

A group of Iraqi soldiers in desert camouflage uniforms and red berets are marching in a line across a flat, open landscape. They are carrying large Iraqi national flags on tall, thin poles. The flags are red, white, and black, with the Arabic word 'الله أكبر' (Allahu Akbar) written in green on the white band. The sky is clear and blue.

Reintegration of Combatants In Iraq After ISIL

Jacqueline Parry & Emily Burlinghaus

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Introduction

The campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) culminated on 9 December 2017 when Prime Minister Abadi declared that ISIL no longer controlled territory inside Iraq.¹ After years of fighting, tens of thousands of combatants began to return home, many to communities affected by war and economic crisis. This report examines the unique context facing ex-combatants and communities in Iraq. It focuses on demobilization prospects for the two largest categories of forces mobilized against ISIL: The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and the Kurdish Peshmerga.

This research was initiated nearly one year ago in February and March 2018. At the time, it was still conceivable that PMF and/or Peshmerga leadership might introduce a wide-reaching Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) effort across their respective units. DDR programs typically attempt to address the post-war surplus of combatants in three ways: by collecting, managing and destroying arms; discharging combatants and managing their transition to civilian life; and supporting ex-combatants to reintegrate economically, politically, and socially.² Iraq observers anticipated that the enormous numbers of ex-combatants would create incentives for the country's federal, PMF and Kurdish security agencies to engage in a serious DDR effort. This never happened, particularly on the PMF side. The long-term status of the PMF became too politically controversial for top leadership to move towards DDR in any meaningful way. Instead Iraq's political elites nominally embraced security sector reform (SSR), with little actual to show for by way of concrete steps forward.

This lack of interest in DDR from the upper echelons of PMF leadership should not lead Iraqi civil society organizations and international NGOs to disengage from DDR altogether. Fighters have and will continue to come home as the natural result of the conflict moving on, and their presence has the potential to contribute to or detract from post-conflict stabilization. NGOs and relevant government agencies such as the National Reconciliation Committee (NRC) can incorporate DDR into broader community development, reconciliation, and social cohesion initiatives. Yet such attempts must proceed cautiously. Scholars have noted how DDR programs have generated violence and instability when community members sought retribution against returned ex-combatants and refused to support their reintegration.³ These

1 Emma Graham-Harrison, "Iraq formally declares end to fight against Islamic State," *The Guardian*, December 9, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/09/iraq-formally-declares-end-to-fight-against-islamic-state>.

2 Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl and Nicholas Sambanis, "Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Programs: An Assessment," Folke Bernadotte Academy, 2010, http://faculty.virginia.edu/jsw/uploads/research/Disarmament,%20Demobilization,%20Reintegration%20Programs_%20An%20Assessment.pdf.

3 Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl and Nicholas Sambanis, "Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Programs: An Assessment," Folke Bernadotte Academy, 2010, http://faculty.virginia.edu/jsw/uploads/research/Disarmament,%20Demobilization,%20Reintegration%20Programs_%20An%20Assessment.pdf.

experiences underscore a key lesson: Demobilization plans must be community-specific and account for the unique social, political, and economic realities of each locality.⁴

Methodology

This report offers an exploratory study of DDR in Iraq. It employed a mixed-methods approach, encompassing desk study analysis and semi-structured interviews. The desk study included academic and policy literature as well as internal position reports and presentations. Primary data was collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews conducted in February and March 2018 in Baghdad, Basra, Kirkuk, Nineveh and the Kurdistan Regional of Iraq, and a preliminary half-day roundtable held in February 2018 in Baghdad. The focus of the roundtable was the overall dynamics of returning combatants and reintegration in Iraq, with a heavier focus on and representation of PMF actors and issues. Roundtable attendees included representatives from the Prime Minister's Office, National Reconciliation Commission, PMF, tribal leaders from Salah al-Din and Diyala, academics, and humanitarian/ development actors.

55 total interviews were conducted by the research team. Participants in the study included 33 combatants or their associates, among them 3 senior Peshmerga leaders; 15 Peshmerga combatants; 3 senior PMF leaders; 6 PMF combatants; and 6 family members of martyrs (3 from the Peshmerga and 3 from the PMF.) In addition, the research team conducted 22 interviews with key informants, including provincial and local authorities in areas of high mobilization; humanitarian/development actors; researchers; journalists; social activists; and western government and military officials involved in security sector reform and DDR in Iraq.

This research and the associated roundtables were funded as part of a three-year project examining local, hybrid and sub-state forces in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria from a comprehensive security perspective. The research is funded by the Netherlands Research Organisation, and jointly carried out by IRIS, the Global Public Policy institute in Berlin, and the Afghanistan Analysts Network.

⁴ For example, see: "Stockholm Initiative on Disarmament Demobilisation Reintegration: Final report," Ministry for Foreign Affairs Sweden, pp. 41-45 February 2006, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ED1EF744FE93A788C1257428003110CB-gvtSweden_feb2006.pdf.

POPULAR MOBILIZATION FORCES

Background

When ISIL launched its armed campaign in the summer of 2014, Iraq's national security forces were overwhelmed and left many communities undefended. To fill this critical gap, Iraq's most influential Shia cleric, Grand-Ayatollah Al-Sistani, issued a fatwa on 13 June 2014 calling upon all able-bodied Iraqi men to take up arms. Tens of thousands responded, but instead of joining the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), the majority turned to non-state armed groups. Most of these volunteers joined (or re-activated with) long-standing militia groups, many of which were associated with Iraqi political parties or pre-existing politico-religious constituencies. A smaller number of volunteers mobilized into groups that had no connection to a political party but formed in direct response to Sistani's fatwa, usually to protect Shia religious sites from ISIL.⁵ By Executive Order, Prime Minister Maliki gathered all of these groups under a single umbrella and recognized them as the *Hashd al-Shabi*, or Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).

Between Sistani's June 2014 fatwa and Prime Minister al-Abadi's announcement that military operations were complete in December 2017, the PMF grew to include between 50⁶ and 70⁷ different groups. The majority are Shia and originate from southern Iraq; however, the PMF also expanded its base to include Sunni combatants and numerous minority forces. Over the course of several years, the PMF developed from an assortment of armed groups into a formal consortium. Most significantly, in November 2016, Iraq's parliament approved a law granting legal status to the PMF, and, in March 2018, Prime Minister al-Abadi issued a decree that incorporated the PMF into the country's security forces. This decree granted PMF combatants salaries and other benefits similar to soldiers under the Ministry of Defense and, at least on paper, subjected PMF combatants to the country's military service laws and regulations.⁸

Discussions between the PMF and government regarding force integration and reduction have been underway for several years. The March 2018 Decree established rules that foresee a reduction in forces and indicate that the full contingent of PMF

5 András Derzsi-Horváth, "Who's Who: Quick Facts About Local and Sub-State Forces," *Global Public Policy Institute*, August 16, 2017, <https://www.gppi.net/2017/08/16/quick-facts-about-local-and-sub-state-forces>.

6 Renad Mansour, "More than Militias: Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces are here to Stay," *War on the Rocks*, April 3, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/more-than-militias-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces-are-here-to-stay/>.

7 Nicholas A. Heras, "Iraq's Fifth Column: Iran's Proxy Network," *Middle East Institute*, October 2017, https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PP2_Heras_IraqCT_0.pdf.

8 "Prime Minister, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces Dr. Haider Al-Abadi Issues Regulations for Adapting the Status of the Popular Mobilization Units" (in Arabic), Office of the Prime Minister, March 8, 2018, <http://pmo.iq/press2018/8-3-201803.htm>. Yet, gaps in regulation of the PMF remain. There is a lack of clarity regarding age ceilings (i.e. at what age is retirement mandatory), salary, honorary rank, the status of the PMF as a federal force (or not), the type of weapons the PMF are allowed, whether the PMF is authorized to operate outside of Iraq, and the benefits that accrue to demobilized or retired veterans.

forces are not expected to remain indefinitely on active duty. According to the Decree, combatants between the ages of 18 and 25 must graduate from either the Command College or the Defense Ministry's Staff College in order to hold the rank of lieutenant or above. Roughly 20 percent of PMF commanders do not meet this standard and thus would in theory be forced to retire. In interviews in March 2018, the National Reconciliation Committee claimed that some 43,000 PMF fighters would likely begin demobilizing as a result of the conclusion of major hostilities with ISIL. PMF leaders at the time said that 20 percent of their forces had already returned home.

Nonetheless, the political discourse surrounding the PMF has shifted since this research was initially conducted, and large-scale demobilization, reduction or integration into Iraqi security forces does not seem to be likely at least in the short-term. Rather than decreasing, the recent electoral victories have led to an expansion of PMF forces. According to information obtained from the Prime Minister's office in February 2018, there were an estimated 152,000 combatants registered with the PMF, of which roughly 120,000 were receiving salaries from the central government. An additional 32,000 combatants received salaries from other sources.⁹ However, by the end of 2018, an additional 30,000 allocations had been granted for PMF salaries, and one budgetary expert interviewed in March 2019 suggested that another 30,000 to 36,000 had been added since the formation of the new government. Some of these allocations may be intended to replace attrition or losses, but the overall trend has been toward maintaining and even increasing the size of the PMF in order to strengthen of the patronage networks of political parties.

Although this suggests that top-down restructuring or integration of the PMF is not likely in the current political moment, demobilization of PMF fighters is happening to some extent on an ad hoc basis, and limited numbers of fighters are returning home. The subsequent section will discuss the impact of these returning fighters and possible consequences on community dynamics.

Community Attitudes Towards the PMF

This section focuses on interviews conducted with community members in Basra, the governorate from which the highest number of PMF combatants mobilized. For their efforts in the war against ISIL the PMF are revered across southern Iraq.¹⁰ Pictures of martyrs are displayed along highways, roundabouts and government buildings. One town in Basra displays 630 martyrs in a single roundabout, earning itself the nickname

⁹ PMO Office, Baghdad roundtable, [18 February 2018].

¹⁰ Community attitudes towards the PMF outside the predominantly Shia southern provinces are typically more distrustful. Sunni Arabs accuse PMF combatants of carrying out revenge attacks against those accused of ISIL affiliation, pointing to instances of torture, extrajudicial assassinations, imprisonment, property damage and secondary forced displacement. For example, see: Alex MacDonald, "300 civilians executed' by Iraqi militias during Fallujah fighting: Activists," *Middle East Eye*, June 7, 2016, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/300-civilians-executed-iraqi-militias-during-fallujah-fighting-activists>.

‘town of martyrs’ for the heavy toll the war exacted. This widespread veneration arguably has a downside, however; interviewees reported that some combatants return “with the idea that they’re liberators. They feel like nobody can tell them what to do,”¹¹ and there is little accountability for their actions, given the military and political strength of the groups.

One must contextualize such attitudes in relation to the current political situation in Basra. Despite the prolific oil wealth in the province, Basra residents suffer from poverty – 16.1% of the population is estimated to live below the poverty line¹² – and face staggering challenges in terms of access to services.¹³ Basra residents have frequently hit the streets in protest over their poor living conditions. Most recently, in the summer of 2018 protests erupted first in Basra and later across southern Iraq. The communities to which demobilized combatants return are among the poorest in Iraq.

A recurrent concern amongst Basra interviewees was the increase in weapons and violence, since the war on ISIL began. Provincial authorities noted they have seen “new types of crime and violence here in Basra” that indicate perpetrators have experience with combat.¹⁴ Basra residents and authorities argued that while domestic gun ownership has long been a widespread practice, the post-ISIL era has ushered in higher rates of violent gun usage among locals and a severe lack of accountability. This applies not only on the streets but also in the home.¹⁵ Community members, combatants and local authorities all attribute the increase in violence to poor weapons management on the part of PMF combatants. Weapons management is determined by each PMF unit, but practices are inconsistent and ad hoc. Some units were properly instructed and commanded to store weapons in a designated area each time they returned to Basra, while others received no instructions at all.

Community attitudes towards DDR programming reflected the tensions described above: On the one hand, PMF efforts against ISIL were deeply appreciated, but at the same time, disruptive behavior, corruption, and preferential treatment were resented.

11 W., local researcher, Basra, [7 March 2018].

12 United Nations Joint Analysis Unit, *Basrah Governorate Profile* (February 2014).

13 Water infrastructure in Basra is poorly maintained and the natural water source contains high salt content, making much of the water produced in the city’s treatment plants undrinkable. See: “Data Collection Survey on Water Resource Management and Agriculture Irrigation in the Republic of Iraq: Final Report,” Japan International Cooperation Agency, April 2016, http://open_jicareport.jica.go.jp/pdf/12253860.pdf. In addition, Basra’s heavy reliance on electricity and natural gas from other countries (notably Iran and Kuwait) leave it vulnerable to sustained power outages that take place frequently, see: Hayder Al-Khafaji, “Report: Iraq gas imports from Iran exceed 1.2 billion cubic meters,” *Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies*, December 14, 2017, <http://www.bayancenter.org/en/2017/12/1312/>. “Iran Gas Export to Basra Likely in March,” *Financial Tribune*, January 9, 2018, <https://financialtribune.com/articles/energy/79571/iran-gas-export-to-basra-likely-in-march>. Finally, Basra’s education system is overcrowded and under-resourced, as of 2015, there were 1,800 public schools in Basra housed in only 1,000 buildings, and the inability to afford private education widens the divide between lower- and upper-class families, see: Ammar al-Saleh, “Teach the Rich: Basra’s Private School Business Booming, But So Are Students’ Fees,” *Niqash*, December 10, 2015, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/society/5173/>.

14 Member of Basra Provincial Council, Basra, [8 March 2018].

15 S., local researcher, Basra, [6 March 2018].

Community interviewees made two recommendations to balance these tensions. The first was that DDR programming must distinguish between those who “profited” from the war and those who did not. This “profit” referred to criminal benefit obtained through looting or abuse, which Basra residents were conscious took place when PMF combatants were deployed in Anbar, Salah-al Din and Nineveh.¹⁶

Although these crimes took place outside of their own province, Basra interviewees were angered by reports of criminal behavior and even more by the idea that combatants who engaged in criminal activity might also benefit from federal demobilization assistance. As one interviewee noted: “Some people stole things while they were deployed, they looted villages. We know who these people are, and the community will get angry if they receive benefits from the government.”¹⁷ A local municipal leader (mukhtar) in an area of high mobilization diplomatically expressed this sentiment: “The main point is to focus on people who got nothing from the war, and the ones who are getting nothing after the war, that is the only way communities will accept the government supporting ex-combatants.”¹⁸

A second suggestion from community interviewees was to engage ex-combatants in work that benefits the wider community. This might include rebuilding schools or hospitals, for example, or cleaning the city. Here there are obvious parallels to work already performed by the PMF across southern Iraq. In multiple provinces, the PMF advertise their role in providing services and building critical infrastructure, often competing with state or private actors; for example, in late 2017, the national waste management company stopped collecting garbage in Basra because the provincial council had failed to pay 15 billion dinars (\$12.6 million) in arrears.¹⁹ As household rubbish overwhelmed residential streets, the PMF took over responsibility for waste collection. It provided bulldozers and trucks bearing the PMF logo and that of the Ministry of Oil (credited with at least partial funding) as well as the required manpower.²⁰ These public works were widely praised by community interviewees as contributing to the improvement of their neighborhoods.

But involving the PMF in reconstruction and service delivery also poses risks to community relations. Ex-combatants have an unfair advantage when it comes to acquiring jobs because they have access to their group’s existing networks; as one

16 This is consistent with new reports, for example, see: Alex MacDonald, “300 civilians executed by Iraqi militias during Fallujah fighting: Activists,” *Middle East Eye*, June 7, 2016, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/300-civilians-executed-iraqi-militias-during-fallujah-fighting-activists>.

17 W., local researcher, Basra, [7 March 2018].

18 Mukhtar, Basra, [8 March 2018].

19 “Iraq’s Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State,” *International Crisis Group*, July 30, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/188-iraqs-paramilitary-groups-challenge-rebuilding-functioning-state>.

20 Author visit to Basra in February 2018, S., local researcher, Basra, [6 March 2018].

PMF leader put it, “having the Hashd [PMF] on your résumé makes finding a job very simple these days”.²¹ Moreover, the PMF’s status as a quasi-state entity, led by influential political figures, has allowed it to capture key components of the market, driving out state or private employers and their potentially more diverse recruitment pools. There is also a risk that the PMF’s expansion into reconstruction and service provision will undermine the state and exacerbate the trust deficit that exists between citizens and the government. This requires careful consideration of state oversight of PMF activities and the long-term implications of supporting expansion into the economic sphere.

Combatants’ Perspectives: Economic Drivers

Interviews with combatants explored both the drivers of the mass mobilization and the challenges of reintegration. While PMF leaders asserted that combatants originally mobilized in order to defend Iraq from ISIL without any economic incentive, by contrast lower-level PMF combatants reported that economic need was indeed a key factor in driving mobilization. Most respondents came from poor families who did not own property. They were unemployed or working as daily laborers before joining the PMF.²² This socio-economic context must be a central pillar of any effective DDR program. Unless employment can be provided outside the PMF, demobilization is likely to be tumultuous and ineffective.

Mukhtars in areas with high rates of PMF mobilization affirmed that combatants took up arms for a mix of reasons – religious, patriotic and economic – and point to the poor living conditions of many PMF recruits and the chronic lack of employment in southern Iraq as realities that influenced recruitment.²³ This is not to say that conscription promised riches. Until Prime Minister Abadi’s November 2018 declaration equalized PMF salaries with those of the ISF,²⁴ the salary for a PMF combatant was relatively low – only \$350 a month compared to the ISF average rate of \$700.²⁵ Moreover, during deployments, many PMF commanders would divide salaries equally amongst their units so as to extend to include volunteers. As a result, it was common for each PMF combatant to receive only \$250 per month while they were fighting.²⁶

21 “Iraq’s Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State,” *International Crisis Group*, July 30, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/188-iraqs-paramilitary-groups-challenge-rebuilding-functioning-state>.

22 Member of Basra Provincial Council, Basra, [8 March 2018]; R., Local NGO worker who supports ex-combatants and their families, Basra, [6 March 2018]; H., international organization that works with combatants, Basra, [6 March 2018]; Mukhtar, Basra, [8 March 2018].

23 PMF combatant, Basra, [26 February 2018], W., local researcher, Basra, [7 March 2018], Organizations working with ex-combatants, Baghdad roundtable, [18 February 2018].

24 Joseph Hammond, “Iraq will pay Popular Mobilization militias the same as their army counterparts,” November 15, 2018, *The Defense Post*, <https://thedefensepost.com/2018/11/15/iraq-popular-mobilization-militias-equal-salary/>.

25 PMF leader Y, Baghdad, [24 February 2018].

26 PMF combatant, Basra, [26 February 2018].

There was consensus across combatant interviewees that the most critical factor for demobilization and reintegration was employment. Without jobs, combatants have “nothing to come back to,” and cannot afford to get married or buy property, which impedes their ability to transition to civilian life.²⁷ PMF leadership reported that the ability to work and support their family was more important than the perceived ‘social status’ of a job.²⁸ PMF combatants agreed. “There’s no unsuitable work; ex-combatants will do anything, they just need a salary,”²⁹ one PMF combatant explained. Another noted: “Combatants will be happy to do any type of work: guards, cleaners, there isn’t anything they won’t do. Their families are very poor, so they just want to work, on anything.”³⁰ In fact, during the war it was common for combatants to work as daily laborers while off-duty since the PMF salary wasn’t enough to sustain a family.³¹ The need for jobs for disabled veterans was mentioned frequently by combatants. There was particular concern for those who were injured in the initial years of the war. These disabled veterans are often not registered with the PMF and therefore have no right to compensation, medical care or a pension.

When it comes to reintegration, PMF leaders and combatants worried most about unskilled youth, since they are poorly equipped for government or private sector jobs and may “feel like they have nothing to offer.”³² Ex-combatants with a broader professional skillset – and particularly those previously employed by the civil service – have voluntarily demobilized in relatively large numbers and returned to their usual jobs, according to PMF leaders. Unskilled youth, by contrast, remain overwhelmingly with the PMF. The concern for these combatants is that with no job experience outside the PMF, they are “more likely to keep their combatant’s mindset and it may be difficult to change.”³³ It is essential that these ex-combatants “feel like they’re included in society”³⁴ and can “build a sense of pride and respect after demobilizing so that psychologically they feel ok.”³⁵

Combatants repeatedly argued that access to jobs or other assistance should not be provided through PMF leadership. Combatants recounted instances in which commanders kept the units’ salaries for themselves, or where assistance to the families of martyrs never arrived. The corrupt behavior of some PMF leaders

27 PMF leader, Baghdad roundtable, [18 February 2018].

28 PMO, Baghdad roundtable, [18 February 2018].

29 PMF combatant (with father), Basra, [9 March 2018].

30 PMF combatant (2), Basra, [9 March 2018].

31 S., local researcher, Basra, [6 March 2018].

32 PMF combatant (2), Basra, [9 March 2018], similar sentiment expressed by PMF combatant (with father), Basra, [9 March 2018].

33 PMF leader, Baghdad roundtable, [18 February 2018].

34 Member of Basra Provincial Council, Basra, [8 March 2018].

35 Organizations working with ex-combatants, Baghdad roundtable, [18 February 2018].

undermined combatants' trust in the government and political parties,³⁶ as did the lack of salaries in the early years of the war. One combatant who fought without pay explained that “we were left without trust, we don't believe the Iraqi government will support us in anything.”³⁷ Instead, they requested that assistance go directly to the ex-combatant or his family, bypassing the leadership, or alternatively that the aid be processed by a local charity such as al Ayn, an organization supported by the *marja* (Shia religious leadership) that builds homes for martyrs' widows and provides assistance to disabled veterans. PMF combatants drew attention to the economic plight of martyrs' families. In a context where employment opportunities for women are limited, the widows and children of martyrs are dependent upon the mercy and resources of their extended family.³⁸ Many children of martyrs have left school to beg on the street.³⁹ A land allocation scheme exists, but even a martyr's family is still required to pay around 1 million IQD in land tax.⁴⁰ In addition, if a widow remarries, she loses the pension of her martyred husband, which can undermine the care of her children.⁴¹

Finally, PMF leaders, combatants and community interviewees all recognized the importance of “making the mental transition from fighter to civilian.”⁴² Some interviewees noted that ex-combatants acted aggressively after they returned, and local authorities noted an increase in criminal and domestic violence. Few if any mental health or psychosocial support services are available in southern Iraq. Multiple interviewees pushed for services in accessible locations: in the neighborhoods where ex-combatants live, in community halls rather than hotels, or in schools, to help children make sense of the war and related events.⁴³ Several noted that distressed ex-combatants should receive mental health support. Others felt that sharing experiences between combatants or families would help them to feel less alone and to develop ways to handle the symptoms of returning combatants.⁴⁴

36 M.I., widow of PMF martyr, Tuz Khormato, [27 March 2018].

37 PMF leader, Baghdad roundtable, [18 February 2018].

38 R., Local NGO worker who supports ex-combatants and their families, Basra, [6 March 2018].

39 PMF combatant (2), Basra, [9 March 2018].

40 W., local researcher, Basra, [7 March 2018].

41 Mukhtar in Qorna, Basra, [7 March 2018].

42 Member of Heroes and Martyrs Fund, Basra Provincial Council, Basra, [8 March 2018]. A similar statement came from Member of Basra Provincial Council, Basra, [8 March 2018]; also reported during Baghdad roundtable, [18 February 2018].

43 PMF combatant (2), Basra, [9 March 2018].

44 Mukhtar, Basra, [8 March 2018].

PESHMERGA

Background

In 2015 the total size of the Peshmerga was estimated to be between 190,000 and 250,000 combatants, while in 2019, estimates by international experts working with the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs are closer to 300,000.⁴⁵ This is not a unified force, however: the Peshmerga is divided into two factions. The division mirrors the governing duopoly in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG): one faction reports to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the other to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).⁴⁶ The two parties fought a civil war against one another in the mid-1990s and have since maintained their own party forces overseen by separate Peshmerga ministries, as a means of securing the balance of power.

In the decade following the 2003 invasion, efforts were made to unify and professionalize the Peshmerga. The KDP and PUK signed a Unification Agreement in 2006 and committed to integrate and depoliticize their respective forces, and in 2009, the separate Peshmerga ministries of the KDP and PUK were organized into a single KRG Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs. The joint Ministry created 14 integrated Peshmerga brigades under its command and made recruitment of its 40,000 combatants independent of party membership.⁴⁷

Yet the overall picture is still one of division: Around 100,000 combatants – the majority of the Peshmerga – remain outside the Ministry’s 14 integrated brigades. These non-integrated forces are divided in roughly equal halves between the PUK (known as the 70s Force) and the KDP (known as the 80s Force), each of which maintains its own organizational structures and is geographically confined to its party’s sphere of influence.⁴⁸ These non-integrated forces are generally recognized as more experienced, capable, and better equipped than the integrated brigades. The KDP and PUK also retain their own security, intelligence, and counter-terrorism forces.⁴⁹

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45 Fazel Hawramy, “Kurdish Peshmerga Divisions Hamper War Effort,” *Al-Monitor*, January 13, 2015, [http:// www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/01/iraq-kurdish-peshmerga-division-islamic-state.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/01/iraq-kurdish-peshmerga-division-islamic-state.html).

46 Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the state: Evolving national identity in Iraq, Turkey and Iran*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005).

47 Feike Fliervoet, “Fighting for Kurdistan? Assessing the nature and functions of the Peshmerga in Iraq,” Clingendael Institute, March 2018, p. 1, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2018/fighting-for-kurdistan/>.

48 The PUK control a green zone encompassing Sulaymaniyah Province, while the KDP control a yellow zone spanning Erbil and Dohuk Provinces.

49 Feike Fliervoet, “Fighting for Kurdistan? Assessing the nature and functions of the Peshmerga in Iraq,” Clingendael Institute, March 2018, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2018/fighting-for-kurdistan/>.

(known as the 70s Force) and the KDP (known as the 80s Force), each of which maintains its own organizational structures and is geographically confined to its party's sphere of influence.⁴⁸ These non-integrated forces are generally recognized as more experienced, capable, and better equipped than the integrated brigades. The KDP and PUK also retain their own security, intelligence, and counter-terrorism forces.⁴⁹

ISIL's advance across northern Iraq in 2014 put reform on the backburner. Further challenges to reform of the Peshmerga continued after the defeat of the terrorist group. In early 2017, the KRG adopted a 35-point package (more recently refined into 31 points) that included a commitment to unify 70s and 80s Forces under the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs (MoPA), tackle corruption and streamline bureaucracy, and reduce the size of the overall fighting force. Progress on these reforms was tepid from the beginning, but then came to a firm halt in the fall of 2017. In September 2017, despite admonition from the Iraqi government and international community, the KRG held an independence referendum in areas under its control. In retaliation, on 16 October 2017, Baghdad ordered the ISF and affiliated forces to retake control of Iraq's disputed territories, resulting in a 40% reduction in Kurdish-controlled territory and the loss of Kirkuk's oil fields. The political humiliation associated with the loss of the disputed territories not only generated significant Baghdad-KRG tensions but also ignited internal KRG party divisions. Party officials accused each other of betrayal and being on the payroll of the enemies of the Kurds, and some even called for the official division of the Kurdistan region into separate PUK and KDP territories.⁵⁰

This tension destroyed any progress made towards a unified Peshmerga force. Both the KDP and PUK instructed their Peshmerga forces to reinforce the checkpoints separating their respective territories, and most of the unified brigades simply fell apart. The overall reform process and any attempts to unify and downsize the Peshmerga were still on hold throughout the main period of research in the spring and summer of 2018. International advisors working with the MoPA said that as of late 2018 the reform process surrounding the (now) 31-point plan appeared to be picking up again in the fall of 2019, with the appointment of a senior officer in charge of reforms. However, they worried there was still a lack of political will to tackle the most difficult reforms.

Urgency of Peshmerga Demobilization

The Peshmerga face urgent needs to downsize and demobilize, but doing so would also require attention to deeper structural reforms. The current fighting force is bloated with those who mobilized in the fight against ISIL, combatants recruited to gain political

⁵⁰ Fazel Hawramy, "Peshmerga Unification in Jeopardy," The London School of Economics and Political Science Middle East Centre Blog, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/03/16/peshmerga-unification-in-jeopardy/>.

support, officers who fought in the 1990s, and thousands of ghost employees. This arrangement has placed enormous financial strain on the KRG. The 2019 federal budget – one of the largest in the country’s history at \$111.8 billion – offered a short-term solution by providing for the payment of Peshmerga forces. It awards the KRG approximately 13.63 percent of the total budget and ensures that Peshmerga will be paid regardless of whether the KRG produces its federally mandated oil quota of 250,000 bpd through state-owned companies.⁵¹ While the latter stipulation shields Peshmerga from the effects of disputes between Baghdad and Erbil, it perpetuates core issues such as salary disbursements for ghost Peshmerga. The burden of the bloated public sector requires fundamental reform, and the KRG continues to face pressure to downsize substantially so that it can sustain the salaries of its own security forces.⁵²

A fundamental hurdle to such downsizing is the way that the Peshmerga salaries are tied into existing patronage networks. In the KRG, patronage networks built and sustained primarily by the KDP and PUK regulate access to government jobs and public resources, municipal services, reconstruction, and even basic assistance. Up to one-in-three Kurds are considered employees of the KRG, and the security forces provide one of the most prevalent sources of income.⁵³ By aligning with a political party, Peshmerga soldiers receive benefits that non-aligned citizens do not in the form of employment and material support. KRG political leaders are in no hurry to dismantle their patronage systems, despite pressure from the international community to do so.

Force reduction of the Peshmerga is of urgent policy concern given that the KRG cannot afford the 1 billion USD monthly price tag required to sustain its excessive public service employment.⁵⁴ Moreover, reform is essential to lessen party influence over Peshmerga operations, and to shift the authority for these issues to the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs. The KDP and PUK must drastically downsize their separate forces and private militias, retire the old guard of partisan Peshmerga combatants who date from the civil war, and cut the inflated salaries of their commanders.⁵⁵ Attempts

51 “Iraq Parliament Approves Largest-Ever Budget for 2019,” Asharq Al-Awsat, January 24, 2019, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1559961/iraq-parliament-approves-largest-ever-budget-2019>; “Kurdistan’s share in 2019 budget goes up to 3.63% - source,” The Baghdad Post, January 26, 2019, <https://www.thebaghdadpost.com/en/Story/35585/Kurdistan-s-share-in-2019-budget-goes-up-to-3-63-source>.

52 “Abadi: Peshmerga must come under Iraqi control, or downsize,” Rudaw, October 31, 2017, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/31102017>.

53 Michael Hansen et al, *Strategies for Private-Sector Development and Civil-Service Reform in the Kurdistan Region-Iraq* (RAND Corporation: 2014).

54 “Why Iraqi Kurdistan is Struggling to Pay Its Bills,” Stratfor, January 28, 2016, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/why-iraqi-kurdistan-struggling-pay-its-bills>.

55 Mario Fumerton and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, “Kurdistan’s Political Armies: The Challenge of Unifying the Peshmerga Forces,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 16, 2015, p. 7, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2015/12/16/kurdistan-s-political-armies-challenge-of-unifying-peshmerga-forces-pub-61917>.

at reforming and unifying the Peshmerga do continue into the present, albeit in a limited fashion.

Community Consequences of Peshmerga Demobilization

Like the PMF, policy makers must first consider the economics of demobilization. The first to demobilize have been the ad hoc fighters who joined post-2014. These volunteer combatants did not receive an official salary or formal benefits (such as healthcare), but in 2016 they started to receive periodic ‘assistance’ of USD 300 to USD 500 per (irregular) month.⁵⁶ There was a registration system to dispense these payments but it was applied haphazardly. No accurate records exist to count or track the volunteers. Many combatants came from poor backgrounds and had limited employment options available. The Peshmerga salary, even if haphazard, was therefore critical. A Harvard study confirms the relevance of a salary in mobilization: 44 percent of the Peshmerga respondents reported that economic need was a key reason people mobilized.⁵⁷

From the perspective of Peshmerga combatants we interviewed, three factors were critical for reintegration: jobs, mental health support, and public recognition. The Peshmerga are the primary source of employment in many Kurdish communities, and, for many combatants, the only feasible livelihood, given their limited education. Alternatives to public service are few: private sector jobs – for which most combatants are ill-equipped – account for only 20 percent of the workforce, and the daily labor that engages almost 40% of the population provides only irregular and insufficient income.⁵⁸ The second most requested type of support was mental health. Interviewees spoke freely of difficulty sleeping, depression, and the need to talk in confidence to someone who would, in the words of one combatant, “understand me and what I have seen on the frontline.”⁵⁹ Interviewees also drew attention to the mental health of the children of martyrs, who are brought up “surrounded by talk of revenge” and who sometimes struggled to relate to their peers.⁶⁰

Combatants also described the importance of recognition for the sacrifices Peshmerga made in the fight against ISIL. Numerous interviewees – particularly those with alternate sources of income – considered public recognition even more important than getting a job or financial support. One interviewee noted: “I don’t want anything

56 N., Peshmerga volunteer, Dohuk, 14 March 2018; S., Peshmerga volunteer, Erbil, 13 March 2018

57 Matthew Franklin Cancian and Kristin E. Fabbe, “What Iraq’s Kurdish Peshmerga Believe And How It Will Affect the Country’s Post-ISIS Future,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 25, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2017-08-25/what-iraqs-kurdish-peshmerga-believe>.

58 Michael Hansen et al, *Strategies for Private-Sector Development and Civil-Service Reform in the Kurdistan Region-Iraq* (RAND Corporation: 2014).

59 S., Peshmerga volunteer, Erbil, 13 March 2018

60 F.H., journalist, Sulaimani, 8 April 2018

from the government except a document that recognizes my time on the frontline,”⁶¹ while others spoke on behalf of other combatants, noting: “Many of them don’t need any help, all they want is for someone to tell them thank you.”⁶²

Mass demobilization would also raise a number of issues for communities to which these fighters return. One important concern that has already manifested is the effect that returning fighters and the flood of weaponry has had on overall law enforcement and safety. Weapons markets thrive in Kurdistan, offering not only rifles but also heavy artillery, with little restriction. A spokesman for the Erbil police acknowledged that the number of firearms circulating in the market had increased, and linked the increase to the many Peshmerga combatants and volunteers who fought ISIL.⁶³ Interviewees complained that powerful families or tribes buy and store weapons “similar to a military unit,” and “this allows them to behave as they please, they are lawless and nobody can control them.”⁶⁴ Numerous interviewees noted that offences involving guns have risen and the existence of multiple weapons in homes is destabilizing community security.⁶⁵ There are numerous reports of improper storage of weapons by combatants while on leave, leading to domestic incidents and fatalities.⁶⁶

Demobilization also has the potential to trigger larger concerns about corruption, favoritism, and entrenched interests. Partisan support for combatants was a source of deep resentment amongst interviewees. They complained that political manipulation of the Peshmerga benefitted some while ignoring others; as one volunteer noted, “what hurts most is the discrimination between different martyrs. You see one martyr’s family who gets a lot of attention from the government or a political party and another who receives nothing.”⁶⁷ Families of martyrs and disabled veterans were widely acknowledged as financially desperate, with multiple reports of the widows or children of enlisted Peshmerga martyrs begging on the street.⁶⁸ If a family was not connected to a political party or politburo leader there appeared few opportunities to receive assistance. This partisanship, together with the perceived manipulation of combatants by party Commanders, meant that Peshmerga interviewees were skeptical of a DDR program facilitated by their own leadership.⁶⁹ Instead, numerous interviewees

61 S., Peshmerga volunteer, Tel Osqof, 15 March 2018

62 B., Peshmerga leader, Sulaimani, 8 April 2018

63 “Iraqi Kurdistan rife with gun violence,” *E Kurd Daily*, May 20, 2017, <https://ekurd.net/iraqi-kurdistan-unlicensed-guns-2017-05-20>.

64 I.C., Peshmerga, Sulaimani, 8 April 2018

65 S., Peshmerga volunteer, Erbil, 15 March 2018

66 “Iraqi Kurdistan rife with gun violence,” *E Kurd Daily*, May 20, 2017, <https://ekurd.net/iraqi-kurdistan-unlicensed-guns-2017-05-20>.

67 N., Peshmerga volunteer, Dohuk, 14 March 2018

68 J.S., Peshmerga volunteer, Dohuk, 14 March 2018; H.T., Peshmerga volunteer, Dohuk, 14 March 2018

69 S., Peshmerga volunteer, Tel Osqof, 15 March 2018; M., Peshmerga accountant, Sulaimani, 9 April 2018; H.T., Peshmerga volunteer, Dohuk, 14 March 2018

requested that support be provided directly to each combatant or martyr's family, bypassing political parties or senior Commanders.⁷⁰

RECOMMENDATIONS

Notwithstanding their differences in terms of function, relationship with the state, and profile of combatants, the Peshmerga and PMF share some common concerns regarding DDR.

Employment is the primary challenge to ensuring successful DDR. Economic motivations were central in driving mobilization, as conscription promised a salary to recruits who were largely poor. DDR programs should support skills development of ex-combatants as well as diversification of local economies, given that in most areas alternatives to public service are few and most combatants are ill-equipped for private sector jobs. Many ex-combatants considered the type of work unimportant given their pressing need to support their family.

The transition from soldier to civilian also requires addressing mental health and public recognition. Maintaining a sense of dignity and psychological well-being post-war was a pressing concern. Most combatants did seek public recognition for the sacrifices made in war, and wanted affirmation of their motivations for fighting and for the war itself – that they had acted in defense of Iraq and the Iraqi people. Combatants often linked the (perceived) lack of recognition for the deaths of their fellow fighters with poor mental health.

There is an urgent need for regulation of weapons as well as community education on safe use and storage of weapons. Across the KRG and southern Iraq, the presence of weapons in the home and on the street has increased with the return of fighters from the war, as has gun-related violence. This has destabilized community security and led to higher reported rates of domestic violence. There is a critical need for legislation or other measures to better regulate weapons when combatants are off-duty.

Reintegration assistance must take a community-based approach to avoid fueling local tension. The communities to which combatants return are usually poor, lack access to even basic services and are dominated by patronage networks. Many community members expressed concerns that federal support directed to ex-combatants could raise questions of fairness. Supporting ex-combatants in this environment is a complex balancing act. Assistance to ex-combatants should be delivered in a way that positions the wider community as an equal beneficiary.⁷¹ This

70 H.T., Peshmerga volunteer, Dohuk, 14 March 2018; A., volunteer Peshmerga, Chamchamal, 10 April 2018; H.S., Social activist, Sulaimani, 8 April 2018; M., Peshmerga accountant, Sulaimani, 9 April 2018

can be achieved by designing, planning, and implementing DDR within a broad recovery and development framework that addresses the social context into which ex-combatants are reintegrating.⁷² Community members should be consulted in the design of a DDR program to ensure that it captures their concerns.⁷³

Reintegration activities should help develop positive social connections between ex-combatants and community members. Combatants and local authorities proposed the expansion of joint micro-projects that engage both ex-combatants and community members in activities for the benefit of the public. Community development projects that link employment and public service may also support this goal.

