaderships to set aside differences and prioritize the fight against ISIS. Clearing ISIS from any area does not mean that stability is guaranteed. Up to this point, more work is needed to diminish ISIS' long-term appeal in post ISIS areas. However, clearing ISIS could act as the first step towards reconciliation and the re-enfranchisement of Iraqis.

5. The Sinjar operation can cement the U.S. role as a trusted mediator. The U.S. achieved this role by deploying hard power including blanket air cover around Sinjar and intelligence support. Diplomatically, the U.S. was likely able to broker an understanding between the various anti-ISIS forces in Sinjar convincing them that it was in their best interest to clear ISIS. Moving forward, this role will need to be repeated for the Mosul operations and more likely to clear towns closer to Sinjar including Tal Afar to the east. Anti-ISIS forces in the rest of Iraq should not view success in Sinjar as the U.S. shifting its attention away from Mosul and Anbar. Those forces, however, may do just that due to pre-existing distrust. Therefore, the U.S. will have to send signals that it intends to target ISIS not only in northern Iraq, but in the rest of Iraq and the region.

Challenges & Opportunities in Post-ISIS Territories:

The Case of Rabia

by Christine van den Toorn and Ahmed Ali
August 3, 2015

SUMMARY

One success story in the war against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) happened in October 2014, when Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga cooperated with the Iraqi Shammar tribe to clear ISIS from the predominantly Sunni Arab border town of Rabia in northern Iraq's Ninewa province. This military alliance was essential to defeating ISIS and denying it control of contiguous terrain between Iraq and Syria. It is a positive example of former rivals setting aside their differences in order to neutralize ISIS. The security gains in Rabia were complemented by the return of the large majority of the local population who fled when ISIS attacked.

However, the road ahead is more difficult than the one behind. The current Iraqi Kurdish Iraqi Sunni Arab alliance is in jeopardy for a multitude of reasons. Strategically, local and national stakeholders cannot define the final status of Rabia as part of either federal Iraq or Iraqi Kurdistan. On the ground, dormant ethnic tensions, intra-tribal power struggles, mistrust, territorial disputes, and lack of reconstruction in the area will challenge the pact.

Success in Rabia is crucial in order to inspire similar military alliances in other predominantly Sunni parts of Iraq like Mosul, Anbar and Salahaddin. Furthermore, it will prevent ISIS from regaining a presence on the Iraqi-Syrian border. Therefore, Baghdad, Erbil, local tribes, and the United States have an imperative interest in achieving a positive outcome in Rabia.

BACKGROUND: ISIS ATTACKS RABIA

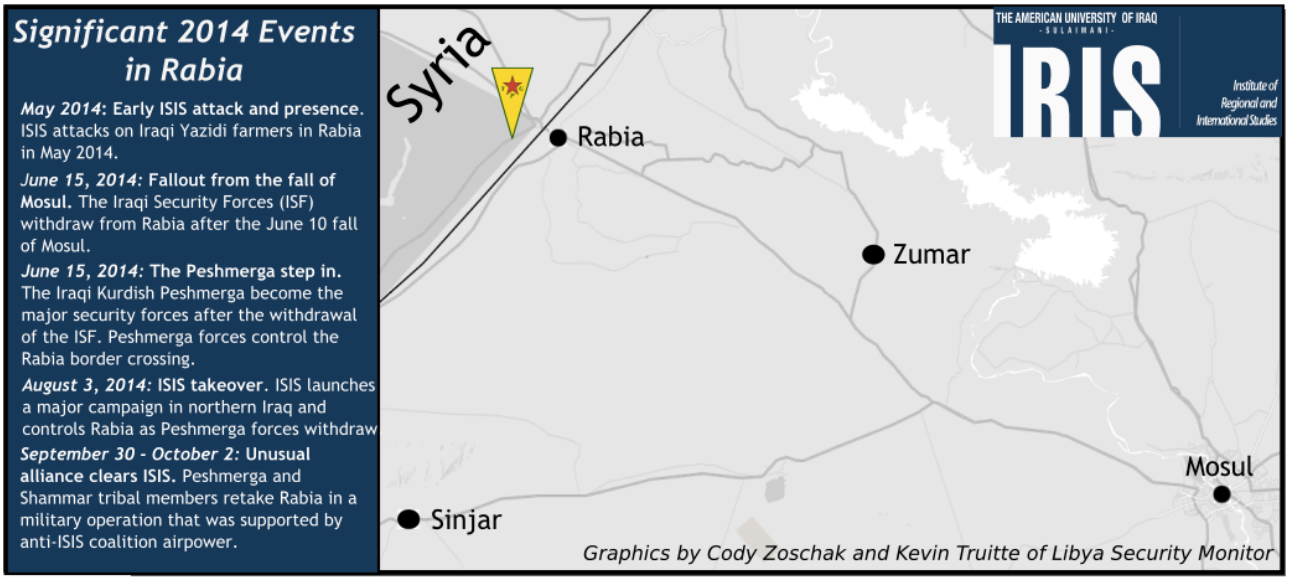
In August 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) took control of Rabia -- a strategic sub-district, or nahiya, in Ninewa province on the border with Syria -- and its surrounding areas, Zumar, and most infamously the Yazidi district of Sinjar, which lies just south. Rabia is dominated by the Iraqi Arab tribe of Shammar, one of Iraq's biggest tribal confederations or qabila. ISIS had taken control of neighboring Mosul and Tal Afar, the district, or qadha, to which it belongs, located east and southeast of Rabia, earlier in the summer.

The conquest of Rabia, Sinjar and Zumar solidified ISIS' hold on Ninewa and prompted them to move further east toward Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, reaching the Makhmour area. Those events prompted the anti-ISIS coalition air campaign. ISIS had a presence and freedom of movement in Rabia by May 2014 despite the presence of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). During that period, it attacked Iraqi Yazidis working in Rabia's farms and fleeing Sinjar through Rabia in anticipation of an ISIS assault.

ISIS bombed the homes of Shammar sheikhs who were allied with the Iraqi state and attacked Rabia-based Peshmerga through June and July of 2014 to soften Peshmerga defenses in areas west of Mosul.

Control of Rabia was significant for the Iraqi government and the United States military in the aftermath of the 2003 fall of Saddam Hussein. For ISIS, control of Rabia was important in order for the group to maintain contiguous control of terrain in northwestern Iraq and between Iraq and Syria. The sub-district is in a strategic position between Mosul and Syria, borders Sinjar and is part of Tal Afar, all areas ISIS conquered. It includes a border crossing that, traditionally, along with the surrounding areas, has acted as a lucrative business center for local tribes and multiple Iraqi governments. Rabia is well-known for its fertile soil and agriculture, from which ISIS could also benefit. It was also a message that Sunni Arabs who resisted the group would face severe consequences.

In October 2014, Rabia was liberated in a relatively quick operation because of the joint Sunni Arab Shammar-Peshmerga alliance that attacked under cover of coalition air support. Tactically, members of the Shammar tribe acted as guides for the Peshmerga during the operation and directed them to ISIS positions and areas where ISIS had implanted Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). A second key component in the swift liberation was the fact that most Shammar, the majority tribe in the area, and one of the largest in Iraq, did not collaborate with ISIS.



SHAMMAR-KDP ALLIANCE

The joint Shammar-Peshmerga force that liberated Rabia was made possible by a deal between Sheikh Abdullah Ajil al-Yawer, a prominent Shammar Sheikh in Rabia, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the leading Kurdish party in Ninewa and Dohuk, a province of Iraqi Kurdistan that borders Rabia. Al-Yawer has since then stated to multiple outlets that the Shammar and Peshmerga were in "full cooperation." He makes regular visits to Erbil and his good relations with various senior KDP leaders.

Such deals between Sunni Arabs and Kurds are nothing new. For instance, the former governor of Ninewa, Atheel al-Nujaifi, who was in office from 2009 to 2015, was a vocal critic of Iraqi Kurdish policies and presence in Ninewa. However, by late 2012 he shifted his position and became an ally of the KDP as his relations with Baghdad worsened. This was motivated by oil deals between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and international oil companies in areas that are officially part of Ninewa such as Bashiqa and Qaraqosh. Nujaifi's brother, Osama, who was the speaker of Iraq's Council of Representatives (CoR), also shifted his position from anti-Iraqi Kurdish to what is currently a complete alliance.

For the Shammar, the alliance falls within the long-established tribal policy of building relations with the dominant adjacent power. Traditionally, tribal policy is based on survival and pragmatism. These realities and the threat of ISIS made the Shammar alliance with Peshmerga more possible. As al-Yawer told the authors, "I will do whatever it takes to allow my people to go back." This situation and desire are present in multiple predominantly Iraqi Sunni areas. Baghdad and the KRG must capitalize on these conditions to facilitate the clearing of ISIS.

However, in ways the deal is a shift from past Shammar policy toward the Kurds. Relations between KDP and al-Yawer, and other Shammar sheikhs, have been tense at times over the past ten years. Since the 2003 fall of Saddam Hussein, Iraqi Sunni leaders including the Shammar possess perceived and real grievances towards the more powerful Iraqi Shi'a and Kurdish parties. In Ninewa it has been the rise of Kurdish influence, and Shammar claim the KDP has taken steps to marginalize their political, economic and social power around Rabia and the greater province. The KDP, on the other hand, state they have and will continue to contribute to development in Rabia.

Potentially the biggest threat to the alliance is that branches and personalities within the Shammar tribe, both sheikhs and tribesmen, are steadfast in their opposition to any deal with the KDP and the Kurds, and seek to work with Baghdad to secure the future of Rabia. So while the dominating presence of one tribe in Rabia facilitates any future political deals and security arrangements, like most tribes in Iraq the Shammar are not united politically or socially.

RABIA POST-ISIS

The picture in Rabia is mixed. One of the successes in the area is its repopulation. Of the area's 13,000 families, 12,000 have returned. Realistically, it is easier to repopulate Rabia given the fact that the majority of the population did not support ISIS. Furthermore, it is easier to vet families in Rabia because of its uniform tribal landscape, which allows for a system of future accountability. Most of these families were based in Dohuk and across the border in Syria.

Security in the area is stable as the Peshmerga forces are stationed around the sub-district with locals providing security inside the city. Last fall, Zerevani Peshmerga – Iraqi Kurdistan's militarized police force – trained 200 Shammar tribal members, and in August 2015 the Peshmerga provided 100 AK 47 machine guns to Shammar tribal members. The Syrian Kurdish Yekineyen Parastina Gel (YPG), which has close ties with the PKK in neighboring Turkey, controls the Yarubiyah border crossing on the Syrian side. As a result, ISIS has not been able to represent a threat to Rabia since October 2014. Additionally, ISIS has been unable to launch attacks probably because of its plan to protect its positions in Tal Afar to the east and Sinjar to the south of Rabia.

In contrast to the security situation, the infrastructure and services in Rabia are still depleted almost a year after its clearing. There is a lack of electricity and water provision. There are also complaints about school conditions and shortages of teachers. Neither Baghdad nor Erbil has provided Rabia with services. This is partially because of the ongoing anti-ISIS war and the country's economic crisis. It is also an example of classic disputed territory politics. The federal government views Rabia skeptically for building alliances with Erbil and in return the KRG is unable or unwilling to fully commit to a territory outside the constitutionally-defined Iraqi Kurdistan. To be sure, Rabia has been under-resourced for a long period of time. However, given that it has set a good example in post-ISIS repopulation, better service delivery could serve as a model for other tribes in Iraq to turn against ISIS. The lack of rebuilding in Rabia sends a discouraging message to the rest of Iraq as it grapples with a post-ISIS future.

CONCLUSIONS

Clearing ISIS through Peshmerga-tribal cooperation is a positive model, and a military combination that can be replicated elsewhere in Iraq. The success of the model will depend on the backing of coalition air power and participation of local security forces. The situation in Rabia demonstrates that rivals can, at least temporarily, put differences aside and overcome their past tensions to defeat ISIS. This modus operandi can be applied to relations between Baghdad and Iraqi Sunni tribes. That said, tribes in other areas are not as clear-cut as the Shammar are with regard to ISIS. Elsewhere in Iraq, tribes are split, with sections supporting ISIS and others opposing it. This difference complicates Baghdad's approach to the Iraqi Sunni

tribes that are perceived as having partly supported ISIS. Militarily, Rabia should be considered as a launching pad for future operations to clear ISIS in Tal Afar, Sinjar, and Mosul.

Moving forward, different scenarios for the security structure in Rabia will exist. The first possibility is the return of the pre-ISIS security architecture composed of Iraqi federal government forces. Before the August ISIS takeover of Rabia, it was under the control of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Iraqi Border Police (IBP). The Shammar in the area were prominent in the security infrastructure as most of them were in the local Iraqi Police (IP). Peshmerga will also likely be in the area. Iraqi Kurdish forces are currently positioned to the east of the center of Rabia in the town of Zumar, which is important for the Iraqi Kurds as it falls within what is known as the Disputed Internal Boundaries (DIBs) areas and has untapped oil reserves. DIBs areas are disputed between Baghdad and Erbil and are supposed to be solved according to article 140 of the Iraqi constitution.

Due to the withdrawal of both ISF and then Peshmerga from the area in the summer of 2014, it is certain that there will be a major local component to any new force. Local Shammar forces are already in place and currently fall under the Ministry of Peshmerga. Nevertheless, their affiliation could shift to the Ministry of Defense or Ministry of Interior in Baghdad, depending on disputed territory deals. In either case, conditions in the area can improve as long as the Shammar cooperate with the Peshmerga or ISF and vice versa. Power struggles between Baghdad and Erbil could exacerbate intra-Shammar disagreements and will jeopardize stability in Rabia.

The YPG can play a role in maintaining security in the area by ensuring stability across the border. Thus far, there have not been any cross-border issues. The YPG will have to maintain a neutral stance and cannot be involved in the politics of the area. Its role will be more positive if it remains strictly focused on security.

From a governance standpoint, the future of Rabia is still uncertain. Sheikh Abdullah al-Yawer told the authors, “We do not know the endgame.” The success of the current situation will depend on multiple national and local actors. For now, the deal between the KDP and the Shammar is hyper local and isolated from national politics. It is based on the assumption that the cooperative relations between both sides will continue. It further assumes that Baghdad will continue to be preoccupied with other parts of the country and disregard the significance of Rabia. These two conditions are fluid.

To avoid regression in the deal between the KDP and the Shammar, both sides will have to maintain the current alliance based on power sharing. If the Shammar and the Kurds are unable to do so – a possibility considering the shifting alliances in Iraq – there could be major security and governance gaps that ISIS, or some future reincarnation of ISIS, will exploit in order to establish a foothold in the area. Indeed, ISIS is adept at exploiting ethno-sectarian tensions. Local and national actors must avoid a return to status quo political and social

dynamics that existed before and facilitated the rise of ISIS. Thus, the KDP-Shammar alliance will need to be monitored by the United States, particularly in the very likely event of Baghdad's involvement in the area.

The Shammar-KDP alliance is an example of political deals in a post-ISIS world: one between former foes motivated by mutual interest, political competition and a shared anti-ISIS outlook. This instance stands out, but is not the only time Iraqi Kurds and Iraqi Arabs have cooperated against ISIS: joint efforts between Iraqi Arab Shi'a and Iraqi Kurds in Diyala and Salahaddin province are another example. Former enemies can certainly become allies.

Locally, the deal between the Shammar and the KDP can also collapse in the future. Active competition between them as well as intra-Shammar division and opposition is possible as the ISIS threat that unites them subsides. As one prominent Shammar Sheikh told the authors, "There should not be airpower from above if there is no political deal on the ground." To him, the deal with the KDP was personal and not representative of the entire Shammar tribe. In order for the deal to be sustainable, al-Yawer will have to show it yields concrete results and benefits for the people. This means the KDP and KRG will have to contribute to reconstruction in Rabia.

Another issue will be the administration and changing ethno sectarian demographics related to Tal Afar and the creation of new provinces. After ISIS is cleared from Mosul, there will undoubtedly be an initiative to establish Tal Afar as a province. Presumably, this will include Rabia, which legally belongs to what is the district of Tal Afar. Tal Afar was a mixed Iraqi Shi'a and Sunni Turkmen town that is now an epicenter -- if not the epicenter -- of ISIS activity. If and when it is cleared it could be a majority Shia Turkmen province. Inclusion in such an area will be resisted by both the KRG and local Shammar tribe, who are already advocating for the establishment of Rabia as a separate province. The U.S. is trusted by all parties in Rabia given its previous work with al-Yawer and established relations with Baghdad and Erbil. Therefore, an active American role in this regard as well will be significant to mediate future tensions.

The local demands for the province of Rabia will likely get traction moving forward. One impetus for establishing the province will be the result of the security breakdown that took place between June and August 2014, culminating in ISIS taking control of Rabia. The demands will also be motivated by the lack of development in Rabia over the last ten years. Such demands for local autonomy, which exist in multiple provinces in Iraq today, will have to be balanced with the central state – be that in Baghdad or Erbil.

There will also need to be a sincere reconciliation process with the neighboring Yezidis of Sinjar. This is possible due to the historic socio-economic relations between the two groups, and the fact the Shammar did not align with ISIS. While unique, it can serve as a starting point and model for ethno sectarian reconciliation in Iraq.

Questions about the administrative status of Rabia reflect the patchwork of actors that have been involved in the area and can complicate an already tenuous situation. Before the 2014 ISIS campaign, Rabia was not technically part of the Disputed Internal Boundaries (DIBs) areas. However, Peshmerga fought and died to clear the area and therefore the KRG perceives that it has a right in determining its future. Geographically, Rabia lies between Sinjar - a major region in the DIBs discussion - and Dohuk. But Rabia is strategic for Baghdad as it borders the non-DIBs territories of Mosul and Tal Afar. Additionally, it contains a border crossing that Baghdad will see as key for its territorial integrity and the huge financial gain from tariffs. Local determinism will be a factor, and Baghdad will unlikely cede Rabia de facto. It will rather be subject to the future agreements that will eventually settle the DIBs and new borders as well as areas of control in a post-ISIS Iraq. In this sense, Rabia is an example of the new territorial challenges that Iraq faces in the aftermath of clearing ISIS. Such areas remain in a transitional phase of ongoing local power struggles, which should be watched closely by parties with an interest in stabilization.