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The Gangs of Iraq

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Marauding pro-government militias are using the fight against the Islamic State as a pretext to destroy Sunni Arab communities across the country.

ERBIL, Iraq - Behind the relative safety of the large concrete blast walls, a Kurdish Peshmerga commander sat behind a dark wooden desk and described the situation in the battle-scarred towns in Iraq's northern province of Salahaddin.

"There is no one left in any of these villages, they are all empty," he told me.

This was not entirely true. As my colleague and I drove into the village of Yengija, some 50 miles south of Peshmerga-controlled Kirkuk, in an area controlled by the Islamic State until late August, the streets were packed -- but not with residents.

Men who looked like soldiers lined the main street, scores of them, standing at attention with AK-47 assault rifles slung over their shoulders. With U.S.-provided Humvees parked along the side of the street, it looked like a military parade was about to start. But there was nothing official about this army. The men bore no insignia of Iraq's armed forces: Most had on mismatched military fatigues, while some wore black balaclavas printed with a menacing skeleton face. From their slender frames, it looked like some were no more than 16 or 17.

It was only when we saw the bright yellow flags flying from a checkpoint and burned-out buildings that we realized who these armed men were. They were part of the Saraya al-Khorasani Brigade, one of the many Shiite militias that have assumed a national military role since the Iraqi government's security forces crumbled this summer, fleeing their positions as the Islamic State fighters swept through Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city.

The Khorasani Brigade is a relatively recent addition to the network of Shiite militias in Iraq -- and despite a similar sounding name, has no connection to the Khorasan Group, the alleged al Qaeda-affiliated organization that was the target of U.S. airstrikes in Syria in September. The Khorasani Brigade is just one of dozens of similar militias that are essentially running their own show in parts of the country. These Shiite militias are supplied with weapons and equipment from the central government in Baghdad, which is now being assisted by a U.S.-led military alliance in its fight against the Islamic State.

These militias' actions will only exacerbate Iraq's existing sectarian tensions. The country is no stranger to sectarian violence: Its Shiite population suffered for decades under the oppressive rule of Saddam Hussein, and after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 the country spiraled into a cycle of revenge violence, culminating in a bloody civil war in 2006 and 2007. Many accused the largely autocratic rule of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki

of fueling sectarian flames.

While the Iraqi central government has virtually no formal authority over the militias, who act as a law unto themselves, some key politicians in Baghdad have strong alliances to individual militias. In October, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi appointed Mohammed Salem al-Ghabban -- a prominent member of the Badr Organization, a Shiite political group that controls one of the largest and most infamous militias -- as interior minister.

Despite being almost completely unaccountable to any official ministry, the Shiite militias have been tasked by the government with a key role in the war against the Islamic State. Yet what we saw in Yengija laid bare the costs of relying on these groups. Beyond the main road, an entire neighborhood of two-story homes was razed and flattened, with concrete slab roofs heaped atop piles of rubble. Personal belongings, children's toys, and furniture peeked out from under the debris, a poignant reminder of the Sunni Arab families who, until recently, had lived there. All these families had fled in August when the militia started battling the Islamic State fighters in the surrounding area.

The destruction was overwhelming. The only houses that remained standing shared one common feature -- blackened exterior windows showing where the militia had set fire to them in their efforts to destroy whatever they could not loot.

Families that had been driven from their homes told us that when the militia arrived, they destroyed the families' homes. Former residents told us that those who have tried to return are accused of being Islamic State members or sympathizers; some were held by the militia for days, blindfolded, questioned, and beaten -- or simply disappeared. In the Peshmerga-controlled city of Kirkuk, we met Hamad, a government worker from Yengija. He told us that he had snuck back into the village undetected two weeks earlier to try to collect some of his family's belongings after being told by neighbors that his home was undamaged. But when he arrived, he found his house emptied of its valuables and his neighborhood torched.

The militia had made no effort to conceal its crimes, but instead advertised their destruction by spray-painting "Khorasani" and Shiite slogans on the walls that were still standing.

In a back corner of the village, Kurdish Peshmerga forces have established a small base from which they control a small residential quarter. It seemed their only common goal with the Shiite militia was repelling the Islamic State. As the Khorasani Brigade turned their efforts toward driving out the Sunni Arab population that lived in the town, the Kurdish forces found themselves outnumbered and powerless to intervene. The Peshmerga commander told us that the Shiite militia will not allow his forces to enter areas where they exercise control.

As we walked around the handful of streets under Peshmerga control, the air became filled with smoke as the Khorasani Brigade set more houses on fire. Approaching one, we could still see the stain where the militia had poured the kerosene they used to start the fire. It was deliberate and precise. As we watched the smoke billow from one house, its mud brick walls collapsed in front of us. There is little chance that Yengija's residents will ever return here. If any do, they will find that where they formerly lived and worked is now a scene of utter destruction.

What we saw at Yengija was not at all unique. During our visit to a makeshift camp at the foot of nearby hills, we met dozens of displaced families from more than 20 predominantly Sunni villages within a 10-mile radius of Yengija. They all provided similar, chilling accounts of the systematic destruction of their villages by government-backed militias determined to prevent Sunni Arabs from returning. Hundreds of families have been left homeless, and are now taking shelter in abandoned factories, in graveyards, and under cars and trucks. They were pushed from their homes by the Islamic State, but are prevented from returning by these militia groups.

"I took my family out to protect them from ISIS," Ahmed, a young business owner from the nearby village of Hufriyah, told me. "I didn't realize that the people who came to fight ISIS were going to be the ones we would need protection from."

There is mounting evidence that Iraq's Shiite militias are using the fight against the Islamic State as cover for a campaign of sectarian violence targeting Sunni Arab communities. The Baghdad authorities have turned a blind eye to these militias' crimes, while foreign governments have ignored the militias' use of their military aid to

pursue their campaign against Sunni Arabs. If the central Iraqi government doesn't rein in Shiite militias and hold them and their commanders to account for their crimes -- including war crimes -- Iraq may enter even more terrible times.

As Shiite militias reportedly prepare to launch an offensive south of the predominantly Sunni city of Tikrit, which was captured by the Islamic State in June, it seems likely that they will leave similar patterns of destruction and displacement in their wake. A small window of opportunity still remains to halt the militias' rampage of retribution. But unless the government and its foreign allies seize their chance to put a halt to this destruction, Iraq may yet slide into a new abyss of sectarian violence and revenge killings.

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