



# Winning the Post-ISIS Battle for Iraq in Sinjar

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# Principal Findings

**What's new?** The Islamic State (ISIS) is defeated in Iraq, and its genocidal campaign against the Yazidis in Sinjar has ended. But Iran-backed Shiite militias – Popular Mobilisation Units – now control the district. Much of Sinjar's mostly Yazidi population and its administration remains displaced. Trade is at a trickle and reconstruction has stalled.

**Why did it happen?** Close to war-torn Syria, Sinjar is vulnerable to external intervention. Since 2003, a succession of outside forces has wrestled to control it – the Iraqi state, ISIS, the two main Kurdish parties of Iraq, Shiite militias, and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its affiliates active in Turkey, Syria and Iraq.

**Why does it matter?** Sinjar needs political and economic reconstruction if the displaced are to return to their homes. Yet Baghdad's weakness may compel it to channel reconstruction funds through the Shiite militias and Yazidi proxies. In Sinjar, as in other disputed territories, this move would entrench non-state groups, compromise the Iraqi state, and perhaps hinder reconstruction and return.

**What should be done?** Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's government should seek to offset militias' influence by winning over and empowering other local partners. Iraq's National Reconciliation Commission should reach out to skilled administrators from Sinjar, regardless of political affiliation, to reconnect the power supply, restore health services, reopen schools and launch reconstruction.

## *Executive Summary*

Seized by Islamic State (ISIS) militants in August 2014, Sinjar, a majority-Yazidi district on Iraq's north-western border with Syria, has been the scene of tragedy: a genocidal campaign of killings, rape, abductions and enslavement, and the surviving community's exodus to safer-ground camps in the adjacent Kurdish region. Incremental efforts to drive ISIS out of Sinjar, starting in November 2015, have brought peace but no political or economic recovery. The district's occupation by a succession of Iraqi and non-Iraqi sub-state actors has militarised the population, fragmented the elites and prevented the return of the displaced. Only the effective re-entry of the Iraqi state, mediating between factions and reinstating local governance, can fully stabilise Sinjar, lay the ground-work for reconstruction, allow the displaced to return and end foreign interference.

The problems in Sinjar have their origin in the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and removal of the Saddam Hussein regime. Dysfunctional governance and sectarian strife reduced the role of both the federal government and the administration of Ninewa governorate, in which Sinjar is located, to a symbolic one. Real power was exercised by the party that took advantage of the administrative and security vacuum, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The KDP co-opted local elites to perform the routine tasks of rule. Yet it won little popularity. It treated the Yazidis, a distinct ethno-religious minority group, as Kurds, which many resent, and as second-class Kurds at that – which they resent even more. Moreover, it barely disguised its ambition, opposed by many Yazidis, to annex Sinjar to the Kurdish region.

The KDP made itself still more unpopular by withdrawing its forces from Sinjar ahead of the ISIS assault, leaving the population to the jihadists' mercy. Affiliates of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a Kurdish guerrilla movement in Turkey, stepped into the breach, rescuing ISIS's surviving Yazidi victims with the help of U.S. airpower and, over time, pushing back ISIS without, however, restoring local government. These groups then ruled parts of Sinjar, with the KDP controlling others, each recruiting local fighters into their rival militias but neglecting to serve the interests of the Sinjar population, most of whom remained displaced. The standoff between the PKK affiliates and the Turkey-backed KDP kept the area contested and unsafe.

The escalating U.S.-supported battle against ISIS in 2017 saw the return of Iraqi state security forces to northern Iraq, accompanied by Iran-backed Shiite militias, the Hashd al-Shaabi, known in English as Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs). First, they defeated ISIS in Mosul, and then, in mid-October, following an independence referendum organised by the Kurdistan regional government (KRG) that backfired, the PMUs went further. Supported by the government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, encouraged by Iran and given a green light by Turkey, they drove the KDP out of Sinjar and marginalised the PKK affiliates – Turkey's target. (Turkey, along with the U.S. and the European Union, designates the PKK as a terrorist organisation.) The skeletal, KDP-leaning district council and administrative bodies, mainly composed of Yazidis, fled to the Iraqi Kurdish region, joining their Yazidi constituents. Rather than jumpstarting reconstruction and governance, PMU rule since October 2017 has further dispersed the Yazidi community.

As long as the Iraqi government remains weak, Sinjar will be fought over by external forces because of its strategic location close to the borders with Syria and Turkey. ISIS's military defeat now provides an opportunity for the Abadi government, keen to regain sovereignty over all of Iraq ahead of national elections in May 2018, to set things right. Abadi should incorporate fighters of competing militias into a unified police force and restore governance via administrative institutions that open their doors to skilled local personnel regardless of which outside actor they aligned themselves with in the recent past.

Whether Abadi is capable of such an approach is an open question. The problems in Sinjar reflect the broader challenge of demobilising militias and integrating their fighters into state security forces, lest they undermine central authority and prevent the emergence of functioning state institutions. What happens in Sinjar may thus point to the prime minister's political fate and the country's general direction. One potent enemy may have been defeated, but the battle for Iraq's political soul is far from over.

**Beirut/Brussels, 20 February 2018**

# Winning the Post-ISIS Battle for Iraq in Sinjar

## I. Introduction: Sinjar's Disputed Status

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Located some 50km from Iraq's border with Syria, directly south of the Kurdish governorate of Dohuk and 120km west of the city of Mosul, the town of Sinjar, which Kurds call Shengal, sits on both a geographic crossroads and a political fault line. The town and the surrounding district of the same name belong to Ninewa governorate, of which Mosul is the capital, and are part of what the 2005 Iraqi constitution refers to as disputed territories: fourteen administrative districts spread over four governorates nominally under central state control but claimed by the Kurdish region. The status of these territories remains unresolved, but from 2003 until mid-2014 the peshmerga and security forces of the two main Iraqi Kurdish parties exercised de facto control, including in disputed districts of Ninewa governorate, after the U.S. dismantled the Iraqi army and faced growing insurgency.<sup>1</sup>

Sinjar's disputed status and strategic proximity to the borders with Syria and Turkey turned it into an arena for competing interests, vulnerable to outside meddling and attacks. In August 2014, as fighters of the Islamic State (ISIS) advanced into the area, peshmerga forces of the locally dominant Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) withdrew pre-emptively, abandoning the local population.<sup>2</sup> Most people in Sinjar are Yazidis, an ethno-religious community deemed heretics by ISIS followers.<sup>3</sup> The jihadists, many of whom were local Sunni Arabs who had long lived peacefully with their Yazidi neighbours, launched a campaign of killings, kidnappings and forced conversions of the Yazidis, taking women and girls as sex slaves.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Kurdistan region has yet to adopt a constitution, but drafts that have circulated place the following Ninewa districts inside the Kurdistan region: Aqri, Sheikhan, Sinjar, Tel Afar, Tel Kayf and Qaraqosh (also known as Hamdaniya), as well as Bashiqa sub-district (part of Mosul district). For background on the disputed territories in Ninewa, see Crisis Group Middle East & North Africa Report N°90, *Iraq's New Battlefield: The Struggle over Ninewa*, 28 September 2009. In the course of fighting ISIS, Kurdish forces deployed to all these areas except Tel Afar. See Crisis Group Middle East & North Africa Report N°158, *Arming Iraq's Kurds, Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict*, 12 May 2015.

<sup>2</sup> A senior Kurdistan regional government official referred to the episode as shameful for his party, the KDP. Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 16 March 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Yazidis are indigenous to northern Mesopotamia. Most, a population estimated at 500,000-650,000, live in Iraq, centred on Sinjar, Sheikhan, Tel Kayf and Bashiqa; some live in northern Syria; many others are scattered throughout the diaspora. Though Kurdish-speaking, they do not necessarily self-identify as Kurds. See Birgül Açıkyıldız, *The Yazidis: The History of a Community, Culture and Religion* (London, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> The UN has described ISIS's atrocities in Sinjar as genocide. "They Came to Destroy": ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis", UN Human Rights Council, 15 June 2016: [http://ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A\\_HRC\\_32\\_CRP.2\\_en.pdf](http://ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A_HRC_32_CRP.2_en.pdf). See also "A Call for Accountability and Protection: Yazidi Survivors of Atrocities Committed by ISIL", UN Assistance Mission for Iraq/Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, August 2016.

Survivors fled inside Sinjar mountain, the massive rock formation that rises from the desert floor and both defines and divides the district geographically. From there they escaped westward into Syria through a corridor opened and protected by fighters of the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), as well as U.S. airpower.<sup>5</sup> They subsequently re-entered Iraq through the KDP-controlled Samalka/Faysh Khabour border crossing, settling in camps for the internally displaced in Dohuk governorate.<sup>6</sup>

In late 2015, the KDP and, separately, fighters affiliated with the PKK wrested the area north of Sinjar mountain as well as the town itself from ISIS's control. But they then turned on each other in a tense standoff that ensured that no Yazidis could return home. Two years later, a combination of Iraqi security forces and Iran-backed Shiite militias, known as Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs, the Hashd al-Shaabi), defeated ISIS remnants and subsequently drove KDP fighters out of the district. Afterward the PMUs used the area to advance their own (and Iran's) interests, further dividing those Yazidis who remained by co-opting some and shunning others; this situation has served as yet another deterrent to the return of the displaced.<sup>7</sup> A Yazidi civil society activist bemoaned his community's fate:

Alien forces are waging their wars on Yazidi lands. Sinjar mountain no longer belongs to us; it has become a square on a chessboard over which these forces compete. The Yazidis will not be able to return home for another ten years; we can no longer trust anyone to protect us. Losing Sinjar to us is like travelling with a compass that has no north.<sup>8</sup>

This report sheds light on this small corner of Iraq, whose population is neglected while its territory is contested with unremitting ardour. It is based on several visits to the area, as well as conversations with representatives of the various parties concerned over the past two years. It forms part of a larger Crisis Group project that seeks to propose pathways toward a negotiated settlement of the vexed question of Iraq's disputed areas. Sinjar is one of the smallest of these areas but certainly not the simplest of the country's unresolved problems, nor the least important given its strategic location.

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<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of the YPG's role in northern Syria, see Crisis Group Middle East & North Africa Report N°176, *The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria*, 4 May 2017.

<sup>6</sup> An estimated 180,000 were settled in these camps. "Sinjar After ISIS: Returning to Disputed Territory", PAX, June 2016, p. 14. The real number of displaced could be much higher. See "Contamination and Damage Assessment: Province of Mosul", Reliefweb, November 2016, <https://reliefweb.int/map/iraq/iraq-contamination-and-damage-assessment-province-mosul-districts-telefar-and-sinjar-7>.

<sup>7</sup> Among Ninewa's districts, Sinjar has seen the lowest number of returnees since ISIS's defeat, even though it was the first to be retaken from ISIS. See "Iraq Protection Cluster: Ninewa Returnees Profile", Reliefweb, September 2017, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Returnees%20Profile\\_Ninewa\\_Sep%202017.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Returnees%20Profile_Ninewa_Sep%202017.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Crisis Group interview, Dohuk, July 2017.

## II. A Community Thrice Divided

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### A. *The KDP Ascendant*

When U.S. forces ousted the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003, old disputes resurfaced to shape the post-regime order/disorder. A major one was the status of Iraq's Kurds. In 1970, their leaders had negotiated an autonomy arrangement with Saddam. But autonomy was not fully realised until 1991, when the defeat of Iraqi forces in Kuwait provided Kurdish rebel parties, protected by the U.S., with the opportunity to carve out a zone in the north free of Iraqi control. From the parties' perspective, the Iraqi army's withdrawal was only partial, as the army held on to territories they considered part of the Kurdish region, a belt of administrative districts stretching from the Syrian to the Iranian border that was home to Kurds as well as Iraqis from other ethnic and religious communities. The town of Kirkuk lay at the centre of these districts; its oil riches were the main stumbling block to the peaceful resolution of the disputed territories' status. Sinjar was the western-most of the districts and strategic for other reasons.

These areas had long been the target of regime Arabisation policies, which focused on the Kurds but also the Yazidis. In the 1977 national census, Yazidis were forced to register as Arabs; in the 1980s, the regime destroyed Yazidi villages in Ninewa governorate and killed Yazidi men who had joined the Kurdish insurgency.<sup>9</sup> In recognition of the Yazidis' plight, the Kurdistan regional government, elected in 1992 after the U.S. established a safe zone in northern Iraq, created a directorate for Yazidi affairs.<sup>10</sup>

In 2003, the two main Kurdish parties, the KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), sent their fighters into the disputed territories to establish de facto control, and supported a constitutional process in Baghdad with the clear intent to resolve these territories' legal status in the Kurdish region's favour. While the PUK was dominant in the areas from Kirkuk southward toward Iran, the KDP reigned supreme northward to the Syrian border.<sup>11</sup>

Failure to resolve the disputed territories' status politically resulted in the entrenchment in those areas of Kurdish forces, as Baghdad was weakened by insurgencies, sectarian conflict and government dysfunction. Yet Kurdish control did little to end the dispute. In 2008, the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) took it upon itself to lay the groundwork for political negotiations by preparing a (yet unpublished) comprehensive study on the demographics, economics and politics of these areas,<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Human Rights Watch, *Iraq's Crime of Genocide: The Anfal Campaign against the Kurds* (New Haven, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> The 2005 Iraqi constitution granted Yazidis minority status, with representation in the council of representatives. On Iraq's minorities, see "Crossroads: The future of Iraq's minorities after ISIS", Minority Rights Group International, June 2017.

<sup>11</sup> For a visual representation of the shifting balance of forces in Sinjar since 2003 described in this chapter, see the maps in the appendix.

<sup>12</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East & North Africa Report N°88, *Iraq and the Kurds: Trouble Along the Trigger Line*, 8 July 2009, pp. 7-10.



but its efforts floundered amid the political fervour of the 2009 local and 2010 parliamentary elections, as well as resistance from Baghdad and Erbil.<sup>13</sup>

The KDP ruled Sinjar and other disputed areas by using its leverage in Baghdad and Mosul to place party loyalists in the local administration and establish parallel security institutions.<sup>14</sup> Sinjar became a backwater: it was under the KDP's military control and administered de facto by the Kurdistan regional government in Erbil, but in practice neglected.<sup>15</sup> The central state's presence was limited to certain administrative activities, such as paying public employees, and displaying national symbols, such as the Iraqi flag atop district government buildings. The city of Dohuk in the Kurdish region replaced Mosul as the hub for Yazidis wanting to do business or pursue their studies.

Such was the scene in June 2014, when jihadist militants entering from Syria routed Iraqi security forces stationed in Mosul and the Ninewa plain. The victors declared an Islamic caliphate. Within days, state security forces across central Iraq disintegrated, leaving the disputed territories under the exclusive control of the KDP and PUK, whose peshmerga faced ISIS fighters along a front the length of the disputed territorial belt. The KDP held on to Sinjar, which ISIS besieged from three sides.<sup>16</sup>

Two months later, on 3 August, ISIS fighters moved into Sinjar, causing the KDP peshmerga to withdraw toward the Kurdish region without a fight. Only U.S. airstrikes stopped the jihadists' further northward advance.<sup>17</sup> On 13 August, local Yazidi

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<sup>13</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°55, *Oil and Borders: How to Fix Iraq's Kurdish Crisis*, 17 October 2017.

<sup>14</sup> District and sub-district council members appointed by the U.S. in 2004 still held their positions in 2017. In February 2008, the Iraqi council of representatives passed Law 21, the "Provincial Powers Act", regulating the appointment and prerogatives of local officials (governor, mayor, sub-district director), as well as the powers of local councils (at governorate, district and sub-district levels). The law was only partially implemented, however, and elections did not take place at the district and sub-district levels. See the English translation of the Provincial Powers Act: <http://www.iraq-ig-law.org/ar/node/562>.

<sup>15</sup> The KDP's pre-2014 co-optation policies included concessions such as paving roads to Yazidi shrines and opening the Dohuk university to Yazidi students from Sinjar, yet at the cost of limiting the Yazidis' political representation: excluding Yazidis not loyal to the KDP from local governance, withholding and distributing public funds before and after provincial elections to serve the KDP's electoral interests, and committing election fraud. See Christine van der Toorn, "Fake Parties, Frauds, Intimidation and other Strong-Arm Tactics", *Niqash*, 9 May 2013.

<sup>16</sup> From June 2014 onward, ISIS militants were in control of territories to Sinjar's south (Baaj), east (Tel Afar/Mosul) and north (Rabiya). Only Highway 47 running westward from Sinjar to the Syrian border remained ISIS-free. In August 2014, ISIS launched an attack on Sinjar town from villages to its south, also taking Highway 47. See Christine van der Toorn, "How the U.S.-Favoured Kurds Abandoned the Yazidis when ISIS Attacked", *The Daily Beast*, 17 August 2014.

<sup>17</sup> The reasons for the KDP's sudden retreat from Sinjar remain contested. The KDP cites a lack of weapons, the suddenness of ISIS's assault and the fact that peshmerga forces were overstretched, defending an extended front. Crisis Group interview, Zerevani commander, Dohuk, July 2017. The director of a Yazidi civil society organisation rejected these arguments: "After the fall of Mosul [in June 2014], there were 3,000 peshmerga in Sinjar. These were well-armed, because the local KDP peshmerga commander had made a deal with the retreating Iraqi army. He took the weapons of the 3rd army division's 11th regiment in Sinouni, and the 2nd army division's 10th regiment in Tel Afar. But they did not put up a fight, and their retreat was so well organised that not even one of them was killed". Crisis Group interview, Dohuk, 17 November 2016. For other narratives that counter

cells of the Shengal Resistance Units (Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şengalê, YBŞ) – a new group of PKK fighters consisting of Yazidis from both Iraq and Syria – and the YPG deployed to Sinjar from their bases in Syria and Qandil in northern Iraq. These forces carved out a corridor to evacuate the local population via the mountain range to the north of the city (which ISIS was unable to take), and westward into Syria.

In October 2014, the KDP regained control of the towns of Rabia and Zummar to the north and east of Sinjar from ISIS, and a year later, in November 2015, a combination of YBŞ/YPG units and KDP peshmerga supported by U.S.-led coalition air power retook Sinjar town. The YBŞ/YPG – the pro-PKK – units assumed control of the district's western part, while KDP peshmerga and their local allies dominated its east, leaving areas south of Highway 47, which connects Mosul to Syria, to ISIS.<sup>18</sup> For two and a half years, that front remained static, while inside Sinjar town and on Sinjar mountain the two rival Kurdish forces maintained an uneasy standoff.

### B. *A Growing Intra-Kurdish Struggle*

Opening the escape route from Sinjar into Syria in August 2014 won the PKK and its Syrian affiliate the YPG the allegiance of disaffected Yazidis in a region where the PKK previously had had no more than a small presence in the form of sympathisers of its leader Abdullah Öcalan, and who then became the YBŞ.<sup>19</sup> Serhad Shengal, a Yazidi PKK-trained cadre from Syria serving as public relations officer with the YBŞ, recounted his arrival in Sinjar from the PKK's headquarters in Qandil, a vast mountain range in north-eastern Iraq, in August 2014:

I came from Qandil and was among those who helped people escape. We did not know the area and we needed guides. There were PKK and YPG fighters, and some 300 Yazidis from Sinjar who had been advisers to the YPG. With their help we opened a corridor that allowed the people of Sinjar to escape through the plain and reach Rojava [the self-administered zone in YPG-held northern Syria].<sup>20</sup>

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the official KDP line, see Matthew Barber, "The future of the Yazidi in Shingal", Nalia Radio and Television, 31 January 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group observations, Sinjar, September 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Saeed Hassan, a Yazidi PKK sympathiser who became a YBŞ senior commander, recounted: "After the fall of the [Saddam Hussein] regime, some Yazidis began to read Öcalan's writings. In 2006, we organised a small conference of Öcalan's sympathisers and founded TEVDA, or the Free Democratic Movement [Haraka al-Dimuqratiya al-Hurra]. I was its secretary-general. We did not have the resources to attract support among the Yazidis. We could not pay salaries, like the KDP did. After the fall of Mosul to ISIS, we understood that Sinjar was in danger. I went to Qaracho [YPG headquarters near Rumeilan in Syria] and asked the YPG to come and give us military support". Crisis Group phone interview, June 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sinjar, 8 September 2016. The YBŞ and its female branch, the Sinjar Women's Units (YJE), claimed to have around 1,200 fighters in late 2016. Many had been recruited from internally displaced people (IDP) camps on the western flank of Sinjar mountain, as well as from Newroz camp in Syria's Hasaka governorate, to which nearly 500 Yazidi families were resettled in August 2014. Crisis Group interview, NGO worker, Hasaka governorate, 17 October 2016.

The YPG and YBŞ also established a local political wing, the Yazidi Freedom and Democracy Party (Hizb al-Hurriya wa al-Dimuqratiya al-Ezidi), and a Sinjar autonomous council.<sup>21</sup>

The PKK may have instructed its affiliates to leap to the Yazidis' aid, but in creating the humanitarian corridor they also established a foothold for what would soon become a critical supply channel from Iraq to YPG fighters in Syria. These fighters had filled a security vacuum in Kurdish areas there after the Damascus regime withdrew its forces in 2012, being preoccupied with fighting for its survival in other parts of the country. In its senior command a non-Iraqi group, the YPG/YBŞ appeared to have no other ambition in northern Iraq than to keep its supply channel open – unlike the KDP, which sought to annex Sinjar district, along with other disputed territories, to the Kurdish region.

As the battle to push back ISIS started up in both Syria and Iraq in late 2014, the U.S. threw its military support behind the YPG, despite the latter's direct association with the PKK, an organisation on Washington's terrorist list.<sup>22</sup> This intervention turned Sinjar into a strategic prize: for the U.S.-YPG effort to defeat ISIS, and for the KDP-Turkish efforts to dislodge the PKK affiliates from the area, even as the KDP also was assisting the U.S. in fighting ISIS.

The main motivation for Sinjar Yazidis to join the YBŞ's ranks has been strong enmity toward the KDP: frustration over its governance since 2003 and anger over its abandonment of the local population in August 2014. Many of the YBŞ's recruits were youths orphaned in the ISIS rampage. The vast majority of Sinjar Yazidis had no prior affiliation with the PKK but were independent or associated with other parties that opposed KDP rule, such as the Yazidi Movement for Reform and Progress.<sup>23</sup>

When the YPG/YBŞ and, separately, the KDP wrested Sinjar town from ISIS in November 2015 with U.S. help, the Baghdad government, seeking to regain control of the disputed territories and sensing an opportunity to at least curb the KDP's influence in Sinjar, agreed to fund the YBŞ through the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA), the state agency that had been paying PMU fighters' salaries.<sup>24</sup> Thus the KDP-PKK rivalry came to intersect with the long-running feud between the federal government in Baghdad and the KDP-dominated Kurdistan regional government (KRG) in Erbil, turning the Sinjar Yazidi community into double hostages.

In response to these developments, the KDP shifted from trying to restore its formal authority over Sinjar town, which had been heavily damaged in the November 2015 fighting, to establishing security control only, which it was forced to share

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<sup>21</sup> It was called *al-majlis al-ta'sisi*, or foundational/constituent council, initially, and *majlis al-idara al-dhatiya*, or self-administration council, subsequently.

<sup>22</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *The PKK's Fateful Choice*, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> A Yazidi member of the Ninewa provincial council described the motivations: "Yazidis joined in response to anti-KDP propaganda. But the goals of the Yazidi Movement for Reform and Progress are at odds with the PKK's ideology. While the former champions Yazidi nationalism, the PKK opposes all forms of nationalism. This partnership can be transitional". Crisis Group interview, Dawud Jundi, Dohuk, 10 July 2017. The YBŞ recruited vulnerable boys and girls to become fighters against ISIS. See "Iraq: Armed Groups Using Child Soldiers", Human Rights Watch, 22 December 2016.

<sup>24</sup> From late 2015 onward, nearly half of the YBŞ's fighters were on the ONSA payroll. Within the YBŞ, these salaries were pooled and then shared among the members, providing each with about \$350 monthly. See "Sinjar militia claims Baghdad providing arms and salaries", *Rudaw*, 9 January 2016.

with the YPG/YBŞ. The KDP's administrative weight shifted to Al-Shimal sub-district, directly north of the mountain, with the pro-KDP district director (*qa'im maqam*), who commuted to the deserted ruins of Sinjar town from his base in Dohuk, stopping off along the way in the town of Sinouni to converse with his fellow KDP loyalists of the Al-Shimal sub-district council. Meanwhile, PKK-trained cadres took charge of administration in areas under YPG/YBŞ control, such as Khanasour on the mountain's northern flank close to the Syrian border. The KDP controlled access to Sinjar district at the bridge across the Tigris near Faysh Khabour, allowing through only Yazidis deemed loyal to the KDP; it also constricted the flow of goods needed for reconstruction and restarting the economy.<sup>25</sup> It was common to hear local Yazidis grumble about Kurdish control, whatever its provenance, as neither group allowed them to return and rebuild.<sup>26</sup>

The KDP recruited, paid and commanded its own Yazidi security force, placing it under the nominal command of a local Yazidi leader, Qasem Shesho,<sup>27</sup> and limited political representation and military activity outside the party's purview in areas it controlled. For example, Hayder Shesho, a cousin of Qasem with a militant background in the PUK and the Yazidi diaspora, returned to Sinjar after the August 2014 crisis to recruit and train an armed force of his own, which he aimed to keep independent. His attempt collapsed after the KDP detained him for a week in April 2015.<sup>28</sup>

Early in 2017, tensions between the KDP and YBŞ came to a head. On 3 March, clashes broke out in Khanasour between the YBŞ and a force of Syrian Kurds raised and trained by the KDP called the Peshmerga Roj and deployed to the YBŞ-held area. There were casualties on both sides.<sup>29</sup> A week later, pro-PKK militants bussed in protesters from Syria via the border crossing it controlled, which triggered new vio-

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<sup>25</sup> Citing security reasons, the KDP restricted traffic at the Suhaila bridge crossing, largely blocking the flow of goods essential for agriculture (such as fertilisers and spare parts for machinery) and reconstruction (such as cement and cinderblocks), and thus discouraging the return of the local population. See "Iraq: KRG Restrictions Harm Yazidi Recovery", Human Rights Watch, 4 December 2016. Moreover, most of the estimated 180,000 Yazidis displaced in the Kurdish region carry no documents that verify their property rights, potentially making them dependent on the KDP, which controlled access to the area, to reclaim their homes and lands. See "Sinjar After ISIS", op. cit., pp. 28-29.

<sup>26</sup> Voicing a widely heard anti-Kurdish narrative, a Yazidi tribal leader cooperating with the PMU in 2017 said: "The Kurdish parties are the reason for how ISIS could come into this area in the first place. There is no difference between the KDP and PKK. Each has come to Sinjar for its own interests and not that of the Yazidis. The KDP wants to have a land without people. We don't want anything to do with the Kurdish parties". Crisis Group phone interview, 19 June 2017.

<sup>27</sup> The KDP-affiliated Yazidi peshmerga forces reportedly had about 8,000 members in March 2017. They receive their salaries from the KDP's security police, the *asayesh*, in Sinjar and fall outside the purview of the Erbil-based peshmerga ministry. Crisis Group interview, peshmerga ministry official, Suleimaniya, 8 March 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Hayder Shesho's Ezidkhan Protection Force (Hêza Parastina Êzîdxanê, HPÊ) reportedly had about 5,000 fighters in July 2017, including 400 women, and maintained a training camp in Sharaf al-Din, a town east of Sinouni. In April 2015, the KDP detained him for a week, but in 2016 he struck an agreement with the peshmerga ministry that allowed him to maintain a Yazidi security force and establish a political party. Crisis Group interview, peshmerga ministry official, Suleimaniya, 10 July 2017.

<sup>29</sup> There are conflicting reports on casualties, but it appears two people were killed and a dozen injured. Isabel Coles, "Rival Kurdish groups clash in Iraq's Sinjar region", Al Jazeera, 3 March 2017.

lence.<sup>30</sup> The KDP made no secret of its desire to expel the PKK affiliates from Sinjar, perhaps betting that Turkey, the KDP's ally and the PKK's mortal enemy, would do the job.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, on 25 April, the Turkish air force struck pro-PKK fighters in the area.<sup>32</sup> Turkey and the KDP could do little more, as the U.S. needed a corridor to supply the YPG with weaponry. When the KDP cut U.S. non-lethal aid to the YPG across that border in March 2017, Washington briefly suspended all assistance to the Kurdistan regional government until the KDP stood down.<sup>33</sup>

### C. *Enter Shiite Militias*

In late 2016, local dynamics began to change as the campaign to drive ISIS from Mosul got underway. In September and October, the Obama administration mediated security agreements between Erbil and Baghdad, and between Baghdad and Shiite political factions linked to the PMUs,<sup>34</sup> especially those backed by Iran.<sup>35</sup> These deals allowed the Mosul operation to go forward without significant problems between the participants – a precarious non-coalition whose members understood and accepted

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<sup>30</sup> Loveday Morris, "Yazidis who suffered genocide are fleeing again, but this time not from the Islamic State", *Washington Post*, 21 March 2017.

<sup>31</sup> The KDP has felt directly threatened by the PKK. The PKK's Syrian affiliates control a swath of the country's north east, where they have become a partner with the U.S. in the fight against ISIS. The party also maintained strongholds in Iraq, namely near the town of Makhmour south west of Erbil, and in Qandil, a mountain range near the Iranian border. Even more concerning from the KDP's perspective are the increasingly close relations between the PKK and the KDP's historical governing-partner-and-rival, the PUK, which maintains good relations with Iran. A KDP official said: "Sinjar has become an issue of national security for us [KDP]. We cannot tolerate the PKK's presence any longer. We don't want to reach the point of confrontation, but we have had enough of the PKK, and the U.S. has not pressured them enough to find an agreement on Sinjar. We don't have a deal with Turkey to bomb Sinjar, but we are ready to do anything to get them out of there". Crisis Group interview, Erbil, 18 November 2016.

<sup>32</sup> See Dilshad Abdullah, "Sinjar on the brink of major conflict between PKK, Turkey", *Al-Monitor*, 9 May 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, March 2017.

<sup>34</sup> The text of the agreement signed between KDP officials and Haider al-Abadi's government has not been made public. According to a U.S. official, it held that Kurdish troops would halt their advance through the Ninewa plain at Mosul's eastern outskirts and let elite Iraqi units take the city, while the PMUs would limit their advance to the southern Ninewa plain without entering the city. The KDP committed to returning to Baghdad all territories captured after June 2014, after ISIS's onslaught in northern Iraq. The agreement made no specific reference to Sinjar, thus postponing a settlement for the area. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Erbil, 16 November 2016.

<sup>35</sup> The Hashd were established in response to a call for volunteer fighters from Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in June 2014, after ISIS had taken Mosul, Tikrit and other cities, and threatened Baghdad. Leaders of pre-existing Iran-backed Shiite militias used the call to recruit fighters to their side; Sistani supporters agreed to be placed in the regular army or other state security forces. The latter helped retake some areas from ISIS, but their primary motivation appeared to be the protection of Shiite holy sites, whereas the former turned into auxiliaries of state security forces as they moved northward to retake Mosul. For a nuanced analysis of the Hashd, see Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future", *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 28 April 2017.

their individual and separate roles in the counter-ISIS operation but always kept one eye on how that fight would position them against other rivals.<sup>36</sup>

As the battle proceeded in 2017 and victory loomed, the participants started to prepare for the aftermath, an expected race for the spoils. On 13 May, Iran-backed PMUs launched an attack from their forward positions near Tel Afar west of Mosul to drive ISIS from Qayrawan, a small town located midway between Mosul and the Syrian border, and surrounding villages. Pushing westward, they reached the border at Umm Jaris, directly west of Sinjar town, on 29 May, then moved south to seize a 30km strip along the border, in addition to the southern half of Sinjar district.

By that time, the Yazidi affiliates of both the PKK and KDP had fighters deployed in Sinjar town and the district's half north of the mountain. As the PMUs, led by the Kataeb Imam Ali, entered the area, they promoted themselves as Iraqi units operating by Baghdad's fiat. Because the KDP refused to join the PMU-led offensive against ISIS in southern Sinjar (a mixed Yazidi-Sunni Arab area),<sup>37</sup> local Yazidis keen to regain their lands and exact revenge on ISIS formed new battalions or joined existing ones, such as the Lalish Battalion (Fawj Lalish), which the PMUs had established in the aftermath of the ISIS attack on Mosul and Tel Afar in 2014.<sup>38</sup> Others, exasperated by Kurdish rule and keen to see the back of the KDP in particular, began defecting from their KDP units to join the conquering Shiite militias, deploying along the border and throughout the district.

Once they had evicted ISIS, the PMUs delegated internal security duties to the armed groups they had raised. The PMUs gained additional local acceptance by co-opting Yazidi tribal leaders with a history of cooperation with local Sunni Arab leaders who had refused to side with either the KDP or ISIS.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Each side received what it wanted: the KDP expanded its control over some of the disputed territories in western Ninewa without sacrificing peshmerga fighters in the battle for Mosul city; the PMU was able to deploy from Salah al-Din governorate to southern Ninewa and westward to the Syrian border, thus preventing the emergence of a region controlled by Sunni militias; and the Abadi government could claim victory in Mosul city with its U.S.-trained elite forces. The PKK was not part of any deal, and neither was Turkey.

<sup>37</sup> The KDP had little interest in southern Sinjar. It wanted to annex strictly Yazidi areas to the Kurdish region, keeping out the district's Arab areas. The Kurdish parties displayed a similar preference in other parts of the disputed territories. Nor did the YPG/YBŞ join the fight against ISIS in southern Sinjar, as its strategic objective was to maintain its Iraq-Syria supply channel in the Khanasour area on Sinjar mountain's northern slopes.

<sup>38</sup> For example, one of the KDP's Yazidi battalions – from Kocho, a village south of Sinjar newly retaken from ISIS – defected under the leadership of tribal leader Naif Jasso to join the PMUs. See Matthew Barber, "The end of the PKK in Sinjar: How the Hashd al-Sha'bi can help resolve the Yazidi genocide", Nalia Radio and Television, 30 May 2017. In June 2017, the KDP expelled from the Kurdish region four Yazidi families of fighters who had joined the PMUs. See "Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Yazidis Fighters' Families Expelled", Human Rights Watch, 9 July 2017. The YBŞ suffered defections as well, especially when the Office of the National Security Adviser gradually stopped disbursing fighters' salaries. In October 2016, the pay became discontinuous and by late 2017 it had reportedly stopped altogether. Crisis Group phone interview, YBŞ commander, November 2017. On the Lalish Battalion, see <http://www.nrttv.com/en/birura-details.aspx?Jimare=6196>. The name Lalish resonates with Yazidis, as it is the small town in northern Iraq where their holiest shrine is located.

<sup>39</sup> Yazidi tribal leaders operating as part of the PMUs reported that strategic coordination happened directly with PMU deputy chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis regarding recruitment of fighters, payment

Thus, when the Kurdish independence referendum, staged on 25 September 2017 by Masoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdish region and leader of the KDP, back-fired, the PMUs could build on the advantageous position they had create in Sinjar earlier that year. On 16-17 October, facing advancing Iraqi army divisions and PMUs across the disputed territories, Kurdish forces withdrew precipitously from most of those areas, allowing the army and PMUs to deploy there. In Sinjar, KDP fighters fled northward to the Kurdish region on 17 October. The army's 15th division took position at the main border crossing to Syria at Rabiya, an Arab town between Sinjar and the Kurdish region, while PMUs and PMU-affiliated groups deployed along the border between Rabiya and Umm Jaris.<sup>40</sup> The army and PMUs did not challenge YPG/YBŞ forces in Khanasour, who therefore continued to control a 15km stretch of the border.<sup>41</sup>

#### D. *An Administrative Vacuum*

The KDP's departure ended the intra-Kurdish standoff and thereby reduced the likelihood of renewed fighting. Yet the PMUs' presence and their control of border crossings with Syria in southern Sinjar ushered in a new phase of militia domination that poses a challenge to Baghdad's authority, given the PMUs' unclear status within the Iraqi security forces, and has done little to bring the kind of peace that would allow displaced Yazidis to return.

The PMUs have pursued the same divide-and-rule, co-optation and security-control approach as their Kurdish predecessors. Since October 2017, they have tolerated the presence of Yazidi militias, but only to integrate them under the PMUs' chain of command, taking advantage of intra-Yazidi divisions and the community's lack of cohesive leadership.<sup>42</sup> Murad Sheikh Khalo, a Yazidi PMU commander, said:

Now that the KDP has withdrawn, we have opened up recruitment into the Hashd [PMUs] and we now have about 3,000 fighters. We hope to attract into our ranks all those who were previously enrolled in other militias. The Yazidi fighters with

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of salaries and deployments within Yazidi-populated villages. Crisis Group phone interview, Yazidi leader operating with the PMU, 19 June 2017.

<sup>40</sup> On the Kurdish referendum crisis, see Crisis Group Report, *Oil and Borders*, op. cit. On 17 October, all KDP-affiliated forces – the security police (*asayesh*), the Zerevani special forces and KDP-trained Syrian peshmerga units (Peshmerga Roj) – withdrew from their positions in Sinjar district to reposition north of the Tigris. Crisis Group phone interviews, Rabiya tribal leader, 17 October 2017; PMU Yazidi commander, 20 October 2017.

<sup>41</sup> The YPG-controlled border crossing at Makhfar Jarbiya – a large covered checkpoint on the road to Hasaka in northern Syria – has seen a lively trade in persons and goods.

<sup>42</sup> Qasem and Hayder Shesho's forces remain deployed in Sharaf al-Din and Sinjar town, while YBŞ fighters keep a presence in western Sinjar district between Khanasour, Majnuniya and Jeddala. Since both Qasem Shesho's militia and the YBŞ are no longer receiving salaries, and the future of Hayder Shesho's forces remains uncertain, the PMUs may expect these militias' Yazidi fighters to defect to the PMUs. According to a YBŞ commander, many of the Lalish Battalion's fighters are YBŞ defectors. Crisis Group phone interview, YBŞ commander, 27 November 2017.

the YBŞ can stay with them as long as they agree to integrate either in the Iraqi security forces or in the PMUs and answer to our chain of command.<sup>43</sup>

The KDP's departure left an administrative vacuum in Sinjar that further militates against an expeditious return of the displaced. Yazidi technocrats who fled to the Kurdish region after August 2014 remain there; moreover, in October 2017, the KDP-backed district council and administration moved from Sinouni to Dohuk, carrying out their functions from the small town of Sumeil ever since. Yazidi professionals, such as doctors and teachers, who left Sinjar have yet to return to restart health facilities and schools. A Yazidi NGO official said that, for this reason, even if the PMUs were to appoint a new administration, they would have trouble finding skilled personnel to run it.<sup>44</sup> In this way, and by controlling a large population of displaced Yazidis whose vote it could try to muster in 2018 elections, the KDP still holds the key to Sinjar's revival.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Crisis Group phone interview, 22 October 2017. According to Sheikh Khalo, two Yazidi PMU brigades (*liwaa*) of 1,000 fighters each are deployed along the Iraq-Syria border.

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group phone interview, Yazidi NGO official, 25 November 2017.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group phone interview, Hayder Shesho, Yazidi commander, 25 November 2017. Local elections are scheduled to be held alongside national elections on 12 May, but there has been some suggestion that they may be postponed, or postponed in only some governorates such as Kirkuk and Ninewa, because of instability in the disputed territories and backroom discussions about power-sharing as a way of managing a fraught political situation.



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### III. Weak State, Strong Militias

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#### A. *PMU Rule*

Since mid-October 2017, Iran-backed PMUs have had the military and political upper hand in Sinjar. Formally integrated into the Iraqi security architecture, they operate as a parallel institution to the state security forces, with their own chain of command.<sup>46</sup> PMU commanders determine who deploys on the Iraq-Syria border in southern Sinjar, who controls strategic roads and which army or PMU units the growing number of Yazidi recruits should join.<sup>47</sup> Their military chain of command is reflected in political decision-making. They have co-opted Yazidi tribal leaders, with Sheikh Khalo acting as point man answering to the PMUs' Shiite commanders and their deputy leader, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.<sup>48</sup>

Through Sheikh Khalo and his local network of loyalists, PMU commanders, acting outside the law, appointed a new Sinjar district director and began to appoint directorate heads.<sup>49</sup> A YBŞ commander criticised the new PMU-imposed administration as “a de-facto administration”:

No one has been consulted. The PMUs came as a representative of the state, but in reality they are only serving the personal interests of a few Yazidi figures connected to them. These guys have nothing in Sinjar; they are only making business from the Yazidi cause.<sup>50</sup>

Sheikh Khalo saw things differently:

The new district director and administrators have been selected according to their loyalty to the unity of Iraq. The former [KDP-backed] district council and

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<sup>46</sup> The Law of the Popular Mobilisation Authority, issued in November 2016, placed the PMUs under the prime minister's direct command. While the Hashd comprise fighters concerned with Iraq's self-defence who placed themselves under army command in 2014, many commanders and fighters joined pro-Iran militias that arose from the post-2003 security vacuum (following the Coalition Provisional Authority's dismantling of the army). The law's original text is available at: <http://www.nrttv.com/Ar/Detail.aspx?Jimare=35620>. See also Mansour and Jabar, “The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future”, *op. cit.*

<sup>47</sup> A YBŞ commander said: “The Iraqi army is not present in Sinjar district; they deployed in Rabiya. While army Major General Abdul-Karim al-Shweili told us we could stay on the border in positions abandoned by the KDP, Abu Ali al-Qurawi, who is only a major in the PMUs but reports directly to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, decided otherwise, and he had the last word”. Crisis Group phone interview, 24 November 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Abu Ali al-Qurawi, a Shiite commander, is Muhandis's envoy to Sinjar. He is assisted by a security director who is a Shiite Arab from southern Iraq. They both have personal ties to Sheikh Khalo.

<sup>49</sup> Iraqi law provides that only the district council can appoint the district director.

<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group phone interview, 26 November 2017. An Arab tribal leader from Rabiya mentioned in the immediate aftermath of the KDP's withdrawal that it was likely that the Iraqi government would appoint Naif Jasso, a Yazidi tribal leader from Kocho who enjoys legitimacy among Yazidis, as Sinjar's new district director. Crisis Group phone interview, 17 October 2017. The PMUs sidelined Jasso, however, and gave the position to a less popular Yazidi tribal leader whom PMU commanders could more easily control. The PMUs have no legal authority to make such appointments. Crisis Group phone interview, Yazidi NGO official, 17 October 2017.

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administration have expired. I am arranging meetings with all the ministries in Baghdad in order to bring services back to Sinjar.<sup>51</sup>

This may be true, but by monopolising the appointment of Yazidi administrators and managing the relationship with Baghdad, the PMUs have been imposing their rule. By way of example, a Yazidi NGO representative said: “If I want to register my NGO in Baghdad, I can do so only through the PMUs. But if I agree to this, I’d become part of their patronage network”.<sup>52</sup> Also, to reach PMU leaders, local actors say they have had to go through the PMUs’ Yazidi intermediaries.<sup>53</sup>

Undertaking Sinjar’s reconstruction under these conditions would give power and resources to a handful of local Yazidi leaders who represent only part of the local population, including those who remain displaced. If PMU rule continues unchallenged until the parliamentary and local elections, scheduled for 12 May 2018, these leaders may use the PMUs’ military power to secure positions in the district and sub-district councils, thus leaving them in control of a strategic passageway to Syria.<sup>54</sup> In other words, having overseen operations that recaptured Sinjar from ISIS, the Iraqi government has acquiesced to control of much of the area by actors only loosely affiliated with the state.

#### B. *A Weakened Baghdad*

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has the ambition to restore the federal government’s authority over all of Iraq, but he is saddled with a weak and dysfunctional state apparatus hollowed out by corrupt political parties. To succeed, he would need to engage with the PMUs and their local subsidiaries in areas they helped retake, along with the army, from ISIS and the KDP, while seeking to counterbalance them by winning over and empowering other local leaders who previously sided with the KDP.

In Sinjar, competing co-optation policies by non-state actors have profoundly divided local elites. To restart local institutions, and allocate funds for service provision, Abadi would need to enlist Yazidi politicians and technocrats who have gravitated toward either the PMUs or the Kurdish parties. That task is daunting. The PMUs’ strength acts as a disincentive for local politicians to challenge their control. Moreover, few Yazidis have personal, political or business connections with Baghdad-based politicians any longer; to the extent that they do, those perceived as associated

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<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group phone interview, Sheikh Khalo, 24 November 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group phone interview, 25 November 2017.

<sup>53</sup> A YBŞ leader said, for example: “I asked Abu Ali al-Qurawi for an appointment with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, but it does not work that way: I have to pass through their appointed Yazidi intermediaries. I am still waiting”. Crisis Group phone interview, 25 November 2017.

<sup>54</sup> As of February 2018, the federal government was refraining from any form of engagement with the KRG, arguing that if the Kurds are genuine in their wish for independence, there is nothing more to talk about. The KRG and some Kurdish parties have tried to make overtures to the Baghdad government, but it is unlikely there will be any significant interaction until after the 12 May parliamentary elections, when Kurdish parties may become indispensable in attempts to form a new federal government. This could provide leverage for a pushback against PMU control of disputed areas such as Sinjar.

with the KDP may be particularly distrusted in Baghdad, especially after the 25 September 2017 Kurdish independence referendum.<sup>55</sup>

The logical way for the government to proceed would be to empower local councils, including in Sinjar, with reconstruction funds channelled through the Ninewa governorate administration in Mosul. Yet that course of action would pose its own set of problems: Ninewa's governor and governorate council are accused of having mismanaged funds, directing the monies to their own preferred localities.<sup>56</sup> Baghdad ministries themselves suffer from a corrupt and parasitic bureaucracy that concentrates decision-making in the hands of specific figures, including officials charged with post-conflict reconstruction, many of whom have developed business and personal relations with PMU leaders. PMU networks thus tend to be more efficient channels for the disbursement of reconstruction funds in areas they control in the disputed territories.<sup>57</sup> The problem is that the PMUs have their own favoured local beneficiaries. A Yazidi NGO official said:

The National Reconciliation Commission plans to appoint a representative committee to help the government bring back institutions to Sinjar. If PMU-empowered Yazidi leaders will have the last word on who will be in this committee through their personal connections, the process will fail.<sup>58</sup>

So far, the government's efforts to reach out to Yazidi partners other than those associated with the PMUs have been uncoordinated and timid. The Office of the National Security Adviser continues to communicate with the YBŞ, while the army has attempted to strike a deal with Hayder Shesho to integrate some of his forces.<sup>59</sup> The only way for Baghdad to reassert sovereignty and gradually disempower the PMUs'

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<sup>55</sup> A Yazidi NGO official said: "There is a witch-hunt climate in Baghdad. If you have any previous relation with the Kurdish parties, or your NGO was registered in the Kurdish region, Baghdad politicians find you suspect, a person they cannot trust". Crisis Group phone interview, 25 November 2017.

<sup>56</sup> According to an NGO official dealing with post-ISIS reconstruction: "The Ninewa provincial council has allocated many of the funds it received from Baghdad to Mosul city and Tel Afar, while neglecting areas such as Sinjar. At the same time, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) has its own reconstruction campaign whose funds do not pass through local administrations, but the UNDP is reluctant to operate in contested areas such as Sinjar". Crisis Group phone interview, 24 November 2017. International agencies are reluctant to operate in unstable areas such as Sinjar because of security concerns, as well as scepticism about the utility of starting reconstruction when control is in the hands of non-state actors and remains contested.

<sup>57</sup> The PMUs are present in the disputed territories mainly in areas inhabited by Shiites, especially in Diyala governorate, the Tuz Khurmatu district of Salah al-Din governorate and small parts of Kirkuk governorate. Their presence in Sinjar, which has no Shiite population, is explained by their link to Iran, which has an interest in controlling part of the border with Syria.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group phone interview, Yazidi NGO official, 25 November 2017. An initial list of proposed committee members had 80 names, but Yazidi PMU leaders appeared to have a strong voice in who to include, as figures such as Hayder Shesho, who worked closely with the Kurdish parties over the past year, were absent. Crisis Group phone interview, NGO official advising the government's National Reconciliation Commission, 25 November 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group phone interviews, YBŞ leader, 25 November 2017; Hayder Shesho, 25 November 2017. Shesho has started bringing electrical power from Mosul to Sinjar north of the mountain, where he has his headquarters (in Sharaf al-Din). Crisis Group interview, journalist who visited the area in January 2018, Brussels, February 2018.

pervasive networks may therefore be to reintegrate the PMUs' Yazidi fighters into the local police force and lure back Yazidi technocrats previously working in KDP-backed institutions, despite their history of association with a party that sought to wrest Sinjar from the federal government's control.

While the Baghdad government may not yet have the strength to proactively reassert its administrative authority in Sinjar, its legal authority gives it some leverage to prevent matters from completely escaping its control. Until now, it has not endorsed the PMU-appointed district director and sub-district administrators. Its approval of these appointments would effectively hand over the district to the PMUs. It is wise for Baghdad to continue to withhold its blessing if it wishes to return Sinjar to state authority.

### C. *Regional Power Plays*

Baghdad's failure to restore its sovereignty in Sinjar through means other than the PMUs – which are only nominally government agents – is emblematic of the challenge it faces elsewhere in the disputed territories. In Sinjar, it may help formalise the PMUs' patronage networks within local councils, further marginalising Yazidi technocrats associated, however loosely, with the Kurdish parties, and discourage the return of effective local governance as well as the displaced population. Sinjar Yazidis who have tied their lives to the Kurdish region may choose to stay there as second-class residents rather than returning to their neglected, militia-dominated home territory that has become a battleground for regional powers pursuing strategic objectives unrelated to the population's wellbeing.

Sinjar sits at a strategic crossroads. Through its allied Shiite militias, Iran benefits from a corridor into Syria through territory wrested from ISIS. Since October 2017, the PMUs have seized additional areas adjacent to the border, either patrolling these lands themselves or delegating the task to affiliated Yazidi fighters. A YBŞ commander noted ruefully: "Yazidis working for the PMUs are handing Sinjar to the Iranians, who will use it for their own interests, whatever these may be".<sup>60</sup>

Turkey wants to see the PKK's affiliates removed from Sinjar, and had hoped, in October 2017, that the Iraqi army and PMUs would take care of the matter. Ankara did not oppose the Baghdad government's retaking of the disputed territories after the ill-fated Kurdish independence referendum. Masoud Barzani had staged the plebiscite over its express objections, and Ankara wanted to teach him a lesson.<sup>61</sup> When the Iraqi army attempted to retake the entire border area with Syria, Washington reportedly intervened, thus keeping open two separate corridors into Syria – both the KDP's and the YPG's. A Turkish official said Washington, in doing so, had made "a big mistake".<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group phone interview, YBŞ commander, 25 November 2017.

<sup>61</sup> Turkey decided not to oppose the Iraqi army's move into the disputed territories because it was upset about the referendum and saw an opportunity to mend its relations with the Baghdad government, which had frayed after 2011. And while it wanted to teach Barzani a lesson, it also acted to limit the damage to the Kurdistan regional government, keeping Turkey's border at Ibrahim Khalil open (despite pressure from Iran to close it) and the oil flowing through the Kurdish pipeline into Turkey. Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, January 2018.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, January 2018.

While the army and PMUs did not engage in direct confrontation with the YBŞ/PKK in Khanasour, they appear to be trying to erode the group's role in Sinjar by encouraging the defection of its Yazidi fighters, pushing PKK-trained cadres to Syria or Qandil, and cutting the ties between the YBŞ and the YPG.<sup>63</sup> Breaking the YBŞ's bond with the YPG in Syria could represent a convergence of Iranian and Turkish interests: this move would allow both Ankara and the Syrian regime to prevent the Syrian Kurdish region from slipping out of the economic embargo that has threatened to strangle it, and eventually permit the regime to retake it from the YPG. As a result of this pressure, non-Iraqi, PKK-trained YPG/YBŞ cadres have either left Sinjar or assumed a lower profile, sensing their vulnerability to a possible Turkish attack or a clash with the PMUs.

#### D. *Breaking Dependency Patterns*

Sinjar's Yazidi community, traumatised by genocidal violence and displacement, now has fallen victim to competition among armed groups with foreign patrons, preventing the population's return to their lands and livelihoods. The ordeal of 2014 and subsequent standoff in Sinjar have left many Yazidis in a state of existential anxiety over their future in Iraq. Over the past three years, the contrast between the proliferation of competing groups, each with its own political symbols hoisted in public spaces, and the meagre trickle of returning residents has been stark.

Events in Sinjar over the past few years enabled external actors' co-optation of Yazidi elites, but they also prompted growing criticism of these patterns of dependency. The younger generation of Yazidis in particular feels a sense of subjugation.<sup>64</sup> The youths' activism is challenging traditional power structures, as they urge their community to become master of its own destiny. A Yazidi civil society activist said:

In the past, religious and tribal leaders were our only point of reference. But because they let themselves be used, they failed. There are respected tribal leaders and younger religious figures who have started showing a different approach, but we desperately need a new type of leadership that refuses to be someone else's pawns. Yazidis should stop feeling as if they don't deserve anything.<sup>65</sup>

The greatest challenge Sinjar's Yazidis face will be to restore the ties that linked community members to their lands, to one another and to their cultural heritage, all of which ISIS's jihadists, many of whom were local Sunni Arabs, were set on violently severing. Today, Yazidi community and culture are threatened by the local power

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<sup>63</sup> As a PMU commander put it: "Foreign fighters should leave Sinjar, and if they refuse we will expel them". Crisis Group phone interview, 22 October 2017. The YBŞ seems determined to resist. One of its commanders said: "The Iraqi army asked us to lower the YBŞ flag and keep only the Iraqi one, and to dress in Iraqi uniforms, not the YBŞ's. But we suffered more than 285 martyrs [fatalities among its fighters] in Sinjar. We are ready to fight to the death to keep our positions". Crisis Group phone interview, 25 November 2017.

<sup>64</sup> A Yazidi leader said: "We, Yazidis, are often victims of our own actions. Before the events of August 2014, we received funding to pave Sinjar's streets. A member of the district council, a Yazidi, took the money and used it to buy the worst quality of material. I asked him why, and he answered: 'For us, Yazidis, this is good enough'". Crisis Group interview, Dohuk, 10 July 2017.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group interview, Yazidi civil society activist, Dohuk, 10 July 2017.

struggles that have been unleashed. An important step toward a better future should come through new leadership not beholden to militias but willing and able to reinvigorate local institutions. It would be best for this revival to occur under Baghdad's formal authority, but with a great deal of local autonomy, as provided for by the Iraqi constitution and law.

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## IV. Conclusion: Returning Sinjar to Its People

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Liberated from ISIS fighters intent on annihilating the Yazidi minority and freed of the KDP and PUK bent on annexing Sinjar to the Kurdish region, Sinjar nonetheless remains a disputed district. Yazidis displaced in the Kurdish region may see their temporary exile turn permanent, as most of the district remains off limits to them due to militia control and lack of reconstruction and development. Yazidi elites have been increasingly fragmented and disempowered by a decade-long competition between the Kurdish region and Baghdad, an intra-Kurdish feud between the KDP and PKK/YPG/YBŞ, and, most recently, the military and financial tutelage of the PMUs.

Baghdad's continued absence from Sinjar will have negative repercussions for both the Abadi government and the Yazidis seeking to return to a normal life. The most viable way forward for Baghdad would be to leverage what its rival, the KDP, has built over the last decade: a local administrative elite that will formally remain in power until elections in May 2018. Even though this elite largely comprises personnel who either support the KDP or have proved willing to work with it, they possess the skills needed for the restoration of functioning governance institutions in Sinjar. With the KDP militarily excluded from the area, this elite could proffer its administrative and technocratic know-how without the KDP imposing political restrictions on the allocation of reconstruction funds based on loyalty.

Under this logic, and acting through the National Reconciliation Commission, Baghdad could lead the way by restoring local governance through an administrative body composed of Yazidis who have worked with all sides: the KDP-backed council, the PMUs and the YBŞ. This initiative could bring technocratic skills back to Sinjar, diminish Yazidi dependence on external powers, facilitate the provision of international reconstruction aid and improve prospects for the return of the displaced. The task will not be easy, but it is consistent with the government's ten-year reconstruction plan, published in June 2017, that seeks IDP returns, the rebuilding of damaged infrastructure and steps to effect intra-communal coexistence.<sup>66</sup>

A reinvigorated role for Baghdad in Sinjar also may help the federal government in reaching a much-needed compromise with the Kurdistan authorities over the future of the disputed territories generally, including the status of Sinjar. The Kurdish referendum debacle has left Kurdish parties with a dilemma: postpone negotiations with Baghdad and thus allow the PMUs to gain strength in the disputed territories; or support Baghdad's attempt to restore local institutions, staffed by local elites willing to work with both the federal government and Erbil. Either way, the Kurdish region's hold and claim on the disputed territories will be diminished. But dealing with Baghdad would enable the creation of a formal framework for negotiations supported by UNAMI and the international community to determine these territories' status within Iraq, based on the constitution.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> See "Iraq Situation", UNHCR Flash Update: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20170628%20UNHCR%20Iraq%20Flash%20Update.pdf>.

<sup>67</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Oil and Borders*, op. cit. No serious effort to resolve the disputed territories question can be undertaken before the May 2018 elections and the formation of new governments in both Baghdad and Erbil. (Elections for the Kurdish national assembly are due to take

The tragedy Sinjar and its people suffered in 2014 attracted global attention. The Abadi government should take advantage of whatever international support it can mobilise for Sinjar's reconstruction, given the sympathy the Yazidi plight has generated, to focus resources on improving the district at long last and reconnecting it to the centre. Doing so would benefit the Yazidis and show that the Iraqi leadership is prepared not only to win the battle against ISIS but also to rebuild Iraq by protecting and reconciling its diverse communities.

**Beirut/Brussels, 20 February 2018**

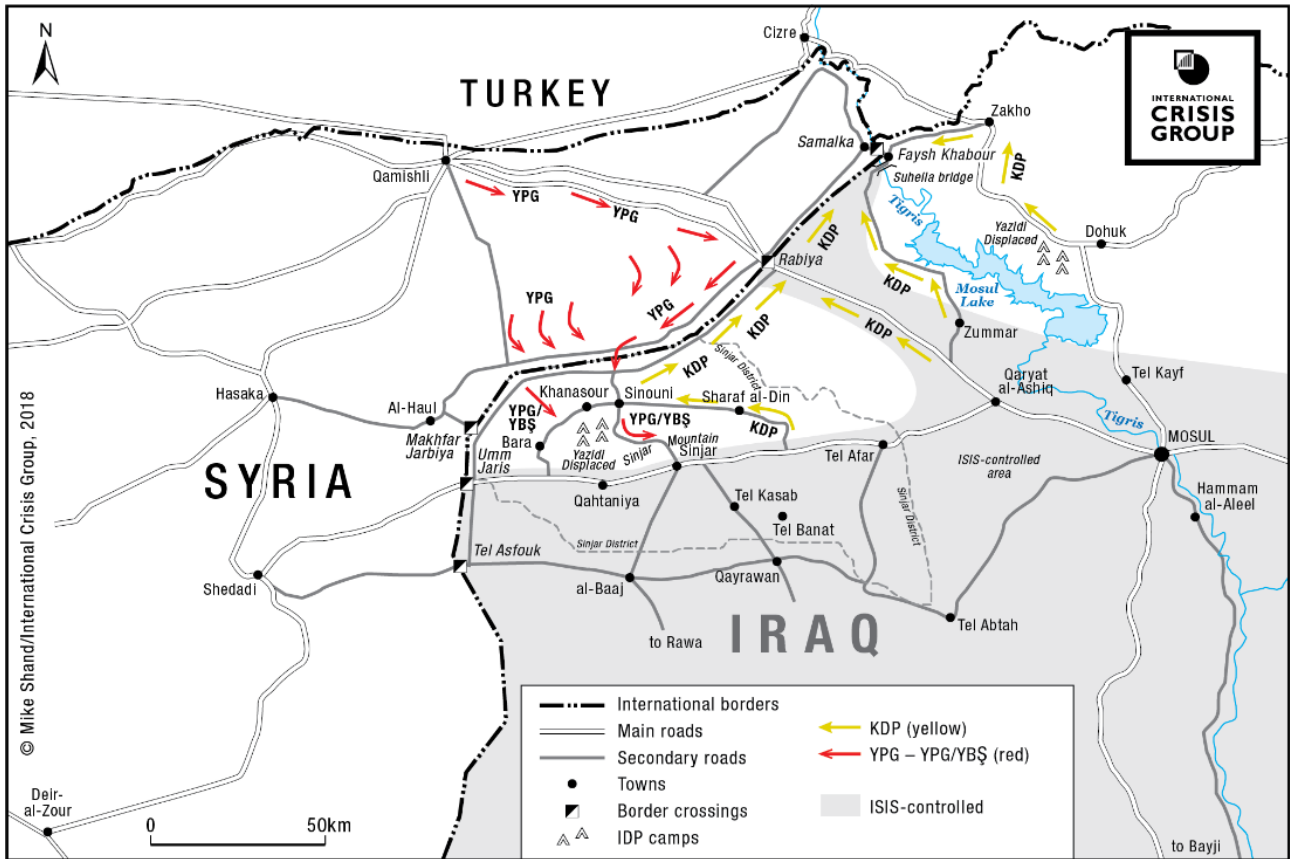


Appendix A: Map of Iraq

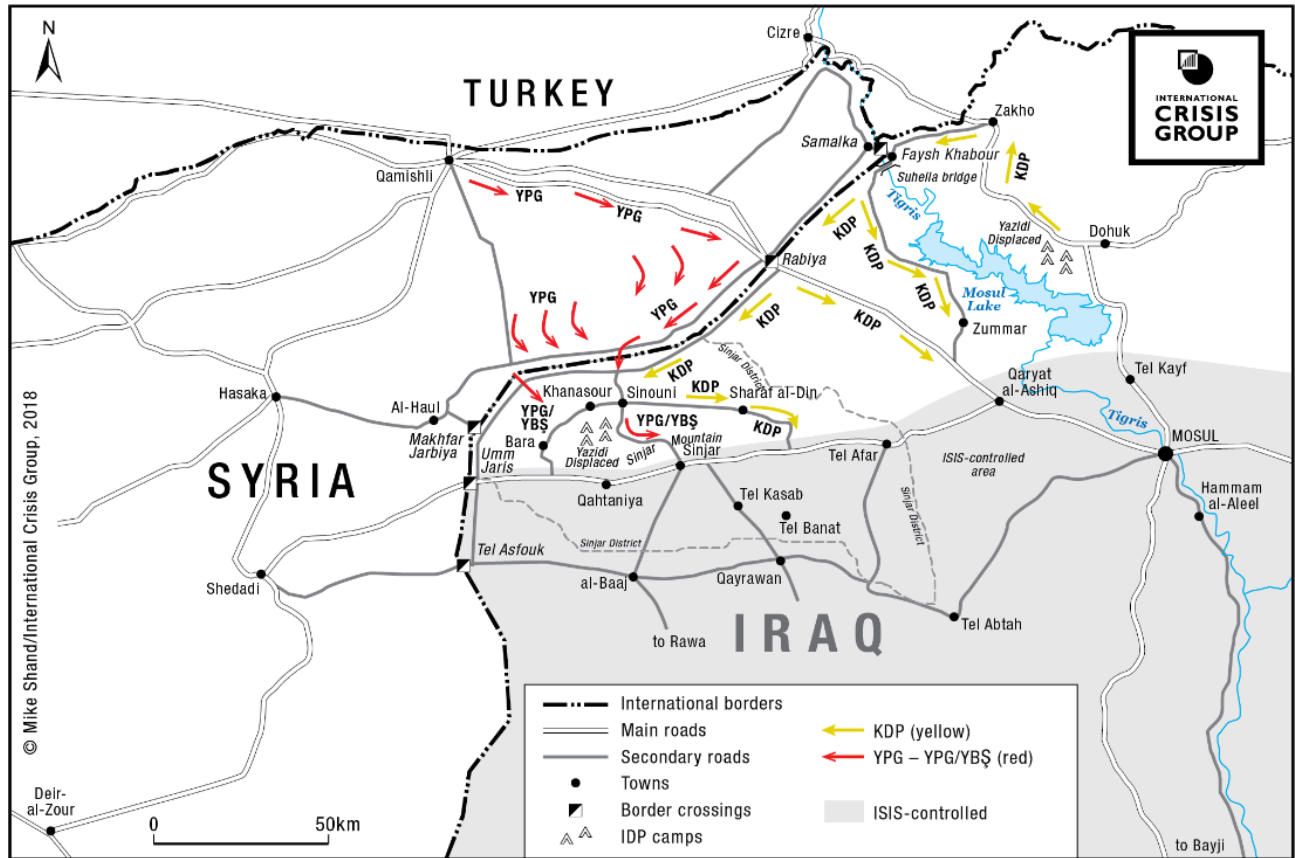


Appendix B: Maps of Presence of Armed Forces in Iraq's Sinjar Area

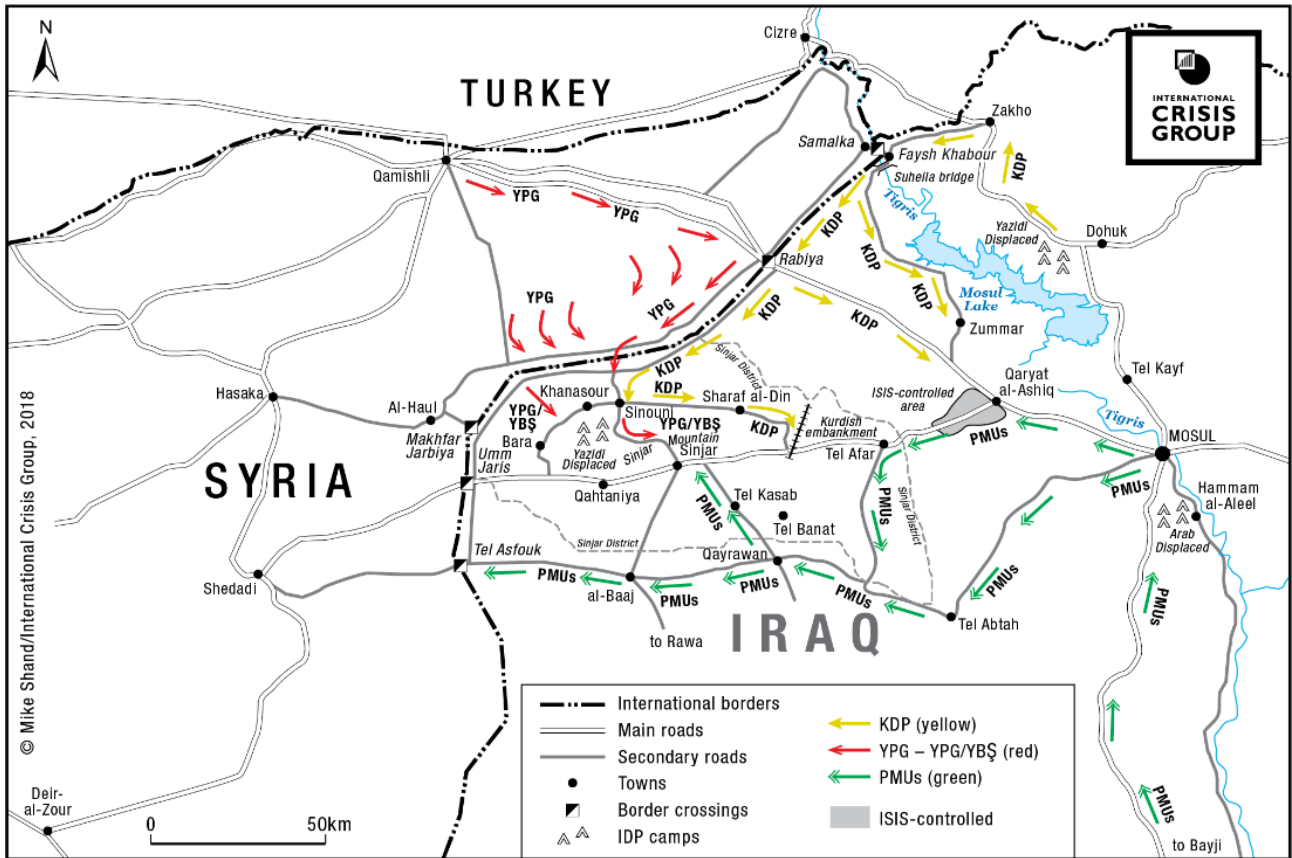
August 2014



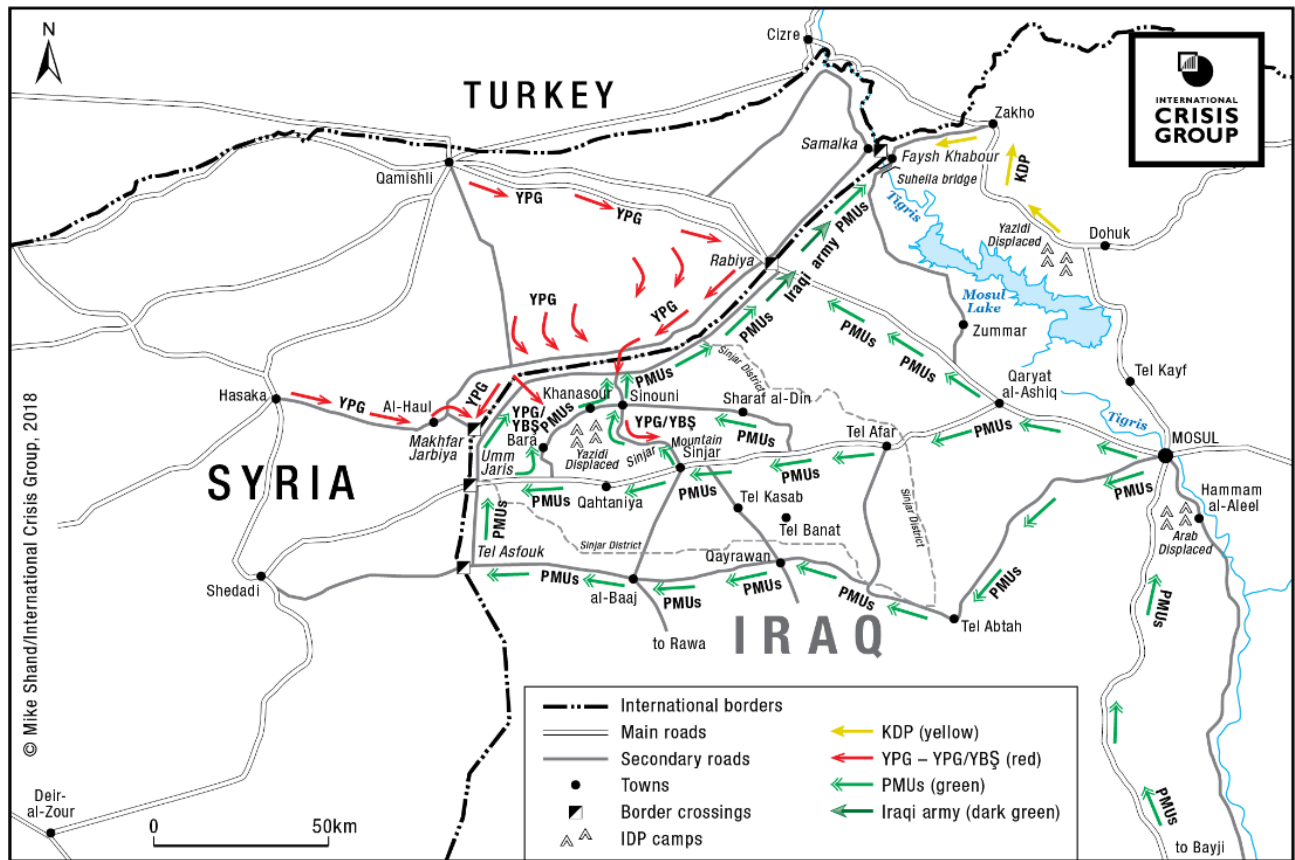
December 2015



September 2017



January 2018



## Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord Mark Malloch-Brown. Its Vice Chair is Ayo Obe, a Legal Practitioner, Columnist and TV Presenter in Nigeria.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIS Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in ten other locations: Bishkek, Bogota, Dakar, Kabul, Islamabad, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Sanaa, Tblisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), European Commission, Directorate General for Neighbourhood Enlargement Negotiations, Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, German Federal Foreign Office, Global Affairs Canada, Irish Aid, Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

Crisis Group also holds relationships with the following foundations: Carnegie Corporation of New York, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Henry Luce Foundation, Humanity United, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Oak Foundation, Omidyar Network Fund, Open Society Foundations, Ploughshares Fund, Robert Bosch Stiftung, and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund.

**February 2018**

## Appendix D: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2015

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*Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

*Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action*, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

*Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid*, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

### Israel/Palestine

*The Status of the Status Quo at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade*, Middle East Report N°159, 30 June 2015 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

*No Exit? Gaza & Israel Between Wars*, Middle East Report N°162, 26 August 2015 (also available in Arabic).

*How to Preserve the Fragile Calm at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade*, Middle East Briefing N°48, 7 April 2016 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

*Israel/Palestine: Parameters for a Two-State Settlement*, Middle East Report N°172, 28 November 2016 (also available in Arabic).

*Israel, Hizbollah and Iran: Preventing Another War in Syria*, Middle East Report N°182, 8 February 2018.

### Iraq/Syria/Lebanon

*Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict*, Middle East Report N°158, 12 May 2015 (also available in Arabic).

*Lebanon's Self-Defeating Survival Strategies*, Middle East Report N°160, 20 July 2015 (also available in Arabic).

*New Approach in Southern Syria*, Middle East Report N°163, 2 September 2015 (also available in Arabic).

*Arsal in the Crosshairs: The Predicament of a Small Lebanese Border Town*, Middle East Briefing N°46, 23 February 2016 (also available in Arabic).

*Russia's Choice in Syria*, Middle East Briefing N°47, 29 March 2016 (also available in Arabic).

*Steps Toward Stabilising Syria's Northern Border*, Middle East Briefing N°49, 8 April 2016 (also available in Arabic).

*Fight or Flight: The Desperate Plight of Iraq's "Generation 2000"*, Middle East Report N°169, 8 August 2016 (also available in Arabic).

*Hizbollah's Syria Conundrum*, Middle East Report N°175, 14 March 2017 (also available in Arabic and Farsi).

*Fighting ISIS: The Road to and beyond Raqqa*, Middle East Briefing N°53, 28 April 2017 (also available in Arabic).

*The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria*, Middle East Report N°176, 4 May 2017 (also available in Arabic).

*Oil and Borders: How to Fix Iraq's Kurdish Crisis*, Middle East Briefing N°55, 17 October 2017 (also available in Arabic).

*Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province*, Middle East Briefing N°56, 9 February 2018.

### North Africa

*Libya: Getting Geneva Right*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°157, 26 February 2015 (also available in Arabic).

*Reform and Security Strategy in Tunisia*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°161, 23 July 2015 (also available in French).

*Algeria and Its Neighbours*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°164, 12 October 2015 (also available in French and Arabic).

*The Prize: Fighting for Libya's Energy Wealth*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°165, 3 December 2015 (also available in Arabic).

*Tunisia: Transitional Justice and the Fight Against Corruption*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°168, 3 May 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

*Jihadist Violence in Tunisia: The Urgent Need for a National Strategy*, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°50, 22 June 2016 (also available in French and Arabic).

*The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°170, 4 November 2016 (also available in Arabic).

*Algeria's South: Trouble's Bellwether*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°171, 21 November 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

*Blocked Transition: Corruption and Regionalism in Tunisia*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°177, 10 May 2017 (only available in French and Arabic).

*How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°178, 24 July 2017 (also available in Arabic and French).

*How Libya's Fezzan Became Europe's New Border*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°179, 31 July 2017 (also available in Arabic).

*Stemming Tunisia's Authoritarian Drift*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°180, 11 January 2018 (also available in French and Arabic).



**Iran/Yemen/Gulf**

*Yemen at War*, Middle East Briefing N°45, 27 March 2015 (also available in Arabic).

*Iran After the Nuclear Deal*, Middle East Report N°166, 15 December 2015 (also available in Arabic).

*Yemen: Is Peace Possible?*, Middle East Report N°167, 9 February 2016 (also available in Arabic).

*Turkey and Iran: Bitter Friends, Bosom Rivals*, Middle East Briefing N°51, 13 December 2016 (also available in Farsi).

*Implementing the Iran Nuclear Deal: A Status Report*, Middle East Report N°173, 16 January 2017 (also available in Farsi).

*Yemen's al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base*, Middle East Report N°174, 2 February 2017 (also available in Arabic).

*Instruments of Pain (I): Conflict and Famine in Yemen*, Middle East Briefing N°52, 13 April 2017 (also available in Arabic).

*Discord in Yemen's North Could Be a Chance for Peace*, Middle East Briefing N°54, 11 October 2017 (also available in Arabic).

*The Iran Nuclear Deal at Two: A Status Report*, Middle East Report N°181, 16 January 2018 (also available in Arabic and Farsi).



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