

Trapped in a vicious cycle

Factors of instability in the Nineveh Plains

CRU Report

Nancy Ezzeddine
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Cover photo: A member of Iraqi security forces inspects the remains of wall panels and colossal statues of winged bulls destroyed by Islamic State militants in the Assyrian city of Nimrud, on the eastern bank of the Tigris River, south of Mosul, Iraq. August 1, 2017

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Abstract

The Nineveh Plains have long been characterised by ethnoreligious diversity that has triggered waves of marginalisation and sectarian violence far more often than peaceful co-existence over the past decades. The Islamic State occupation represented only the latest of many episodes of violence. Although it was short-lived, the impact of IS has been profound as it further ruptured the Plains' social fabric and dysfunctional governance. Indeed, as the threat of IS has gone and violence abated, old vulnerabilities persist while new ones have arisen.

This report analyses four major factors of instability that characterise the Nineveh Plains today from a perspective of crisis and conflict: 1) the current administrative and governance vacuum produced by the weak capacity of local authorities and a paralysing dispute between Baghdad and Erbil; 2) fragmented security arrangements with each actor exerting autonomous control within their part(s) of the Nineveh Plains; 3) chronic displacement without coherent policy on how to enable safe returns or support vulnerable communities; and 4) growing social tensions in the aftermath of the war sowing feelings of anger, betrayal and disillusionment among communities.

As the weight of these issues drags communities down and a government response remains absent, desperation and misery grow. Because the different factors of instability reinforce each other – consider for example how continued insecurity prevents the displaced from returning – they create a vicious cycle.

Based on our research, we make the case that greater development support for the area is long overdue and should focus on : (1) improving opportunities for communities to engage in joint projects and cooperation; (2) strengthening capacities of local governance structures to engage in recovery and reconstruction; (3) extending basic services to Sunni communities; (4) renewing economic agency and productivity in urban and rural areas; and (5) contextualising development work through a conflict-sensitive approach.

Introduction

For much of its modern history, Iraq has been caught up in sectarianism and conflict, most recently with the rise of the Islamic State (IS). The ethnoreligious heterogeneity of the Nineveh Plains has made it an epicentre of sectarian tensions and disputes. Since the mid-1970s, the Ba'athist Arabization campaigns involved the forced displacement and cultural Arabization of Nineveh Plains' minorities including village destruction, depopulation and deportation of Kurds and Yazidis. Arabization concentrated on moving Sunni Arabs into the area by, for example, reallocating plots of land to Ba'ath loyalists. Since the overthrow of the Hussein regime in 2003, the region has once more become a bone of contention between the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan regional government in Erbil. Post-2003 Kurdification policies by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) have sought to reverse previous attempts at Arabization and to regain control of the Nineveh Plains.¹ This has created serious inter-ethnic problems with non-Kurdish populations. Making an already bad situation much worse, IS mercilessly targeted the Plains' ethnoreligious non-Sunni minorities, especially indigenous Yazidis, Christians and Turkmen. The extremist organisation sought to wipe out the entire collective memory of these communities, as was evident in the group's systematic destruction of religious and heritage sites.

After the defeat of IS in 2017, the security situation in the Nineveh Plains gradually improved and today the area is considered largely stable with a low incidence of violence. But as the threat of IS has gone and violence has abated, old vulnerabilities persist while new ones have arisen. Citizens are neglected and communities underserved in a post-war landscape of dire conditions.² Reconstruction remains a huge challenge and efforts to date have given little priority to livelihoods and economic infrastructure. The government is closing camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) without any coherent policy on how to enable safe returns or support vulnerable communities upon the return of displaced groups. As a result, thousands of families leaving camps have little to return to and therefore either become re-displaced or emigrate. This continues to dramatically shift the area's demographics and local control to the disadvantage of minorities.

1 Arabs experienced intimidation and harassment and were forced to leave their homes in order to increase the Kurdish demographic.

2 Halawa, H. 2020. *The Forgotten Iraq*, Middle East Institute. See: <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2020-03/The%20Forgotten%20Iraq.pdf>.

As the respective governments in Baghdad and Erbil are more focused on oil and land disputes elsewhere because of their greater strategic value, the Nineveh Plains have been ignored. Poor governance has produced power vacuums occupied by informal actors and armed groups. Deliberately discriminatory policies of marginalisation and deprivation by political majorities and armed groups have continued to tether the Plains' agricultural and commercial dynamism since before IS occupation. The combination of conflict prior to IS and the recent fight against it have destroyed much of the area's social capital. The war and its aftermath, moreover, sowed feelings of anger, betrayal and disillusionment among its communities, which either were ravaged by IS (mostly non-Sunni) or initially gravitated towards it (mostly Sunni) and were subsequently punished. The complete rupture of the pre-2014 status quo due to the war also intensified already pervasive identity issues, which is linked to settlement of the administrative status of disputed territories and the protection of minority groups. As the weight of these issues drags communities down and a government response remains absent, desperation and misery grow.

To inform more positive action from outside the area, this report examines key factors of stability and instability in the Nineveh Plains or, more precisely, in the triangular area between Duhok, Erbil and Mosul composed of the districts of Shekhan, Hamdaniyah and Tel Kaif. Long considered home to Iraq's many religious and ethnic minorities, this part of the Nineveh governorate represents a micro case study of tensions faced more generally in liberated areas with mixed ethno-sectarian groups.

The report's key insight is that the current level of human insecurity is likely to breed more frustration, grievance and anger among marginalised communities (even though security levels have improved) and this risks triggering another round of displacement or even violence in the longer term. Avoiding such a scenario requires addressing the triple crisis of political contestation over the area between Baghdad and Erbil, social distrust and division and the prevailing fragmentation of security arrangements.

On the basis of 23 field interviews³ and extensive desk research, the report analyses four major factors of stability and instability in the area: Section 1 analyses the administrative and governance vacuum; Section 2 surveys the fragmentation of its security arrangements; Section 3 examines chronic displacement; and Section 4 assesses its growing social tensions. Section 5 concludes the report with policy recommendations

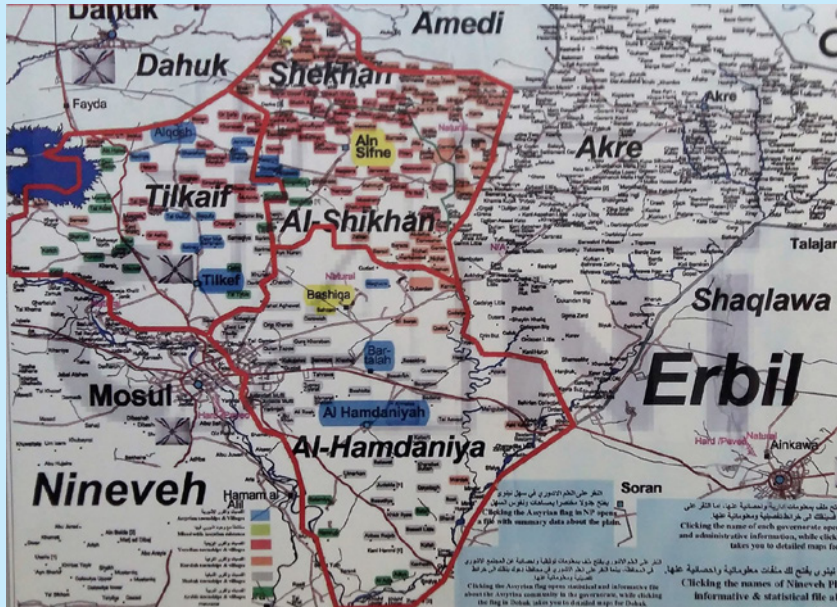
3 Interviews were undertaken across the three districts of Shekhan, Hamdaniya and Tal Kaif, with representation from each ethnic and religious group in each district (Christian – Yazidi – Shabak – Kakaie – Turkman / Shia and Sunn). They included members of local administrations (municipal and governorate level), armed groups, civil society organisations, religious authorities and community members. Interviews lasted an hour, on average, and covered issues pertaining to governance, security, reconstruction and social relations.

that should be taken into account when designing or implementing development work in the area.⁴

Box 1 The districts of Shekhan, Hamdaniyah and Tel Kaif

The Tigris River divides the Nineveh province geographically and demographically. The area to the right of the river, the Nineveh Plains, is estimated to cover about 5,000 square kilometres, and extends in the form of a plain arc surrounding the city of Mosul, from the Hammam al-Alil side in its far east, up towards the Kurdish-majority town of Barada Rush, then heading west towards the town of Farah and reaching the Mosul Dam Lake. This plain includes the districts of Tel Kaif, Hamdaniyah and Shekhan, which were historically populated predominantly by Syriac Christians (mainly Assyrians and Chaldeans). A minority of Shabaks (Sunni and Shiite) inhabited the rural areas of Hamdaniya, and particularly its Bartilla subdistrict. Shekhan district was inhabited mainly by Kurds with a Yezidi majority. While it is difficult to assess the current estimates, it appears that the majority of inhabitants in the Nineveh Plains are currently Shabaks (majority Shia, minority Sunni), followed by the Christian population, the Yezidis, the Kurds, Arab Muslims, the Kaka'is and Turkmen. The strategic location of the Nineveh Plains is significant as the region connects Mosul with both Erbil and Dohuk via highway number two, with four additional internal routes solidifying area connectivity. Furthermore, it includes the key border crossing of Khosrsaband and is believed to connect Iraq to Syria and Lebanon through an informal military transport route.

4 The research tried to remain inclusive of different perspectives while accounting for subjectivity, post-conflict trauma and the degree to which different respondents had been exposed to conflict. The report only presented findings that were triangulated by several respondents, reported in several media outlets or other research reports. In addition, the authors spoke to five key informants from international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGO)s and central government personnel working in the region or about the region to obtain a broader perspective. Finally, the research was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic and several changes were needed to accommodate schedules and the safety of respondents.



Source: Nineveh© Provincial Council

(In)stability factor 1: Administrative and governance vacuum

The three districts of the Nineveh Plains under scrutiny here are classified as disputed territories under Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi constitution. Tel Kaif and Shekhan have disputed boundaries with the Duhok governorate of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Hamdaniyah shares a disputed boundary with the Erbil governorate. Since 2016/17, the government of Iraq has alleged control over much of the Plains in nominal terms, although not in material terms, leaving non-government actors with the “lion’s share of influence”.⁵ The neglect by federal and regional governments has been evidenced through the dismal service infrastructure and weak institutional capacities of local service providers. Against this backdrop, this section identifies the following key findings that are detailed below:

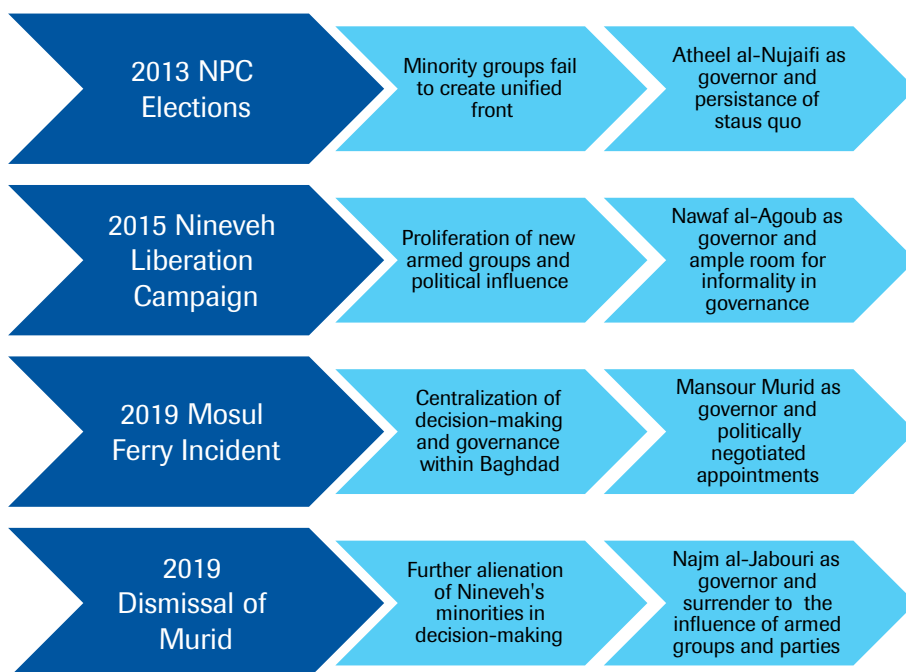
- The convoluted governance situation of the Nineveh Plains produces, paradoxically, both an absence of governance and a complex lattice of governance, which results in citizens having to develop multiple networks to access different services and receive support from different informal actors to cope and survive.
- Local politicians representing the populations of the Plains are linked to different parties in the dispute between Baghdad and Erbil, since both administrations have applied pressure on local communities through local leaders to identify with one government or the other. The result is that the Plains becomes a political playing field for Erbil and Baghdad instead of vice versa.⁶ Unsurprisingly, this increases polarisation within communities, limiting chances for more resolution-oriented political dialogue.
- Yazidi, Assyrian, Christian and Shabak representation in the Iraqi parliament and the NPC remains largely symbolic. MPs for these communities only represent their individual group as minority votes that can’t ‘tip the scales’ in one direction or another. This produces limited space and unbalanced competition for minority

5 Skeleton, M. and Bahnam, K. 2019. *The Bishop and the Prime Minister: Mediating Conflict in the Nineveh Plains*. LSE Blogs. See: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2019/01/25/the-bishop-and-the-prime-minister-mediating-conflict-in-the-nineveh-plains/>.

6 Van Zoonen, D. and Wirya, K. 2017. *The Shabaks: Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict*. MERI. See: <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/The-Shabaks-Perceptions-of-Reconciliation-and-Conflict-Report.pdf>.

groups at the local level as well. Hence, their ability to lobby or create pressure for greater rights for their communities is limited.

Nineveh's provincial council and governorate



The Nineveh Provincial Council (NPC) was elected in 2013 amidst heightened security turmoil. This resulted in a significantly lower turnout at about half that of 2009: 581,449, compared to 995,169 in the previous election. The 39 member council was dominated by representation from minority groups. The increase in the representation of the latter groups meant that a scatter of different Christian, Yazidi and Shabak political parties won a total of 18 seats with each winning between one to four seats.⁷ The number of seats won by minorities demonstrated popular discontent and lack of confidence in the previous council due to its fractured nature and inability to deliver basic services.⁸ Nonetheless, and despite the loss of Arab parties' control over the council, the fragmented political landscape and inability to create stronger coalitions

⁷ Independent High Electoral Commission. 2013. '2013 Nineveh Governorate Election'.

⁸ Candidates were able to canvass outside Mosul due to better security, and many Mosul-based candidates withdrew from the election.

between minority political blocs allowed the status quo to persist. The Brotherhood and Coexistence Alliance, consisting of the KDP and the PUK, with a total of 11 seats, followed by the Muttahidoon coalition of Arab Sunni parties with 8 seats, remained in the lead. As a result, Atheel al-Nujaifi, from the previous council, remained governor.⁹

The reversal to the 2009 status quo, in addition to conflict and heightened political tensions, regressed the already dismal performance of the NPC. After the liberation of Nineveh from IS started in 2015, al-Nujaifi was replaced by Nawaf al-Agoub. Al-Agoub's tenure witnessed a shift in local balance of power in favour of new armed groups and political factions that had little presence in Nineveh prior to IS.¹⁰ Known for widespread corruption and embezzlement, the new governor provided room for new actors to embed themselves within Nineveh's governance.¹¹ Al-Agoub forged powerful alliances with militias and Shia parties to dominate the system of governance and remain in power irrespective of his policies (or lack of).¹² The increasing informality in governance and control by armed groups and parties over small pockets of land especially within the Plains, undermined what little remained of local governing institutions.

The death of more than 100 Iraqis in the sinking of a ferry in Mosul's Tigris river created sufficient pressure to replace al-Agoubi in 2019. With growing discontent and media attention to Nineveh's regressing state of governance, Baghdad reacted by attempting to further centralize power within its own coffers. This primarily included a transfer of powers from the local government in Nineveh to federal ministries. Until this day, several governorate-level service directorates, including health and education, are directly connected to the federal government ministries and not the provincial councils in contradiction to the recommendations by the Higher Coordination Committee of Provinces and the constitution.¹³ In addition, the Council of Representatives (CoR) overrode the local NPC members to remove al-Agoub and imposed the selection of his successor, Mansour Murid. Murid was a political appointee by Baghdad's political elite, specifically a negotiated deal between PMF's head, Falih al-Fayadh, the KDP and a number of Arab Sunni parties.

Murid's selection and deselection by Baghdad, signalled a cycle of competition over control of Nineveh's resources and governance by political parties. Murid's inability to accommodate party interests and mediate the influence of competing factions, primarily

9 Saleed, A. 2013. 'Voter's Revolution in Ninawa: Local Minorities Take Over Provincial Government', Niqash.

10 Saleem, Z. 2020. 'Prisoner of the Deal: Nineveh's governor and local state capture', LSE.

11 This system allowed al-Agoub to embezzle over \$64 million of funds intended for Nineveh's reconstruction.

12 Ala'Aldeen, D. 2020. 'Nineveh as a Model', Middle East Research Institute.

13 The federal ministries of municipalities and construction, sports and youth and justice and social affairs have already transferred powers back to the local government in Nineveh.

within the PMF, threatened his survival. As a result, Murid was pressured to resign seven months after his appointment. In an attempt to consolidate power, political parties nominated Najm al-Jabouri as a compromise candidate.¹⁴ Despite al-Jabouri's popularity locally, specifically within Mosul, his authority is largely constrained by the political blocs that brought him into power. In addition, four years after the liberation of Nineveh, real power now resides and is embedded outside of his office, and his ability to leverage sufficient support to reinstate formal governance structures is limited. Case in point, to date, al-Jabouri has not attempted to challenge vested economic interests and military presence of several PMF groups and other parties in Nineveh.

Consequences on governance within the Nineveh Plains

Thirteen years and four governors later, the 2013 election results remain relevant to the character of governance within the Nineveh Plains. The inability of the Plains' minority groups to lobby through a unified political coalition has resulted in their continued seclusion from provincial politics. The political dominance of large, traditional political parties at the national level, has made competition even more impenetrable for minority groups. Specifically, the Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish parties rarely require the support of Christians and minorities to assure their dominance. With a total of nine seats reserved for representatives of minority groups from the Nineveh Plains in parliament – five for Christians, one for Kurdish minorities and one each for Yazidis, Assyrians and Shabak – from a total of 329 seats, their ability to influence decision making is limited at best.¹⁵ However, with over a third of seats within the provincial council, minority groups are still rendered futile as they compete against entrenched political parties with resources, influence and connections. The CoR's decision to dismiss provincial councils in 2019 further amplified this phenomenon by providing governors with individual exposure to power, limiting the oversight previously warranted by the council. As governors are often selected from prominent Arab Sunni tribes to tailor to Mosul's population, constituents from the Plains feel largely unrecognized and excluded from the benefits and assistance provided by the governorate.

Traditional political parties also exploit the fragmentation within the Plains' minority population to their advantage. Most notably, the political dispute between Erbil and Baghdad is devolved to local politicians and leaders. Both the central government in Baghdad and the KRG continue to apply pressure on local communities to identify with one government or the other. Unsurprisingly, this increases polarization within

14 Al-Jabbouri is a native of Nineveh from a powerful Sunni Arab tribe. He served as Nineveh Commander of Operations of the Iraqi army during and after the war against IS. In that position, al-Jabouri built a reputation for being a professional military commander and developed political ties across Nineveh.

15 Iraqi Parliament Council, at : <https://ar.parliament.iq>.

communities and limits the chances for more resolution-oriented political dialogue. For example, the Plains' Shabak community is represented by two competing political camps.¹⁶ The 'Shabak nationalist' camp led by Hunain al-Qaddo, a parliamentarian representing al-Maliki's State of Law bloc, before he passed away in December 2020. Al-Qaddo's camp favours the separation of the Plain from Nineveh's governorate to attach it directly to the federal government in Baghdad. The camp has gained prominence amongst the Shabak community as a result of its security dominance and clientelist handouts to constituents.¹⁷ The opposing Shabak camp is pro-Kurdish and is led by Mala Salim, a KDP parliamentarian. Salim's camp also advocates for the separation of the Plain from Nineveh's governorate, only to be tied to the KRG administration in Erbil. More significantly, however, political leaders begin to represent Erbil and Baghdad in the Plains instead of representing the Plain's constituents in Erbil and Baghdad.

Marginalization of the Plains from provincial and government decision-making coupled with political competition and polarization has produced a mosaic of segregated bubbles of governance. Specifically, the legislative and executive bodies at the district and subdistrict levels are overruled by various political, security and religious actors. Striking is the ascension of armed groups as key governance actors rooted in their ability to successfully manipulate the absence of state institutions in the Plains to solidify their control. Their roles extend beyond providing security services and control of territory to providing employment, tax collection and administrative and basic services to constituents. While several of these armed groups have direct and indirect ties and affiliations to national actors including the PMF and the KDP's Peshmerga, they remain localized to a great extent. This allows them to retain autonomy in managing local governance issues and operations independent of regional or national changes in politics or policies.

The capture of state resources by national and local actors has made citizens' access to basic services within the Plains rather difficult. This has mostly pushed citizens to develop a multitude of networks as coping mechanisms to get by. The majority of ordinary citizens do not want to take sides in the several ongoing disputes (see section 4). In fact, interviews showed that residents try to maximize benefits across several actors in order to receive sufficient services. For example, several respondents continue to receive services from Erbil and Duhok, including water, healthcare and education, as the KRG still has an extensive service infrastructure that pre-dates 2014. Simultaneously, residents acknowledge dependency on Baghdad in receiving salaries and welfare benefits. As a result, citizens live in a town where security is provided by,

16 Van Zoonen, D. and Wirya, K. 2017. 'The Shabaks Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict', MERI.

17 Almas, M. et. Al. 2020. 'Religious and ethnic minorities quota seats between fragmentations and rivalries of dominant political parties.' Kirkuknow.

for example, KRG-affiliated groups, as in Shekhan; work in a second town benefiting from employment opportunities with Shia armed groups; and register in a third town closer to Mosul for benefits from the central government in Baghdad or the NPC. Such convoluted governance practices have undermined the authority of provincial and central governments to the advantage of community governance structures that operate on a quid pro quo mechanism – that is, services for influence.

(In)stability factor 2: Security polarisation

The Arab-Kurdish dispute over control of the Plains predates the fight against IS and has long nested community tensions. Kurdish sponsored armed groups including the Peshmerga, Christian forces and Kurdish-affiliated units of the Iraqi army extended influence and control over large swaths of the Plains. Nonetheless, exclusionary policies and marginalization of Shia Muslim Shabaks allowed Baghdad an entry point into the Plains through experimenting with sponsorship of new Shabak armed groups.

Shortly afterwards, in August 2014, IS took full control over the Plains. The Kurdish forces and federal police in the Plains withdrew immediately as IS began to approach urban centres and Christian and Yezidi towns. In 2016, liberation operations were launched with aerial support from global coalition forces, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), Kurdish forces and tribal forces. The joint efforts of these actors succeeded in ridding the area of IS in a short period of time but also fragmented the security landscape of the Plains. Against this backdrop, this section identifies the following key findings that are detailed below:

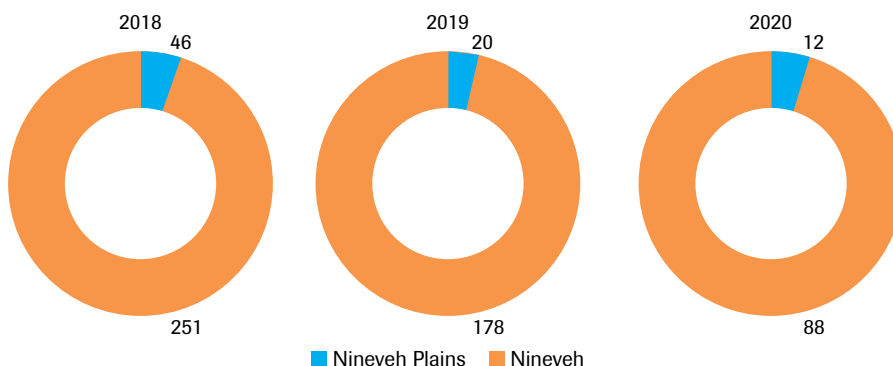
- The degree of acceptance and preference by the local population of the many security actors that expanded their influence after liberation of the territory from IS is mixed and differs along ethno-sectarian lines.
- The latter is the result of security actors, chief among them the PMF, favouring their own constituencies to the detriment of other communities in the area. In fact, while often at the forefront of security provision, the local PMF units in the Nineveh Plains (specifically the 30th and 50th Brigades) play a pivotal role in exacerbating social tensions and shifting power dynamics by controlling areas of strategic value and empowering Shia communities.
- Consequently, the ensuing situation has produced a large degree of frustration from local non-Shia communities that feel the PMF's presence favours the growth of the Shia population in an area once dominated by non-Shia minority groups.

The security constellation in the Nineveh Plains

Since the liberation, the Nineveh Plains features a relatively stable security situation with limited IS activities. This is primarily due to two reasons. First, the Plains' landscape – flat extensions of land – means it is easy to secure by controlling key entry points, in contrast to the mountainous regions in other parts of Nineveh. Second, the

restricted movement of IS suspects' families and their concentration in PMF-secured camps has limited violent activity to incidents in camps of Hamdaniyah, for example, or Tal Kaif's border with Mosul. Figure 1 below, provides an overview of the security situation in the Plains.

Figure 1 Number of incidents of violence in Nineveh Plains as a percentage of total incidents in Nineveh¹⁸



Source: ACLED database (2020)

However, the liberation of the Nineveh Plains also provided ample opportunity for security actors other than IS to extend influence and control. Previously dominant Kurdish forces – including the Peshmerga, Asayish and the Nineveh Plains Guards and Forces – have lost large swathes of territory in the Plains which are now controlled by the Iraqi Army, PMF groups (mainly the 30th and 50th brigades) and the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU) that participated in the liberation.¹⁹ Beyond losing territorial control, the track record and conduct of Kurdish forces in Nineveh province has been mixed. Several respondents indicate feelings of betrayal caused by the retreat of Kurdish forces during the fight against IS. Therefore, the degree of their acceptance and preference by the local population, including Christians and Yezidi Kurds, is mixed too.

As per figure 2, Kurdish forces were pushed back to the northern periphery of the Plains controlling the Shekhan district and the border between Tel Kayf and Duhok. Tal Kayf has been handed over to the Iraqi army and federal police in 2019, but large security gaps persist. The Christian Bablyon Brigade, the 50th PMF Brigade, extends along the

18 This includes bombings, attacks against civilians and security forces, and operations against IS sleeper cells.

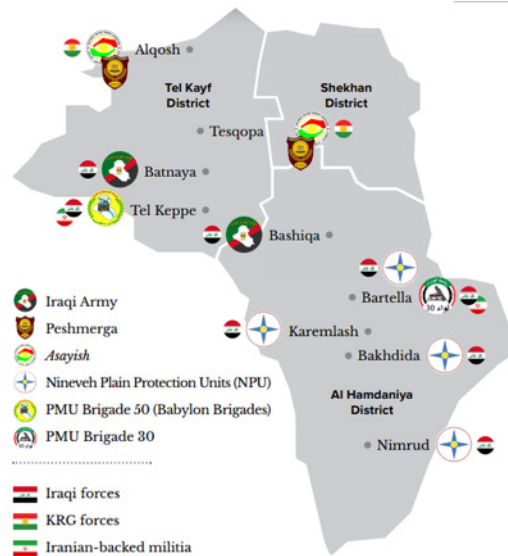
19 Knights, M. and Kallian, Y. 2017. 'Confidence and Security-Building Measures in the Nineveh Plains'. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

border between Mosul and Tal Kayf controlling entry into the district from its southern borders. In Hamdaniya, the Plains largest district, territory is divided between Liwa al-Shabak, the 30th Brigade, and the NPU, an Assyrian military organization. The NPU oversees checkpoints in eastern Christian areas such as Bakhdida and Bartella. The 30th Brigade, also headquartered in Bartella, controls most urban centers and border controls in and out of Hamdaniya.

The fragmentation of the security architecture and territorial control has divided up the region among the various security forces, each exerting control within their territory. Major highways and checkpoints are often manned by different groups, making travel difficult and trapping residents and humanitarian workers in particular areas. Security forces have taken matters into their own hands, ignoring orders issued by Baghdad. Each group demands its own set of permissions, documentation or charges to work and move in a given area.²⁰ In addition, the highly securitised nature of the Plains often amplifies social tensions and forcibly favours a group's own constituents at the cost of other ethnoreligious groups. Christian, Shia and Kurdish forces advantage their own communities and compete over strategic sites for an economic edge; for example, previously disenfranchised Shabak communities from rural areas gained sway in Christian areas and urban centres – producing a significant shift in local power in the process.

20 Halawa, H. 2020. 'The Forgotten Iraq', Middle East Institute.

Figure 2 Distribution of security actors in the Nineveh Plains

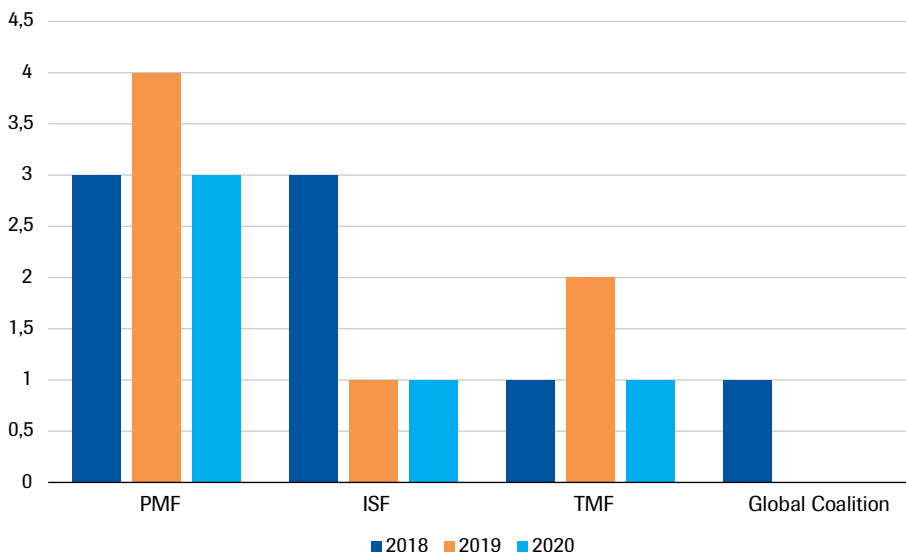


Source: Assyrian Policy Institute. 2020. 'Contested Control: The Future of Security in Iraq's Nineveh Plain'²¹

Until today, PMF forces were considered the first responders against IS attacks in the region. Figure 3 below shows that it is the PMF, ISF and tribal forces (in descending order) that were involved in countering IS attacks between 2018 and 2020. Notably the role of the ISF and Global Coalition forces has decreased significantly after 2018 as the fight against IS dissolved.

21 See (accessed November 2020): https://50f3ad00-5b28-4016-898f-6130d301c97a.filesusr.com/ugd/6ae567_98f8f8912baa40949a18a3a0b717eaea.pdf

Figure 3 Frequency with which security actors have been involved in violent incidents against IS



Source: ACLED database (2020)

The PMF's evolving role

Beyond averting an IS insurgency, several PMF groups guard a number of checkpoints in the towns of Tal Keif and Hamdaniyah and their surroundings. Despite the protection they provide, their strategic control and evolving role causes the PMF to remain a source of local contention and polarisation. For several respondents, the PMF groups are heroes who sacrificed their lives to defeat IS – in stark contrast to government forces and Kurdish Peshmerga that proved unreliable and abandoned the Christians and Assyrians when IS approached. For others, the PMF continues to forcefully control territory against the wishes of local residents. Indeed, several reports about PMF misbehaviour from local residents, human rights watchers and international organisations have been voiced in the last few years and taken centre stage in the discussion around the region.²² In July 2019, the United States issued sanctions against two local PMF figures (30th and 50th)

22 Persecution International Christian Concern. 2021. 'Nineveh Plains Transitional Justice Report: March'. <https://www.persecution.org/2021/04/05/nineveh-plains-transitional-justice-report-march-2/> ; Gadalla, P. 2020. 'Three years after the Caliphate, Iraq's Christians find little incentive to return', Atlantic Council. Ghafuri, L. 2020. 'Iran-backed militias impede religious freedom in Iraq: US monitor', Rudaw.

and the former governor of Nineveh, who facilitated PMF activities.²³ The PMF's response was aggressive and local Christians were placed within their crosshairs for further harassment.²⁴ A number of protests and demonstrations have thus been recorded over the last two years, with residents demanding the exit of the PMF from their area and their replacement by the official security forces.²⁵ However, participation in such demonstrations has never exceeded a few dozen residents, either due to fear or because several residents have begun normalising the existence of the PMF in the Plains.

Increased scrutiny and stern warnings from international partners have indeed seemed to tame the PMF for a limited period of time in 2019. For starters, Waad Qaddo, the 30th Brigade founder for the Shabak in Nineveh, was replaced by his assistant Zain al-Abedin Kheder.²⁶ Waad Qaddo's belated removal was met with some reservations by locals, as the leadership change did not include major structural transformation to the local PMF group.²⁷ In addition, Brigade 50 began to withdraw from several towns, specifically Bashiqa and Batnaya. The Hashd's area of control has been delineated and is now restricted to Bartella and Tel Kaif's border with Mosul (see figure 2). Over the same period, human rights violations and reported violence began to decline and security perceptions of local residents gradually improved.²⁸ Such changes were in line with the PMF commission's attempt to formalise local PMF structures and professionalise their operations across Iraq – including Nineveh – in 2019.

However, these positive developments were short lived. Today, the PMF is relatively leaderless and torn by a struggle for control between different factions as a result of the assassination of its erstwhile leaders Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) general Qassem Soleimani in a US drone strike in Baghdad in January 2020. The killing of the pair at the same time – and the inability of the Iranians to replace them with figures with the same leadership skills – has loosened Iran's grip on the PMF and created a crisis of coordination with respect to administrative

23 US Department of Treasury. 2019. 'Treasury Sanctions Persons Associated with Serious Human Rights Abuse and Corrupt Actors in Iraq.' <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm735>.

24 Evans, C. 2020. 'Nineveh Plains Transitional Justice Report: July'. Persecution International Christian Concern.

25 Shafaq News. 2020. 'Nineveh Plain people block a road with Kurdistan Region and demand the exit of PMF'. <https://shafaq.com/en/iraq-news/nineveh-plain-people-block-a-road-with-kurdistan-region-and-demand-the-exit-of-pmf>.

26 SyriacPress. 2020. 'Iran-backed Brigade 30 militia withdraws five kilometres from its Nineveh Plains bases after U.S. pressure'.

27 Davison, J. and Rasheed, A. 2019. 'Baghdad's crackdown on Iran-allied militias faces resistance'. *Reuters*.

28 ACLED Database (2020), violent incidents recorded in the Nineveh Plains.

authorities. Al-Muhandis had previously used the financial and human resources of the PMF Committee to tighten control over factions and bring them under his influence.

As Nineveh is considered a 'special' governorate (in addition to Anbar) without its own (decentralised) PMF Commission coordination unit, special liaison officer Brigadier-General Muhammad Ismail al-Shakabi used to report to al-Muhandis directly. Yet, this link is now broken.²⁹ Al-Muhandis had continuously supported and reinforced local PMF groups in the Plains to ensure that he could maintain sufficient control over them. For example, he provided them with reassurance and reinforcement after both prime ministers al-Abadi and Abdul Mahdi pushed for the implementation of Executive Order 1388 that required the transfer of local PMF units in the Plains (Brigade 30th and 50th) to the operational and administrative control of the army-led Nineveh Operations Command. While far from ideal, it at least ensured that these local PMF units operated in a fairly disciplined manner and could be called to order by al-Muhandis.

The vacuum resulting from al-Muhandis' death gave these local PMF groups a freer rein to compensate locally for lost national support and leverage. Accordingly, local PMF factions such as Brigade 30 and 50 in Nineveh have future-proofed their position. Respondents indicated that old checkpoints were reinstalled, access to several towns and cities (especially across the disputed borders) was once again limited and unjustified discrimination against local Christian and Yezidi populations resurfaced after the January 2020 assassination. In some cases, PMF actions are meant to prevent Counter Terrorism Services (CTS), Iraqi army or coalition forces from entering an area in which the PMF wishes to maintain its primacy. The attack on Erbil airport in October 2020, for example, was initiated by six missiles launched from the Nineveh Plains in an area controlled by the PMF. The attack was small in scale – the intention was to demonstrate PMF capabilities and test the coalition response rather than to cause loss of life.

The complexity of the PMF's role in the Plains is attributed to a number of factors. Primarily, calls for redeployment and integration into formal security structures is difficult for local PMF forces that are embedded within local communities and operate in their home districts, contrary to PMF groups with a more national presence. As a result, local PMF groups play a pivotal role in local social structures and power dynamics by empowering Shia communities. Moreover, both PMF groups in Nineveh (Brigades 30 and 50) control areas of strategic value with good accessibility to trade markets, highways and urban centres. Accordingly, this has produced a large degree of frustration from local non-Shia communities that feel the PMF's presence favours the growth of the Shia population in an area once dominated by non-Shia minority groups.

29 Knights, M. et. al. 2020. 'Honored, Not Contained: The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces'. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Finally, PMF groups in the Plains enjoy a large degree of autonomy. Law No. 21 allows the governorates to decide if, and where, Iraqi military units should be stationed locally. However, this law does not seem to apply to Nineveh. PMF leaders have large degree of control over such decision making, view their presence in the province as critical and question both the integrity of the Iraqi Army and the possibility of integrating the two forces.

Box 2 A brief profile of key PMF units operating on the Nineveh Plains

Liwa al-Shabak (30th Brigade)

The PMF 30th Brigade (Liwa al-Shabak/Quwar Sahl Nineveh) is a force of 1,000-1,500 from the Shabak people, a non-Arab ethnic minority native to the Nineveh Plains. The Shabak are both Shia and Sunni by religion, and Brigade 30 is dominated by Shia Shabak. The brigade has established its headquarters in Bartella. Primarily, PMF 30th is involved in large-scale business operations, as it controls the strategic territory on the eastern periphery of Mosul city, north and south of the Mosul to Erbil highway, meaning that it controls trade between Mosul and Erbil, carrying all manner of goods to Mosul markets and serving as the main reconstruction artery. Their vehicle checkpoints also provide significant money-making opportunities. Their traditional connection to eastern Mosul suburbs and mechanics quarters have placed them in pole position in the scrap metal market, a large industry due to the high levels of destruction in the city. The 30th Brigade largely operates from depopulated towns such as the Christian towns of Bartella, Bazwiya and Bashiqa, seizing control over uninhabited land and vacant homes. Several respondents have indicated that Shabak and Shia Muslim populations have benefited from the presence of the 30th Brigade, as it facilitates access to services and housing for their constituents.

Brigade 30 has been the cause of controversy regarding sectarian abuses and specifically for seeking to prevent the return of Christian IDPs to Bartella. As a result, Waas Qado, the Brigade 30th's commander, has since then been subjected to US sanctions. The Brigade also often limits international access to several areas within the Plains. On 3 February 2021, the 30th Brigade even harassed a coalition military foot patrol that was conducting a patrol outside its base.

Kata'ib Babylon (50th Brigade)

Despite its local character, there are nevertheless a number of speculations about members of Brigade 50th, with several interviewees believing that a majority of its soldiers are outsiders 'pretending to be local Christian units'. With a total of 1,000 soldiers, the brigade is located in an area northeast of

Mosul called Batnaya. Many of its fighters are in fact not Christians, but originate from Baghdad's Sadr City, Muthana and Dhi Qar. It is led by a Christian fighter from Baghdad called Rayan al-Kildani. Al-Kildani is known for being a fervent loyalist to the IRGC and was a close associate of al-Muhandis. His relationship with the local Christian population is tense, including with reputable religious leaders and clerics in the region, such as the Patriarch of Babylon and the head of the Catholic church. Brigade 50th is believed to have illegally seized and sold agricultural land and is also accused of discriminatory behavior in Batnaya.

Sources: Knights, M. et. al. 2020. 'Honored, Not Contained: The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces', The Washington Institute for Near East Policy; EASO. 2020. 'Iraq Security Situation – Country of Origin Information Report'. Assyrian Policy Institute. 2020. 'Contested Control: The Future of Security in Iraq's Nineveh Plains'.

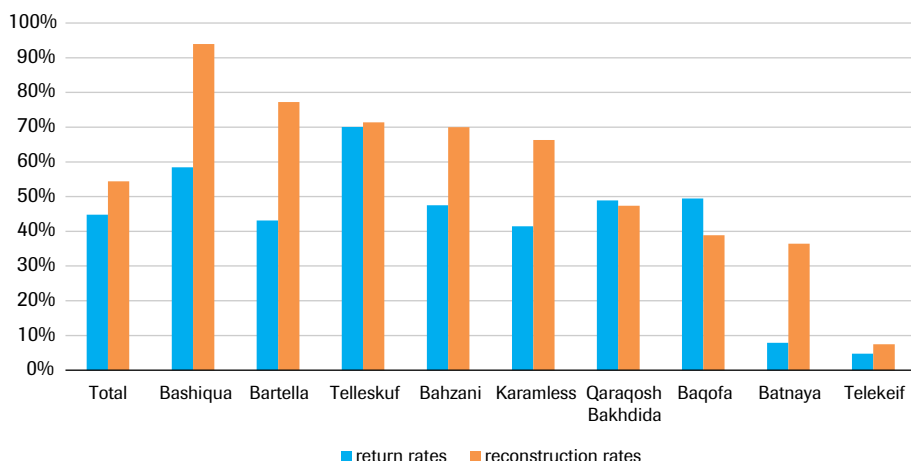
(In)stability factor 3: Chronic displacement

Despite the military defeat of IS in Iraq in 2017, the process of return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) continues to face appreciable challenges alongside the slow rate of reconstruction and rehabilitation. This section attributes this to three main factors. First, many of those that left IDP camps have found little to return to, as limited attention is being given to either services or livelihood programmes that could provide jobs and education, which in turn yields to the frustration of local populations towards the government's apparent prioritisation of the construction of new settlements. Second, largescale corruption is diverting reconstruction funds and disincentivising engagement from the international community. Furthermore, PMF groups, local authorities and political parties all compete over reconstruction funds. Third, non-Muslim minorities in the Plains are concerned about the rural to urban displacement of Shia Shabaks, as these now wield greater influence over traditionally Christian sites, further hampering the return of minorities and altering the ethno-sectarian distribution of the area.

Nineveh governorate has the highest rate of IDPs of all the Iraqi governorates (110,316 out of a total of 324,078 – roughly a third).³⁰ Reconstruction, often believed to be the main positive driver of return, progresses at a snail's pace (e.g. repair of houses and churches, but also re-activation of social services). Almost four years after its liberation, the extent of reconstruction of the destruction previously wrought is estimated at 50 percent. Figure 4 below provides a few insights into reconstruction and return patterns.

30 IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix, numbers as of June 2020. Available at: <http://iraqdtm.iom.int/>.

Figure 4 Reconstruction and return rates in the Nineveh Plains



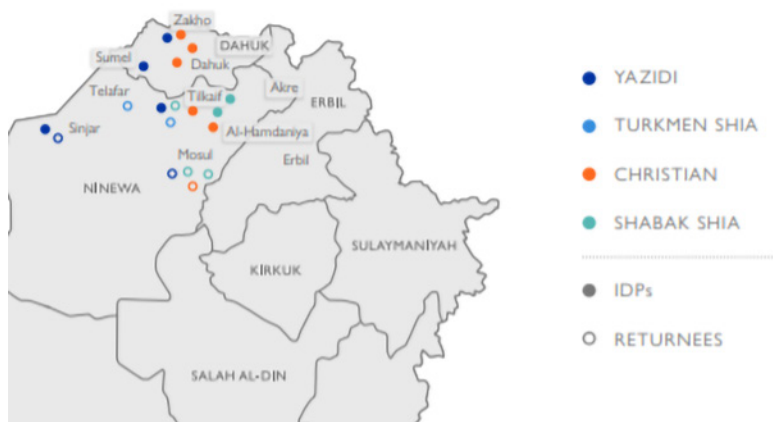
Source: Authors' calculations using NRC Iraq Surveys

The most salient points concerning the lack of causality in the relation between reconstruction and return are the following:

- On average, the full suite of reconstruction efforts has enabled an equivalent 45 percent of previously displaced people to return. This includes a large push from governments that began a campaign in 2019 to close camps to reduce displacement.
- Both reconstruction and return patterns are not linear and discrepancies exist within different parts of the region and among different ethnoreligious groups. For example, 35 percent of Christians have returned, compared to 50 percent of Assyrians and 80 percent of Shabaks.³¹
- Displacement data is also partial as it does not incorporate displacement within districts or permanent resettlement. Figure 5 below shows that displacement of Plains' minorities continues within the Plains' boundaries as communities move around to find settlements in places that feel safest and provide them with sufficient livelihood opportunities and services. Primarily the Christians and Shia Shabak IDPs are competing over urban centres in the Tal Kaif and Hamdaniyah districts.

31 IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix, numbers as of June 2020. Available at: <http://iraqdtm.iom.int/>; IOM Iraq, *Understanding Ethno-Religious Groups in Iraq: Displacement and Return*, Baghdad, February 2019, pp. 7; Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) International. *Life After ISIS: New Challenges to Christianity in Iraq: Results from ACN's Survey of Christians in the Liberated Nineveh Plains*, June 2020, pp. 27.

Figure 5 IDPs and Returnees in Nineveh³²



Source: IOM (2019)

The main conclusion from the data provided above is that reconstruction (of homes) is not sufficient to guarantee return of displaced migrants. Return rates remain lower than reconstruction rates, despite forced closure of camps. In several towns (such as Tel Kaif, Batnaya, Bartella and others), high rates of reconstruction did not incentivise return correspondingly. This is attributed to a number of causes:

- Many of those who left camps have found little to return to. The collapse of infrastructure and lack of basic necessities, including electricity, water, sanitation and medical services, has left communities in the Nineveh Plains underserved. While reconstruction efforts are focused on rehabilitation of homes and roads, limited attention is being given to services or livelihood programmes that could provide jobs and education. Locals are frustrated by the government's apparent prioritisation of the construction of new settlements over creating the conditions that would enable the safe and dignified return of its displaced population. According to IOM, more than 37,000 people have been 're-displaced' in Iraq since March 2018, meaning that they tried to go home but left again because they found life there untenable. Nineveh had the highest number of re-displacements among any other province in Iraq, standing at 25,000. Families are migrating away from the cities of the Nineveh Plains and back to IDP camps, as urban economic deprivation is too severe. Christians and minority groups often seek asylum in European countries,

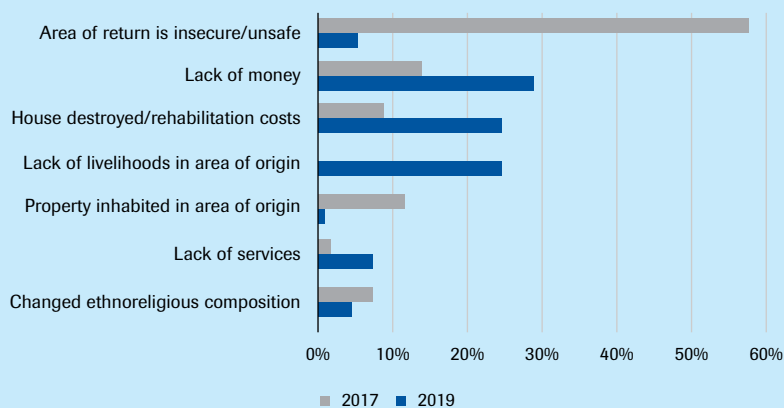
32 IOM. 2019. 'Understanding ethnoreligious groups in Iraq: Displacement and Return' <https://publications.iom.int/books/understanding-ethnoreligious-groups-iraq-displacement-and-return-february-2019>.

the US and Australia, and nearly 100,000 have fled to Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. Nineveh is thought to accommodate the highest number of returnees living in the most acute vulnerabilities overall. Nearly half of the people in need have acute humanitarian needs, of which a large proportion are children.³³ Most returnees are unable to meet their basic needs like food and shelter. IDPs, in and out of camps, and returnees experienced partial or full collapse of living standards and disrupted access to basic goods and services, exhausting their capacities to cope and frequently leading them to negative coping mechanisms, including liquidation of livelihoods assets or subscribing to an armed group in more extreme cases. They lack access to services such as healthcare, portable water, improved sanitation, education and livelihood opportunities.

Box 3 Economic hardship and limited livelihood opportunities in the Nineveh Plains³⁴

In 2017, more than 57 percent of IDPs cited security as the primary obstacle to return. In 2019, they were significantly less concerned about security but rather more about the lack of livelihoods and poor financial resources. Fewer concerns about personal safety are not resulting in greater returns due to such lack of livelihood opportunities and the financial costs of relocating back home.

Ninewa Plains IDPs: Most Commonly Shared Obstacle to Return



Source: IOM (2019). Rural Areas in Nineveh. Legacies of Conflict on Rural Economies and Communities in Sinjar and Nineveh Plains.

33 OCHA. 2020. 'Humanitarian Needs Overview – Iraq'.

34 See: DRC. 2018. 'Multisector Needs Assessment: Ninewa Plains', IOM (2019). Rural Areas in Nineveh. Legacies of Conflict on Rural Economies and Communities in Sinjar and Nineveh Plains.

The Nineveh Plains feature the second lowest rate of economic activity in the country, with Shekhan considered the most impoverished in terms of per capita income and per capita expenditure. In the years leading up to the IS takeover of large swathes of the Plains, 40 percent of the population was living below the poverty line, a percentage that has risen since.

Despite Nineveh being one of Iraq's most fertile regions, producing much of the country's grain and fresh produce, the region's farmers face challenges in relying on agriculture to sustain their livelihoods. Food insecurity rates are high. Inadequate policies, the dry climate, urbanisation, demographic engineering, land disputes and remaining security issues prevent farmers from making a living from agricultural work alone. In the period 2014-2017, agricultural infrastructure was damaged as a result of the fighting to expel IS from Nineveh. The group destroyed land, infrastructure and resources as they retreated – reducing Iraq's agriculture capacity by around 40 percent in the process. Despite efforts to replenish supplies and livestock and rebuild infrastructure, farmers returning to the Plains have yet to reach pre-IS production levels and unemployment remains high. Therefore, farmers in Nineveh tend to engage in additional economic activities just to stay afloat, such as shopkeeping, basic trade and taxi driving.

Such agricultural challenges have also increased rural poverty and inequality compared with urban areas. Rural returnees rely heavily on business, agriculture/farming and husbandry, urban returnees rely more on public employment and assistance from international or local non-governmental organisations (NGOs). As more of the latter is available than of the former, this further incentivises farmers to discard their lands and resettle in urban areas.

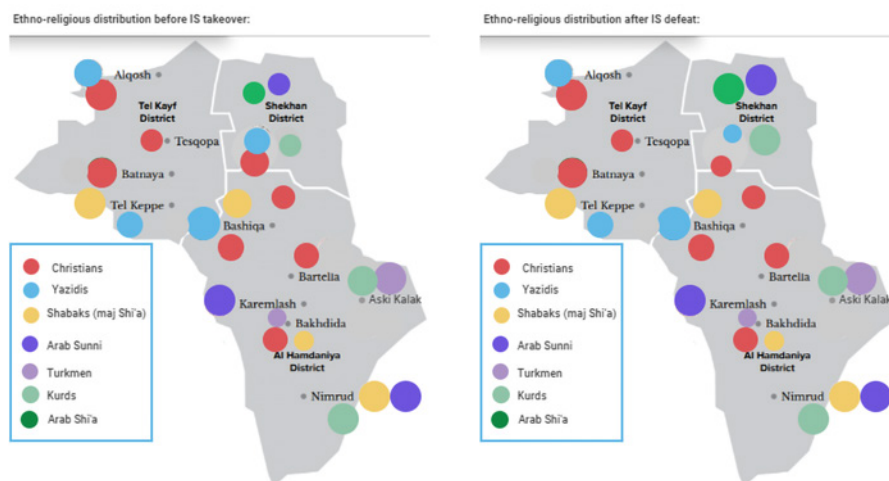
- Largescale corruption is diverting reconstruction funds and disincentivising engagement from the international community. The armed struggle against IS has been transformed into a political struggle between PMF groups, local authorities and political parties over reconstruction funds. The respective governors of Nineveh have been accused by the local population of largescale embezzlement of humanitarian aid aimed at supporting the return of migrants and reducing vulnerability. Large-scale corruption – in addition to the presence of a fragmented security architecture – also makes it more difficult for international and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to set up aid programmes.³⁵ Interviews with (I)NGOs working in the region underlined these challenges, indicating that access is limited and often disrupted, forcing them to work undercover or through informal channels (through the PMF, for example) to get things done.

35 Interviews with NGOs in the Nineveh governorate.

- Sectarianism, armed groups and extremism are beginning to change the identity and heritage of the Plains, making non-Muslim minorities feel less welcome and lessening their safety if they decide to return. Many Christians and Assyrians are frightened of the possibility that IS will return and are fearful of living in towns adjacent to Arab Sunnis (see Figure 6). Respondents signalled that corruption prompts security forces to sell housing permits to 'strangers', often families associated to IS. In addition, non-Muslim minorities in the Plain are concerned about the rural to urban displacement of Shia Shabaks, as these now wield greater influence and control over Christian and Assyrian areas in Tel Kaif and Hamdaniya respectively (see Figure 6). However, low rates of return and high rates of immigration have left newly reconstructed houses and empty plots of land vacant for Shia Shabak. Shabaks prefer to move into Christian neighbourhoods – or town centres – where they have opened up shops and bought land and properties, benefiting from better employment and public services such as healthcare and education.

Several non-Muslim interviewees compared this to Saddam's Arabization campaign when Iraqi authorities forcibly expelled Nineveh Plains residents from their homes and moved Arabs in from elsewhere in Iraq. Nineveh Plains residents, however, disagree on whether the demographic change occurring in the area is forced or not. Shabak respondents claim it is voluntary and underline freedom of movement in their native district. Christians label it as demographic change by stealth that slowly transforms the Plains.

Figure 6 Ethnoreligious distribution in the Nineveh Plains



Source: Produced by the authors based on interview data by district.

(In)stability factor 4: Social fragmentation and incohesion

Islamic State's swift seizure of vast swathes of territory created new fissures and exacerbated old animosities among the diverse communities of the Nineveh Plains. Members of certain communities joined IS, while others showed sympathy to the group and yet others were mercilessly prosecuted by it. The war against IS also prompted some communities to form their own armed forces (the Shia Shabak, for example), which can now be used to challenge rival communities and impose one-sided solutions. While no government plan for the post-IS situation is available and Iraq as a whole faces substantial economic and political headwinds, the Plains' dynamics are likely to continue to be conflictual and communal relations may worsen further. Understanding how communities perceive reconciliation and conflict is a key element in ensuring the safe return of IDPs and prevent new displacement.

Against this backdrop, this report identifies four conflict dimensions that affect the Plains and that correspond to – i.e. either because they are a result of, or are aggravated by – the three factors of instability selected and analysed previously in this report. They include:

- *Contestation between Erbil and Baghdad:* After Iraqi forces regained control of the Plains in 2016, political parties from both sides started to pit communities against each other and mobilise identity as a political instrument. Both governments seek to gain control over the area. This has increased Kurdish-Arab rivalry but also created splits in both the Shabak and Christian communities, pitting those loyal to Erbil against those loyal to Baghdad.
- *Muslim – non-Muslim tensions:* Religious identity has become more salient since IS took over the Nineveh Plains, especially between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Shia and Sunnis have populated Christian and Assyrian areas, which has created friction and social tensions due to an unwillingness to coexist on the part of non-Muslims due to IS, in addition to ongoing discriminatory practices from Muslims.

- *Arms and armed actor proliferation*: The proliferation of armed actors in the Plains perpetuates conflict, as it accentuates social cleavages, creates new violent clashes, facilitates securitisation of issues that could otherwise be peacefully resolved and stimulates factions to seek control over strategic locations.
- *Sunni stigmatisation*: The social isolation and security-heavy approach of Sunni groups after the defeat of IS has led to their increased marginalisation – socially and administratively – by all actors of the Plains.

As a result of the issues listed above, largescale discrimination is becoming common practice in the Nineveh Plains. Christians discriminate against Shabaks, who refer to themselves as 'second-class citizens'. In turn, Shabaks discriminate against Christians by deploying armed forces and committing acts of violence. Meanwhile, Sunni communities in the Nineveh Plains have been stripped of their agency with limited access to legal protection, sentenced to a life at the margins. Women cannot get married or seek employment; they cannot access basic services such as medical treatment and are gradually losing their most basic rights.

Unlike regular displacement camps, where residents are allowed to work, receive benefits and services, Sunnis are placed in Nineveh's highly securitised camp zones with restrictions on movement and limited access to basic services.³⁶ Leaving the camps is also very difficult for a large number of Sunnis, as going home requires legal documents (e.g. for children who were born under IS rule and do not have government-issued papers).³⁷ Getting such papers, requires women to disavow their husbands and their actions. But a wife's disavowal of her husband can be used in court as proof of the man's affiliation to IS. In addition, if the wife accuses him of being an IS member, his family might take revenge. Others just consider their husbands unwilling IS collaborators rather than affiliates.

Some camp residents choose not to go through the lengthy bureaucratic process of leaving because they fear being exposed to discrimination and harassment at the hands of officers managing such cases who typically have little sympathy towards Sunni who lived under IS rule. A recent report by the Iraqi Center for Documentation of War Crimes details grave discriminatory practices by Iraqi security forces and the Shabak

36 Shafaq News. 2020. 'PMF: ISIS lost 95% of its combat force in Nineveh'. <https://shafaq.com/ar/Iraq-News/PMF-ISIS-lost-95-of-its-combat-force-in-Nineveh>.

37 Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) estimates that about 45,000 children in camps across Iraq are missing birth certificates or other civil documentation, putting them at high risk of being sentenced to a life on the margins of Iraqi society.

30th brigade in Nineveh's jails and detention centres.³⁸ This includes systemic use of torture and other human rights violations. In addition, cases of kidnappings and forced disappearances from camps continue to surface. Residents of camps and detention centres have no access to legal aid and (I)NGOs often have to bribe security officers to allow them to enter such camps undercover.

(I)NGOs that provide assistance and support to Sunni groups face criticism and delegitimisation from residents and community members across the Plains. When asked about their relationship with other communities, the connection with the Sunni Arab community was consistently said to be the worst. They find it difficult, if not impossible, to re-establish trust with the Sunni population – unlike their professed openness to reconcile with other groups. Many seem to prefer moving towards further social, territorial and political segregation as a way of avoiding problems. Non-Sunni respondents often shared personal stories of intimidation, discrimination, killings and terrorist attacks from their time living in the villages of the Nineveh plain under IS control. Many had been forced to flee from their homes due to violence or threats thereof and find it difficult to reconcile with the Sunni community more broadly.

On the other side of the ledger, Sunni residents are refusing to turn in those who guided IS when it arrived in 2014 and hand them over to the courts because these are seen as incapable of administering justice fairly and efficiently. This fuels views that Sunni villagers are protecting terrorist accomplices. In fact, IS forced some Sunnis into silence when it was pushed out of Bashiqa in 2016. Moreover, if someone starts to talk, it will be like a ball of wool unravelling and others will fall under suspicion through gossip and hearsay that might well put their lives in danger. For example, Human Rights Watch has documented cases in which IDPs have falsely accused other (Sunni) camp residents of supporting or joining IS to settle scores with or retaliate against personal rivals.³⁹ In other words, the absence of a reliable government process and institutions allows community prejudices and grievances to fester, entrench and persist.

38 Saleh, I. 2020. 'Iraq: Muslim scholars say prisoners being tortured.' Anadolu Agency: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/iraq-muslim-scholars-say-prisoners-being-tortured/1882301>.

39 Marsi, F. 2020. 'Nowhere to go: Mosul residents in limbo as camps close.' *The New Humanitarian* <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/03/11/mosul-iraq-residents-in-limbo-camps-close>.

Conclusion and recommendations

Years of demographic engineering, conflict and displacement continue to transform the demographic makeup of the Nineveh Plains, resulting in growing tensions between different ethnoreligious groups. The fact that this region is part of a larger territory that remains disputed between the Kurdish and Iraqi governments has furthermore contributed to creating and accentuating community divisions by maintaining political rivalries in an unstable environment dominated by continuous competition over resources and loyalties. More recently, relations between the Plains' different communities were negatively affected by IS rule from 2014 to 2017. This has further weakened institutional capacities and prevented the area's communities from mobilising collectively to demand better representation, services and livelihoods from both Baghdad and Erbil. The result is impoverished and marginalised communities riddled with fractures that create competition, discrimination and violence.

This has several implications for the work of international organisations and donors wishing to engage in development activities in the Nineveh Plains. The table below produces a brief risk analysis of each of the (in)stability factors analysed above.

Table 1 Engagement risks for international organisations associated with each factor of (in)stability

(1) Administrative vacuum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult access, contradictory compliance and protocols for different areas and by different groups • The cumbersome need to manage central government bureaucracy and corruption • Limited availability of local governance partners with sufficient capacity and authority • Divided governance structures and service infrastructure between KRG and GoI-linked territories
(2) Security polarisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased security threats to (I)NGO staff • Limited and disrupted access to strategic sites • Service infrastructure controlled by armed actors and services selectively redistributed to constituents • Projects that delegitimise and/or threaten armed groups' influence are purposefully disrupted (e.g. empowering local communities and improving agency)
(3) Chronic displacement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discrepancies in reconstruction support to different areas and to different ethnoreligious groups produces re-displacement and demographic changes • Closure of camps and 'forced' return of migrants increases social strains and will augment both individual vulnerability and community tensions in the Nineveh Plains
(4) Social fragmentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marginalisation of Sunni communities and limited access to justice will encourage future violence • The lack of a national reconciliation strategy embedded in reconstruction programmes will leave existing community divisions unaltered and, combined with the presence of armed groups, likely worsen them over time • Limited stabilisation and development funds will also increase vulnerability and resource competition

Based on our analysis, our recommendations centre on supporting the process of post-conflict recovery via improving livelihoods, better integrating of marginalised communities and bringing about greater social cohesion. Practically, five issues deserve urgent attention:

First, medium to long-term support programmes should strengthen capacities of local governance structures and push them to lead the recovery and reconstruction process in a more professional and institutionalised framework. For example, local crisis management and recovery committees could be established in each district to administer the reconstruction process and coordinate the efforts of different formal and informal actors and groups. With the right incentives and support from central governments, such committees could bridge the gap between the central and Kurdish administrations, monitor the work of armed groups and streamline the process.

Second, the process of reconstruction should provide opportunities for joint projects and cooperation between the different communities of the Nineveh Plains. Working together in the pursuit of shared outcomes increases inter-group contact, builds trust and opens

up new channels of communication. Although the establishment of district centres such as Bazwaya may lead to the building of new schools and hospitals in Shabak areas, it fails to help transform the relationship between different communities in Nineveh. Rather than building a new hospital or education centre in each pocket housing a different community, it would be more constructive in the long-run to ensure that Shabaks can safely access public education and hospitals in places like Mosul, Bartalla, and Al-Hamdaniya.

Third, development projects and humanitarian aid require a more detailed local mapping and needs assessment of communities, displaced populations, returnees and armed groups in order to ensure that operations are conflict sensitive and contribute to bridging existing differences rather than (inadvertently) strengthening them. The legacy of demographic engineering and the disputed status of many of Nineveh's rural areas pose a continuous threat for stability and reconstruction. Disputes over land and property need to be addressed through transparent legal mechanisms in which all groups in rural areas feel represented. In this regard, it is vital that local institutions and law enforcement capacities are improved and extended into rural areas.

Fourth, greater focus on restarting businesses, strengthening institutions and rehabilitating agricultural land and capital (specifically in rural areas) is necessary to improve agency and productivity. Reconstruction efforts so far have overly emphasized rehabilitation of shelter and homes none of which have, however, improved residents' livelihoods or incentivised return of displaced families. In addition, the majority of reconstruction is done in urban centers, which has promoted large-scale migration and contributed to the already existing urban-rural ethnoreligious divide.

Fifth, service delivery and service infrastructure should extend to Sunni detention and displacement camps, including legal aid, as their residents await justice. International organisations like the UN and human rights organisations should strongly advocate for such support as part of a broader strategy to prevent future grievances, or even extremism, from developing. Such support could be closely supervised by Iraqi forces and government representatives but must be co-led by international donors due to current biases and negative perceptions, and preferably undertaken by international organisations because of their greater neutrality.