



Contested Control: The Future of Security in Iraq's Nineveh Plain

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ABOUT ASSYRIANS

An estimated 3.5 million people globally comprise a distinct, indigenous ethnic group. Tracing their heritage to ancient Assyria, Assyrians speak an ancient language referred to as Assyrian, Syriac, Aramaic, or Neo-Aramaic.

The contiguous territory that forms the traditional Assyrian homeland includes parts of southern and southeastern Turkey, northwestern Iran, northern Iraq, and northeastern Syria. The Assyrian population in Iraq, estimated at approximately 200,000, constitutes the largest remaining concentration of the ethnic group in the Middle East. The majority of these reside in their ancestral homelands in the Nineveh Plain and within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Assyrians are predominantly Christian. Some ethnic Assyrians self-identify as Chaldeans or Syriacs, depending on church denomination. Assyrians have founded five Eastern Churches at different points during their long history: the Ancient Church of the East, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, and the Syriac Orthodox Church. The majority of Assyrians who remain in Iraq today belong to the Chaldean and Syriac churches.

Assyrians represent one of the most consistently persecuted communities in Iraq and the wider Middle East.

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ABOUT THE ASSYRIAN POLICY INSTITUTE

Founded in May 2018, the Assyrian Policy Institute works to support Assyrians as they struggle to maintain their rights to the lands they have inhabited for thousands of years, their ancient language, equal opportunities in education and employment, and to full participation in public life.

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Table of Contents

KEY FINDINGS	7
PART I: Introduction and Background	9
Methodology	11
The Nineveh Plain	12
The Assyrians of Iraq	13
The Nineveh Plain and Iraq’s “Disputed Territories”	14
The Post-Ba’ath Kurdification of the Nineveh Plain	15
The Nineveh Plain Governorate Proposal	16
PART II: The Pre-Islamic State Security Dynamic in the Nineveh Plain	18
The Nineveh Plain Police Force Initiative	18
The KRG’s “Church Guards”	19
A Power Vacuum Emerges in Nineveh	21
PART III: Collapse in Security in the Wake of the Islamic State’s Assault	22
Disarmament	22
Abandonment and Betrayal	24
Peshmerga Blockades	26
Lasting Mistrust of KRG Security Forces	27
Liberation from the Islamic State	28
PART IV: Security Forces in the Nineveh Plain	30
The Popular Mobilization Forces	33
National Security Service-Administered PMF	34
Nineveh Plain Protection Units	34
Popular Mobilization Committee-Administered PMF	36
Brigade 50 (“Babylon Brigades”)	36
Brigade 30 (“Liwa al-Shabak/Quwat Sahl Ninawā”)	37
KRG-Aligned Forces	37
Nineveh Plain Guard Forces	38
Nineveh Plain Forces	38
<i>Dwekh Nawsha</i>	39
Misrepresentation in the Media	40

PART V: Assessing Returns	41
Understanding the Rate of Return to NPU-Controlled Areas	44
Understanding the Rate of Return to KRG-Controlled Areas	45
Understanding the Rate of Return to Brigade 30-Controlled Areas	47
Understanding the Rate of Return to Brigade 50-Controlled Areas	48
Opposition to the NPU	49
PART VI: Policy Recommendations and Concluding Remarks	51
APPENDICES	59
Appendix 1: Disarmament Order distributed to village in the Nineveh Plain in July 2014	59
Appendix 2: Iraqi Ministry of Interior’s 2006 Authorization...for the Nineveh Plain	60
Appendix 3: General Directorate of Facilities Protection Order...Facilities Protection Program	61
Appendix 4: Key Terms	62
REFERENCES	67

List of Tables and Figures

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Overview of Local Security Forces Formed in Response to ISIS	38
Table 2: Rate of Assyrian Return to the Nineveh Plain	47

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Map of the Nineveh Plain	17
Figure 2: Security in the Nineveh Plain as of May 2020	36
Figure 3: Operational Control of Relevant Armed Forces in Ninewa Governorate	37
Figure 4: Rate of Assyrian Return to the Nineveh Plain	45

Key Findings

- Physical and political violence against Assyrians in Iraq has understandably fostered feelings of deep mistrust towards the Iraqi Central Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government. The events of 2014 further strained the relationship between Assyrians and government authorities; many Assyrians do not trust the Iraqi Government and KRG to protect them or address their needs. For many displaced Assyrians, the inability to trust Iraq's larger security forces, including the Peshmerga, is the primary impediment to returning to the Nineveh Plain and remaining in Iraq in general.
- The lasting presence of competing forces in the Nineveh Plain has exacerbated the region's instability and stymied repatriation and reconstruction efforts.
- Various actors, including the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Badr Organization, continue to exploit the lasting instability for political gain at the expense of minoritized communities, such as Assyrians.
- Local security forces constituted within an appropriate legal framework that strengthen the rule of law continue to be the preferred means of obtaining security. This dynamic is captured perfectly by the differing rates of return to the Nineveh Plain: Where non-local forces dominate, return rates lag; when forces with pre-existing cultural ties to local populations are in control, return rates are significantly higher.
- NPU-administered areas have seen the highest rates of return among Christian Assyrians (see pages 42-43) in the Nineveh Plain. Despite the limitations of the NPU, its soldiers' connections to the local community provide reassurance and it has garnered significant popular support. For many Assyrians, the events of 2014 demonstrate that the only way for the community to feel secure is for Assyrians to be able to protect themselves.
- Peshmerga-controlled towns in the Nineveh Plain have comparably low rates of return. The security situation has even affected returns to Alqosh, where—despite the fact that the town never fell to the Islamic State—many residents fled and never returned. Regardless of the locale, the primary reason cited by individuals for not returning home to KRG-administered areas is a deep distrust of these forces. Specifically, the Peshmerga's tactical withdrawal preceding the Islamic State's attack in August 2014 has left the Christian Assyrian population largely unable to depend on KRG forces.

- Iranian-backed PMF forces, including Brigade 30 and Brigade 50, are preventing the return of displaced Assyrians to the Nineveh Plain. These forces have been accused of human rights abuses, criminal activity, and intimidation of local populations. Brigade 30 shares security responsibilities with the Nineveh Plain Protection Units in Bartella, where its presence has negatively impacted the return of local Assyrians. Christian Assyrian return to areas under the control of Brigade 50 is negligible.
- In 2019, the Iraqi Army replaced Brigade 50 in Batnaya and Bashiqa. While these towns are slowly progressing, the Iraqi Army has failed to match the rates of return produced by the Nineveh Plain Protection Units, and returns remain comparably low.
- Despite being under-resourced, both in terms of funding and materiel, the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU) continues to perform well beyond its limited resources, and has outpaced Iraq's larger security forces in terms of facilitating the return of local populations.
- Control over security in an area enables competing actors to effectively control the area and who returns to it, increasing dominant actors' abilities to shift demographics in anticipation of a future referendum to settle the disputed status of the Nineveh Plain. In addition, it gives nonlocal actors control over resources, as well as influence over local political dynamics. The latter was exemplified by the KDP's ability to unilaterally replace the mayor of Alqosh with a KDP-affiliated individual in 2017, overriding a standing federal order.
- The Iraqi Government has repeatedly demonstrated its inability to protect vulnerable populations in Iraq, such as Assyrians. The state remains weak and unable to reign in PMF forces backed by Iran. These forces have demonstrated that they are outside state control. Further, the Iraqi Government has failed to properly support and empower PMF forces administered by the National Security Service, such as the Nineveh Plain Protection Units.

Part I: Introduction and Background

With regard to the Nineveh Plain, a considerable debate exists as to which governing authority best serves the interests of the Assyrian people.

Iraq's indigenous Christian Assyrian population is beset by ethnic, sectarian, and political divisions. In general, the preferred goal is a measure of political autonomy in the Nineveh Plain, but minority status and the absence of a foreign state to protect them means that security and political rights are contingent upon accepting the authority of one of the country's larger security forces: Iraqi Central Government in Baghdad or the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil. With regard to the Nineveh Plain, a considerable debate exists as to which governing authority best serves the interests of the Assyrian people. At the core of this debate is the question of security: The historical record—best represented by the summer 2014 invasion of Ninewa Governorate by the Islamic State—has shown that neither option is sustainable.¹

Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the U.S. military authorized KRG security forces to deploy in Ninewa, Kirkuk, and other governorates to temporarily fulfill the security vacuum following the collapse of the Iraqi Army in the wake of de-Ba'athification.² This complicated dynamic—security controlled by the KRG in governorates still officially administered by the federal government—did little more than produce tragic results for Assyrians in Ninewa, especially those in the Nineveh Plain. The KRG seeks to annex the resource-rich Nineveh Plain via a dubious claim that the area is “historically Kurdish,” and has used its military presence to enforce territorial claims. The Arab-dominated Iraqi central government in Baghdad rejects the Kurdish ethno-nationalist claim over key territories within Ninewa and Erbil's secessionist agenda in general, but it has long neglected the region. As neither side can be confident they will maintain control of the Nineveh Plain, the area has suffered from underdevelopment and systemic negligence in public investment and service provision.³

The most glaring consequence of the administrative and security arrangements of the Nineveh Plain, however, is the collapse of security in the summer of 2014; in both the Nineveh Plain and Sinjar, minorities were systematically rendered vulnerable to genocidal attacks.

The Nineveh Plain was liberated in early 2017, but post-conflict stabilization efforts have only reinforced the status quo. The KRG clings to control in the Nineveh Plain's northernmost towns. Various Iranian-backed groups, some affiliated with the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and others not, occupy territory in an attempt to remake the Nineveh Plain's demographic composition. Iran's end-game is a veritable "Shia belt" stretching from Tehran to Beirut that runs through northern Iraq and the Nineveh Plain via local Shabaks on Tehran's payroll. The U.S., which still has thousands of troops stationed in Iraq as part of the anti-ISIS coalition, is struggling to thwart Iran's expanding influence. As part of these efforts, in January 2020, the U.S. killed Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Soleimani was a major general in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and head of its al-Quds force, which specializes in paramilitary operations and military intelligence. The U.S. held him directly responsible for the deaths of U.S. servicemen.⁴ Muhandis was the Deputy Chief of the Popular Mobilization Committee, which has been reported to have close links to the al-Quds Force. He was on the U.S. government's list of designated terrorists.⁵ Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians took to the streets to rally against political corruption, economic stagnation, and rampant foreign intervention.⁶

Caught in the middle are a number of Assyrian groups seeking a measure of political autonomy, chief among them the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM). In November 2014, the ADM supported the creation of an Assyrian-led security force: The Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU). The ADM/NPU's primary goal is the creation of a Nineveh Plain province for minorities falling within direct federal government authority and equal to the fourteen provinces outside the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).⁷ Assyrian officials argue that the establishment of such an entity would give minoritized peoples political rights equal to those of Iraq's larger ethno-sectarian groups. Critically, it could help elevate the heterogeneous Nineveh Plain above the Arab-Kurdish feud over the "disputed territories of northern Iraq."⁸

In January 2014, the Iraqi central government endorsed the creation of three new governorates, including a Nineveh Plain Governorate.⁹ Yet the rise and spread of the Islamic State, the KRG's territorial ambitions, political marginalization of minorities, foreign intervention, ongoing domestic turmoil, and the difficult process of reconstituting the Iraqi state has meant that the plan has yet to get off the ground.

The liberation of territory held by the Islamic State provided some reprieve for Assyrians, but security threats and a deep sense of mistrust continue to inhibit the return of internally-displaced persons (IDP). The prospects for Iraq's most vulnerable peoples after ISIS are tied to the larger framework of

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Iraqi politics. The Iraqi Government and the KRG do not enjoy a favorable stance among the Assyrians; the Iraqi Government is seen to be largely neglectful of the Assyrians while the KRG is seen to be largely focused on its own ethno-nationalist agenda at the expense of Assyrians and Yazidis.¹⁰ Post-liberation security arrangements have exacerbated their sense of fear and mistrust.

This report examines the failed security policies that enabled the Islamic State's 2014 invasion of Ninewa. It also examines the differing rates of return to the post-liberation Nineveh Plain as the primary and most objective indicator of a preferred security policy, and assesses the various factors behind differing rates of return. The goal is two-fold: first, it aims to convey a detailed understanding of the how these failed policies explain the current security challenges facing Assyrians, including their broader implications for Iraq. Second, it suggests policies for security provision in the Nineveh Plain into the future that are most likely to result in increasing further return of displaced Assyrians and ensure their long-term survivability in the region.

This report is organized into six parts. Part I provides a broad overview of the geography, demography, and strategic importance of the Nineveh Plain. Part II addresses the security policies that enabled the Islamic State's invasion and occupation of the area. Part III examines security failures during the initial stages of the Islamic State's northern Iraq offensive. Part IV presents information about the various security forces currently contesting for control of the Nineveh Plain. Part V analyzes rates of return to the Nineveh Plain. Policy recommendations and concluding remarks are offered in Part VI.

Methodology

This report conveys and contextualizes findings made by the authors during multiple research trips to Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon (between 2016 and 2019), in addition to data gathered on an ongoing basis from a wide range of local Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain. The Assyrian Policy Institute has interviewed (either in person or by phone) upwards of 90 individuals belonging to Assyrian communities in the Nineveh Plain, as well as Assyrian refugees displaced from the Nineveh Plain following the events of August 2014. In addition, the API has conducted interviews with relevant Iraqi Assyrian officials, local NGOs, and representatives of political parties. The authors have also interviewed members of NPU leadership and their authorized representatives in preparation of this report.

All individuals interviewed were informed of the purpose of the interview, and verbally consented to the use of information provided in this report. Names and identifying information of the majority of interviewees have been withheld in the interest of their personal safety.

The Nineveh Plain

The Nineveh Plain stretches north and east from Mosul. It consists primarily of the districts of Tel Kayf, Sheikhan, and Hamdaniya. The Nineveh Plain has historically been described as an ethno-sectarian mosaic. Several minority groups trace their origins to the area and its surrounding environs, including the Shabak¹¹ and Yazidi¹² communities, respectively. It is the area's indigenous Assyrian population, however, that is thought to be the Nineveh Plain's largest demographic.¹³ Most Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain belong to either the Ancient Church of the East, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, or the Syriac Orthodox Church,¹⁴ and often choose to self-identify based on their religious affiliations.

Even prior to the advent of ISIS, the Nineveh Plain was among Iraq's poorest, most ignored, and most underdeveloped areas, lacking many basic services.¹⁵ Due to the presence of KRG security forces post-2003, the Nineveh Plain fell under de-facto control of the KRG, but remained administratively and legally under Baghdad's authority. This dynamic negatively affected the stability of the region and proved disastrous for the communities caught in the political cross-fire.

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Figure 1. Map of the Nineveh Plain



The Assyrians of Iraq

Iraq's Assyrian population numbered approximately 1.5 million prior to the 2003 U.S. invasion. By June 2014, the same month Islamic State forces entered Nineveh province, that number was below 1 million. Today, some estimates put Iraq's Assyrian population at no more than 200,000.¹⁶

Assyrians are bound together by their desire to remain in their historic homelands. Nevertheless, serious intragroup cleavages have prevented political cooperation for almost the entirety of independent Iraq's history. In his doctoral dissertation, Gregory J. Kruczek (2018) notes that Iraq's Assyrians are unable to pursue collective political goals due to three interrelated cleavages. The first cleavage centers on the acceptance, adoption, and advancement of the Assyrian ethnicity above denominational/ecclesiastical ones. The second cleavage is the battle for collective leadership of the community between clergy and their secular counterparts. The final cleavage is whether or not collective rights are best pursued through the Iraqi central government or the KRG, which is typified by the debate over a Nineveh Plain Governorate. In many cases, these cleavages have been contrived or exacerbated by non-Assyrian actors. These cleavages do not amount to a threat for intra-group violence. Rather, they function to consistently thwart collective action and provide Iraq's larger security forces with pressure points to exploit.¹⁷

Throughout Iraq's history, Assyrians, as well as other minorities in Iraq, have been consistently labeled "traitors" by majority groups. Iraqi troops and Kurdish irregulars massacred thousands of Assyrians in 1933 near the northern town of Simele on the grounds that they threatened the newly independent state's cohesion and its "Arab" identity.¹⁸ The oppression of Assyrians continued under the Ba'ath's "Arabization" campaigns.¹⁹ Following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, Assyrians were targeted for being "Western sympathizers" in addition to religious persecution.²⁰ The Iraqi Government demonstrated its inability to protect them.

Contrary to popular perceptions of the KRG's treatment of minorities, since its founding the KRG has marginalized Assyrians through a number of harmful policies, patterns of governance, and discriminatory practices that have driven Assyrians from the region. Many Assyrians have accused the KRG of illegal land seizures, electoral manipulation, and physical intimidation.²¹ The KRG's practice of awarding minorities reserved seats in parliament is seen by many observers as more of a tactical ploy to buttress the semi-autonomous region's image as secular and tolerant than it is an effort to actually include such groups in governing structures.

Thus, physical and political violence against Assyrians in Iraq has understandably fostered feelings of deep mistrust towards the federal government and the KRG. The events of 2014 further strained the relationship between Assyrians and governmental authorities; many Assyrians do not trust the Iraqi Government or the KRG to protect them or address their needs.

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The Nineveh Plain and Iraq’s “Disputed Territories”

As part of its operations to topple the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003, the U.S. military authorized the Kurdish Peshmerga to deploy south of “the Green Line,” the de facto boundary established in 1991 separating the KRG from central government-controlled territory. In Ninewa Governorate, this meant that Kurdish forces took up positions in Sinjar, Hamdaniya, Tel Kayf, Makhmour, and Sheikhan districts. Hamdaniya, Tel Kayf, and southern Sheikhan are the epicenter of the Nineveh Plain. Northern Sheikhan, also considered part of the Nineveh Plain, had been under KRG control since 1991.²²

Kurdish officials jumped at the chance to occupy resource-rich and culturally significant areas “Arabized” by the Ba’ath but claimed as “historically Kurdish.” The oil-rich city of Kirkuk is often called “the Kurdish Jerusalem” by Kurdish leaders. But the Nineveh Plain, aside from its abundance of arable land, was also thought to contain significant oil and gas deposits. According to a recent study published by Harvard University:

In the long-term, Nineveh also holds the potential to serve as a source of production: one of Iraq’s largest undeveloped oil fields lies in the Nineveh Plain. While Exxon signed a deal with the KRG in 2011 to begin its exploitation, the unstable security situation has prevented any serious development initiatives.²³

“Disputed by who? We have always lived here. Show me the Kurdish cemeteries, if they claim this is their land.”

With Kirkuk as the centerpiece, these areas—the entirety of the Nineveh Plain included—are colloquially known as the “disputed territories of northern Iraq.” Of critical importance is the fact that many of these areas are not disputed to the area’s indigenous Assyrians and other minorities. For example, in a June 2018 *National Review* article, a Nineveh Plain-based priest argued, “Disputed by who? We have always lived here. Show me the Kurdish cemeteries, if they claim this is their land.”²⁴

Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution established December 2007 as the deadline for holding a referendum on adding Kirkuk and other portions of the disputed territories to the KRG.²⁵ Yet the Constitution is vague regarding which areas are actually disputed, including those within Nineveh. It essentially endorses the pre-U.S. invasion Green Line.²⁶ To be sure, no authoritative rendering of the disputed territories exists.

Primarily because of a lack of support among local populations for KRG annexation, the status of the disputed territories was not resolved by the deadline put forward by Article 140; the KRG continues to dispute the administrative status of these areas (i.e., whether they should fall under the administration of the KRG or remain under the administration of the central government). The original draft of the KRG constitution published in 2004 contained no mention of the Nineveh Plain. Many Assyrians reject the term “disputed territories” altogether, and see the KRG presence in the Nineveh Plain as occupation.

The designation of the Nineveh Plain and Sinjar as disputed territory is contrary to the interests of the Assyrians, Yazidis, Shabaks, and other peoples of the region.

The designation of the Nineveh Plain and Sinjar as disputed territory is contrary to the interests of the Assyrians, Yazidis, Shabaks, and other peoples of the region. Kurdish claims to this territory, often at the expense of minoritized communities, have generated resentment towards the KRG. The ongoing political conflict has created lasting uncertainty, prevented development, enabled violence, fueled emigration, and continues to hinder return to areas affected by ISIS. A critical February 2018 report published by the International Crisis Group determined that only the Iraqi Government can stabilize Sinjar and the other disputed territories.²⁷

The Post-Ba'ath Kurdification of the Nineveh Plain

In tandem to consolidating its military presence in the Nineveh Plain following the Peshmerga's deployment south of the boundaries of the KRI (described in Part 2 of this report), the KRG seized the opportunity to secure undue influence over provincial government structures in the Nineveh Plain. In 2005, a Sunni Arab boycott of the provincial elections enabled the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) to gain political control in Ninewa Governorate. In elections riddled with fraud, the KDP-led "Kurdish bloc" won 31 of 41 provincial seats, which was wildly disproportionate to their population size in the region.²⁸ Further, it is widely understood that senior KDP figure and Deputy Governor of Ninewa, Khasro Goran, held the actual power in Ninewa Governorate. According to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy:

The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) became *primus inter pares* in Ninawa (sic) via Khasro Goran, ostensibly the deputy governor but actually the power behind the throne in Mosul and Ninawa. Goran and the Iraqi military chief of staff, Babakir Zebari, who was also a KDP member, worked directly with the Kurdish commander of the 2nd Iraqi Army division, Maj. Jamal Muhammed, to achieve de facto Kurdish domination of the city's security.²⁹

Control over the deputy governorship and provincial council meant that the KRG had final say over resource distribution, security, and development projects within Ninewa. While Sunni Arabs were the province's majority population, Assyrians formed the largest ethnic group in the Nineveh Plain. No group was arguably more important to countering the weight of pro-Baghdad Sunni Arabs than the Nineveh Plain's Assyrian majority.³⁰

The Nineveh Plain is almost entirely devoid of ethnic Kurds, and the KDP does not have a natural base in the region. Its annexation to an expanded KRI was therefore contingent upon suppressing opposition, placing KDP loyalists in local administrations, and courting the loyalties of indigenous groups who generally rejected KRG governance. The KRG used its military presence in the Nineveh Plain to enforce its policies and employed heavy-handed tactics

to silence activists and political opponents, including physical intimidation, restricting access to public services, and extrajudicial detentions.³¹ At the same time, the KRG bought the allegiance of some Assyrian political and religious leaders.

The KRG funneled millions of dollars into the Nineveh Plain as part of this strategy. Dozens of run-down churches were rebuilt. Housing was constructed for the thousands of Assyrians fleeing violence in Iraq's urban centers. Food aid, rent assistance, medical care, and jobs were doled out. Suffering from socio-economic marginalization, many Assyrians benefited from this assistance in the short-term. However, many claimed this assistance came with a steep price. Food, rent aid, security, and jobs were often contingent upon the recipient expressing pro-annexation and pro-KRG sentiments.³² Basic needs were politicized by the KRG for political gain. In 2005 Human Rights Watch documented the following testimonial from a Nineveh Plain-based priest:

Before 2005, no one cared about our communities or churches and then overnight we started to receive funding. The Kurds have a hidden agenda and are using money to coopt Christians—it's not because they want to help our people... *I believe that anyone who disagrees with their agenda puts their life at risk.*³³

Since at least 2007, U.S. officials were aware of the KRG's corruptive practices in the Nineveh Plain and its detrimental effect on Assyrians. Yet no corrective action was recommended let alone taken. States a U.S. Department of State report submitted to Congress that year:

In Nineveh, the Christian minority faces considerable hardship. Some factions are under-represented politically; some suffer from uneven resource transfers from the Kurdistan Regional Government Ministry of Finance; and some experience human rights abuses... On the basis of relative need, it would be inappropriate to single out this group for special treatment.³⁴

Baghdad and Washington's inability, unwillingness, or both, to stop Kurdish territorial encroachments forced many Assyrians that wished to remain in their historic homelands into an unholy and coerced pact with the KRG. Many were given the means to stay, but the terrorism that drove thousands from central and southern Iraq into Nineveh was replaced by more covert forms of political oppression and silencing, such as physical intimidation, electoral manipulation, arbitrary detentions and arrests, and illegal land grabs.

The Nineveh Plain Governorate Proposal

Assyrians have long sought the creation of a Nineveh Plain Governorate on the basis of Article 125 in the Iraqi Constitution.³⁵ On January 21, 2014, the Iraqi Council of Ministers voted for the creation of a Nineveh Plain Governorate for minorities, following more than a decade of advancing the policy within Iraq's

federal institutions and political processes, in conjunction with advocacy by Assyrians.³⁶ Political autonomy was and still is seen as the only way to stop the outflow of Assyrians from their historic homelands, remove the Nineveh Plain from the Baghdad-Erbil feud, and provide the group with a veritable cultural and physical safe-haven.³⁷

The constitutionally-based potential for governorates to positively affect the social, economic, and political condition of citizens is significant. Governorates are given paramountcy in disputes with federal authorities on matters directly affecting their citizens.³⁸ Provinces are also provided for in the division of revenues collected by the federal government.³⁹ Of course, this does not ignore the fact that Iraqi federalism is not functioning as intended, but a new Nineveh Plain Governorate will add to the positive political development of Iraq by virtue of the needs of its citizenry. This includes, but is not limited to, the formation of local police forces and educational, cultural, health, and agricultural programs. Governorates are also allocated a share of the national budget, which is determined by its needs, resources, and share of the national population.⁴⁰

The January 2014 decision renewed hopes for a sustainable future for the Assyrians in Iraq.

The January 2014 decision renewed hopes for a sustainable future for the Assyrians in Iraq. But six months later, Iraq was in its second civil war in less than ten years. More recent efforts by Assyrian leaders to reignite the Nineveh Plain Governorate plan since the defeat of the Islamic State have been unsuccessful.

Part II: The Pre-Islamic State Security Dynamic In The Nineveh Plain

While all Iraqis were affected by the sectarian violence that followed the 2003 U.S. invasion, minoritized populations were especially vulnerable

While all Iraqis were affected by the sectarian violence that followed the 2003 U.S. invasion, minoritized populations were especially vulnerable. With respect to Assyrians, no fewer than 70 churches were targeted.⁴¹ Dozens of religious leaders were attacked, kidnapped, or murdered.⁴² Thousands of Assyrians hailing from the country's urban centers sought refuge in the Nineveh Plain and the KRI. Hundreds of thousands more left Iraq altogether.⁴³

Washington, and later Baghdad, endorsed a temporary KRG security presence in areas outside the "Green Line," including the majority of the Nineveh Plain as part of efforts to combat the nationwide insurgency.⁴⁴ However, Kurdish leaders never intended their presence to be temporary. Assyrians attempted to push back as the KRG consolidated its military control of the Nineveh Plain, but Kurdish authorities consistently blocked any effort to advance political goals that conflicted with the KRG's, particularly a local security force.

The Nineveh Plain Police Force Initiative

In June 2006, the Iraqi Ministry of Interior in conjunction with U.S. officials authorized the creation of a Nineveh Plain Police Force (NPPF) composed primarily from the local Assyrian and Shabak populations.⁴⁵ KRG officials quickly moved to block the order; the NPPF was a potential threat to annexation plans. One Kurdish leader called the proposed force an illegal "Christian militia."⁴⁶ But it was Erbil's Assyrian proxy force in Nineveh, the "Church Guards," discussed below in more detail, that fell outside Iraq's official security forces.

The central government's order remained blocked for two years. In April 2008, at a State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs hearing in Washington, then-Congressman Mark Kirk (IL)⁴⁷ confronted the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq about the delay:

On June 14 [2006], the Iraqi Minister of Interior ordered the creation of a local police for the Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain. They issued Order 1793 authorizing a force of about 700 policemen to patrol the nine Christian villages there in the Nineveh Province. Two years after the order, the police force doesn't exist.... Central Command tells my office that they support the standing orders of the Iraqi Government. And the Kurdish Regional representative here, Mr. Barzani, told me that the KRG supports the creation of this police force. The community has issued detailed planning of the police force to protect them. I don't think we had detailed planning like this for any other villages in Iraq, but we certainly have it for these villages. So, what's the holdup here?⁴⁸

By late April the recruitment and training of the NPPF was underway. But within months, Ninewa Governorate officials—acting on the directives of the KDP elements in its leadership—reassigned a large contingent of the force to “Facilities Protection Services” in areas outside the Nineveh Plain, including Mosul.⁴⁹ Thus, the KDP negated the purpose of the force and reduced its visibility. The Assyrian Democratic Movement, the preeminent independent Assyrian political party in Iraq, released the following statement on the matter:

The June 2006 original order was blocked by the prejudicial policies of neighboring parties [a common euphemism for the KDP] who say they will protect our people with their militias while denying us the right to [our own] policing in order to keep us dependent on them...The dominant parties controlling Ninawa (sic) Governorate deny us our basic right to security.⁵⁰

That November, hundreds of NPPF recruits in Hamdaniya District demonstrated against what they perceived to be attempts to disband the force.⁵¹ The official protest statement read: “We were distributed into police stations in the city of Mosul, ignoring our rights to serve in our own regions.”⁵² The NPPF was ultimately disbanded.

The KRG's “Church Guards”

To further undermine efforts at creating a Nineveh Plain-based security force the KRG's Assyrian Finance Minister, Sarkis Aghajan, established a KDP-proxy force under Peshmerga command: The Church Guards.⁵³ The force is also sometimes referred to as the “*Herasat*”, the “Church Guardians” or the “Christian Peshmerga.” The force was organized around the local churches and was comprised of local Assyrians. At its peak, it is estimated that the Church Guards



Assyrians hold protest in the Nineveh Plain against the KDP's attempts to marginalize the NPPF. (November 2008)

numbered somewhere between 1,000-1,500.⁵⁴ It acted as a supplementary force to the Peshmerga and *Asayish*, guarding church facilities and manning checkpoints.



Former KRG Finance Minister Sarkis Aghajan (right) receives former U.S. Consul General Alex Laskaris (left), who at the time was serving as the team leader for the Ninewa Provincial Reconstruction Team. (2011)

Sarkis Aghajan is a senior KDP figure of Assyrian background. Aghajan was appointed to serve as KRG Minister of Finance and Economy in 1999 until he was abruptly replaced in 2009. Many attribute Aghajan’s ascension in the KRG to his personal relationship with his childhood friend KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, but it became increasingly clear in the years that followed that Aghajan was being used by the KDP to entrench its influence in the Nineveh Plain and to support the KRG’s claim to areas historically inhabited by Assyrians. Through Aghajan, the KDP created and supported—financially and otherwise—new Assyrian political parties and organizations used to project democracy and coexistence within the KRI and to advance the KDP’s interests in the Nineveh Plain.

Many Assyrians actively opposed the presence of the Church Guards in their respective locales. Of principle concern was that they were illegal, highly-politicized, and therefore lacked the independence necessary to act in the best interests of local populations.⁵⁵ Basim Bello, the mayor of Tel Keppe District, denounced the KRG-funded militia in a 2009 report by Human Rights Watch:

Bello said, “Why are the asayesh (sic) and Peshmerga even here in Iraqi territory? There’s no reason for it. They want to show they have the power and control of our areas...The security forces [the Church Guards] that the Kurdish authorities now have in place get their orders from the KRG, not the central government.”⁵⁶

It has also been alleged that most members had little to no training and that the position was merely a “ghost job,” meaning a salary was paid but no work was done.⁵⁷ In addition, the KDP has consistently exercised its power to control the voting behavior of members of KRG security forces, including the Church Guards, and used them to secure and maintain political power.⁵⁸ Taken together, it is easy to see why many saw the Church Guards were nothing more than an elaborate public relations ploy to present the KRG as inclusive and a “protector” of Christians, but even more damaging, they served as an effective instrument of control over the local population.

Upon the Islamic State attack in 2014—when security was most needed—the Church Guards were disarmed and ordered by Peshmerga command to vacate their posts. They obeyed their commands, and confirmed earlier fears that they would be compelled to act on the orders of the KRG rather than in the best interests of the local populations. These events will be discussed in detail in Part 3.

A Power Vacuum Emerges in Nineveh

The KRG continued its efforts to consolidate security and administrative control in the Nineveh Plain, but Sunni Arab nationalists in Mosul took control of the Ninewa Provincial Council following the 2009 provincial elections. Sunni Arab parties, such as al-Habda, focused on curtailing illegal KRG territorial encroachments in Ninewa. Arab and Kurdish members of the council refused to cooperate with one another. The disputed territories referendum deadline had come and gone. At one point Kurdish officials threatened to annex areas under their control.⁵⁹ In the process of trying to pass a constitution for the region, the KRG issued a new draft asserting that Kirkuk and the Nineveh Plain are “Kurdish lands”.⁶⁰ This, despite the fact that there was little to no historic or contemporary Kurdish population in these areas. Baghdad, let alone the local Assyrian population, was not pleased.

As a result of the Erbil-Baghdad dispute, resource distribution and developmental projects in Ninewa came to a halt, and two separate administrative and security arrangements took shape.⁶¹ Caught in the political crossfire were the Nineveh Plain’s Assyrians and other marginalized communities. This dynamic ultimately created a power vacuum that the Islamic State stepped into.

Part III: Collapse In Security In The Wake Of The Islamic State's Assault

When Islamic State forces advanced, the Peshmerga preemptively retreated from their posts, abandoning the local populations and exposing them to genocide.

In June 2014, Islamic State forces attacked Mosul, the capital of Ninewa Governorate. The Iraqi army collapsed. Thousands of civilians fled.⁶² Fears of ethno-cultural genocide at the hands of the Sunni jihadist proto-state were soon confirmed.⁶³ Mosul's Assyrians sought refuge north in Dohuk Governorate, east in the Nineveh Plain or in Ankawa, the Assyrian-majority suburb of Erbil. Smaller numbers later sought refuge in Baghdad. Thousands more left Iraq. By August, the Islamic State was pushing east.

Two weeks before ISIS invaded the Nineveh Plain, while neighboring Mosul was occupied, the Peshmerga and other KRG security forces forcibly disarmed local populations, asserting a full monopoly of arms and control over security, while pledging to protect all. Yet when Islamic State forces advanced, the Peshmerga preemptively retreated from their posts, abandoning the local populations and exposing them to genocide. Assyrians and other minorities have since testified that KRG forces never informed locals that they were withdrawing.⁶⁴

Disarmament

When the Iraqi Army collapsed at Mosul, Assyrians from the Nineveh Plain, just like Yazidis from Sinjar, began organizing local defense forces.⁶⁵ But in mid-July Kurdish officials began confiscating weapons belonging to Assyrians and Yazidis, including those of their own proxies, the Church Guards. Residents were told their weapons were inadequate and that the Peshmerga would lead defense efforts.⁶⁶ A notice was then distributed throughout Hamdaniya District informing residents that they would face severe consequences if they failed to

disarm. A translated version of this notice appears below. A copy of the original text appears in the appendices of this report:

To the citizens of Bakhdida, Karamlesh, and Bartella:

Anyone who owns any middle-caliber weapons, heavy weapons, or ammunitions of the said weapons must deliver them to the Security Committee. In case of inspection and finding the said weapons, the person possessing them will be subject to the maximum legal penalties. We hereby call on all citizens to cooperate with the Security Committee.

Head of the Security Committee
[Signature]⁶⁷

The API has accumulated dozens of testimonials from Nineveh Plain residents regarding the series of events described above. Several are presented below.

Eyewitness 1, from Bakhdida:

There were several local security checkpoints throughout our area [manned by the Church Guards]. [There were] approximately 20 stations. All of these stations were stripped of their weapons and ammunition on the basis that these weapons were insufficient and had little ammunition. [...] The second reason we were given was that the Kurdish defense forces, the Zerevani, were now here and would protect the area. But the Zerevani was protecting itself and not our areas.⁶⁸

Eyewitness 2, from Bakhdida:

The situation was relatively calm due to assurances from the Peshmerga that they will protect us. They told us that the Nineveh Plain would be defended by Peshmerga the same way they defend Erbil Province. However, what happened was very different. The Peshmerga and other KRG security forces retreated after disarming the local Christian population. This resulted in the community being forced to flee our homes. We feel that we were the victims of a trap that was deliberately created. By disarming us, they oppressed the locals by denying us our right to defend ourselves.⁶⁹

Eyewitness 3, from Bartella:

When Mosul was overtaken by ISIS, we had our own local security forces [the Church Guards]. We had over 1500 Christian armed security guards stationed in our areas. At this time, the Zerevani arrived. [...] Three days after they arrived, there were orders to turn over all weapons to the Zerevani. Then the Zerevani pulled back, leaving us all behind. We were without weapons—without anything. What could we do other than flee?⁷⁰

Abandonment and Betrayal

On August 6, 2014, as ISIS militants advanced into the Nineveh Plain, KRG security forces abandoned their posts without notifying local populations. The API has accumulated numerous testimonials from Nineveh Plain residents regarding the Peshmerga's unannounced withdrawal, which many regard as a betrayal. Several are presented below.

Eyewitness 4, from Bakhdida:

In 2014, when Mosul fell, al-Hamdaniya was still not occupied. The Kurds came to protect our town. They promised us that ISIS would take the city over their dead bodies. However, when ISIS came, the Kurds withdrew without firing a single bullet. They did not warn or tell civilians that they were withdrawing. They left silently. We eventually heard rumors that ISIS was coming and within three hours the whole city evacuated. When we fled, however, we found that the Kurds had closed the roads behind them and had placed obstacles so that ISIS couldn't follow. The problem is that we couldn't pass the obstacles easily either. You can't imagine the conditions these IDPs suffered. They survived hunger and thirst, and were mistreated at the checkpoints.⁷¹

Eyewitness 5, from Alqosh:

The Peshmerga didn't tell anyone they [ISIS] were coming. They didn't fire a single bullet. They just left the villages.⁷²

Eyewitness 6, from Bakhdida:

On that day [August 6, 2014], I saw with my own eyes what had happened. [...] Within Hamdaniya itself, the local inhabitants remained with no idea that ISIS was approaching. My friend [name withheld] and I rode our bicycles to the outskirts of town to see what was happening. We did not see any of the Kurdish forces, the Zerevani, who were supposed to be there protecting and controlling the town. It appeared that they were the first to leave the area. We kept riding to see if they were perhaps elsewhere. We looked until 2:30am and did not find a single Zerevani soldier. No military or security forces at all. We quickly returned to our town and started waking people from their sleep and urging them to flee, because we had no weapons to protect ourselves.⁷³

Eyewitness 7, from Bakhdida:

We had no choice but to leave [Iraq]—how could we possibly feel safe in Iraq again, knowing we'd been left to ISIS?⁷⁴

Eyewitness 8, from Karamlesh:

The Peshmerga were supposed to protect us—they put up their flags in our towns, but they were the first to leave and abandon the villages. By the time ISIS arrived [in the Nineveh Plain], the Peshmerga was already in Erbil.⁷⁵

Eyewitness 9, from Batnaya:

*The Peshmerga gave assurances to the locals. They told us, 'We will never leave you. We will protect you.' They assured us that ISIS would never enter. What choice did we have but to trust them?*⁷⁶

Eyewitness 10, from Bakhdida:

*It was about 3pm in the afternoon. I was driving with a friend when we heard an explosion nearby. We headed that way to see what had happened. We heard people screaming as we neared. Two young boys— aged six and eight— who had been playing soccer were struck by a mortar. This is when we knew ISIS was coming. We gathered their remains and put them into an empty bag of chips and delivered them to their families. We realized the Peshmerga had abandoned us during the night. Word spread quickly and then the church bells were ringing—a signal that it was time to leave. We did not know if we would make it out in time. No human being should have to experience this kind of terror.*⁷⁷

Eyewitness 11, from Tesqopa:

*Imagine what it's like for us to read all these stories and hear praise for the Peshmerga and their bravery against ISIS. It never made the headlines, but the Peshmerga fled. They fled without even telling us we were on our own.*⁷⁸

THE YAZIDI EXPERIENCE IN SINJAR

Yazidis in Sinjar have made similar accusations against KRG security forces. In August 2014 Iraq-based Journalist Christine Van den Toorn reported that Sinjar's Yazidis were told to remain in their homes and that the Peshmerga would protect them. But on that fateful night when ISIS arrived, the Peshmerga were nowhere to be found.⁷⁹ Most Yazidis from Sinjar blame the Peshmerga for disarming and abandoning them during the ISIS onslaught, actions that led to the mass atrocities committed against them.⁸⁰

The consequences for Yazidis in Sinjar were far more severe than what most Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain endured. In her memoir *The Last Girl*, Nobel Peace Prize laureate and Yazidi genocide survivor Nadia Murad described the Peshmerga's retreat:

We were even more shocked, though, by the Kurds who had sworn to protect us. Late at night, without any warning and after months of assuring us that they would fight for us until the end, the Peshmerga had fled Sinjar, piling into their trucks and driving back to safety before the Islamic State militants could reach them...We tried to focus our anger on the leaders in Kurdistan making the decision rather than on the individual soldiers. What we couldn't understand, though, was why they left without warning or taking us with them or helping us get to safety...Villagers called it treason. Those with houses near their posts saw the Peshmerga leave and begged them, with no success, to at least leave their weapons behind for the villagers to use.⁸¹

Many Yazidis believe the KRG is merely pursuing its own interests in Sinjar. They view the Peshmerga withdrawal prior to August 3 as an example of this, and argue that the only way for Yazidis to feel safe is for Yazidis to be able to defend themselves and/or enjoy international protection. In the absence of the latter, many Yazidis have expressed support for armed Yazidi groups, such as the Shingal Resistance Units (YBS).⁸²

The Secretary General of the Peshmerga Ministry, Lieutenant General Jabbar Yawar, later justified the withdrawal saying, “We didn’t have the weapons to stop them (ISIS).”⁸³ Yet ISIS ultimately presented an opportunity for the KRG. As one anonymous KRG official told *Reuters* in June 2014: “Everyone is worried, but this is a big chance for us. ISIS gave us in two weeks what [former Iraqi Prime Minister] Maliki has not given us in eight years.”⁸⁴

During the operations to liberate Ninewa Governorate from Islamic State control, Peshmerga leaders made clear their intention to capitalize on the instability and solidify their control over liberated areas. Peshmerga Major General Jamal Weis was quoted saying, “If the Peshmerga enters an area and liberates it, it will stay with the Peshmerga.”⁸⁵ Similarly, a KRG official said in a statement to Fox News: “The Peshmerga will not withdraw from areas we consider to be Kurdistanian areas.”⁸⁶

Peshmerga Blockades

The API has accumulated numerous eyewitness accounts from the village of Tel Keppe, approximately eight miles northeast of Mosul, alleging that KRG security forces blocked local populations from evacuating Tel Keppe when Islamic State forces approached. For example, an Assyrian refugee from Tel Keppe interviewed by the API in Amman, Jordan, explained that the Peshmerga prevented him from entering Tel Keppe to rescue his family, and later prevented them from leaving:

They [the Peshmerga] set up dirt barriers around the checkpoints so that no cars could pass [to enter]. It was three meters tall. No cars could drive over it. The only way through was the checkpoint. That was the [only] way you could get through. There were barriers at both checkpoints. There’s one [checkpoint] that leads down to Mosul, and one that leads to Dohuk. They had blocked the Mosul checkpoint [as ISIS had conquered Mosul], again with dirt barriers. The only option we had was that one [which led to Dohuk]. After two days of fighting [with the Peshmerga] to enter Tel Keppe [to rescue my family], they told me they would shoot me if I tried to enter. [...] The Kurds [Peshmerga] told me, ‘We will shoot you.’ I told them they could shoot me, but I was going to get my family out of there. When I returned to the checkpoint [with my family], they told me I was not permitted to leave. I told them, ‘If you want

to shoot me, shoot me.’ I got through the checkpoint and others followed after me.⁸⁷

Minority Rights Group International (2017) also reported on barriers erected by fleeing Peshmerga soldiers, purportedly with the aim of stalling the ISIS advance northward.⁸⁸ Regardless of the reason, some residents of Tel Keppe, most of them elderly, were forced to live under ISIS rule until the town’s liberation in early 2017.⁸⁹

Lasting Mistrust of KRG Security Forces

The Peshmerga’s calculated retreat under the cover of nightfall meant that dozens of Assyrians were killed or taken captive. Tens of thousands sought refuge in Dohuk or Erbil, while smaller numbers fled to Baghdad. Many would eventually leave the country altogether. Alqosh was the only Assyrian town in the Nineveh Plain that was not occupied by Islamic State forces.

For many displaced Assyrians, the inability to trust Iraq’s larger security forces is the primary impediment to retuning to the Nineveh Plain and remaining in Iraq in general. A 2017 report by the Germany-based Konrad Adenauer Foundation states:

Christians in Alqosh, Bartella, Bashiqa, Batnaya, Baquba, Qaraqosh, Karamles, Tel Uskuf and other Christian localities believe they were betrayed by the Kurdish Peshmerga twice in 2014, first on 23 June and then on 6 August. In both cases Peshmerga forces failed to protect Christians and fled in haste: in June when there were signs of impending IS attacks (23 June 2014) and in August when the attacks actually took place (6 August 2014). This “betrayal” has had such a harmful effect on the relationship between Christians and the Peshmerga, the Kurds in general and the [KRI] government that it could not be remedied even after Christians—forced to flee from their IS-occupied settlement areas—received shelter in the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan.⁹⁰

The following testimonials provided to the API by Assyrians paint a grim picture with respect to the deep sense of distrust that exists towards the country’s larger security forces:

Eyewitness 12, from Bakhdida:

*We have no trust in the forces that were supposedly protecting the area because they proved their failure. Only with local forces supported by international forces do I believe that our people will return and remain in our lands. We have no trust in the Iraqi or Peshmerga forces and we are not prepared to become victims again. We hope that this message has reached those who make these decisions.*⁹¹

Eyewitness 13, from Alqosh:

If the Peshmerga abandoned us once, what's to stop them from doing it again? This is not something that happened years ago. This is something we ourselves lived through. How can we be expected to feel secure with Peshmerga here again?⁹²

Similarly, many Assyrians that have since migrated abroad spoke of the ineffectiveness of KRG security policies in the Nineveh Plain, including the Church Guards.

Eyewitness 14, from Batnaya:

The Peshmerga betrayed us, but the Herasat [Church Guards] also fled. That was disheartening because they were men from our own villages. But at least they let us know [ISIS was approaching] before they left us. That's the only difference between the Peshmerga and the Herasat—[the latter] at least told us we were on our own.⁹³

Eyewitness 15, from Bakhdida:

The Herasat soldiers are powerless. They weren't allowed to fire a single bullet. Their job wasn't the security of our towns, it was to take orders from the KDP, and that is what they did.⁹⁴

Eyewitness 16, former member of the Church Guards:

We were not given the chance to defend our towns. We didn't know they [the Peshmerga] would flee, and by the time ISIS arrived, we had nothing in our hands to defend our people with. We had to escape just like everyone else.⁹⁵

The KRG's systematic disarmament of the Church Guards—its own proxy force—seemed to confirm the worst fears that some Assyrians had of the force. That is, it would be forced to act on the orders of its paymaster rather than in the best interests of the communities it was purportedly created to protect.

Liberation from the Islamic State

The Nineveh Liberation Operation Command (NLOC) prosecuted the Iraqi government's anti-ISIS military campaign. Backed by the U.S.-led international coalition, the operation included Iraqi Security Forces, KRG Peshmerga, and, though not formally aligned with the U.S. and its allies, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).

The Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU) was the only NLOC-authorized Assyrian force to participate. The KDP and the Badr Organization did field their own Assyrian military proxies; however, none were officially recognized as part of NLOC. Additional information on the various forces which operated in the Nineveh Plain during the liberation phase and/or the post-conflict phase is found in the following section of this report.

In October 2016, operations to liberate northern Iraq began. By January 2017, the Nineveh Plain was free from the Islamic State's grasp. Yet control over the area was still contested. Kurdish forces and their Assyrian proxies controlled the major Assyrian towns of Alqosh, Tesqopa (Tel Eskof), Batnaya, and Bashiqa. Iraqi-security forces, including the Nineveh Plains Protection Units, controlled Bakhdida (Qaraqosh), Karemlash, Bartella, and Nimrud.⁹⁶ Brigade 50 of the PMF developed a presence in Tel Keppe; Brigade 30 later took up a presence in Bartella. However, these positions would change the following year.

In September 2017, the KRG held its highly controversial referendum on Kurdish independence. Officials maintained that voting would take place in all areas under KRG control.⁹⁷ This included several towns in the Nineveh Plain, as well as areas secured in the post-Ba'ath period and during anti-ISIS operations. Various Assyrian groups demanded that the Nineveh Plain be excluded, especially the Assyrian Democratic Movement⁹⁸ and Abnaa al-Nahrain.⁹⁹ Their concerns fell on deaf ears. The vote went forward with KRG officials claiming more than 90% overall approval,¹⁰⁰ accusations of fraud were rampant.¹⁰¹

An uneasy peace now exists between Baghdad and Erbil. The Nineveh Plain's Assyrians and other indigenous minorities are again caught in the middle, their futures hanging in the balance.

Erbil's decision to hold the referendum was a strategic miscalculation. Baghdad and the vast majority of the international community, including the U.S. and Iran, rejected the results.¹⁰² Iraqi central government forces reasserted control over Kirkuk, strategic oil fields, and border crossings. In the Nineveh Plain, KRG forces were driven north and east into Tel Keppe District and northern Sheikhan District. Kurdish authorities eventually agreed to suspend the referendum's results.¹⁰³ An uneasy peace now exists between Baghdad and Erbil. The Nineveh Plain's Assyrians and other indigenous minorities are again caught in the middle, their futures hanging in the balance.

Part IV: Security Forces in the Nineveh Plain

Despite the Islamic State's expulsion from the Nineveh Plain, concerns about security remain the main impediment preventing the return of local populations. Control over the area remains contested between Iraqi security forces, KRG security forces, PMF Brigade 30, PMF Brigade 50, and the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU). Figure 2 on page 31 depicts the current security arrangement in the Nineveh Plain.

Contested control and a legacy of mistrust towards the country's larger security forces means thousands of displaced persons and refugees, mostly minorities, refuse to return home. For those that have returned, many are wary of what the future holds.¹⁰⁴ Security fears remain high; the post-ISIS dynamic in the Nineveh Plain is not unlike the situation that enabled the Islamic State's invasion.

The various forces currently operating in the Nineveh Plain fall within the following categories:

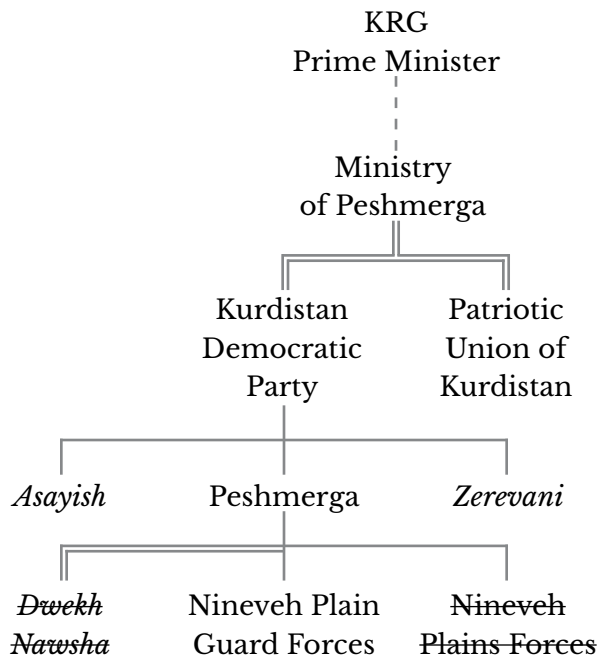
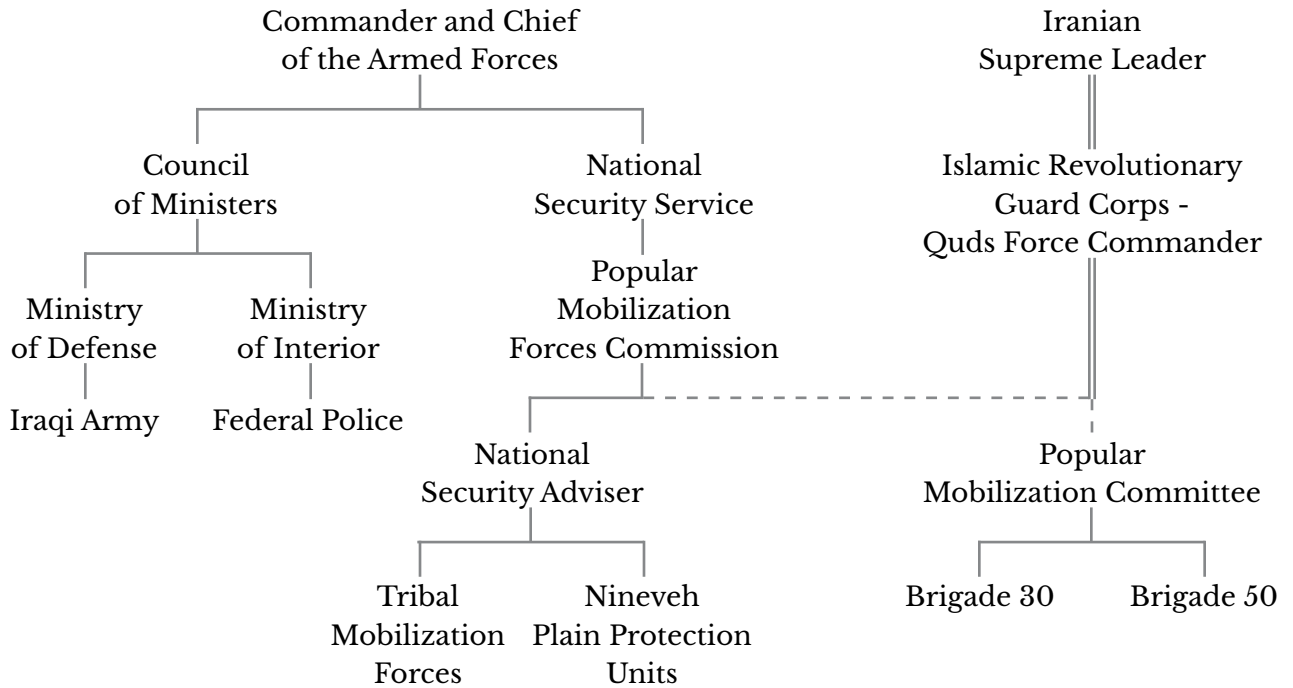
- Iraqi Army and police
- Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), also referred to as al-Hashd al-Sha'abi
- National Security Service-Administered PMF, namely the U.S.-backed Tribal Mobilization Forces and the Nineveh Plains Protection Units
- KRG security forces, including the Peshmerga, *Asayish*, and *Zerevani*
- KRG-funded Assyrian forces, including the Nineveh Plain Guard Forces and the now-defunct Nineveh Plain Forces

Figure 3 on page 32 demonstrates the operational control of the relevant armed forces in Ninewa Governorate.

Figure 2. Security in the Nineveh Plain as of May 2020



Figure 3. Operational Control of Relevant Armed Forces in Ninewa Governorate



— Chain of Command

NSS-administered forces report to the Iraqi Prime Minister via the National Security Service as they are the intended to according to the official chain of command.

- - - Formal Chain of Command

While all PMF forces in Ninewa Governorate officially fall under the command of the National Security Service via Nineveh Operations Command, in practice Iraqi authorities exert little influence over PMC-administered forces. Similarly, while KRG forces are formally administered by the Ministry of Peshmerga, they are in-practice highly-politicized forces operated by the Kurdistan Democratic Party or the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

== Informal Chain of Command

This graphic depicts PMC-administered PMF forces as subordinate to the Iranian Government in the unofficial chain of command because they are Iranian-backed forces. Despite the formal chain of command, real lines of influence flow from Iran to the PMC, and then through the dominant Iranian-backed Shia PMF groups, such as Kata'ib Hezbollah, to the smaller PMF units, such as Brigade 30 and Brigade 50. KRG security forces fall under two major categories: those led in-practice by the Kurdistan Democratic Party or those led by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. The Peshmerga units and other KRG-affiliated forces operating in the Nineveh Plain answer to the KDP.

Note: Figure 3 represents a highly-simplified chain of command designed to demonstrate real lines of authority for those forces operating in the Nineveh Plain. For a more comprehensive look at the chain of command of Iraqi forces, see Jessa Rose Dury-Agri, Omer Kassim, and Patrick Martin, *Iraqi Security Forces and Popular Mobilization Forces: Orders of Battle* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of War, 2017), 59-60.

Table 1 provides an overview of the various local security forces formed after the Islamic State invaded the Nineveh Plain.

Table 1. Overview of Local Security Forces Formed in Response to ISIS

Force	Status	Political Party Linkage(s)	Operational Control
Brigade 30 (Liwa al-Shabak)	Active	Shabak Democratic Assembly; Badr Organization	PMC
Brigade 50 (Babylon Brigades)	Active	Babylon Movement; Badr Organization	PMC
<i>Dwekh Nawsha</i>	Disbanded	Assyrian Patriotic Party	KRG
Nineveh Plain Forces	Disbanded	Bet Nahrain Democratic Party; KDP	KRG
Nineveh Plain Guard Forces	Active ¹	Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council; KDP	KRG
Nineveh Plain Protection Units	Active	Assyrian Democratic Movement	NSS

¹The operational capacity of the Nineveh Plain Guard Forces has been significantly reduced, and most registered soldiers are inactive.

The Popular Mobilization Forces

The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) is an Iraqi state-sponsored umbrella organization composed of various militias formed in the wake of the Iraqi Army's collapse at Mosul.¹⁰⁵ The PMF are divided into two branches. The vast majority are Shia Arab militias directly administered by the Popular Mobilization Committee (PMC), which was led by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis until his death in January 2020.¹⁰⁶ These are the forces that receive direct support from Iran and are generally seen as Iranian proxies. There are two PMC-administered PMF forces in the Nineveh Plain: Brigade 50 and Brigade 30. These forces are backed by the Badr Organization, an Iranian-backed Shia political party in Baghdad, and have a close operational relationship.

In contrast, a smaller number of PMF are administered by the National Security Service (NSS), most notably the U.S.-backed Tribal Mobilization Forces. The only NSS-administered PMF force in the Nineveh Plain is the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU).

The lasting presence of non-local, Iranian-backed PMF has exacerbated the Nineveh Plain's instability and stymied repatriation and reconstruction efforts. Attempts by the Iraqi central government to forcibly integrate the PMFs into the country's official security forces have been mixed. Some have complied; many have not.¹⁰⁷

The lasting presence of non-local, Iranian-backed PMF has exacerbated the Nineveh Plain's instability and stymied repatriation and reconstruction efforts.

In August 2018, former Iraqi Prime Minister Hader al-Abadi signed an executive order requiring that PMC-administered PMF forces to withdraw from Mosul city and the Nineveh Plain and transfer all soldiers in Ninewa Governorate to the operational and administrative control of the army-led Nineveh Operations Command. In July 2019, former Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi reissued the order. At the time of writing, these forces have not complied with these orders, demonstrating that these forces are outside state control.

On May 17, 2020, newly-appointed Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi met the Popular Mobilization Committee headquarters in Baghdad and reaffirmed his support for the institution, stating, “Al-Hashd belongs to the nation and is an official and legally established organization.”¹⁰⁸

National Security Service-Administered PMF

Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU)

STATUS: ACTIVE

A joint effort in November 2014 by residents of the Nineveh Plain and Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) officials, the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU) was formed to ensure Christian Assyrians a long-term presence in their historic homelands. The NPU registered upwards of 2,000 recruits,¹⁰⁹ but the central government only agreed to initially fund 500 soldiers. NPU leadership reported the recruitment process was halted so as to avoid building false hopes.¹¹⁰ The force has since grown to include approximately 600 active duty soldiers with several hundred reserves.¹¹¹ As noted earlier, the NPU was the only Assyrian force authorized by Nineveh Liberation Operation Command to participate in anti-ISIS operations in northern Iraq. It was also the only Assyrian force to receive training¹¹² and modest support from the US-led Combined Joint Task Force—Operation Inherent Resolve.¹¹³ On September 1, 2016, the NPU conducted an operation to liberate the town of Badana from Islamic State control with U.S. air cover and heavy weapons support. This operation would mark the first instance in which an exclusively Assyrian force conducted a joint operation with allied U.S. forces.

The NPU operates under the internal command of a council of officers that reports to the NSS. Despite its nominal affiliation to the PMF, it functions independently of PMF leadership,¹¹⁴ and reports directly to the NSS. NPU soldiers receive their salaries from the Iraqi Government, but the force remains underfunded and poorly equipped.¹¹⁵ The NPU also receives support for non-munitions needs from the Nineveh Plain Defense Fund (NPDF), a US-based nonprofit.¹¹⁶

Though backed by the ADM, the NPU is not a party-political entity; those serving in it are not members or supporters of any particular party. The force is also pan-sectarian, as its soldiers are drawn from several ancient churches in the Nineveh Plain.



NPU soldiers on duty during Palm Sunday festivities. (April 2019)

The NPU was the only Assyrian force authorized by Nineveh Liberation Operation Command to participate in anti-ISIS operations in northern Iraq.



NPU soldiers attend mass held in honor of the NPU on Iraqi National Army Day in Bakhda. (January 2019)

Baghdad recognized the NPU for its participation in anti-ISIS operations by authorizing the NPU's security mandate for all major towns in Hamdaniya District, including Bakhdida (Qaraqosh) and Karamlesh.¹¹⁷ In Bartella, an area also patrolled by the NPU, the situation is more complex. Following the liberation of the Nineveh Plain, the NPU was the dominant force in Bartella, however, its authority has become increasingly constrained as PMF Brigade 30 expanded in size and influence with the support, financial and otherwise, of the Badr Organization. There the NPU is now significantly outnumbered by PMF Brigade 30; it now controls only two checkpoints in the town.¹¹⁸

Despite the limitations of the NPU, its soldiers' connections to the local community provide reassurance and it has garnered significant popular support.

NPU-administered areas have seen the highest rates of return among Christian Assyrians (see page 42). Despite the limitations of the NPU, its soldiers' connections to the local community provide reassurance and it has garnered significant popular support. For many Assyrians, the events of 2014 demonstrate that the only way for the community to feel secure is for Assyrians to be able to protect themselves.

Yet the comparatively high rates of return do not mean that there are not concerns about the long-term viability of the undermanned and poorly-funded force. A January 2017 report published by *Christian Science Monitor* highlighted these concerns:

Most NPU members are from the Nineveh Plains and joined because they want Christian land to be protected by Christians, not the Iraqi Army or Kurdish Peshmerga. It's clear the force has inspired pride in its members. But its capabilities are still limited...The force has no heavy weapons and depends on help from the Iraqi Army and U.S. forces. While its soldiers engaged in several light skirmishes with IS fighters in the weeks after retaking the town, it would not have the firepower necessary to withstand a large-scale attack.¹¹⁹

NPU leadership claims the force keeps the hope for a standalone Nineveh Plain Governorate alive. The pursuit of a direct relationship with Baghdad is presented as an assertion of equality alongside the country's larger ethno-sectarian groups. Yacoob Yaco, member of ADM leadership and former member of the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament, provided the following statement to the API:

We were working towards the creation of a Nineveh Plain province long before ISIS. The Iraqi Council of Ministers issued a resolution on January 21, 2014 authorizing the creation of such a province. We were hopeful that this resolution would become a reality on the ground. When ISIS emerged, many people lost hope, thinking we could no longer pursue this project. However, the NPU has in some sense restored that hope and is keeping it alive.¹²⁰

Popular Mobilization Committee-Administered PMF

Brigade 50 (“Babylon Brigades”)

STATUS: ACTIVE



Brigade 50 soldiers (November 2016)

Brigade 50, also known as the “Babylon Brigades,” misleadingly presents itself as a Christian force and as such is used to project diversity within the PMF. It is led by a Christian, Rayan al-Kildani (Rian Salem Sadiq), but its rank and file consist primarily of Shia Arabs and Shabaks.¹²¹ Many of its non-Christian fighters hail from Baghdad’s Sadr City, Muthanna, and Dhi Qar. In other words, Brigade 50 is a Christian force in name only. According to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the militia was “formed by the Iranian-controlled Kaitab al-Imam Ali (Imam Ali Battalion).”¹²²

Brigade 50 entered Nineveh near the end of anti-ISIS operations. It originally operated throughout the Tel Keppe, Hamdaniya, and Bashiqa Districts. More recently, its footprint has shrunk to Tel Keppe. Brigade 50-administered areas show little to no Assyrian repopulation. Observers note that the force is only there to aid Iranian proxies in Baghdad create a “Shia belt” stretching from Tehran to Beirut. The Badr Organization has officially vowed that “any violation to Babylon means a violation to Badr.”¹²³

At the start of the Battle of Mosul in 2016, a video of al-Kildani was released in which he tells his soldiers that the battle will be revenge against “the descendants of Yezid [a historical Sunni figure loathed by Shia Muslims].”¹²⁴ In another video al-Kildani professes, “After Iraq is freed of D’aesh (ISIS) pigs, the Babylon Brigades will break into two factions: One will go to Syria and the other to Yemen.”¹²⁵ Many Assyrians feel these statements demonstrate al-Kaldani’s motivations and interests are far from those expressed by the Christian Assyrian community in Iraq, with whom he has no tangible relationship.

Brigade 50 has hindered the return of displaced populations. Towns with a Brigade 50 presence have seen negligible returns among Christian Assyrians. Assyrians cite the group’s record of illegal land grabs and human rights abuses. In July 2019, the U.S. levied sanctions against al-Kildani:

Rayan al-Kildani was designated for being a foreign person who is responsible for or complicit in, or who has directly or indirectly engaged in, serious human rights abuse. Al-Kildani is the leader of the 50th Brigade militia. In May 2018, a video circulated among Iraqi human rights civil society organizations in which al-Kildani cut off the ear of a handcuffed detainee.¹²⁶

Kaldani has been described as a ‘fervent loyalist’ of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.¹²⁷ Following the U.S. airstrikes which killed Soleimani and al-Muhandis, Kaldani called for U.S. forces to withdraw.

Towns with a Brigade 50 presence have seen negligible returns among Christian Assyrians.



Rayan Kaldani (second from left) pictured with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Hadi Al-Ameri, Qais Khazali, and Muqtada al-Sadr at a press conference. (December 2015)

Brigade 30 (“Liwa al-Shabak”/ “Qurwat Sahl Nīnawā”)

STATUS: ACTIVE

Headquartered in the Assyrian town of Bartella, Brigade 30 is a Shabak-majority force affiliated with the Shabak Democratic Assembly¹²⁸ but operating under the leadership of the Badr Organization. Formed in September 2014, the force is estimated to have approximately 1,500 soldiers. A former Shabak MP claimed he obtained ‘verbal approval’ from the Iraqi Ministry of Defense for the creation of the force to ‘fight ISIS terrorists.’¹²⁹ Unlike the case of Brigade 50, there is no doubt that the overwhelming majority of troops are local men.

In addition to their positions in Bartella and surrounding Shabak areas, Brigade 30 controls the main trade highway between Mosul and Erbil.

The presence of Brigade 30 in Bartella has disrupted Christian Assyrian resettlement.

The presence of Brigade 30 in Bartella has disrupted Christian Assyrian resettlement. Brigade 30 has gained a reputation for perpetrating human rights abuses against local Assyrian populations. Brigade 30 soldiers have been accused of physical intimidation, rape, extortion, illegal arrests, kidnappings, and property theft. The API has recorded dozens of accounts of physical intimidation, sexual harassment, religious discrimination, robbery, and theft of land or property. In July 2019 the U.S. levied sanctions against the group’s leader, Waad Qado:

Waad Qado was designated for being a foreign person who is or has been a leader or official of an entity, including government entity, that has engaged in, or whose members have engaged in, serious human rights abuses relating to the leader’s or official’s tenure.¹³⁰

Local populations fear that Brigade 30 is using the post-ISIS instability to seize a greater claim over cities like Bakhdida (Qaraqosh) and Bartella and advance demographic change in historically Assyrian areas. The shifting demographics in Hamdaniya District in recent decades have been a source of friction between Assyrians and Shabaks.¹³¹

KRG-Aligned Forces

Following the ISIS takeover of the Nineveh Plain, the KRG formed or supported the formation of multiple Assyrian forces, including the Nineveh Plain Guard Forces (NPGF), the Nineveh Plains Forces (NPF), and *Dwekh Nawsha*.¹³²

To many Nineveh Plain residents, the KRG’s use of Assyrian proxies was part public relations ploy and part political maneuver. More specifically, they represented another effort by KRG authorities to reassert influence in the region to ultimately facilitate its annexation, just as they did with the Church Guards before them. These forces helped 1) bolster the Peshmerga’s image as a multi-ethnic institution, and the KRG more generally, as inclusive and welcoming to minorities, 2) downplay the Assyrian community’s mistrust of the Peshmerga, and 3) create the illusion of support for the Peshmerga’s return to the Nineveh Plain.

Nineveh Plain Guard Forces (NPGF)

STATUS: ACTIVE

Often referred to as the Christian Peshmerga, the Nineveh Plain Guard Forces (NPGF) is the largest of the KRG's Assyrian proxies. It is made up primarily of former members of the Church Guards (see page 19) and is politically tied to the KRG-funded Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council (CSAPC), a party founded by former KRG Minister Sarkis Aghajan.¹³³ The CSAPC is affiliated with KRG President Nechirvan Barzani's faction of the KDP.

The NPGF was estimated to have registered approximately 1,500 soldiers. However, it is unclear how many were on active duty at any one time. Many of its soldiers claim to enlist with the militia as a source of income, rather than to support its ideology, as livelihood opportunities are limited.¹³⁴

NPGF soldiers did participate in the Nineveh Plain's liberation embedded among Peshmerga ranks, but the force's operational capacity was drastically curtailed after KRG forces withdrew from areas in Sinjar and the Nineveh Plain following the September 2017 Kurdish independence referendum. The NPGF now plays only a minor security role, its presence limited to Tesqopa (Tel Eskof). Most NPGF soldiers are no longer on active duty, but many allegedly continue to collect salaries.¹³⁵

Nineveh Plain Forces (NPF)

STATUS: DEFUNCT

The Nineveh Plain Forces (NPF) was founded in January 2015 by the Bet Nahrain Democratic Party (BNDP), a small¹³⁶ KDP-backed Assyrian political party. Like the NPGF, the Nineveh Plain Forces were also registered within the Ministry of Peshmerga. At one time the group claimed it had upwards of 600 soldiers.¹³⁷ Yet some observers alleged that no more than 50 were active at any one time. When the Nineveh Plain was liberated the NPF secured a small, mostly symbolic presence in Batnaya until the October 2017 withdrawal of KRG forces following the Kurdish referendum.¹³⁸

The NPF's stated goals were similar to those of the Nineveh Plains Protection Units; the key difference being that the NPF and the BNDP advocated for a Nineveh Plain Governorate administered by the KRG. BNDP leader Romeo Hakkari has been a vocal proponent for Kurdish independence.¹³⁹ But following the failed referendum the NPF was stripped of its security responsibilities. The last official update on its social media accounts is dated September 2, 2017.¹⁴⁰ The force was disbanded soon after.



NPGF soldiers receive training at a Peshmerga training base in the Kurdistan Region. (February 2016)



Swedish MP Lars Adaktusson meets with NPF leader Safaa Khamro. (April 2016)

Dwekh Nawsha

STATUS: DEFUNCT

Dwekh Nawsha (whose name in Assyrian means “self-sacrifice”) was an all-volunteer¹⁴¹ Assyrian force created on August 11, 2014 by members of the Assyrian Patriotic Party (APP). Though it was never formally authorized by the KRG Ministry of Peshmerga, but operated under Peshmerga command¹⁴² and was trained and partially-equipped by Peshmerga officials.¹⁴³ However, according to various sources, “limited capabilities did not make the brigade a significant factor in the ISIS/Kurdish Peshmerga conflict.”¹⁴⁴

At its peak, APP leadership claimed it retained nearly 200 active soldiers. Yet most reports suggested the number was much less. The group reportedly recruited a handful of foreign volunteers, ranging from a former nightclub doorman¹⁴⁵ to former U.S. Marines.¹⁴⁶

In August 2014, *National Geographic* described the force as “symbolic, rather than active,” estimating it had less than 50 soldiers.¹⁴⁷ According to an April 2015 report by CNN:

So far, the militia has only assembled and trained 40 fighters. [...] Since they are still small and have no heavy weaponry, the *Dwekh Nawsha* fighters say they coordinate closely with local Kurdish Peshmerga commanders and share the same foxholes on the frontline.¹⁴⁸

Indeed, *Dwekh Nawsha* did not participate in operations to liberate Nineveh. One of the militia’s leaders was quoted in a January 2017 report by the *Christian Science Monitor*:

The *Dwekh Nawsha* fighters need approval from the peshmerga for most of their movements. For two years, they waited at their base, taking shifts on the earthen berm that marked the front line, where they peered at IS fighters less than four miles away in the town of Batnaya.

But in October, when the moment finally arrived to launch the battle for the majority-Christian town, the *peshmerga* commanders told *Dwekh Nawsha* fighters to stand down. “We were ready to attack. They even told us the hour, and we were all preparing to leave the base at 4 a.m. when the order came that we couldn’t go,” says Samir Oraha, a team leader in the militia. “We all became depressed at that moment. We were angry and sad.”¹⁴⁹

The force was ultimately disbanded, and official social media accounts for the *Dwekh Nawsha* have since been disabled.



Dwekh Nawsha soldiers pictured with APP President Emanuel Khoshaba.

MISREPRESENTATIONS IN THE MEDIA

In recent years, there has been widespread concern that misinformation about security realities in the Nineveh Plain is causing tangible harm to the interests of local minorities. There is a long history of misinformation and popular misperceptions about the status of minorities in Iraq, particularly those living under KRG rule. The level of interaction with misinformation remains high and the media continues to play a role in spreading false narratives at the expense of minorities.

For example, in April 2016, BBC published an article “Christian militia fighting ISIS” covering Brigade 50 [Babylon Brigades], despite the fact that it is a Shia Arab-majority force.¹⁵⁰ Similarly, while the *Dwekh Nawsha* was limited in number and operational capacity, it received extensive media coverage and was sensationalized despite the fact that the militia never saw combat. For example, in August 2016, Assyrian Patriotic Party President Emmanuel Khoshaba Youkhana appeared on *The Rubin Report*, where he was introduced as the “Commander in Chief of the Assyrian Army.”¹⁵¹ KRG-aligned militias garnered widespread media attention, with numerous articles quoting KDP-affiliated informants maintaining that the Peshmerga are more than capable and willing to defend the Nineveh Plain, making no mention of the Peshmerga’s 2014 tactical withdrawal.¹⁵²

These symbolic or pseudo forces are used by a variety of actors pursuing competing agendas to create the illusion of support for their claims to these territories at the expense of Assyrians and other minorities. These conflicting and often false narratives have also served to diminish the importance of the NPU as a grassroots initiative. Indeed, that news outlets cover these forces without proper vetting and nuance suffocates authentic Assyrian voices.

Failure to report verified and trustworthy information with regard to Assyrians in Iraq, the Nineveh Plain in particular, has damaging effects and real-world consequences for them. The spread of misinformation has muddled the organic voices within the community, making advocates, NGOs, and Western government officials less able to understand their needs. These reports have also created the illusion of disunity among the Assyrian population, which threatens to deepen existing divisions within the community. Assyrians in Iraq are certainly beset by denominational/sect and political divisions, but it is critical for reporters to distinguish between organic and artificial divides in order to avoid undermining the advancement of community interests.

Part V: Assessing Returns

Table 2 on page 42 provides estimates of Assyrian rate of return to the Nineveh Plain. Figure 4 on page 43 presents the same data in graphic form. All figures reflect this report's publication date.

There are numerous factors that influence return decisions, such as level of devastation and lack of economic opportunities. However, for Christian Assyrians, security remains the most salient concern.¹⁵³ As demonstrated in Table 2 and Figure 4 below, the return rates to areas secured by the NPU far exceed return rates in those towns outside the control of the NPU. In these areas, rehabilitation efforts are bearing meaningful and tangible returns. In contrast, the presence of PMC-administered PMF forces and KRG forces in other areas has prevented or disrupted return, and in some cases, has hindered the work of NGOs and donor nations.

In testimony provided at a September 2019 hearing hosted by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, the Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator for the Middle East Bureau at USAID, Hallam Ferguson, testified that rates of return are higher in Qaraqosh (Bakhdida) due to “comparatively good security.”¹⁵⁴

The following sections analyze the rates of return shown in Table 2 and Figure 4. It also addresses how different security factors have either promoted or impeded these figures.

Table 2: Rate of Assyrian Return to the Nineveh Plain¹⁵⁵

Village	Security Arrangement	Pre-ISIS Population	Current Population	Current Percent of Return
Alqosh ¹	Peshmerga/Asayish	6,000	4,500	75%
Bakhdida (Qaraqosh)	NPU	50,000	35,000	70%
Baqopa	Peshmerga/Asayish	1,000	250	25%
Bartella ²	NPU and Brigade 30	10,000	3,000	30%
Bashiqa ³	Iraqi Army; formerly Brigade 50	4,500	1,250	28%
Batnaya ⁴	Iraqi Army; formerly Brigade 50	2,500	50	2%
Karamlesh	NPU	3,000	1,500	50%
Tel Keppe (Tel Kayf)	Brigade 50	3,000	200	7%
Tesqopa (Tel Eskof)	Peshmerga/Asayish	10,000	2,000	20%
All		90,000	47,750	53%

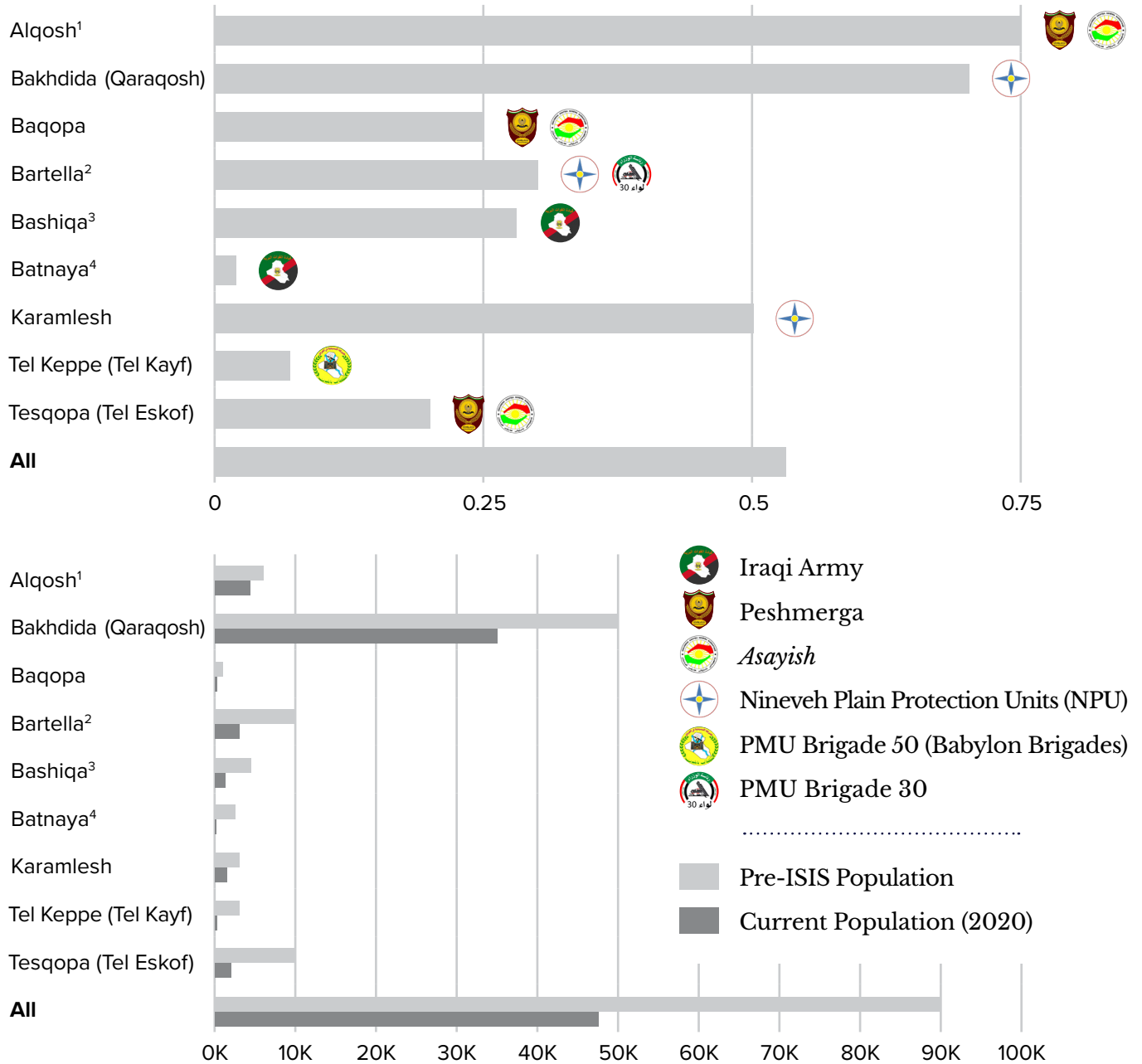
¹The ISIS never assumed territorial control of Alqosh despite the fact that it was abandoned by the Peshmerga on August 6, 2014. Therefore, it was left fully intact. The Peshmerga reasserted its authority in Alqosh on August 9, 2014. However, in some cases returns were protracted due to lack of necessary confidence in KRG-affiliated security forces. Twenty-five percent of Alqosh's pre-ISIS population remains externally-displaced.

²Following the liberation of the Nineveh Plain, the NPU was the dominant force in Bartella, however, its authority has become increasingly constrained as Brigade 30 has expanded in size and influence with the support, financial and otherwise, of the Badr Organization and nonlocal PMF forces.

³From late October 2016 to October 2017, security in Bashiqa was controlled by Peshmerga forces until their withdrawal from the area when Iraqi forces led a campaign to restore federal authority in the region, enabling Brigade 50 to develop a temporary presence in Bashiqa. Most returnees of Assyrian background returned to Bashiqa between August and October 2017. Brigade 50's presence hindered additional returns. Bashiqa is now controlled by Iraqi Army forces, but many displaced persons continue to lack the necessary confidence in current security arrangements.

⁴Following its liberation from ISIS, Brigade 50 controlled Batnaya until Iraqi Army forces replaced them in the early months of 2019.

Figure 4: Rate of Assyrian Return to the Nineveh Plain



¹The ISIS never assumed territorial control of Alqosh despite the fact that it was abandoned by the Peshmerga on August 6, 2014. Therefore, it was left fully intact. The Peshmerga reasserted its authority in Alqosh on August 9, 2014. However, in some cases returns were protracted due to lack of necessary confidence in KRG-affiliated security forces. Twenty-five percent of Alqosh's pre-ISIS population remains externally-displaced.

²Following the liberation of the Nineveh Plain, the NPU was the dominant force in Bartella, however, its authority has become increasingly constrained as Brigade 30 has expanded in size and influence with the support, financial and otherwise, of the Badr Organization and nonlocal PMF forces.

³From late October 2016 to October 2017, security in Bashiqa was controlled by Peshmerga forces until their withdrawal from the area when Iraqi forces led a campaign to restore federal authority in the region, enabling Brigade 50 to develop a temporary presence in Bashiqa. Most returnees of Assyrian background returned to Bashiqa between August and October 2017. Brigade 50's presence hindered additional returns. Bashiqa is now controlled by Iraqi Army forces, but many displaced persons continue to lack the necessary confidence in current security arrangements.

⁴Following its liberation from ISIS, Brigade 50 controlled Batnaya until Iraqi Army forces replaced them in the early months of 2019.

Understanding the Rate of Return to NPU-Controlled Areas

The rate of Assyrian return to NPU-administered towns outpaces those administered by other forces. In fact, NPU-administered towns have more returnees than those areas secured by all other forces combined.

The NPU currently controls security in most of Hamdaniya District, including Bakhdida (Qaraqosh), Karamlesh, Bartella, and Nimrud. Following its liberation, the NPU was the dominant force in Bartella, but not long after, the Badr-backed Brigade 30's expanded footprint came at the NPU's expense. Consequently, the rate of return in Bartella is significantly lower than in other NPU-administered locales.

NPU soldiers are uniquely-motivated by their familial and cultural ties to local populations.

NPU soldiers are uniquely-motivated by their familial and cultural ties to local populations. The force's reliability is expressed through the complete absence of reported violations and transgressions against it. Local residents provided the API with the following testimonials about the role of the NPU in their respective communities:

Eyewitness 17, from Bakhdida:

*It gives us a sense of comfort and security to know that our own people are guarding our towns. Their future is tied to ours, so we know we can trust them. We feel safe with the NPU here. Even if they are small in number, we know they would never abandon us. We know they will protect us no matter what happens.*¹⁵⁶

Eyewitness 18, from Bakhdida:

*Life has returned to Bakhdida. Thanks be to God, most of our people have returned. They would not have returned if the NPU was not here. I can say that with certainty, because it is true for me and my family.*¹⁵⁷

Eyewitness 19, from Karamlesh:

*If a force comprised of our own people was defending the Nineveh Plain when ISIS came, they would have fought to defend it. Even if they didn't have enough weapons. They never would have fled. They would have at least gotten us to safety. We know the NPU would never leave us behind.*¹⁵⁸

The NPU may be the Nineveh Plain's most-trusted force. But serious doubts remain as to its viability as to whether or not it would constitute a reliable defense in the event of another ISIS-level onslaught. One resident of Bakhdida expressed the following sentiments to the API: "We have faith in the NPU, but they don't have the numbers and equipment they need in order to protect us in the long-term. It's impossible for a security force to survive without real support."¹⁵⁹

Understanding the Rate of Return to KRG-Controlled Areas

Specifically, the Peshmerga's tactical withdrawal preceding the Islamic State's attack in August 2014 has left the Christian Assyrian population largely unable to depend on KRG forces.

The KRG's longstanding goal to formally annex the Nineveh Plain remains unchanged. KRG security forces continue to operate in the northernmost towns of the Nineveh Plain, including the major Assyrian towns of Alqosh and Tesqopa (Tel Eskof). Peshmerga-controlled towns have comparably low rates of return, ranging between 20 and 25 percent. The security situation has even affected returns to Alqosh, where—despite the fact that the town never fell to the Islamic State—many residents fled and never returned. Regardless of the locale, the primary reason cited by individuals for not returning home to KRG-administered areas is a deep distrust of these forces. Specifically, the Peshmerga's tactical withdrawal preceding the Islamic State's attack in August 2014 has left the Christian Assyrian population largely unable to depend on KRG forces. The following testimonials accumulated by the API stand as stark evidence of this trend.

Eyewitness 20, from Tesqopa:

*We don't want the Peshmerga here. They [KRG security forces] were here before ISIS, and look what happened to our homes and our people. Most of the people of this town are gone because of what they did. How can we be expected to trust them again?*¹⁶⁰

Eyewitness 21, from Baqopa:

*The Peshmerga already showed us that they are not here to protect us. Are we supposed to forget that they abandoned us to ISIS just five years ago? We are still dealing with the consequences of their actions, and yet they returned here and put up their flags as though nothing happened.*¹⁶¹

Eyewitness 22, from Tesqopa:

*If a force comprised of our own people was defending the Nineveh Plain when ISIS came, they would have fought to defend it. Even if they didn't have enough weapons. They never would have fled. They would have at least gotten us to safety. We know the NPU would never leave us behind.*¹⁶²

Eyewitness 23, from Alqosh:

*There won't be any more protests in Alqosh. There is no freedom here. There is no democracy under the KRG. If you demand your rights, you suffer the consequences. The people here don't want any more problems. But we've learned—we are used to it. They wanted to instill fear in our people, and they've succeeded.*¹⁶³

Eyewitness 24, from Tesqopa:

*There aren't many of us left. If the Peshmerga and Asayish don't leave, we will. And that's what they [the KRG] want.*¹⁶⁴

The API has also accumulated numerous reports of harassment and intimidation at the hands of KRG security forces. For example, on November 5, 2017 Tesqopa native Fuad Masoud, an ADM official and officer in the Nineveh Plains Protection Units, was denied passage through a Peshmerga-manned checkpoint and blocked from returning home after running errands outside the area.¹⁶⁵ A 2017 report by Minority Rights Group International lends additional credibility to Masoud's claim:

Ninewa (sic) Protection Unit (NPU) forces, not affiliated with the KRG, who are on rotation are regularly delayed at KRG checkpoints when attempting to return to Ninewa. For example, a commander was prevented from entering for 17 days, due to restrictions at surrounding Kurdish checkpoints.¹⁶⁶

Allegations of arbitrary short-term detentions without formal charges are also not uncommon. Detainees claim to have been beaten, threatened, and held in solitary confinement for extended periods. For example, between November 8-9, 2017, four Assyrian activists from Tesqopa were allegedly held for several days without charges. Each claimed they were interrogated about their activism, including their involvement in a public Facebook page supporting the central government's campaign to reassert control over the Nineveh Plain.¹⁶⁷

The presence of KRG forces and their alleged extra-judicial practices has created an intimidating environment.

The presence of KRG forces and their alleged extra-judicial practices has created an intimidating environment. Many Nineveh Plain residents claim that Kurdish security forces make ample use of informants and constantly monitor the social media activities of activists and journalists alike:

Those who accuse the government of land grabbing and criticize violations discussed in earlier chapters of this [Minority Rights Group International] report—including the KRG blockades of Sinjar and Tel Kaif, Peshmerga looting of minority properties, and restrictions on IDP returns to regained minority territories in Hamdaniya and elsewhere—are frequently subjected to arrests, detention and threats so severe that they prompt emigration.¹⁶⁸

Attempts by Nineveh Plain residents to push back have consistently been met with a heavy hand. In the summer of 2017, the residents of Alqosh held three protests aimed at preventing KDP-affiliated officials from unilaterally replacing the town's mayor with a KDP member. Following the third protest, KDP-affiliated officials threatened eleven individuals with arrest, including the head of the local branch of the Assyrian Democratic Movement. No additional protests occurred. A federal court ruling later ordered the previous mayor to be reinstated, but he was then abducted and beaten before KDP-affiliated officials deposed him a second time.¹⁶⁹

The Peshmerga has been accused of blocking members of minoritized communities who do not support the KDP from returning home to Sinjar and the Nineveh Plain.¹⁷⁰ The KRG has also been accused of politicizing and deliber-

ately hijacking humanitarian efforts for political gain and the control of local populations. Independent NGOs have reported repeated obstructions since 2014 by Peshmerga and *Asayish* forces to humanitarian efforts in minority-inhabited areas in Ninewa.¹⁷¹

Understanding the Rate of Return to Brigade 30-Controlled Areas

Prior to the rise and spread of the Islamic State, Bartella's majority Assyrian population numbered near 10,000.¹⁷² Today that number sits at less than 3,000. In other words, the return rate among Bartella's Assyrian population is approximately 30 percent. This means that of all the towns with an NPU presence, Bartella's rate of return is the lowest owing to the concurrent presence of Brigade 30 soldiers. The largest wave of Christian Assyrian return took place between August and October 2017, at which point the NPU was still the dominant force. Since Brigade 30 established primary control of the town, further Assyrian return stalled.

Many residents fear that Brigade 30's seizure of security responsibilities in historically Assyrian areas not only threatens their political interests, but advances demographic change.

Many residents fear that Brigade 30's seizure of security responsibilities in historically Assyrian areas not only threatens their political interests, but advances demographic change.¹⁷³ Indeed, in the years since ISIS, historically Assyrian areas have been repopulated with non-locals—mostly members of the Shabak community—which is viewed by some as a deliberate effort to consolidate the aforementioned "Shia belt."

The API has accumulated dozens of allegations of harassment, religious discrimination, robbery, and intimidation at the hands of Brigade 30. For example, a number of female respondents interviewed reported that Assyrian women and young girls—generally when traveling without a male companion—are often subjected to verbal sexual harassment and pressure to wear a *hijab*.¹⁷⁴ Brigade 30 soldiers are also alleged to have threatened the town's primary Syriac Orthodox Church and its clergy.¹⁷⁵ Below are several testimonials from Assyrians regarding Brigade 30's negative influence in the Nineveh Plain:

Eyewitness 25, from Bartella:

*They [Brigade 30] can get away with anything. We are afraid of them because they are not accountable to anyone. If they want, they can drape their flags over our churches, in front of our homes, and nobody will dare say anything.*¹⁷⁶

Eyewitness 26, from Bartella:

*Their soldiers tell us, 'We run these towns, and we will do what we want.' They don't even listen to the Prime Minister. Who in Iraq has more power than the Prime Minister?*¹⁷⁷

Eyewitness 27, from Bartella:

*My own relatives won't return here [to Bartella] because of Liwa al-Shabak [Brigade 30]. It's common knowledge that they are preventing return, but no one can do anything about it.*¹⁷⁸

A 2019 U.S. Department of Treasury report appears to confirm many of these allegations:

The 30th Brigade has extracted money from the population around Bartella, in the Ninewa Plain, through extortion, illegal arrests, and kidnappings. The 30th Brigade has frequently detained people without warrants, or with fraudulent warrants, and has charged arbitrary customs fees at its checkpoints. Members of the local population allege that the 30th Brigade has been responsible for egregious offenses including physical intimidation, extortion, robbery, kidnapping, and rape.¹⁷⁹

Understanding the Rate of Return to Brigade 50-Controlled Areas

As discussed earlier in this report, Brigade 50 is a pseudo-Christian force. It is led by a Christian with ties to the Badr Organization, an Iranian-backed Shia political party in Baghdad. The force's rank and file are composed almost entirely of non-local Shia Arabs and Shabaks. Its soldiers have been accused of criminal activity and the intimidation and harassment of local populations.

In the immediate post-ISIS environment, Brigade 50 took up positions in the village of Tel Keppe (in Tel Kayf District) and parts of Hamdaniya District. Following an attack on an NPU base in July 2017, Brigade 50 was expelled from Hamdaniya.¹⁸⁰ In October 2017, Brigade 50 took up positions in Bashiqa and Batnaya, after the enforced withdrawal of KRG forces following the failed independence referendum. In early 2019, the Iraqi army replaced Brigade 50 in Batnaya and Bashiqa. Between 2017 and 2019, these areas saw almost no return.

Brigade 50 now operates exclusively in the town of Tel Keppe, where the rate of Assyrian return remains negligible. The API has accumulated numerous testimonials regarding Brigade 50's negative effects in Tel Keppe:

Eyewitness 28, current displaced person from Tel Keppe:

*Hardly anyone has returned to Tel Keppe [town], and they won't until [Brigade 50] is gone. Tel Keppe is like a completely different world now.*¹⁸¹

Eyewitness 29, current refugee from Tel Keppe:

*The fact that hardly any Assyrians have returned to Tel Keppe speaks for itself.*¹⁸²

Eyewitness 30, Iraqi Assyrian NGO worker:

*The presence of the Babylon Brigades has prevented the return of its residents. Similarly, it has prevented development. While progress is being made in other parts of the Nineveh Plain, the same cannot be said for Tel Kepe.*¹⁸³

The following passage from a recent US Department of the Treasury report does not mince words when describing the force’s destabilizing efforts in Nineveh:

The 50th Brigade is reportedly the primary impediment to the return of internally displaced persons to the Ninewa Plain. The 50th Brigade has systematically looted homes in Batnaya, which is struggling to recover from ISIS’s brutal rule. The 50th Brigade has reportedly illegally seized and sold agricultural land, and the local population has accused the group of intimidation, extortion, and harassment of women.¹⁸⁴

The complete lack of return to areas controlled by Brigade 50 signify the threats posed to the local Christian Assyrian community.

The complete lack of return to areas controlled by Brigade 50 signify the threats posed to the local Christian Assyrian community. In the absence of Brigade 50, towns like Batnaya and Bashiqa are now more recently, but still slowly, progressing; however, even in these areas the Iraqi Army has failed to match the rates of return produced by the NPU.

Opposition to the NPU

Though NPU efforts—with limited federal support—are producing outsized gains in the return of displaced Christian Assyrians to the Nineveh Plain, opposition to the NPU (or Assyrian-led security forces in general) has been expressed by various actors, including Iraqi and KRG officials, as well as prominent Christian religious clerics.

For example, former Nineveh Governor Atheel al-Nujaifi (2009-2015) argues that the formation of minority-led security forces is problematic:

“I think it’s very dangerous for these minority groups to have their own forces. [...] These minorities can be destroyed for that. If Christians establish a Christian force to protect the Christian area, how much do you think they will be? A couple hundred. A couple hundred want to fight the majority...”¹⁸⁵

Should minority-led forces, such as the NPU, receive proper funding and support as well as comprehensive training, they have the potential to meet long-term local security needs.

Indeed, Nujaifi echoes common concerns, namely that minority-led forces are small in number and thus ineffective in the face of a major security threat. He also suggests that such a force may be perceived as a threat by neighboring ethnic groups and consequently provoke attacks on these communities. This analysis fails to account for the fact that recruitment levels among Christian Assyrians is high in proportion to their numbers. Should minority-led forces, such as the NPU, receive proper funding and support as well as comprehensive training, they have the potential to meet long-term local security needs.

For many Assyrians, the events of 2014—namely the collapse of the Iraqi Army and the withdrawal of the Peshmerga—validate claims that the only way minorities will be protected is if they are enabled to protect themselves.

The notion that a Christian-led force would make the community a target for majority groups discounts the stark reality that Christian Assyrians have consistently been targeted in post-2003 Iraq in the absence of a security apparatus deployed on their behalf. For many Assyrians, the events of 2014—namely the collapse of the Iraqi Army and the withdrawal of the Peshmerga—validate claims that the only way minorities will be protected is if they are enabled to protect themselves.

In January 2020, *Rudaw* (a KDP-affiliated media outlet) published an op-ed from KRG Minister of Transportation and Communication Ano Abdoka, a KDP figure of Assyrian background likened to former Minister Sarkis Aghajan (see page 20). Abdoka expressly criticized the NPU as a “small militia” which “cannot affect the security equation at all,” advocating for the implementation of joint security measures that would facilitate the Peshmerga’s return to the Nineveh Plain.¹⁸⁶ Abdoka’s claims—evidently driven by the KDP’s agenda with regard to the disputed territories—disregards the NPU’s effectiveness in facilitating Christian Assyrian return to the Nineveh Plain in significant proportions whereas other forces, including the Peshmerga and Iraqi Army, have failed to do so for reasons outlined in previous sections.

Christian religious leaders in Iraq have also expressed concerns—and in some cases, opposition—to the presence of Christian Assyrian security forces. For example, in July 2019, Chaldean Catholic Patriarch Louis Sako issued the following statement:

From our side, we are officially announcing our “refusal” of the presence of any Iraqi armed movement that carries Christian name or feature. On the contrary, we encourage our youth to join official Iraqi Army and federal police services, and those in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to join Peshmerga forces. We respect individual decisions to join *Hashid al-Shaabi* or to get involved in politics, but not to form a Christian “brigade”, since forming a Christian armed militia contradicts the Christian spirituality that calls for love, tolerance, forgiveness, and peace.¹⁸⁷

Such statements have prompted growing criticism among the Christian Assyrian population about the involvement of religious figures in matters related to governance and security. Further, Sako essentially advocates for a return to the conditions that drove hundreds of thousands of minorities into emigration since 2003 and ultimately enabled the events of 2014, failing to account for the collapse of security in the wake of ISIS. Further, Assyrians and other minoritized peoples are underrepresented, to varying degrees, in all Iraqi and KRG security agencies as these forces have their own dominant demographics.

Part VI: Policy Recommendations

In many ways Ninewa is a microcosm of the troubles that plague Iraq. Indigenous peoples are caught in the middle—victims of the competition among more powerful, nonlocal actors, some domestic and others foreign—of a struggle for control of their historic homelands. Reconstruction efforts have produced mixed results.¹⁸⁸ Many residents report difficulties in finding gainful employment. Allegations of political corruption are rampant. In many areas, security remains a private good.

Tens of thousands of Christian Assyrians and other minoritized peoples remain displaced, stuck in transitional spaces, and unsure if they can ever return home. The increasing psychological and financial strains of protracted displacement leave many displaced Assyrians hoping for the conditions that would enable their safe return.

The failure to stabilize the security dynamic in Ninewa and incorporate local populations into the Iraqi state as equal security and political partners will come at considerable risk to these communities.

This section provides a series of policy recommendations. It is not meant to be exhaustive with respect to addressing all of Iraq's troubles, as interlinked as they are. Rather, the primary aims are threefold:

- Raise awareness that unless drastic changes are made, the Nineveh Plain and its peoples will continue to be the pawns of domestic and international actors alike in their struggle for influence in Iraq. As long as this continues, Iraq will inch closer and closer to state failure and complete collapse;
- Help ensure Assyrians and other indigenous peoples retain a place in their historic homelands;

The failure to stabilize the security dynamic in Ninewa and incorporate local populations into the Iraqi state as equal security and political partners will come at considerable risk to these communities.

- Emphasize that Ninewa’s minorities, as well as other groups inhabiting Iraq’s disputed territories, are integral to the security and stability of the country’s most strategically valuable territory and, by extension, efforts to promote pluralism and democracy.

Policy Recommendation 1

Remove PMC-Administered Forces from Nineveh

PMF Brigade 30 and PMF Brigade 50 are both major impediments to resettlement and reconstruction. Concrete steps must be taken to minimize the presence of Brigade 30 and Brigade 50 in the Nineveh Plain. This will require the U.S. to increase its support to Baghdad and Iraqi security forces. Local security forces under National Security Service control, de facto and de jure, must then be deployed to prevent a power vacuum from emerging that Erbil or the remnants of ISIS could potentially exploit. Again, these local forces, one example being the Nineveh Plains Protection Units, must have the full support of Iraqi security forces and, by extension, the U.S. Government. They should be treated as equal security and political partners whose participation is integral in bringing about stability to one of Iraq’s most contested territories.

Policy Recommendation 2

Transition KRG-Aligned Forces Out of Areas Under Iraqi Central Government Jurisdiction

The KRG cannot be allowed to pursue its political and nationalist objectives at the expense of the minoritized communities in the Nineveh Plain and the Iraqi state’s viability in general. All KRG forces must be withdrawn from areas under Baghdad’s legal jurisdiction. In other words, they must return to KRG’s recognized borders as defined in the 2005 Iraqi Constitution.

The absence of KRG security forces will enable the restoration of federal government authority and allow for the development of sustainable, functional, and democratic forms of local administration and security, within the framework of the united, federal Iraqi state.

Admittedly, this will require the U.S. to increase its influence in Iraq, but also engage in a delicate balancing act between Baghdad and Erbil, prioritizing the needs of vulnerable minorities.

Policy Recommendation 3

Honor the Desire for a Local Security Force and Empower the Nineveh Plains Protection Units

Efforts by the Nineveh Plain's Assyrians to form a local security force have been continually undermined by the Iraqi central government and the KRG, who both have traditionally seen the group as political tools. This report has thoroughly documented the complete lack of trust many Assyrians have toward Iraq's larger security forces. It has also documented that local security forces constituted within an appropriate legal framework that strengthen the rule of law continue to be the preferred means of obtaining security. This dynamic is captured perfectly by the differing rates of return to the Nineveh Plain: Where non-local forces dominate, return rates lag; when forces with pre-existing cultural ties to local populations are in control, return rates are significantly higher.

The API has accumulated numerous testimonials regarding the importance of local security to the Nineveh Plain's resettlement and reconstruction. Several are presented below:

Eyewitness 31, from Bakhdida:

*There have been waves of violence against our people in Iraq. It's hard to believe that ISIS will be the last of it. We cannot risk our future here by relying on those who failed to protect us when we needed them. We must be allowed to defend ourselves to have any hope of surviving here.*¹⁸⁹

Eyewitness 32, from Karamlesh:

*Why should we be forced to choose between Iraqi army or the Zerevani? Where were these forces when ISIS attacked? We need our own security forces. It's the only way we can remain here.*¹⁹⁰

Eyewitness 33, Respondent from Alqosh:

*We see an Assyrian-led force as necessary, because we don't trust any other forces anymore, as they only use their power to oppress us. When the time to defend us came, they just withdrew.*¹⁹¹

Eyewitness 34, Respondent from Sharafiyah:

*I am waiting for the day that our own soldiers control the checkpoints in these towns. Only then can I promise my mother she won't ever have to flee again.*¹⁹²

Policy Recommendation 4

Increased U.S. Support for the Nineveh Plain Protection Units

The 2017 United States National Security Strategy lists three primary policy goals for the Middle East:

- Deny safe havens or breeding grounds for jihadist terrorists;
- Prevent regional domination by any power hostile to the US—namely Iran; and
- Facilitate the region’s stable contribution to the global energy market.¹⁹⁴

The Nineveh Plain’s security sector significantly impacts these three objectives. But a significant portion of the Iraqi population, including government officials, want U.S. forces to leave. Iraq’s sovereignty should be respected. However, the country is not yet capable of standing on its own two feet.

A quick U.S. withdrawal would likely produce two overlapping and reinforcing dynamics in Ninewa: first, Iran will continue to expand its footprint, followed by the re-emergence of multiple, mostly non-local groups in Nineveh; filling a security/power vacuum similar to the one that ISIS stepped into. Both would mean disaster for Assyrians, Yazidis, and other minorities—and Iraq on the whole.

The NPU has received some training and modest support from the US-led Combined Joint Task Force—Operation Inherent Resolve, but it has not received the level of support afforded to other NSS-administered forces, such as the Tribal Mobilization Forces. In fact, the US remains vague about what role local forces like the NPU will continue to play:

USDF diplomatic engagement also serves as the cornerstone of the USG’s impact on the Ethnic Security Dilemma mechanism. The U.S. has largely been unclear on its view of minority militia groups involved in local self-defense. While the U.S. clearly prefers that formal ISF take the security lead as part of its Local, Multiethnic, “Police Primacy” stance, it has also refrained from calling for the disbandment of groups like the Christian Ninewa Plains Protection Unit (NPU). In fact, in many cases, it has even supported these groups through train and equip efforts.¹⁹⁵

The U.S. should recognize the intrinsic value of the NPU. The NPU can serve as a bulwark against growing Iranian influence, a local security partner in defense of religious freedom and democracy, and a stabilizing force within Iraq’s most strategically contested territory. More generally, the U.S. must continue to push for integrating minorities into the state as equal partners, security forces included, and ensuring they have a long-term presence in their historic homelands. Doing so provides the foundation for pluralism and democratic reform to take root. It is for these reasons that this report advocates for increased financial and logistical U.S. support for the NPU as part of Iraq’s official security forces.

Policy Recommendation 5

Support the Creation of a Nineveh Plain Governorate

Since 2003, Assyrians have sought to form a multi-ethnic, ethnically diverse province in the Nineveh Plain—their ancestral homeland—in accordance with Article 125 of the Iraqi Constitution. This effort only became more crucial as Baghdad and other places were emptied of Assyrians targeted by violence. The advancement of this policy, however, has consistently been undermined by the negligence of the Iraqi Government as well as interference from the Kurdistan Regional Government. These factors have eroded the capacity of Assyrians to achieve and secure conditions of real equality in the country. As expressed in the NPU’s mission statement:

The NPU strengthens our political claim to normalize control and jurisdiction of the Nineveh Plain in favor of independent Assyrians who wish to maximize their autonomy. Our long-term goal is the creation of a new Nineveh Plain Province separate of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and equal to other provinces under the Government of Iraq. We believe that only through a separate Nineveh Plain Province independent of the KRG may Assyrians realize their potential as free and equal citizens of the Government of Iraq.¹⁹⁶

Article 125 of the Iraqi Constitution is an exceptional constitutional provision for a territorial federal solution for minorities within Iraq’s nascent federal system. This provision is distinct from local government which is explicitly provided for in the authority of governorates under Article 122, which specifies the place of districts, sub-districts, and villages in constituting governorates. It is on this basis that Assyrians have sought the establishment of a Nineveh Plain Governorate since 2005,¹⁹⁷ and more recently, Yazidi leaders have called for a Sinjar Governorate.¹⁹⁸

In the aftermath of genocide, such a province for the Assyrians, Yazidis, and other minorities in the Nineveh Plain is even more urgently needed. A Nineveh Plain Governorate can protect these communities and provide some measure of self-governance and self-defense, while also advancing long-term stability in the region. Such a governorate, with the largest concentration of Christian Assyrians anywhere in Iraq, will be diverse and heterogenous. Its demography—with sizable Yazidi and Shabak populations—will structurally reinforce healthier intergovernmental relations and intergovernmental fiscal relations as these communities have a vested interest in making Iraqi federalism work. A Nineveh Plain Governorate will contribute to counteracting centripetal federal pressures by those seeking to balkanize Iraq and who profit personally and politically from ethno-sectarian violence and continued instability.

The U.S. should provide support for the recognition of a Nineveh Plain Governorate and urge Baghdad to implement Resolution No. 16 issued by the Iraqi Council of Ministers in its meeting on January 21, 2014, which gave prelimi-

nary approval for the creation of a Nineveh Plain Governorate. U.S. officials should recognize that the creation of a multi-ethnic, multi-sectarian governorate for the peoples of the Nineveh Plain—one that could eventually evolve into a semi-autonomous region within a federated Iraq—is consistent with U.S. stated values and interests.

Concluding Remarks

Following months of unrest and political paralysis, the formation of a new government in Baghdad, led by Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, presents an opportunity for the U.S. Government to reengage the Government of Iraq in a way that breaks from the failed policy framework of the past in order to advance policies critical to the survival of the Assyrians and other minoritized peoples in the country. Though Iraqi officials have pledged to reduce foreign interference, it is widely understood that there remains a serious need for continued U.S. assistance. This is especially true for minoritized communities, many of whom lack confidence in the governing authorities and perceive the role of the U.S. in Iraq to be critical to their survival.

The status quo U.S. approach has resulted in disastrous consequences for Assyrians, Yazidis, and other ethno-religious minorities, reflected in the decimation of their populations. The impact of such policies, through which the security of Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain is entrusted to Iraq's dominant ethno-sectarian groups, have serious implications for stabilization and democratic governance—the factors which would enable true reconciliation and lasting peace. This policy framework fostered the enabling conditions for the Islamic State to ethnically cleanse the Nineveh Plain in 2014.

In post-ISIS Iraq, U.S. strategy has prioritized the formation of a multiethnic provincial police force drawn from the dominant ethno-sectarian groups. This approach typically falls under a 'Joint Security Measures' (JSM) policy framework that shares security roles between those dominant ethno-sectarian groups in conflict over the Nineveh Plain. The JSM policy excludes Nineveh Plain locals and reinforces inequality between Assyrians and those non-local ethno-sectarian groups who contest the territory and see it as a place to be conquered or acquired. The flawed JSM policy has unequivocally failed in the past—the realities of Iraq have prevented the creation and sustainability of a police force capable of assuming the lead role for security in Ninewa Governorate. The U.S. must deviate from these theoretically sound but practically unworkable policies. The events of 2014 showed that Assyrians, Yazidis and other marginalized groups paid the highest price for these failures.

More than three years since the liberation of the Nineveh Plain, minimal progress has been made towards long-term stabilization, and the Nineveh Plain remains divided among contesting actors. The U.S. has taken decisive action against the Iranian-backed PMF forces that have gained a foothold in the region by sanctioning the militia leaders of Brigade 30 and Brigade 50; yet at the

same time, it continues to legitimize the KDP's security presence in northern Tel Kayf District. The lack of a clear U.S. position on the future of security in the Nineveh Plain undermines federal authority and reinforces the conditions that left minorities vulnerable to genocide: security controlled by the KRG in areas still officially administered by the federal government.

The fate of minorities in Iraq is a stated priority for the Trump-Pence Administration. But as hundreds of millions of USAID dollars have been funneled into the Nineveh Plain and Sinjar, the U.S. has distanced itself from the key political issues that undermine any positive development. This approach only strengthens the status quo and represents a critical policy failure. If the U.S. does not reassess this approach, the next decade could see the end of the Christian Assyrian presence in Iraq.

The misalignment between stated U.S. objectives with regard to minority populations in Iraq and U.S. status quo policies in the Nineveh Plain undercuts the success of the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU). Moreover, it can obstruct this final opportunity to bring about meaningful and sustainable change. While the U.S. cannot order the Government of Iraq to adopt a policy position, strong U.S. advocacy in support of the policy of minority self-security may serve as reassurance to minoritized communities unable to trust Iraq's larger forces, including the Iraqi Army and KRG Peshmerga.

The policy of minority self-security within a legal, legitimate structure of authority that is transparent and accountable, successfully exemplified by the NPU, is the *only* policy proven to facilitate Christian Assyrian return to the Nineveh Plain in significant proportions. Furthermore, it acts as a stabilizing actor in the region, resisting the presence of hostile actors, and is uniquely motivated to defend local populations. The expansion and empowerment of the NPU could also enable the Government of Iraq to regain control of Ninewa Governorate and elevate the Nineveh Plain above the Baghdad-Erbil dispute in order to prioritize the needs of local communities. Re-establishing federal control of these areas is necessary to rebuild local governing institutions, diminish local tensions, and reduce territorial contestations.

Failure to stabilize the Nineveh Plain, as well as Sinjar, would come at considerable risk for the federal government and its international partners. Security is at the core of stabilization. Simply put, the forces that control security in an area control what happens in it. Thus, stability is impossible to achieve whilst quasi-state forces, including KRG forces, remain in their areas of influence. In general, both the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Badr Organization exploited the dire situation between 2014 and 2017 to consolidate their domination over local communities and strengthen their territorial claims. The establishment and/or cooptation of local minority forces was a crucial part of this strategy. The presence of competing groups creates opportunities for actors whose interests are different from those of local populations and the Government of Iraq to exert influence and disrupt return and reconstruction.

Threats against democratic rule in Iraq are many, and the state remains institutionally weak. It may take years before a democratic breakthrough is made, but the popular uprisings have shown that the Iraqi people are seeking less corruption and immunity, more transparency, and economic reform. However, Assyrians, Yazidis and other vulnerable peoples do not have the luxury of time. Therefore, urgent measures and proven policies are needed to ensure their longevity.

The presence of ethno-religious minority groups such as Assyrians and Yazidis are what make Iraq truly diverse and heterogeneous. Thus, the question of Assyrians in Iraq is about diversity and pluralism—the foundations of a sustainable democracy—just as much as it is about the survival of an indigenous culture and community.

Status quo policies translate into policies of second class citizenship for Christian Assyrians and other ethno-religious minorities. The Government of Iraq and the U.S. Government have the opportunity to break with the harmful policy framework of the past and to pursue new and informed policies that establishes conditions of real equality for Iraq's most vulnerable peoples.

While this report does not offer solutions to the broader security challenges nor the underlying political tensions between Baghdad and Erbil, the policy recommendations provided for the Nineveh Plain are practical and directly applicable to facilitating the return of local populations, preventing an Islamic State resurgence, diminishing foreign interference, and protecting Assyrians, Yazidis, and other ethno-religious minorities.

Assyrians must be directly involved in shaping the policies that will determine their future. Insofar as the individuals that form the NPU are drawn from the populations of the towns in question, they represent a crucial element in the repopulation of these towns and the building of trust in security and political frameworks.

The Government of Iraq and its international partners, namely the U.S., must take urgent action to demonstrate they have learned from the failed policy framework that has driven Christian Assyrians to the brink of extinction in their ancestral lands. The window to act meaningfully and avoid repeating the mistakes of the past is rapidly closing.

Appendix 1

KRG Disarmament Order Distributed to Villages in the Nineveh Plain in July 2004

To the citizens of Bakhdida, Karamlesh and Bartella:

Anyone who owns any middle-caliber weapons, heavy weapons, or ammunitions of the said weapons must deliver them to the Security Committee.

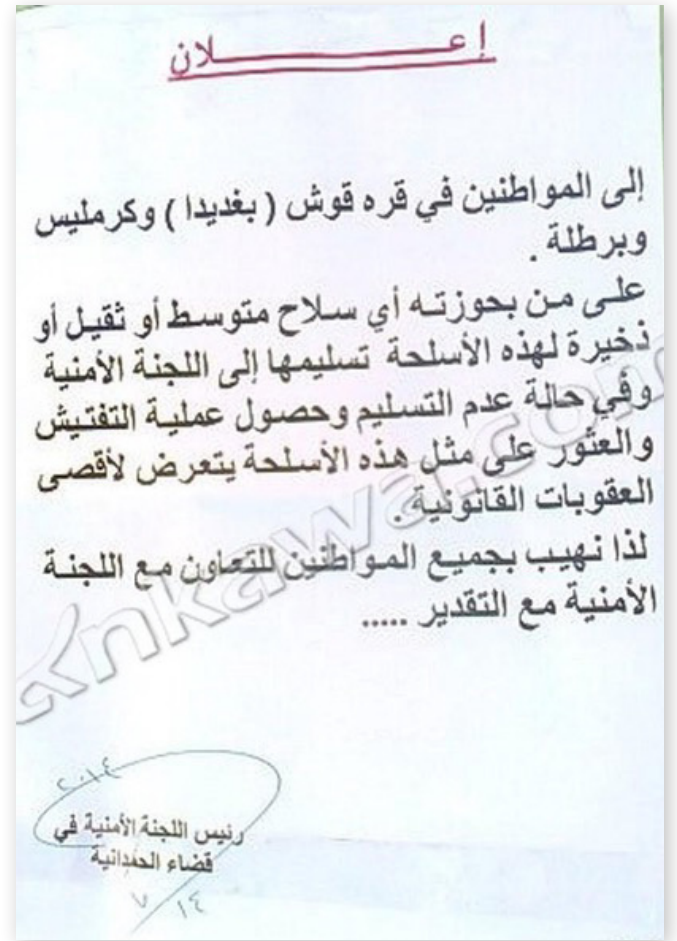
In case of inspection and finding the said weapons, the person possessing them will be subject to the maximum legal penalties.

We hereby call on all citizens to cooperate with the Security Committee.

Kindest Regards,

[Signature]

Head of the Security Committee
Al-Hamdaniya District
14 July 2004



Appendix 2

Iraqi Ministry of Interior's 2006 Authorization of a Local Police Force for the Nineveh Plain

Ministry of Interior
Ninawa Province Police Department
Document No.: 4336
Date: June 14, 2006

Order No. 1975

With regard to the implementation of the order of the Minister of item no. 14 of the law regarding the updated clause of employment and pension of the internal security forces no. 1 of year 1978, and in accordance with the order from the Directorate Office's Assignment Division no. 4532 of April 26, 2006.

This order was directed to us on April 29, 2006 in letter no. 11654 from the Ministry's Office for Police Affairs.

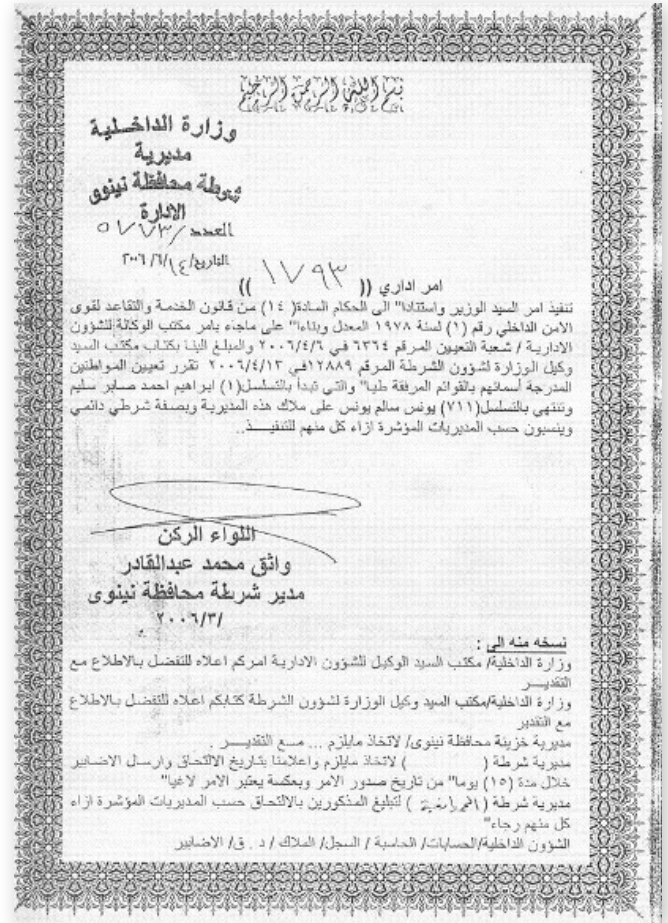
The order was to assign citizens according to the list starting with no. 1: Namrod Yousif and ending with no. 711: Wisam Hanna as permanent police officers in the stations applied for.

Signed,

Wathiq Muhamad Abd Al-Qadir
Ninawa Province Police Director
03/2006

Copies to:

- Ministry of Interior, Management Office Director
- Ministry of Interior, Office of the Police Affairs Director
- Ninawa Province Finance Department
- Police Directorship—to implement in 15 days from the date of this order.
- Hamdaniya Police Department



Appendix 3

General Directorate of Facilities Protection Order Reassigning NPPF to Facilities Protection Services

Republic of Iraq
Ministry of the Interior
Agency of Supported Forces Affairs
The General Directorate of Facilities Protection
Assistance of Governorates F.P.
Directorate of F.P. in Ninawa

To/ Facilities Protection in Hamdaniya
Subject/ Administrative Order

Note to the General Director of the Administration of Individuals/Appointment/34926 on 07-08-2008. Notice about the note of the Committee of Training and Preparation no. 111824 on 07-17-2008. Notice about the note of the General Committee for the Protection of Vital Facilities 4/777/11097.

Having been notified through the note of the General Administration for Province's Affairs 4/472/4633 on 08-05-2008:

1. It was approved to appoint people whose names (267) are mentioned within the lists. They successively begin with (1) Athir Salem and end with (267) Wissam Amir Kurki. They have adhered to protect churches and monasteries in the city of Mosul, its different districts and areas, and they cannot be hired or transferred to areas outside of Mosul.
2. A commission will be formed led by Lieutenant Colonel Walid Khalid Muhammad Abd, Major Abd al-Bari Ahmad Ismael, officer of the internal affairs and the security of our unit and Major Ibrahim Mahmud Hussein.
3. Continuing the inscription of the people who were accepted in order to notify the references about their adherence.

We would like you to be informed, take the necessary steps and notify us. Thank you.

Copies to:

- Administration of the Province's Affairs/Training/For your reference...Please be informed. Thank you.
- President and members of the Committee/Take necessary steps, interview the people mentioned above and provide us with the lists of people who were included within the Training Center of Mosul in order to participate in the main sessions and notify us. Thank you.



Appendix 4

Key Terms

- **Article 125** In the drafting of the Iraqi Constitution, minoritized communities, including Assyrians, managed to secure language that would guarantee them the right to self-administration and the assurance of administrative, political, and cultural rights in their lands under Article 125 of the constitution which states: “The Constitution shall guarantee the administrative, political, cultural, and educational rights of the various nationalities, such as Turkomen, Chaldeans, Assyrians, and all other countries, and this shall be regulated by law.” Legitimate Assyrian political entities who advocate for the formation of a Nineveh Plain Governorate often use the framework of Article 125 to advance this policy.
- **Asayish** The *Asayish* is a Kurdish intelligence agency operating under the command of Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) leadership in both the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and in KRG-controlled parts of the Nineveh Plain. While the purpose of these forces is ostensibly to provide security, they perform the additional function of enforcing compliance with party policies and silencing dissidents. The *Asayish* have been accused of serious human rights abuses by international observers and government agencies.
- **Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM)** Founded in 1979, the Assyrian Democratic Movement is the preeminent “Christian” political party in Iraq. The party is headquartered in Baghdad, with offices in nearly every city, village inhabited by Assyrians throughout Iraq, including the Kurdistan Region and the Nineveh Plain. The ADM is politically opposed to the KDP’s agenda of annexing the Nineveh Plain. It is the chief political sponsor of the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU).
- **Badr Organization** The Badr Organization is an Iranian-backed Shia-Arab organization operating militarily and politically across Iraq. It was established by its leader Hadi al-Ameri in 1983 as the armed wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. The Badr Organization is considered “Iran’s oldest proxy in Iraq” due to its abiding ties. The Badr Organization was a key actor in the war against ISIS, fighting under the banner of the PMU, but it has also been accused of serious human rights abuses, particularly against Sunni Arabs.
- **Brigade 30 (“Liwa al-Shabak”/“Quwat Sahl Ninewa”)** Brigade 30 is an Iran-backed militia comprised of approximately 1,000 fighters mostly of Shia Shabak background operating

in the Nineveh Plain under the banner of the Popular Mobilization Forces. Brigade 30 has a presence mainly in the town of Bartella and has earned a reputation for perpetrating abuses and harassing local Assyrian populations. The force operates under the command of the Badr Organization with the powerful backing of nonlocal PMF forces. It also has ties to the Shabak Democratic Assembly.

- **Brigade 50 (“Babylon Brigades”)** The 1000-strong, Iran-backed Brigade 50 is a Shia Arab majority force operating in the Nineveh Plain under the banner of the Popular Mobilization Forces. The force consists of only a handful of Christian soldiers, but is misleadingly used by the PMF to project diversity within the institution. Brigade 50 operates under the command of the Badr Organization with the backing of powerful nonlocal PMU forces. The force has gained notoriety in the region for perpetrating abuses and criminal activity.
- **Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council (CSAPC)** The Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council, also known as *Majlis Sha’bi*, is a political party founded by the Kurdistan Democratic Party in 2007. It is understood to be the party’s “Christian wing.” The CSAPC is affiliated with KRG President Nechirvan Barzani’s faction of the KDP. Through the CSAPC, the KDP formed the Church Guards in 2008 and the Nineveh Plain Guard Forces in 2014.
- **Combined Joint Task Force—Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF—OIR)** The Combined Joint Task Force—Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF—OIR) is the Joint Task Force established by the U.S.-led international coalition against the Islamic State, set up by the U.S. Central Command to coordinate military efforts against the Islamic State, and is composed primarily of U.S. military forces and personnel from over 30 countries. The stated aim of the CJTF—OIR is to “degrade and destroy” the Islamic State. Its establishment by U.S. Central Command was announced in December 2014, after it was set

up to replace the ad hoc arrangements that had previously been established to coordinate operations following the rapid gains made by the Islamic State in Iraq in June 2014.

- **De-Ba’athification** De-Ba’athification refers to a policy undertaken in Iraq by the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority and subsequent Iraqi governments to remove the Ba’ath Party’s influence in the new Iraqi political system.
- **Disputed internal boundaries (“disputed territories”)** The disputed territories of northern Iraq are regions defined by Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution as having been Arabized during Ba’ath Party rule in Iraq. There is an ongoing territorial dispute over the control/administration of these lands between the Iraqi Central Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government. The Nineveh Plain is included among the so-called disputed territories due to the relatively new claim of the KRG that the region is part of “Greater Kurdistan” despite the fact that the region has never had a sizeable Kurdish population. The KRG continues to dispute the status of minority-inhabited areas such as the Nineveh Plain and Sinjar—i.e. whether the Nineveh Plain should fall under the administration of the KRG or remain under the administration of the Iraqi Central Government, and actively seeks their annexation to the Kurdistan Region.
- **District and sub-districts** Governorates in Iraq are divided into districts which are administered by a mayor and a district council. Similarly, each district is comprised of smaller sub-districts, administered by a local mayor and sub-district councils. The main districts in the Nineveh Plain include Tel Kayf District, Sheikhan District, and Hamdania District.
- **Governorate (also known as ‘province’)** Iraq presently consists of 19 governorates (also known as ‘provinces’) which are defined geographic territories administered by a governor and institutional units known as provincial councils. Provincial councils are designed to function like state assemblies in the United States.

- **Internally-displaced person (IDP)** An internally-displaced person is someone who is forced to flee his or her home, but who remains within his or her country's borders. They are often referred to as refugees, but they do not meet the legal definition of a refugee.
- **Iraqi Central Government** The central (or federal) government of Iraq is defined under its current constitution, approved in 2005, as an Islamic, democratic, federal parliamentary republic. The central government is headquartered in Baghdad, and is composed of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, as well as numerous independent commissions. The executive branch is composed of the President and the Council of Ministers. The legislative branch is composed of the Council of Representatives (Iraqi Parliament), led by the Prime Minister. At the time of writing, the Iraqi President is Barham Salih and the Prime Minister is Mustafa al-Kadhimi. The Prime Minister holds effective power in Iraq's political system.
- **Islamic State** The Islamic State (also known as ISIS or by its Arabic acronym *Daesh*) is a jihadist is a jihadist militant group that follows a fundamentalist, Salafi doctrine of Sunni Islam. It has been designated as a terrorist organization internationally by the United Nations and individual countries. The Islamic State gained global prominence in the summer of 2014 when it claimed territory in Iraq and Syria, and committed genocide and ethnic cleansing campaigns against Yazidis, Assyrians, and other ethnic and religious minorities.
- **Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)** The Kurdistan Democratic Party is the dominant Kurdish faction in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The Kurdish nationalist party is led by the Barzani family, under the leadership of former KRG President Masoud Barzani. The party claims that it exists to promote "democratic values and social justice"; however, the KDP is tribal, autocratic, and as the ruling party, is guilty of extensive human rights violations against Assyrians and other marginalized groups.
- **Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)** Established in 1992, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is the official ruling body of the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq, headquartered in Erbil. The KRG is ostensibly comprised of three branches of government: executive, legislative, and judiciary branches; however, the KDP, led by Masoud Barzani, controls all three branches of government. The current KRG President is Nechirvan Barzani, and the KRG Prime Minister is his first cousin and brother-in-law Masrour Barzani.
- **Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)** The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (also called Iraqi Kurdistan) is an autonomous region located in northern Iraq, comprised of four governorates: Erbil, Dohuk, Sulaymaniyah, and Halabja. The region is governed by the Kurdistan Regional Government. Its unofficial capital is the city of Erbil. The majority of inhabitants are Kurdish, with a significant population of indigenous Assyrians—primarily in Erbil and Dohuk Governorates.
- **Nineveh Liberation Operation Command (NLOC)** The Nineveh Liberation Operation Command was the campaign led by the Central Government to defeat Islamic State and liberate Ninewa and other occupied territories. Headed by Iraqi General Najim al-Jubouri and backed by the U.S.-led international coalition against the Islamic State, the campaign included Iraqi Security Forces, KRG Peshmerga, and their allied militias. The Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU) was the only Assyrian security force formally listed and authorized as an allied force by the NLOC. The operation to liberate the Nineveh Plain began in September 2016, and spanned several months. The area was fully liberated in January 2017, after more than two years of IS occupation.
- **Nineveh Plain** The Nineveh Plain is a region in Iraq's Ninewa Governorate located north-east of the city of Mosul. It borders the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and is officially, though not entirely in practice, under the adminis-

tration of the central government in Baghdad. The Nineveh Plain is the only region in Iraq where the largest demographic group is Assyrian. The area is considered the ancient Assyrian heartland.

- **Nineveh Plain Defense Fund (NPDF)** The Nineveh Plain Defense Fund (NPDF) is a U.S.-based nonprofit provides support to the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU) for non-munitions needs.
- **Nineveh Plain Guard Forces (NPGF)** The Nineveh Plain Guard Forces (NPGF) is a Kurdish proxy force linked to the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council under the operational control of the KRG Ministry of Peshmerga. Also known as the *Herasat*, it was formed out of the remnants of an Assyrian force first created in 2008 by the KDP called the Church Guards. NPGF soldiers did participate in the Nineveh Plain's liberation embedded among Peshmerga ranks, but the force's operational capacity was drastically curtailed after KRG forces withdrew from areas in Sinjar and the Nineveh Plain following the September 2017 Kurdish independence referendum. The NPGF now plays only a minor security role, its presence limited to Tesqopa (Tel Eskof). Most NPGF soldiers are no longer on active duty, but many allegedly continue to collect salaries.
- **Nineveh Plain Police Force (NPPF)** The Nineveh Plain Police Force (NPPF) was formed in June 2006 after an order from the Iraqi Ministry of Interior in conjunction with U.S. officials, composed primarily from the local Assyrian and Shabak populations. However, the order was blocked by KDP-affiliated officials within Ninewa Governorate and ultimately disbanded in 2008.
- **Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU)** The 600-strong Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU) is comprised exclusively of ethnic Assyrians, mostly from the Nineveh Plain. It presently undertakes security in Hamdania District of the Nineveh Plain. It is officially authorized to secure all major Assyrian towns and villages in the Nineveh Plain, but its full deployment has been blocked by other actors, including the Kurdistan Regional Government and Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces. The force was initially authorized via the Popular Mobilization Forces, but operates independently of PMF leadership. The NPU operates under the internal command of a council of officers, and is politically sponsored by the Assyrian Democratic Movement
- **Ninewa Governorate** Ninewa Governorate is a governorate in northern Iraq that contains the Nineveh Plain and Sinjar. Its chief city and provincial capital is Mosul. Ninewa Governorate is ethnically and religiously diverse, with significant numbers of Assyrians, Yazidis, Shabaks, and other marginalized communities. However, the largest demographic is comprised of Sunni Arabs, estimated to make up 80 percent of the governorate's local population. In 2014, most of Ninewa Governorate was overtaken by ISIS and subsequently liberated by coalition forces in 2017.
- **Peshmerga** The Peshmerga are the official military forces of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Nominally, the Peshmerga are under the command of the KRG; however, in practice, the forces are highly politicized, largely divided, and controlled separately by the two dominant Kurdish factions: the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The Peshmerga has asserted its authority over the northern towns of the Nineveh Plain, despite the fact that the region is outside of the KRG's constitutional boundaries.
- **Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)** Also known as *Hashd al-Shabi*, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) is an Iraqi state-sponsored umbrella organization composed of various militias formed in the wake of the Iraqi Army's collapse at Mosul. The PMF are divided into two branches. The vast majority are Shia Arab militias directly administered by the Popular Mobilization Committee (PMC), which was led by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis

until his death in January 2020. These are the forces that receive direct support from Iran and are generally seen as Iranian proxies. There are two PMC-administered PMF forces in the Nineveh Plain: Brigade 50 and Brigade 30. In contrast, a smaller number of PMF are administered by the National Security Service (NSS), most notably the U.S.-backed Tribal Mobilization Forces. The only NSS-administered PMF force in the Nineveh Plain is the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU).

- **Proxy** Within the context of this report, a proxy organization is ostensibly an Assyrian political entity, non-governmental organization, or security force created and/or funded by an external entity (such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party or the Badr Organization). These artificial entities are used mainly by the KDP, but also by Arab majority parties, to advance their interests and agendas as part of a patronage system. For example, the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council is an Assyrian political party founded by the KDP in 2007, and is used to compete with, undermine, and challenge the authority of organic Assyrian political institutions. Similarly, the Babylon Movement, a nominally Christian group funded by the Badr Organization is used to extend and superficially diversify Badr's presence in the north of the country. Visible community figures (including political leaders and clergy) who are co-opted by the dominant majority parties, such as the KDP, are also referred to as proxies. In exchange for a "party salary" these figures are expected to publicly and privately endorse and promote the KDP and its agendas within the community and with foreign officials/entities. These tokenized individuals are frequently presented by the KRG as symbols of ethno-religious coexistence under KRG rule and a validation of the KRG's project to annex the Nineveh Plain. They are also expected to counter claims made by Assyrians about abuses and injustices committed by the KRG. The racist exploitation of vulnerable groups through

this system of patronage is not exclusive to Assyrians; the KDP and others employ similar strategies with communities like Yazidis, Shabaks, Turkmen, and Kakai.

- **Shabak Democratic Assembly** The Shabak Democratic Assembly is an umbrella organization representing Shabak political parties. The party is led by Shabak politician Dr. Hunain al-Qaddo and is associated with PMF Brigade 30.
- **Sinjar** Location in Ninewa Governorate in northern Iraq, Sinjar District (also known as Shingal) is considered the Yazidi homeland. It is one of two major population centers for Yazidis in Iraq. In 2014, Sinjar was captured by the Islamic State and was the site where the events of the tragic Yazidi Genocide took place.
- **Zerevani** The *Zerevani* are the militarized police force operated by the Kurdistan Regional Government. They are under the operational control of the KRG Ministry of the Interior, but are a part of the Peshmerga. They are loyal to the Kurdistan Democratic Party.

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