

Iraq After ISIL

Sub-State Actors, Local Forces, and the Micro-Politics of Control

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REPORT
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Community or regional forces, militia forces, and other local security actors have long existed in Iraq. However, as the Islamic State of Iraq swept through central and northern Iraq in 2014, local, sub-state, and hybrid security forces mobilized to resist. These sub-state and local forces provided an important bulwark against ISIL, filling gaps in the Iraqi Security Forces and holding territory regained from ISIL. But have these groups lived up to their promise in terms of promoting stability? How do any security gains balance against other potential side effects, in terms of protection of civilians, rule of law and governance, or community dynamics? How will the greater reliance on these quasi- or non-state actors impact the long-term prospects for the Iraqi state?

About the Authors & Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary



After their initial retreat and collapse, Iraqi forces rose to confront the challenge posed by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and by the end of 2017 had recaptured the vast areas of northern and central Iraq taken by ISIL in 2014. They were aided in doing so not only by a ‘Coalition’ of international actors and forces, but also by a wide range of local, hybrid, and sub-state security forces (hereinafter LHSFs) who were mobilized to confront the ISIL threat. These LHSFs played a critical role in recapturing and holding territory, but they also pose a challenge for what comes next. As local and sub-state forces have grown and strengthened, they have increasingly assumed responsibility for security, governance, and critical services. As a result, while north and central Iraq may now be out of ISIL’s hands, they are not firmly in the Iraqi state’s control either. This fragmentation of authority and the sheer number of mobilized forces, with conflicting allegiances and agendas, pose significant challenges for the future strength of rule of law and governance, as well as overall stability.

In the first half of 2017, the Global Public Policy institute (GPPi) conducted research examining the role LHSFs were playing in local communities and their

impact on local and national dynamics. Research was conducted in 15 locations in three governorates – Ninewa, Salah ad-Din, and Kirkuk – between February and July 2017. The research examined the dynamics surrounding three major types of LHSFs:

- **Kurdish forces** (~200,000 forces): Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) forces (also referred to as Peshmerga) had long existed and were the only legally recognized regional force in 2014. However, in response to the ISIL threat, the KRG mobilized, equipped, and trained a greater share of Peshmerga fighters. From 2014 on, Kurdish forces' activities and control expanded, in particular extending Kurdish control across more areas in the Disputed Territories.
- **Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)** (~120,000 forces): The PMF is an umbrella organization for some 50+ armed groups who mobilized to support the Iraqi state against ISIL following a 2014 *fatwa* by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's senior cleric. It was granted a legal status equivalent to Iraqi forces in late 2016. While including thousands of new forces that formed only after 2014, its leadership and membership is dominated by a handful of pre-existing, well-established predominantly Shi'a militias. Many of them had emerged well before 2014 and were backed by Iran or Shi'a political parties. They played a significant role in liberating and holding areas, but also sparked some of the most significant human rights and governance concerns.
- **Local or minority forces:** In addition to these larger forces, smaller, locally-recruited forces – from Sunni tribal forces (sometimes referred to as *hashd al-asha'ir* or 'tribal' *hashd*) to local Turkmen, Shabak, Yazidi, and Chaldo-Assyrian or Christian forces – were present in most areas but played a supporting to marginal role. With only a few hundred to a few thousand members each, these local forces did not have the numbers or political strength to stand on their own and tended to affiliate with one of the larger forces: the ISF, Kurdish forces, or one of the leading Shi'a PMF groups.

In some areas, these LHSFs had a positive influence, providing security, allowing for reconstruction and regular governance activities to take place, and enabling aid. In other areas, the positive role of the LHSFs in ousting ISIL was counterbalanced by their forces' criminal, abusive, and predatory behavior. The explosion of armed actors, with easy access to arms and few constraints, has enabled a high level of extrajudicial violence. Some of these acts were purely criminal in nature, but others were driven by political, ethnic, or sectarian motivations. LHSFs tend to mobilize around a specific ethno-religious identity, a trend which has further factionalized already divisive identity politics. Members of LHSFs frequently used their power to lash out at members of opposing sects, parties, ethnicities, or tribes. LHSFs in control of checkpoints or local areas restricted the return of certain populations, either by directly refusing access or by deterring return through the destruction of property or intimidation of local populations. In places like Kirkuk, Tuz, Tal Afar, and other parts of the Disputed Territories, LHSF forces' selective property destruction, prevention of returns, or abuses of other population groups played into existing political, ethnic, and sectarian divisions and appear likely to seed future conflict. The proliferation of LHSFs also

impacted the strength of state authority and rule of law. Although some LHSFs acted only as auxiliaries to ISF, others held areas on their own and were the only governing body or force around, undermining overall state control. Even where the Iraqi government was in charge, the existence of other armed actors deputized to support them precluded coherent command and control. Each of these actors was vested with some degree of local authority, giving the impression that no one actor, particularly the Iraqi government, was in charge. The sheer number of groups, alongside weak command and control and few enforcement options, made it difficult for Iraqi authorities to prevent or punish criminal acts, which reinforced a sense of impunity and lawlessness.

The presence of these many groups also offers opportunities for actors with different interests than the Iraqi government to influence or disrupt local spaces. Regional actors, like Iran or Turkey, actively backed LHSFs in different areas to increase their influence and advance their strategic interests. Both Kurdish forces and the larger Shi'a PMF groups used the 2014–2017 period to increase their leverage in local communities, including by establishing local forces. These local ties may offer either Shi'a PMF or Kurdish forces opportunities to disrupt the status quo where their interests diverge from those of the Iraqi government. The mass mobilization and fragmentation of the security sector poses challenges to the restoration of stability, regular governance, and rule of law. To counter these trends, any future stabilization strategy must try to address the fragmentation of the Iraqi state not only from the top down but also from the bottom up. Re-establishing Iraqi control and stabilizing these areas will require greater attention to the micro-politics of control, to reconstructing local governance spaces, easing local tensions, and reducing competing sources of control from the ground up. The mobilization of and competition between LHSFs is tightly intermeshed with political dynamics in Iraq. Getting these issues under control is key to finding a stable balance between different stakeholders within the Iraqi state.

For the full report, please see: <http://www.gppi.net/publications/peace-security/article/iraq-after-isil-sub-state-actors-local-forces-and-the-micro-politics-of-control/>. To view the original research case studies, please visit: www.gppi.net/publications/iraq-after-isil.

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