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# Iraq: Stabilising the Contested District of Sinjar

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Headquarters

**International Crisis Group**

Avenue Louise 235 • 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 • [brussels@crisisgroup.org](mailto:brussels@crisisgroup.org)

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## Principal Findings

**What's new?** In October 2020, Baghdad and Erbil signed an agreement intended to build stability in Iraq's Sinjar district through a new administration and security structure that would let displaced people return. The deal is only partly fulfilled, however. Turkey is intensifying bombardment of the PKK and its affiliates in the area.

**Why does it matter?** As time passes without a workable arrangement for governing and securing Sinjar, the incentives for displaced Sinjaris living in squalid camps to come home are diminishing. Meanwhile, escalating violence risks drawing the district further into the power struggle between Turkey and Iran.

**What should be done?** Baghdad and Erbil should carry out the Sinjar agreement's governance, security and reconstruction provisions as soon as possible. They should remedy their failure when striking the deal to secure buy-in from Iraqi armed groups on the ground by consulting them and Sinjari civil society representatives on how to make it work.

## *Executive Summary*

Nearly seven years after an ad hoc and uneasy coalition of armed groups and Kurdish regional forces backed by U.S. airpower drove ISIS from Sinjar, the situation there remains fraught. Sinjar, a once quiet district in the remote north-western corner of Iraq, is struggling, with its local government lacking legitimacy, its public services failing expectations and its reconstruction stalling. A plethora of competing armed groups keep the area unsafe, leaving 70 per cent of its population displaced. The district's Yazidi ethno-religious majority targeted by ISIS's genocidal onslaught in 2014 is scattered throughout the north west (and in exile) and politically divided. In 2020, the Iraqi federal and Kurdish regional governments came to an agreement to stabilise Sinjar, but follow-through has lagged and clashes in May between the army and a local militia threatened to derail it altogether. The parties to the agreement will need to work with Sinjar residents to strengthen support for the deal and oversee its implementation, allowing the displaced to return.

Even before ISIS arrived in 2014, Sinjar was hostage to a standoff between the federal government in Baghdad and the Kurdish regional government in Erbil, due to its status as a disputed territory (ie, an area over which both governments claim authority). Iraq's 2005 constitution lays out a process for resolving the dual claims to the disputed territories. But the Kurdish government, and in particular its most powerful constituent element, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), has long sought to control the disputed areas, including Sinjar, as a prelude to annexing them to the Kurdish region. The KDP and its peshmerga fighters moved into Sinjar in 2003, co-opting local elites to perform the routine tasks of governance. It won little popularity, however. In particular, it treated the Yazidis as Kurds, in effect denying their distinct communal identity and sowing resentment.

The ISIS assault on the Yazidis in August 2014 transformed Sinjar into a focal point for an array of armed actors. One was the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) – an insurgent Kurdish group that Turkey (along with the U.S. and European Union) classifies as a terrorist organisation. The PKK had long sought refuge in northern Iraq, though prior to 2014, it had largely been confined to the Qandil mountains and an area of Makhmour district where a camp for Kurdish refugees from Turkey is located. But when the KDP withdrew its peshmerga as ISIS fighters stormed the area, affiliates of the PKK stepped in – assisted by U.S. airpower – rescuing survivors and gradually pushing ISIS back. Then, in late 2015, the U.S. again sent warplanes to help a combination of PKK-linked groups (the Syrian People's Protection Units, or YPG, and the newly established Sinjar Resistance Units, or YBŞ) and KDP peshmerga expel ISIS altogether. For the next two years, Sinjar remained largely under the control of the KDP, which dominated the north east as well as Sinjar town, and the PKK, which was concentrated in Mount Sinjar and the north west.

In 2017, the situation in northern Iraq shifted again. The escalating U.S.-supported counter-ISIS campaign brought Iraqi federal forces back to the north, joined by Popular Mobilisation (al-Hashd al-Shaabi) paramilitary groups mostly comprising Iraqis from other parts of the country. They retook Mosul, the last city under ISIS control. Then the Hashd went farther still. After an independence referendum organised

by the Kurdish regional government backfired, they pushed the KDP out of Sinjar and settled into an uneasy collaboration with the PKK components, offshoots and affiliates already ensconced there.

The resulting governance arrangements are haphazard and ineffective. The KDP enjoys formal dispensation to govern Sinjar, but it exercises its writ from outside the district, and even outside the Ninewa governorate in which Sinjar lies, in neighbouring Dohuk governorate. Within Sinjar, the Hashd has appointed a substitute mayor and sub-district directors without the federal government's blessing, while the YBŞ, which consists mostly of Iraqi Yazidis as well as a small number of Arabs who took up arms against ISIS, has set up a governance arm – the “Sinjar self-administration” – that seeks to perform some bureaucratic functions, but lacks the authority and capability to do them well.

Meanwhile, because of the armed groups it is hosting, Sinjar finds itself increasingly at the centre of competition between Turkey and Iran. Iran backs the Hashd, while Turkey seeks to eliminate the PKK, seeing it as a threat to national security. When KDP fighters withdrew in 2017, Turkey – which collaborates with the KDP in fighting the PKK – lost its main partner on the ground in Sinjar. It thus escalated the airstrikes it was already conducting on suspected PKK hideouts in northern Iraq, hitting YBŞ bases hosting PKK cadres in Sinjar as well. In Turkey's view, high-level YBŞ commanders are themselves PKK members. These attacks have become a regular feature of an already precarious security environment. The Hashd and the PKK (with its affiliates) have found common ground in countering Turkey and the KDP – the Hashd, because it seeks a firmer foothold in the north, deems any Turkish military presence there to be an occupation and rejects the KDP's claim to Sinjar; and the PKK, because it seeks a safe haven in northern Iraq.

Seeking to put the district on a better path, the UN brokered an October 2020 agreement between Baghdad and Erbil that was intended to fill the post-ISIS security and administrative vacuum by bringing the federal and Kurdish regional governments together in jointly managing Sinjar, under Baghdad's overall authority. But thus far, only parts of the agreement are in effect, since it failed to take into account the perspectives of the actors in control on the ground – the YBŞ and the various Hashd groups. The YBŞ, including the “Sinjar self-administration”, rejects the agreement, which not only contains no mention of its role in the district but proscribes it altogether. While the Hashd, which nominally comes under the Iraqi prime minister's authority, is an implementing party, many of the Shiite groups that make up its core view the agreement as rigged against them in seeking to transfer security responsibilities to regular forces under the defence and interior ministries.

The urgency of accelerating the agreement's full implementation became clear in May, when clashes broke out between the army and the YBŞ in one of Sinjar's sub-districts. While such confrontations seem to come and go, they lay bare an unaddressed challenge, which is the fate of the YBŞ, which, though it is affiliated with an external group, the PKK, consists itself of Sinjaris, ie, Iraqi citizens who have legitimate local concerns. This file thus deserves sensitive treatment, not the army's resort to a hammer whenever it spots a crooked nail.

To address the dangerous delay in putting the Sinjar agreement into practice, Baghdad and Erbil should work toward greater acceptance of the deal from the broad

range of local armed actors and community representatives concerned. On the civilian side, the government should appoint an acting mayor for now, consulting closely with both the Erbil authorities and Sinjar community leaders to identify a suitable, politically non-aligned, Yazidi from Sinjar. On the security front, the federal government should shift away from its combative approach, engaging directly with the YBS about challenges like standing up a local police force and seeking to integrate its fighters (and other armed group members) into state forces. The UN Assistance Mission in Iraq could help these measures succeed by sending international civilian observers and technical advisers to oversee the process.

**Baghdad/Brussels, 31 May 2022**

# Iraq: Stabilising the Contested District of Sinjar

## I. Introduction

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Sinjar is a district in northern Iraq 120km west of Mosul, the capital of Ninewa governorate, bordering Syria. A historical crossroads between Iraq and the Levant, it is a largely agricultural area surrounding Mount Sinjar and a small city of the same name. The population is ethnically and religiously diverse, with communities of Sunni Muslim Arabs, Sunni Kurds, Assyrian Christians and a small number of Shiite Arabs. The majority, however, are Yazidis, a distinct ethno-religious group spread across northern Iraq and northern Syria.<sup>1</sup>

The district is part of what the 2005 Iraqi constitution refers to as disputed territories: fourteen administrative districts distributed among four governorates that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) claims but nominally come under the authority of the federal government. The status of these territories remains unresolved, but many areas, including Sinjar, fell under the de facto control of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Sinjar remained largely uncontested by other forces, including the federal army, until the arrival of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, in 2014.

That year, the people of Sinjar fell victim to some of the worst atrocities committed by ISIS, as it expanded its short-lived, self-declared caliphate spanning the border between the two countries. The jihadists singled out the Yazidis, whom they regard as heretics, for particularly vicious assault. ISIS militants killed Yazidi men on the spot. They enslaved women and girls, many of whom ended up in captivity in ISIS-held areas of Iraq and Syria, where they suffered severe sexual abuse. Thousands of Yazidis remain displaced in camps throughout north-western Iraq.<sup>2</sup>

From late 2014, a coalition of Iraqi and Kurdish forces, including Yazidi and other militias raised from the district's population, began driving ISIS out of Sinjar with air support supplied by the U.S. Since that effort was completed, the district has been governed through formal and informal arrangements that involved the regional Kurdish government (acting from outside the district), Iran-affiliated militias and the political arm of a regional Yazidi armed group. In October 2020, the federal government in Baghdad and the Kurdish regional government in Erbil concluded an agreement intended to streamline governance and encourage the displaced to come

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<sup>1</sup> Yazidis are indigenous to northern Mesopotamia. A population estimated at 500,000–650,000, lives in Iraq, concentrated in Sinjar, Sheikhan, Tel Kayf and Bashiqa; some live in northern Syria; many others are scattered throughout the diaspora. Though Kurdish-speaking, they do not necessarily see themselves as Kurds. See Birgül Açıkyıldız, *The Yazidis: The History of a Community*, Culture and Religion (London, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> See, among other sources, Mara Redlich Revkin and Elisabeth Jean Wood, "The Islamic State's Pattern of Sexual Violence: Ideology and Institutions, Policies and Practices", *Journal of Global Security Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2 (June 2021).



home by restoring stability to the district. The deal covered three main points: administration, security management and reconstruction.

This report assesses the situation in Sinjar a year and a half after the stabilisation agreement. It highlights weaknesses in the agreement that have thwarted realisation of its vision to date before offering some remedies for the problems. The report is based on extensive fieldwork in the district, as well as in Baghdad, Duhok, Erbil and Suleimaniya. It builds upon Crisis Group's previous research on Sinjar and other disputed territories, particularly since the ISIS conquests in 2014 but also dating back to the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See, among others, Crisis Group Middle East Reports, N°183, *Winning the Post-ISIS Battle for Iraq in Sinjar*, 20 February 2018; N°215, *Iraq: Fixing Security in Kirkuk*, 15 June 2020; N°194, *Reviving UN Mediation on Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries*, 14 December 2018; N°88, *Iraq and the Kurds: Trouble Along the Trigger Line*, 8 July 2009; and N°56, *Iraq and the Kurds: The Brewing Battle over Kirkuk*, 18 July 2006.

## **II. The Struggle over Sinjar**

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The October 2020 Sinjar agreement took a top-down approach that assumed the two signatories – the governments in Baghdad and Erbil – would be capable of following through with its provisions. Yet, while both governments have the legal authority to make the commitments recorded in the pact, neither has the political power or the local buy-in to put them into action. Consequently, the agreement has led to little change other than expanding the territorial control and authority formally enjoyed by federal forces in the district. Understanding why the deal has sputtered requires a look back at how relations among sub-state actors and regional powers have evolved since 2014.

### **A. ISIS's Defeat and the PKK's Rise**

The war on ISIS changed power dynamics in all the areas of Iraq retaken from the jihadist group, especially in the disputed territories. One key dynamic is the rivalry between the KDP and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which the war tipped in the latter's favour.

The KDP, which, like Turkey, views the PKK as a threat, has long worked closely with Ankara to suppress the PKK's capacities in northern Iraq. But starting in 2014, the ISIS campaign in northern Iraq created pressures that worked at cross-purposes with the Turkey-KDP partnership. The KDP's precipitous withdrawal from Sinjar as ISIS fighters arrived in 2014 left the population exposed to the jihadists' genocidal attacks. Meanwhile, the KDP's main rival, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which had long been friendly with the PKK, called on the PKK to support it in battling ISIS throughout the disputed territories, mainly in Kirkuk.<sup>4</sup>

In August, the PKK stepped in to rescue Yazidis fleeing the ISIS depredations, sending fighters from its Syrian affiliate, the People's Protection Units (YPG), across the Syrian-Iraqi border to Sinjar. Until that time, the PKK had had no physical presence in the district, only sympathisers who identified with its leader Abdullah Öcalan's political philosophy, which the PKK disseminated through a local organisation, Tafda.<sup>5</sup>

The YPG's appearance was a godsend for those who survived the ISIS onslaught. Its fighters helped shepherd the escaping population through a corridor they opened from Mount Sinjar (in the centre of the district) into Syria, and then, via the Faysh Khabour border crossing farther north, back into Iraqi Kurdistan, where the KDP settled most Yazidis in camps. Some families remained as refugees in Syria and many young Yazidis there took up arms against ISIS in Syria with the YPG before joining the fight to liberate Sinjar a year later in 2015, when the PKK set up its affiliate in Iraq, the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS).<sup>6</sup>

While these events were unfolding in Iraq, negotiations between Turkey and the PKK collapsed under the strain of the Syrian civil war next door. The July 2015 breakdown of their two-year truce coincided with escalating military operations against

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<sup>4</sup> Galip Dalay, "Kurdish Politics amid the Fight against ISIS: Can a Common Cause Surmount Old Rivalries?", Al Jazeera Center for Studies, 7 February 2016.

<sup>5</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Winning the Post-ISIS Battle for Iraq in Sinjar*, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Crisis Group interviews, YBS members and Yazidi activists, Sinjar and Erbil, September 2021.

ISIS in Iraq and Syria. A U.S.-led coalition that included the YPG was at the forefront of the effort. Seeing the YPG as an extension of the PKK, Ankara viewed Western support for the YPG as compounding the PKK threat.<sup>7</sup> By 2015, the PKK had entrenched itself in north-eastern Syria through the YPG. Directly across the border, it was also expanding its reach in north-western Iraq through the newly established YBS.

When U.S.-supported military operations to liberate the Sinjar district started in November 2015, the PKK again played a role. KDP fighters approached Sinjar from the north, working side by side, albeit with some friction, with the PKK and YBS. They cleared the district's north of ISIS elements, proceeding toward the main highway that runs from Mosul to the Syrian border, just south of Sinjar town. They did not advance beyond this point, and thus the town remained within the range of ISIS artillery in the district's southern villages from November 2015 until the end of 2017, when federal forces retook those areas as well. The joint PKK-KDP effort to liberate the town did little to allay tensions between the two groups. They took control of different areas – the former in the north west and on Mount Sinjar, the latter in the north east and Sinjar town – and on several occasions turned on each other in direct clashes. The conflict kept many displaced residents from returning.<sup>8</sup>

The KRG's independence referendum in 2017 unsettled Sinjar's governance once more, though the KRG retains formal authority as granted by Baghdad. Angered by the referendum, the federal government sent soldiers and Shiite paramilitaries to push the KDP back in the disputed territories. In October, fearing clashes with these forces, the KDP withdrew from Sinjar again, relocating its administrative personnel northward to Dohuk governorate.<sup>9</sup> At this remove, it continues to administer the district, albeit loosely.

More than seven years after the ISIS attack on Mount Sinjar, many Yazidis – even those still displaced in the Kurdistan region, and thus under the KDP's control – openly express appreciation of the PKK and its affiliates for the August 2014 rescue effort. They also castigate the KDP for abruptly withdrawing from the district in 2014 and pulling out again in 2017 – characterising the latter as a second act of treachery that confirmed the party's lack of commitment to Sinjar and its population. A member of the YBS's Women's Resistance Unit, who took up arms after ISIS killed several of her relatives, explained that, in addition to kicking the jihadists out, “we need accountability from the KDP”. She went on: “We need them to acknowledge the crimes that were committed against us as a result of their withdrawal. Otherwise, we will not allow them back in Sinjar”.<sup>10</sup>

The Yazidis feel affinity for the PKK and YPG for other reasons as well. Unlike the KDP, many Yazidis say, these groups have not tried to impose a Kurdish identity

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<sup>7</sup> For more on Turkey's reaction to these developments, see Berkay Mandiraci, “Turkey's PKK Conflict: A Regional Battleground in Flux”, Crisis Group Commentary, 18 February 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Winning the Post-ISIS Battle for Iraq in Sinjar*, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Fear of clashes with federal troops forced the KDP's peshmerga out of the district. The KDP chose to withdraw its civilian administrators as well, following a pattern it established throughout the disputed territories at the time. See Crisis Group Report, *Iraq: Fixing Security in Kirkuk*, op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, February 2022.

upon them.<sup>11</sup> A former YBŞ commander recalled a 2016 meeting in which a KDP counterpart demanded that the YBŞ submit to peshmerga authority because they are (in the KDP's view) also Kurds.<sup>12</sup> Many Yazidis do not see themselves this way, though Kurdish is the mother tongue of most. Against this backdrop, a Yazidi activist explained that the PKK/YPG's secular orientation is a relief given the persecution Yazidis have suffered at the hands of Muslims, referring not just to ISIS but also to local Arabs and Kurds (who are mostly Sunni Muslims).<sup>13</sup>

But, while the PKK and its affiliates enjoy widespread sympathy among Yazidis, they lack the administrative capacity that the KDP took with it when it withdrew from the district in 2017. The YBŞ set up a PKK-modelled system for self-administration after helping free Sinjar in 2015. This structure existed alongside the KDP-controlled administration until the KDP pulled out and persisted afterward, but it never expanded to fill the space the KDP had left behind. For example, it did not try to appoint a mayor (*qa'im maqam*) for the district, in deference to Baghdad's authority.<sup>14</sup> Because Baghdad still regards the KDP as the legitimate governing actor, the YBŞ has little actual sway. Few administrative functions are today performed in Sinjar itself, with residents travelling to Dohuk to take care of most of their bureaucratic chores.

## **B. Arrival of Pro-Iran Paramilitary Groups in Northern Iraq**

Another important effect of the counter-ISIS campaign was to bring in Shiite armed groups from elsewhere in Iraq, who helped defeat the jihadists in battle and stayed in the north west after victory was achieved. A 2014 religious decree by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani had called on men from across the country to volunteer with the security forces, but the first to answer were Shiite militias that had mostly been dormant since the sectarian war in 2005-2007 (though some had gone to fight for the regime in neighbouring Syria after 2011). In 2016, the government institutionalised the al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation) as part of the state, making it part of the formal security sector with its own budget, including salaries for fighters, from the federal government.<sup>15</sup> Some brigades have remained outside the Hashd umbrella while using the institution to advance their own interests, which they define mainly as countering what they call the continued U.S. military occupation of Iraq and, more recently, the Turkish occupation of parts of the north.

The Hashd is run by the Hashd Commission, a decision-making body that encompasses a core of Iranian-backed paramilitary groups, such as the Badr Organisation, Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq. The Hashd also includes a brigade from Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's powerful nationalist Sarayat al-Salam. At first, it also included the so-called Shrine groups aligned with the Shiite religious leadership, the

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<sup>11</sup> Crisis Group interviews, activists and displaced Yazidis, Dohuk, Sinjar and Erbil, September 2021 and February 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group interview, former YBŞ commander, Baghdad, February 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Crisis Group interview, Yazidi activist, Erbil, February 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Iraq is divided into eighteen governorates, headed by a governor. Each governorate is subdivided into districts and sub-districts. The district head, answerable to the governor, is the *qa'im maqam* or mayor; the sub-district head, answerable to the *qa'im maqam*, is called director.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Report N°188, *Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State*, 30 July 2018.

*marjaeeya*, in Najaf, but they broke away to subordinate themselves directly to the prime minister as commander-in-chief in protest of what they considered the Hashd's excessive autonomy.<sup>16</sup>

Apart from its Shiite core, the Hashd co-opted many armed groups formed by ethnic or religious minorities to fend off the ISIS onslaught. In Ninewa governorate these included Sunni tribal, Christian, Shabak and Turkmen groups. In Sinjar, the Hashd worked closely with the PKK-affiliated YBŞ and integrated some of its fighters.

The Hashd's entry into Iraq's north west has made the conflict over the disputed territories more complex. One of its main aims is to prevent the KDP's return to these areas to promote its separatist aspirations. But, while the Hashd is challenging Kurdish military dominance in parts of the north, it is also undermining Baghdad's authority in places from which the state withdrew in the face of ISIS's 2014 offensive. Today, indeed, the Hashd is far more than a military power. It has advanced politically by fielding parliamentary candidates in the disputed territories drawn from among the minorities allied with it. It has also gained economic influence through its control of illicit commerce inside the country, as well as across its borders, from Iran to Syria, and its practice of levying fees upon business owners through its economic offices in return for protection.<sup>17</sup>

The KDP's withdrawal in 2017 left large parts of Sinjar under the Hashd's de facto control.<sup>18</sup> Only one KDP-backed group under the command of Qasim Shasho remained, deploying in the area around the Yazidis' Sharaf al-Din shrine, north east of Mount Sinjar.<sup>19</sup> To consolidate its hold, the Hashd quickly moved to back the YBŞ and its political component, the Sinjar self-administration. The Hashd national leader at the time, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, sought to tie the YBŞ closer to the Hashd by appointing a mayor and sub-district directors who were loyal to, or members of, the self-administration. But Baghdad did not recognise these appointees and the Hashd did not follow through by calling upon the government to formally replace the KDP administration operating from Dohuk. It then seemingly lost interest in the people it had appointed to govern Sinjar after Muhandis died in the same January 2020 U.S. drone strike that killed Iranian Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani. In September 2021, the head of the Sinuni sub-district in Sinjar said he had barely spoken to the Hashd leadership.<sup>20</sup>

Given that the Ninewa governorate (in which Sinjar district is located) does not recognise the Sinjar-based self-administration, most of the federal funds allocated to Sinjar since 2018 have sat unused in Mosul. Meanwhile, Baghdad has paid salaries to displaced Sinjar government employees living in the Kurdistan region.<sup>21</sup> For its

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik and Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Honored, not Contained: The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 23 March 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Iraq: Fixing Security in Kirkuk*, op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interviews, YBŞ member and representatives of the self-administration, Sinjar, September 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group interview, Qasim Shasho, Sinjar, September 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group interview, head of Sinuni sub-district, Sinjar, September 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents, Sinjar, September 2021; and Najm al-Jubouri, Ninewa governor, Mosul, September 2021.

part, the Hashd began to focus on security, leaving the self-administration to run some public services, such as schools and health care facilities, in the areas it controls.

*C. The Hashd, the PKK and the YBŞ – A Marriage of Convenience?*

Security in most of Sinjar is handled by a condominium of the Hashd and local actors, with the Shiite paramilitaries decidedly the senior partner. This arrangement emerged soon after October 2017, after ISIS was defeated and federal forces left. Hashd units moved northward, brushing up against the PKK's strongholds on Mount Sinjar and in Khanasour. They briefly clashed with PKK and YBŞ elements, which feared the Hashd might seek to drive them out, too, but dialogue via side channels defused the tensions.

Since then, the Hashd has maintained a strategic, mutually beneficial relationship with the PKK, one that spans Iraq and Syria, though it does not always override local tensions. The Hashd negotiated its cohabitation with the PKK and YBŞ from 2017 onward by sharing the spoils, especially of cross-border smuggling. The Hashd benefits from the PKK's coordination of illicit trade with the YPG in Syria. Meanwhile, Sinjar provides the PKK with an additional safe haven, building a sort of land bridge between its bases elsewhere in northern Iraq and Syria. But the Hashd views the PKK – unlike the affiliated YBŞ – as a foreign guest in Iraq. As such, it has worked to limit the group's manoeuvrability in Sinjar; following the signing of the Sinjar agreement, it mediated the withdrawal of some PKK cadres from the district.<sup>22</sup>

It is ties to the Hashd that have brought the PKK into the region's pro-Iran camp. The PUK, which unlike the KDP enjoys good relations with Iran, as well as with some of Hashd groups, was the broker of this new relationship. It helped the PKK forge links with the Hashd as early as 2014, paving the way for their later collaboration in Sinjar.<sup>23</sup>

On the ground, the Hashd has replicated the divide-and-conquer strategy it began employing early in the counter-ISIS campaign to secure its new turf, especially in areas such as the Ninewa plains where it did not yet have a presence. For example, it armed several Ninewa minority groups, some of which are at odds with one another, such as the Shabak and Christians. In the disputed territories, where it was also trying to dislodge the KDP, it formed ties with local armed groups.<sup>24</sup> In Sinjar, it established smaller local militias and made the YBŞ, due to its affiliation with the PKK, the foremost of its junior partners, integrating some of its fighters into the Hashd's 80th battalion, which meant they received a government salary.

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<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hashd and YBŞ members, Sinjar and Baghdad, September 2021 and March 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group interviews, PUK and Hashd officials, Suleimaniya and Baghdad, March 2022. PKK-Hashd relations also stretch beyond Iraq, as some Hashd groups that fought ISIS in Syria under Iranian command work closely with the YPG to maintain smuggling routes between Iraq and Syria through Sinjar.

<sup>24</sup> For example, the Hashd in Sinjar started paying salaries to a force led by Hayder Shasho, a former PUK member, in late 2014. (Hayder is Qasim Shasho's nephew but does not share his KDP loyalist uncle's political affiliations.) But it dropped him again in April 2015, while deepening its relations with other local groups, including the YBŞ. Crisis Group Report, *Winning the Post-ISIS Battle for Iraq in Sinjar*, op. cit.

In the Hashd's eyes, the YBŞ is similar to other Iraqi minority groups that took up arms against ISIS and to which the Hashd extended its support in exchange for their loyalty. It views the YBŞ this way because, although modelled on the PKK and drawing upon the PKK's philosophy, the YBŞ has a membership of Iraqi Yazidis and sees its future within the Iraqi state.

The YBŞ derives its current strength from the support it receives from the Hashd. It wants to incorporate as many of its fighters under the Hashd umbrella as possible in order to obtain a steady stream of income. Even partial incorporation will be a financial boost to the whole organisation, as it can split up the salaries and distribute the shares to its other fighters who are not part of the 80th battalion. In September 2021, the YBŞ claimed its force had 5,000 members, but only some 250 of these were under the Hashd aegis. The YBŞ had to pay salaries for the rest but has struggled to do so, placing many on a volunteer retainer in the hope that they can eventually join the 80th battalion.<sup>25</sup>

Apart from the 250 YBŞ fighters, the Hashd maintains several other local units on its payroll. The Lalish and Kocho battalions are led by rival Yazidi commanders; the Arajia battalion was formed by Mahmoud al-Araji for the area's very small (Arab) Shiite minority; and various Sunni Arab tribes in the district's south-eastern part on the border with Syria established separate militias as well. None commands more than 200 fighters and each competes with the others to enlarge the number of its recruits drawing government salaries.<sup>26</sup>

Many local people, including Yazidis and Sunni Arabs, are disgruntled with both their past experience with the KDP and the present one with the Hashd.<sup>27</sup> The Hashd's disinterest in improving governance in Sinjar, as well as its divide-and-conquer approach to local armed groups – whereby it establishes small groups that compete with each other in order to control them and make sure they do not unite against it – has hurt its standing. Yazidi civilians explain that the resulting proliferation of armed groups invites conflict, as these groups vie with one another over resources rather than provide security for the public. Few Yazidis express trust in the Hashd today, claiming that it is merely pursuing its own interest in maintaining access to Syria and protecting cross-border smuggling. Most of the local armed groups appear to view the Hashd presence strictly as a temporary necessity: they want it around as a counterbalance to the KDP, which they fear will dominate the area again should it return, a prospect they consider worse. They tend to agree on the need for Sinjar to fall under federal authority.

Having been largely absent from Sinjar since 2003, Baghdad has an opportunity to gain the local populations' trust, while maintaining a constructive working relationship with both the KDP and the Hashd to ensure that a new administration and security arrangement can emerge.

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<sup>25</sup> A YBŞ commander explained that the group's long-term goal was to establish a separate brigade under the Hashd umbrella, but a Hashd commander claimed that incorporating such a large number of new recruits was unlikely, even with an expanded budget. Crisis Group interviews, YBŞ commander, Sinjar, September 2021; and Hashd commander, Baghdad, January 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group interviews, local Hashd group commanders, Sinjar, September 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Sinjar residents, Sinjar tribal council representatives and Hashd faction members, Sinjar and Baghdad, September 2021 and February 2022.

#### D. *Iran and Turkey: On a Collision Course?*

The Sinjar situation highlights how the interests of Iran and Turkey in Iraq both converge and conflict. Turkey has long-term goals that require Iranian acquiescence, such as a direct border crossing with federal Iraq and a rail connection to Mosul (an old plan that has made no progress), which would need to traverse the territory that connects Iran to its partner organisations based in Iraq and Syria.<sup>28</sup>

While the two countries may have competing economic and political interests in Sinjar, they share a common interest in preventing Kurdish statehood. Hence, both countries supported Baghdad's decision to reimpose control upon the disputed territories after the Kurdistan Regional Government's September 2017 independence referendum.<sup>29</sup> They were particularly keen to prevent the KRG from declaring statehood in not just the Kurdistan region but in the KRG-controlled disputed territories, as the oil fields there, such as in Kirkuk, could make a Kurdish state economically viable.<sup>30</sup>

Iran and Turkey's shared opposition to Kurdish separatism in Iraq reflects concerns about similar Kurdish aspirations in their respective countries. Iran, like Turkey, seeks to stifle such sentiments at home and has repeatedly attacked separatist groups such as the Party of Free Life in Kurdistan and the Democratic Party of Kurdistan-Iran in their bases in northern Iraq.<sup>31</sup> While Turkey has partnered with the KDP, this relationship has been limited in part because Ankara does not want the KDP to parlay Turkish support into a successful independence bid. While Turkey needs the KDP to help it fight the PKK in northern Iraq, including the PKK's YBŞ affiliate in Sinjar, elsewhere in the disputed territories, it seeks to limit the KDP's power, especially in Kirkuk.<sup>32</sup> Against this backdrop, Turkey assumes that Iran's affinity for the PKK has its limits, believing that Iran will collaborate with the PKK to secure an Iranian land corridor running through Iraq and Syria, but not to support the development of a self-governing system that could lead to Kurdish independence in any of these places.<sup>33</sup>

Both Iranian and Turkish officials also seem certain that prolonged friction over Sinjar will not risk head-on confrontation between the two countries given their long history of balancing interests without going to war, but the risks of expanding conflict in and around the district should not be discounted.<sup>34</sup> Escalation in Sinjar between Turkey and Iran's partners, such as the PKK and YBŞ, has occurred already, threatening to turn the district into an arena for a larger conflict. In the name of curbing

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<sup>28</sup> Sardar Aziz, Erwin van Veen and Engin Yüksel, "Turkish Intervention in Its Near Abroad: The Case of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq", Clingendael Institute, March 2022.

<sup>29</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°55, *Oil and Borders: How to Fix Iraq's Kurdish Crisis*, 17 October 2017; and Crisis Group Middle East Report N°199, *After Iraqi Kurdistan's Thwarted Independence Bid*, 27 March 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Report N°194, *Reviving UN Mediation on Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries*, 14 December 2018.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, "Iran's Guards target Kurdish rebels in Iraqi Kurdistan – report", Reuters, 9 September 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group interview, Turkish diplomat, Baghdad, September 2021. In Kirkuk, Turkey uses its ties with local Turkmen and Arab groups to limit the KDP's influence, thus preventing the Kurdish region from annexing this oil-rich part of the disputed territories.

<sup>33</sup> Crisis Group interview, Turkish diplomat, Baghdad, September 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Turkish and Iranian officials, Baghdad, September 2021.



what it calls the PKK's terrorist activities, Turkey has targeted top YBŞ commanders of the Hashd's 80th battalion.<sup>35</sup>

Turkey acknowledges that it cannot simply equate the YBŞ with the PKK, as the former group's rank-and-file may have signed up for different reasons, either to protect themselves or to earn a living, or due to PKK pressure.<sup>36</sup> Neither is the YBŞ a carbon copy of the YPG, which has attacked Turkish troops in the Turkish-controlled enclave in north-eastern Syria, as well as inside Turkey. The YBŞ, by contrast, has not yet directed grievances at Turkey, much less staged attacks on Turkish assets in Iraq.<sup>37</sup> Yet Turkey has increased its targeting of YBŞ commanders, in the process killing Iraqi nationals, many of whom are revered locally for having fought ISIS. Anti-Turkish sentiment in Sinjar is thus on the rise.<sup>38</sup>

At the same time, there is evidence that Turkey is taking care not to provoke Iran in its operations against the PKK and YBŞ. In Sinjar, Ankara has targeted only PKK cadres and 80th battalion commanders, steering clear of other Hashd groups. In this way, Turkey has sought to signal that it is not going after the Hashd institution *per se*, but only the PKK affiliates within it. Turkey has also refrained from condemning or retaliating for most attacks on Turkish forces in Iraq, including those at its Zilkan base in Bashiqa, north east of Mosul. These attacks are outside the area where the YBŞ tends to operate and appear to be perpetrated mainly by pro-Iranian "resistance" factions tied to the Hashd.<sup>39</sup> Turkey's restrained response suggests it intends to navigate its relationship with Iran with extreme caution.

Even so, if things continue on their present course, Turkey is likely to face growing blowback for its activities in Iraq. The pro-Iran Hashd groups' grievances regarding Turkey go well beyond the problems in Sinjar. As with the U.S. military presence in Iraq, they argue that the Turkish military presence is a form of occupation and should be resisted as such.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, Hashd groups are the first to condemn each new air campaign that Turkey conducts against the PKK in Iraq. In February 2021, the Hashd deployed three brigades to Sinjar in response to Turkish threats of a ground incursion.<sup>41</sup>

Hashd "resistance" groups have effectively used unrest in Sinjar as cover to conceal their involvement in attacks on Turkish troops in Iraq. For instance, a group

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<sup>35</sup> "In Iraq's Sinjar, Yazidi returns crawl to a halt amid fears of Turkish airstrikes", *The New Humanitarian*, 10 February 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group interview, Turkish diplomat, Baghdad, March 2022.

<sup>37</sup> Turkey maintains nearly 40 military bases and smaller outposts in the Kurdistan region, some dating back to the 1990s. Turkey also has the Zilkan base near Bashiqa in the disputed territories, which it established at the end of 2015.

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Sinjar residents and YBŞ members, Sinjar and Baghdad, September 2021 and February 2022.

<sup>39</sup> It is possible that individual Yazidis who have fought with the PKK or Hashd groups in Iraq and/or Syria are part of cells under the banner of Ahrar Sinjar, as they can more easily conceal their movements inside the Kurdistan region than Arab paramilitaries who do not speak Kurdish. See, for example, Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik, Alex Almeida and Anwar al-Zamani, "Ahrar Sinjar: Fasail Employment of the Yazidi Community", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 26 May 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hashd members, Baghdad, February and March 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Tahsin Qasim, "Three PMF brigades deployed to Sinjar to counter Turkish threats", *Rudaw*, 13 February 2021.

called Ahrar Sinjar claimed an attack on the Zilkan base following Turkey's February 2022 air campaign against the PKK in Sinjar and Makhmour districts.<sup>42</sup> Yazidi armed groups in Sinjar denied any involvement or even the existence of a group by that name.<sup>43</sup> But, while the name was unfamiliar to local observers, the wording of the group's statement and its logo both recalled occasions on which Shiite pro-Iran "resistance" factions have relied on so-called façade groups to claim attacks on U.S. or Gulf Arab assets in Iraq in order to give themselves plausible deniability.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, even as Turkey has sought to maintain a balancing act with Iran's non-PKK partners in Iraq, Turkish escalation against PKK targets has triggered a growing number of attacks on its Zilkan base.<sup>45</sup> Hashd groups have moreover hit other Turkish interests, for instance, energy export infrastructure linking the Kurdistan region and the disputed territories to Turkey.<sup>46</sup> The standoff in Sinjar has thus become part of a larger competition between Iran and Turkey in Iraq.

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<sup>42</sup> "Ahrar Sinjar' attacks a Turkish military camp in Iraq", *Shafaq News*, 3 February 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, YBŞ and Yazidi Hashd representatives, February 2022.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik and Crispin Smith, "Discordance in the Iran Threat Network in Iraq: Militia Competition and Rivalry", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 21 October 2021.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, "Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, 1 January to 31 March 2022", U.S. Department of Defense, 31 March 2022.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, "Rocket attack misses Kurdistan refinery but raises security concerns", *Iraq Oil Report*, 7 April 2022; and "Attack hits near Kurdistan's export pipeline", *Iraq Oil Report*, 12 April 2022.

### III. The Sinjar Agreement

#### A. Background

On 9 October 2020, the office of Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi announced the Sinjar agreement, signed by Baghdad and Erbil a week earlier, branding it a historic achievement. This pact between the national and regional authorities was indeed significant, especially because it indicated that the KDP, which in effect had run the district from 2003 till 2014, would now accept Baghdad's authority there, at least until the disputed territories question is eventually resolved.

The agreement, which steers clear of addressing the core issue of Sinjar's status, delineates an administrative and security arrangement with the aim of stabilising the area to facilitate return of the displaced. It emerged against the backdrop of three years of negotiations between Baghdad and Erbil following their joint victory over ISIS and critically after federal forces retook control over the disputed territories in October 2017, from Kirkuk to Mosul and Sinjar, which upended much of the KRG's pre-ISIS administrative and security arrangements in these areas. It came about only because it allowed the KRG to return to Sinjar as a key political player and offered a way to address Turkey's demand that the PKK presence in the district be eradicated.<sup>47</sup>

The UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) and various countries' diplomatic missions, as well as the U.S.-led coalition forces, have made several attempts after 2017 to bring Baghdad and Erbil together in the service of common interests – for example, to address poor local governance and to improve security coordination between federal forces and the peshmerga in order to forestall an ISIS resurgence in northern Iraq.<sup>48</sup> Compared with Kirkuk, over which UNAMI-facilitated talks have so far been futile, the sides considered Sinjar, as a government official put it, to be “low-hanging fruit”.<sup>49</sup>

The agreement followed months of negotiations. Security officials on both sides were both the main negotiators and the signatories. On the KRG side, the lead negotiator was the region's interior minister, Rebar Ahmed. On the Baghdad side, the negotiating team included the national security adviser, Qasim al-Araji, the head of the national security service, Hamid al-Shatri, the deputy head of the Joint Operations Command – the central military command for all Iraqi security forces – Abdul-Ameer al-Shimmeri and the head of the Hashd Commission, Faleh al-Fayadh. The former two were lead negotiators operating as liaisons with all government institutions involved. On the margins were civilian advisers to the prime minister and president.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group obtained a copy of the agreement in October 2020. See Appendix B for the full text.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Crisis Group Report, *Iraq: Fixing Security in Kirkuk*, op. cit.

<sup>49</sup> The stakes are far higher in Kirkuk, which sits atop Iraq's second-largest oil reserves. Crisis Group interview, government official, Baghdad, September 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group interviews, government officials and advisers, Baghdad, September-October 2021 and February 2022.

## **B. Terms**

The agreement's text (see Appendix B) outlines three areas for intervention: administration, security management and reconstruction. A committee composed of federal and Kurdish regional government representatives is to oversee the deal's rollout.

With regard to administration, the agreement calls first for appointing a mayor. Sinjar has had no such official since October 2017, when the KDP left the area for the second time. A joint committee to be formed in accordance with the agreement, as described below, has authority to appoint an independent mayor based on a shared understanding between Baghdad and Erbil, as well as the Ninewa governorate administration in Mosul. After the mayor is in place, the joint committee is to fill other key administrative positions, such as sub-district heads.

The deal outlines several steps with respect to security management. Among the most significant is that it shifts responsibility for public safety to local police in coordination with the national security adviser's office and the intelligence services; all other forces must withdraw from the district. Another stipulation is that the interior ministry recruit 2,500 members to the local police force, 1,500 from among returning displaced Yazidis and 1,000 from among the current residents, including Yazidis, Sunni Arabs and Kurds. The joint committee is responsible for vetting the new recruits to ensure that no PKK elements are among them. The agreement, in fact, calls for expelling the PKK from Sinjar, as well as "ending the role" of its affiliates in the area. It tasks the Joint Operations Command, which answers to the prime minister as commander-in-chief and includes representatives of all security forces, with enforcing this provision.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, the agreement requires that the federal and regional governments form a joint committee in coordination with the Ninewa provincial government to oversee reconstruction of Sinjar.

## **C. Reception**

At first, the deal got a mostly positive reaction. The U.S. and European countries, having been privy to the negotiations, applauded their successful conclusion. Crucially, Turkey gave its blessing after the two sides agreed to its condition that the PKK be kicked out of Sinjar.<sup>52</sup> The local reception was mixed. A broad spectrum of Yazidis, including politically non-aligned activists and advocacy groups, cautiously welcomed it, acknowledging that an understanding between Baghdad and Erbil was a crucial step in restoring stability to the district.<sup>53</sup>

But the reception soon soured as gaps in the deal became obvious. It specified no role for international actors as guarantors; nor did it involve Iran, which could have exerted influence on its local partners to respect the deal's terms. Western countries as well as UNAMI considered Baghdad and Erbil the two parties that needed to forge an understanding. In their support for the agreement, they overlooked the dynamics

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<sup>51</sup> The agreement's exact wording calls for: "Putting an end to the PKK presence in Sinjar district and the areas surrounding it. The organisation and its affiliates shall have no role in the region". See Appendix B.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Baghdad, September 2021 and February 2022.

<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Yazidi advocacy organisations, October 2020.

on the ground, especially Baghdad's inability to fully impose its authority on another state institution, the Hashd, which may have consented to the agreement officially but did not intend to support it. Like the YBŞ, some of the main Shiite Hashd groups argue that the agreement is rigged against them.<sup>54</sup> A federal official said Baghdad and Erbil likewise failed to appreciate how entrenched local armed groups had become and how deeply the Hashd had committed to protecting its interests in the area.<sup>55</sup>

The agreement's glaring neglect of the most sensitive socio-political dynamics quickly eroded its local support. This deficiency resulted partly from the fact that representatives of security institutions had led the way in drafting a deal. But likely a bigger reason was the exclusion of local representatives from the talks. Although federal officials did consult Sinjaris along the way, neither negotiating team included a Yazidi or any other representative of Sinjar's ethno-sectarian communities. Nor were Sinjaris aware of the final deal's terms before they were made public.<sup>56</sup> The civilian advisers involved later said they had quietly cautioned about the lack of local buy-in, to no apparent avail.<sup>57</sup>

Building on criticism that some had expressed from the outset, residents evinced scepticism that the agreement would improve conditions in Sinjar, suggesting that it was merely a sop to Baghdad and Erbil.<sup>58</sup> Some Yazidi civilians, including women and displaced persons, argued that only Sinjaris have Sinjari interests at heart. They feared that neither Baghdad nor Erbil would prevent future violence directed at them; that a future central government could try to "Arabise" Sinjar, subsidising Arab migrants from the south to settle in the area, like Saddam Hussein did; or that the KDP might try to "Kurdify" the district should its forces return. They stressed the need for Sinjaris to be in charge of security, preferably in an official local force rather than as multiple militias, although some would still prefer the latter over federal or regional forces coming in from outside the district.<sup>59</sup>

Many among the Yazidis and Arabs of Sinjar, especially those aligned with the YBŞ, thus vehemently rejected the deal, saying the negotiators had not taken Sinjaris' views into account.<sup>60</sup> The Hashd supports the YBŞ in leading resistance to the deal, which the latter has held up with repeated demonstrations and occasional attacks on federal forces. More than one year on, many displaced Yazidis say they doubt the deal will ever fully come into effect. Some go so far as to say Yazidis should rebuild their

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<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hashd commander, Baghdad, March 2022.

<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group interview, government official, Baghdad, September 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Sinjar political representatives and tribal leaders, Sinjar and Baghdad, September 2021 and February 2022.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interviews, government officials and advisers, Baghdad, September-October 2021 and February 2022.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Yazidi civil society figures and Sinjar tribal council members, Erbil and Baghdad, February and March 2022.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Yazidi civil society figures and Sinjar tribal council members, Erbil and Baghdad, February and March 2022. See also "Mapping Needs of Yazidi Women in Sinjar and Displaced Communities", International Organization of Migration, 27 May 2021.

<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group interviews, YBŞ members, self-administration representatives and Sinjar tribal council leaders, Sinjar and Baghdad, September 2021 and February 2022.

lives outside their homeland, because Sinjar has become an arena for regional power competition.<sup>61</sup>

The deal had other weaknesses as well. On the Erbil side, it did not include the PUK, the second largest party in the Kurdistan region, although a very weak junior partner in the KRG. Neither Baghdad nor Erbil considered the PUK's involvement necessary, as Sinjar borders only the KDP-dominated part of the Kurdistan region.<sup>62</sup> In doing so, however, they ignored the PUK's potential to be an intermediary with the PKK and YBŞ, due to the friendly relations among the three. The deal also glossed over the ways in which political competition in Baghdad might impede implementation of the deal, as the Iraqi government is itself a patchwork of institutions, each led by factional interests.<sup>63</sup> Prime Minister Kadhimi presides over a weak interim government since the elections in October 2021, which from its early days was set on a collision course with Hashd factions only nominally under his control as commander-in-chief.<sup>64</sup>

Limiting the number of views at the negotiating table certainly helped make it possible to reach a deal, but the exclusion of those who will feel the greatest impact from the agreement, namely the population of Sinjar, has made it very difficult to fulfil.

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<sup>61</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Yazidi activists, Baghdad and Erbil, September 2021.

<sup>62</sup> It was easier to exclude the PUK than it might otherwise have been, because the group is deeply divided after the death of its leader, Jalal Talabani, a former president of Iraq, in 2017.

<sup>63</sup> The Iraqi government could have decided what its red lines are and how to implement the deal before signing it. But the prime minister may not have wanted to pursue this path, knowing that he might not get far with the Hashd groups.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Baghdad, September 2021. See also, Sajad Jiyad, "Reconsidering the Security Sector in Sinjar and the Ninewa Plains", International Organisation of Migration, May 2021.

## IV. Making the Agreement Work

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Despite the Sinjar agreement's flaws, it can still be better harnessed to restore stability to Sinjar. The parties will need to move expeditiously, however, to carry out key provisions so that Sinjaris see progress and do not give up on the deal altogether. They will also need to foster more of the dialogue that was missing during the negotiations to secure greater local buy-in for implementation. The following areas should be top priorities.

### A. *Appoint a Mayor*

First, the parties need to appoint a mayor. This issue has become one of the main stumbling blocks to the deal's implementation. The KDP submitted three names to the Baghdad negotiating team, receiving provisional approval for one. Baghdad's negotiators then requested 60 days to consult with various government institutions, including the Hashd, to review the candidate. Yet the KDP has yet to receive a final answer. It has repeatedly asked Baghdad to confirm the provisional candidate, or one of the others, and complains that in neglecting to respond, Baghdad is failing to hold up its end of the deal.<sup>65</sup>

Sinjaris parties consider the KDP's proposed candidates to be partisan, however, which is one reason why Baghdad may be hesitant to appoint one of them, fearing that local residents would reject such a mayor outright. In April, Prime Minister Kadhimî tried to find a temporary solution by appointing the Ninewa governor, Najm al-Jubouri, as Sinjar's acting mayor. The YBŞ, as well as non-aligned Yazidi activists, promptly objected, compelling Baghdad to rescind the appointment only a day later. Jubouri is widely known to be friendly with the KDP and close to the Iraqi army, in which he was a high-ranking commander before taking up his civilian post.

At the same time, Erbil has ignored calls from various Sinjaris to let them elect a non-partisan mayor – and so has Baghdad.<sup>66</sup> They are likely to keep doing so, a federal official noted, following the October 2021 elections.<sup>67</sup> The KDP won all three of Sinjar's parliamentary seats, because so many of its voters are displaced in the Kurdistan region, and on that basis claims the right to fill the district's highest office with its own nominee.<sup>68</sup> Loath as it is to anger Sinjaris by agreeing to a KDP nominee, Baghdad does not want to alienate a powerful player in parliament by entertaining

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<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group interview, KDP official, Erbil, September 2021.

<sup>66</sup> "Mapping Needs of Yazidi Women in Sinjar and Displaced Communities", op. cit.; and "Statement of Yazidi leaders and Yazidi institutions on the agreement between Baghdad and Erbil", Eyzidi Organization for Documentation, 12 October 2020 (Arabic). Some Yazidi civil society actors contend that Sinjar should become a governorate to shield it from Baghdad-Erbil competition, but this idea appears to have found no traction. Crisis Group interviews, Yazidi civil society actors, Erbil, February 2022; and by telephone, April 2022.

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interview, government official, Baghdad, February 2022.

<sup>68</sup> About two thirds of Sinjar's displaced population live in the Kurdistan region, most of them in camps where they had access to polling stations. Though many resent the KDP for leaving Sinjar for ISIS to ransack, many are also now dependent on it for salaries or other means of livelihood and are willing to vote for its candidates.

the Sinjaris' requests. The result is that Sinjar remains without a mayor eighteen months after the agreement was signed.

Both Baghdad and Erbil would benefit from a selection process that is more transparent and inclusive and that is predicated on winning Sinjaris' consent. Without such a process, Sinjaris will continue to resist the agreement's implementation, while KDP-linked administrators will remain in the Kurdistan region – a status quo that none are especially happy about. In order to identify a viable candidate, Baghdad and Erbil should rely on local intermediaries, such as the Sinjar tribal council, which is close to the YBŞ. The council includes many capable community representatives, some of whom have previously been KDP party members and worked in the local administration. These people could be the necessary bridges between the two main opposing sides, the self-administration and the KDP, that are not talking to each other at present. UNAMI could facilitate these talks in coordination with federal government representatives.

In the immediate term, however, the deadlock over the mayor is likely to continue, as government formation in Baghdad has stalled and Prime Minister Kadhimi's caretaker government has only limited capacity for delicate political manoeuvres. Given that Sinjar is in dire need of an authorised administration that can provide public services, an interim arrangement may be the best option. Appointing an acting mayor could be a viable temporary solution. For this purpose, the federal government should consult with both Erbil and Sinjar community leaders to identify a suitable candidate. Ideally, that person would be a politically non-aligned Yazidi from Sinjar, but Sinjaris might also accept an Iraqi army commander, provided that he is non-partisan.<sup>69</sup>

## **B. *Secure the District***

### **1. Baghdad's struggle to assert itself**

Another priority is security. The Sinjar agreement's first requirement in this regard – turning over security to federal agencies and local police – is only partly fulfilled. The national security and intelligence agencies now have offices in Sinjar town, and the 20th army division has taken charge of policing the areas between towns and villages, while the border police patrols the Syrian frontier. Meanwhile, the army has started building a concrete wall along that border. The idea is ostensibly to prevent the entry of ISIS fighters, although the barrier also serves a second purpose, cutting off the YBŞ in Iraq from the YPG and PKK on the other side.<sup>70</sup>

But federal authorities hardly have a monopoly on force. The main YBŞ headquarters in Khanasour remains outside federal control, and the relationship between the army and the YBŞ in the rest of the district is tense.<sup>71</sup> For instance, on 12 January, YBŞ supporters tried to erect a statue of a commander killed in a Turkish airstrike in 2020, but federal forces did not let them. In response, YBŞ members attacked an army

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<sup>69</sup> There is precedent in Iraq for appointing military commanders as acting civilian administrators. In October 2017, when Baghdad imposed federal authority in Kirkuk, it named an army commander as governor. The current governor of Ninewa province is likewise a former army commander.

<sup>70</sup> "Iraq building Syria wall to keep out ISIS fighters", *Asharq al-Awsat*, 28 March 2022. See also, Fehim Tastekin, "Is Turkey behind border wall, Iraqi deployment in Sinjar?", *Al-Monitor*, 3 May 2022.

<sup>71</sup> Crisis Group observations, Sinjar, September 2021.



checkpoint and the national security office in Sinjar town.<sup>72</sup> Such skirmishes have been a regular occurrence for at least a year, especially around Sinjar town and in Sinuni sub-district, where YBŞ members and sympathisers are most active. Security forces have regularly prevented members of the YBŞ-installed self-administration, and even civilians they perceive as YBŞ sympathisers, from passing through army checkpoints.<sup>73</sup>

In April and May, Baghdad's struggle to exercise its writ in Sinjar combined with Turkey's anti-PKK drive to ratchet up tensions, resulting in violence. After Turkey launched its Operation Claw Lock on 18 April, the Iraqi army strengthened its posture in Sinjar by establishing new checkpoints near towns, especially Sinuni. It also deployed more troops to the Syria border zone. The Turkish operation has limited PKK fighters' movement between their strongholds in northern Kurdistan, while the Iraqi army's push to consolidate its authority has squeezed YBŞ efforts to maintain control in part of the district. The YBŞ views the two operations as a concerted effort by Ankara and Baghdad to strangle the PKK and YBŞ alike.<sup>74</sup>

Notable clashes took place in early May. On 1 May, the army skirmished with YBŞ fighters at a checkpoint in Bab Shalo, west of Mount Sinjar, where the two sides exchanged fire without incurring casualties. The following day, fighting broke out in Dukuri village, east of Sinuni town, as the YBŞ resisted the establishment of a new army checkpoint, prompting the army to call in reinforcements. YBŞ snipers shot at soldiers from a schoolhouse in which they had taken shelter and the army retaliated by bringing in the 9th armoured division, whose tanks shelled the building, causing at least three YBŞ fatalities.<sup>75</sup>

The escalation in and around Sinuni played out in residential areas, prompting the largest wave of displacement from Sinjar since the ISIS onslaught in 2014. Some 1,000 families left the area for the Kurdistan region and a smaller number fled to Mount Sinjar. Families in Sinjar, as well as Yazidi activists, have since called for the withdrawal of external forces, with security responsibilities to be handed over to the local police and national intelligence services. They have also demanded that the army's duties be limited to patrolling the district's boundaries, which some residents had done even before the April-May escalation.<sup>76</sup>

While no new clashes have occurred since 2 May, the situation remains tense and residents fear further escalation despite efforts by the parties to calm tempers. The Hashd, which did not intervene on either side during the clashes, has sought to mediate between the army and the YBŞ. So far, the army has not agreed to a YBŞ demand

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<sup>72</sup> Adnan Rashid, "Because of a statue... tension between the Army and the Sinjar Resistance Units", *Rudaw*, 13 January 2022 (Arabic).

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, YBŞ member and government intelligence officer, March 2022.

<sup>74</sup> Amberin Zaman, "Yazidi militia says Iraqi army attacks linked to Turkey's anti-PKK campaign", *Al-Monitor*, 4 May 2022.

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, army officer and YBŞ member, 8 May 2022. The army also suffered three fatalities and several other casualties. An intelligence officer claimed that two of the YBŞ dead were PKK members from Syria and Turkey, an allegation that the YBŞ denied. Crisis Group telephone interview, intelligence officer, 6 May 2022.

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Sinjar residents and activists, May 2022. See also Osama Ghaziri, "Struggle for Sinjar: Iraqis' views on security in the disputed district", U.S. Institute of Peace, 5 April 2021.

that they jointly run checkpoints. Meanwhile, Sinjar tribal leaders have visited Baghdad to discuss ways to stabilise the area.<sup>77</sup>

In addition to creating a highly combustible situation, the events of late April and early May could derail the Sinjar agreement completely. Should the army continue its forceful campaign against the YBŞ, it risks turning the group into a permanent opponent that deploys insurgency tactics against the army with the PKK's help. Moreover, the army's heavy-handedness has caused resentment and fear among the population, particularly in places such as Sinuni, which have been most affected by violence of late. Before further confronting the YBŞ and taking over or establishing new checkpoints, the army should engage with the group in an effort to deconflict activities. Meanwhile, the YBŞ, which has committed to coming under state authority, must refrain from attacking the army.

If Baghdad is to impose its authority on Sinjar, it must gain the trust of the population by – at the very least – preventing fighting in residential areas. To do that, it must attain the monopoly on force it presently lacks. The joint committee needs to stand up the local police force envisaged by the 2020 agreement and move forward with integrating all local armed groups into the state's security forces. With better outreach to the local armed groups and to ordinary Sinjaris, it should be able to handle these tasks, but as discussed below it could also use some outside help.

## 2. Standing up the local police

The joint committee has just begun to register and vet officers for the local police force. The October 2020 agreement provides for a force of 2,500 in total, of which 1,500 places are reserved for returning internally displaced Yazidis now residing in the Kurdistan region and 1,000 for current residents. The challenge is to build a police force representative of all who live in Sinjar or – as the agreement foresees – will return there soon when conditions allow. The joint committee, in particular, should work to assure current residents, as well as the displaced, that a future local police force will be drawn from all the communities of Sinjar. To this end, it should invite civilian representatives from the official administration, as well as the self-administration, in addition to civil society organisations and tribal leaders, to join in overseeing the process of standing up a new force.

Gender balance requires focused attention. Some Yazidi women and groups championing women's rights note that the agreement contains no provision for recruitment of women into the police force.<sup>78</sup> The lack of women's representation in Iraq's security institutions creates broader problems for the population, partly because many women feel uncomfortable asking male police officers for assistance.<sup>79</sup> Helping women gain access to the security services is of particular importance in Sinjar, where thousands of Yazidi women faced the trauma of enslavement and abuse following their abduction by ISIS, some of whose followers were local Arabs. Introducing a

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<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, government official, 9 May 2022.

<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Yazidi women and NGO representatives, Erbil and Duhok, February 2022.

<sup>79</sup> "Mapping Needs of Yazidi Women in Sinjar and Displaced Communities", op. cit.

quota for women recruits to a community unit answering to the local police may help in persuading displaced women to return.<sup>80</sup>

The YBS presents its own set of thorny challenges that will require careful management. It objects to the larger number of spots set aside for the displaced Yazidis, as it suspects that the KDP, via its influence in the camps where these people now live, would be able to gain the upper hand in Sinjar's security management. Yet the ratio of displaced to current residents – approximately seven to three – warrants such a division.<sup>81</sup> Not surprisingly, the YBS finds the vetting requirement particularly noxious, because it could be applied to automatically exclude anyone who is or has been an actual, or merely suspected, YBS member.<sup>82</sup> Meanwhile, the YBS has sought to fill the current residents' share of police positions with loyalists, including people who were not already enrolled under its command, in order to provide job opportunities while retaining an armed force of its own.<sup>83</sup> This practice could well be an obstacle to future demobilisation, as other forces, including those affiliated with the Hashd and the KDP, are likely to keep members outside the local police force for the same reason, absent alternatives, as suggested below.

### 3. The most controversial provision

The 2020 agreement's most controversial provision calls for the expulsion of the PKK and "ending the role" of its affiliates. It has proven impossible thus far to fulfil this clause, among other things, because it was not negotiated directly by all the key actors, because it indirectly suggests the YBS's disbandment and because it offers its members no viable alternative. Initially rejecting the use of force against the PKK and the YBS, Baghdad resigned itself to an incomplete withdrawal, which took place soon after the agreement was signed. The PKK and YBS both pulled their fighters out of the district and sub-district centres and lowered their flags there, but maintained their bases on Mount Sinjar and in Khanasour.<sup>84</sup>

As the April-May clashes fighting have demonstrated, however, that arrangement is unstable. The PKK's presence has resulted in Turkish intervention, and in turn led Baghdad to take its own initiative against the group (to keep Ankara at bay) and to assert itself with the YBS (in order to consolidate its grip on local security). Yet, while Baghdad is right to take ownership of Sinjar's security, it cannot do so effectively if it keeps acting in a way that turns many residents against it.

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<sup>80</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Yazidi women activists and international NGO staff working with Yazidi victims of ISIS, Erbil, February 2022.

<sup>81</sup> See Appendix B for further details.

<sup>82</sup> Crisis Group interview, YBS member, Baghdad, February 2022. He also complained that, on a few occasions, when he and his colleagues were headed to Baghdad as part of a formal delegation to meet with government officials, the army would stop them along the way. On one occasion, they had to turn back and try again the next day; on another, a telephone call to a senior official in Baghdad solved the problem.

<sup>83</sup> Crisis Group interview, government official, Baghdad, March 2022. The government faces a challenge in disbanding the YBS's internal security force (Asayish) and reintegrating its approximately 700 members. So far, the YBS has not agreed to take this step, citing fears that residents who sympathise with the YBS will be at risk should this force cease to exist.

<sup>84</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Sinjar, September 2021.

Further progress is unlikely unless and until the joint committee disentangles the various sub-state actors from one another, primarily by separating the PKK from the YBŞ. Baghdad should thus endeavour to convince Erbil and Ankara that the YBŞ should be dealt with as – just one more – Iraqi armed group, not as a “terrorist organisation”. To this end, Baghdad would also need, of course, to put pressure on the YBŞ not to accommodate PKK activity in Iraq.

The joint committee should then outline a demobilisation and reintegration track for those YBŞ and other local armed group members under the Hashd umbrella, and also those outside it, such as Qasim Shasho’s force, under the supervision of either the interior or defence ministry. It will be a tall order: there is no precedent for a demobilisation effort of this magnitude anywhere in Iraq. Still, it will be necessary to try, as without such an option, some YBŞ military bases will remain out of reach for federal forces, which can only invite further Turkish airstrikes and dissuade the displaced from returning.

While the agreement only contemplates a 2,500-strong local police force, the various armed groups together have some 7,000 additional fighters.<sup>85</sup> The government should outline a long-term plan for integrating those fighters it cannot enrol in the local police into security forces under the defence and interior ministries. Although the army and federal police normally assign the personnel to serve far away from their places of origin, the government could make an exception for Sinjaris who prefer to stay in their home district.

To settle the security situation to everyone’s satisfaction, Baghdad may need to bring in referees from the outside. Many Sinjaris, whether current residents or displaced, have expressed deep disillusionment with the Iraqi state’s ability to provide security detached from partisan interests.<sup>86</sup> Heads of civil society organisations have called on the UN to provide an international peacekeeping force instead.<sup>87</sup> While their entreaties have found no traction, Western countries, such as the U.S., the UK, Germany and France, concerned for Sinjar’s future could throw their weight behind a scaled-down version of the idea. They could advocate for international civilian monitoring of work to fulfil the agreement’s security provisions. International involvement could start with help in standing up the police force and then continue with support for efforts to reintegrate additional fighters into units under interior or defence ministry supervision.

Indirectly, UNAMI already plays such a part, but its role could be enhanced. Formalising civilian oversight with the support of international observers would give the effort greater transparency and legitimacy. For instance, UNAMI could establish a sub-office in Sinjar city staffed with civilians as observers and police advisers to lend technical expertise to the processes described above.

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<sup>85</sup> The number is based on Crisis Group interviews with armed groups’ commanders in Sinjar, September 2021.

<sup>86</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Sinjar residents and displaced Sinjaris, Sinjar, Erbil and Dohuk, September 2021 and February 2022.

<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, civil society activist, March 2022.

*C. Move Forward with Reconstruction with Community Input*

While the agreement tasks the joint committee with reconstruction, it does not specify a timeline for this work or provide the money to carry it out.<sup>88</sup> As with other provisions, Baghdad could take the lead in empowering residents to rebuild their own neighbourhoods. Local and international NGOs could help in assessing reconstruction projects and seeing them through. The national government would first, however, have to allocate a reconstruction budget. This step is likely to be delayed, as Iraqi law prevents a caretaker government from presenting a budget to parliament.

Moreover, even after Baghdad sets aside funds, many Sinjaris will be sceptical that the money will benefit them, because the joint committee includes only officials from Baghdad and Erbil. Absent a local administration that assumes the joint committee's tasks and takes charge of reconstruction, Baghdad must ensure that local representatives are included in the committee's deliberations.

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<sup>88</sup> See Appendix B.

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## **V. Conclusion**

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Events extraneous to Sinjar turned the district from a backwater into a valuable strategic prize. ISIS arrived in August 2014 to connect Mosul with Raqqa in its attempt to create a caliphate stretching across Iraq and Syria. Its monstrous treatment of the local Yazidi population brought in outside help for the latter – too late for many Yazidis, who were either killed or enslaved. The PKK was able to exploit the post-2011 power vacuum in northern Syria to extend its influence there, increasingly at ISIS's expense and also the KDP's. The latter's precipitous withdrawal from Sinjar provided oxygen to the PKK in the district and later to Iran-backed Hashd paramilitaries. But the PKK was followed by its enemy, Turkey, which compensated for the KDP's weakness with repeated airstrikes upon the PKK and its local Yazidi affiliate, the YBS. Amid all this chaos, those among the population who did not previously flee are left without basic services or reconstruction. The displaced are reluctant to come back from camps in the Kurdistan region.

The October 2020 Sinjar agreement could have provided a way to lessen tensions in the district, stabilise it and launch a reconstruction effort, thereby stimulating the displaced population's return and the area's revival. But, by excluding the key parties on the ground, Baghdad and Erbil turned the agreement into a virtual dead letter, particularly as regards governance and security.

The remedy is for Baghdad and Erbil to honour the deal they agreed to – appointing a mayor, if need be on an acting basis, disentangling local from international actors and providing integration opportunities for the former as part of securing the district, and beginning reconstruction – while at the same time drawing the local actors they excluded into new negotiations over carrying out the agreement in full. It will be a difficult task, but leaving the situation in Sinjar as is – a district where waning state power enables power struggles between Turkey and Iran and their respective proxies and allies – will simply invite more violence and displacement. After everything Sinjar's population has gone through in the past decade, surely that future is the last one that anyone would wish for them.

**Baghdad/Brussels, 31 May 2022**

## Appendix A: Map of Sinjar



## Appendix B: Text of Sinjar Agreement

### **Agreement for Restoring Stability and Normalising Conditions in the Sinjar District**

For the purpose of restoring stability and normalising conditions in Sinjar district, and in line with constitutional and legal principles, and in order to address the suffering of the Sinjar population in preparation for the return of the displaced, and to organise the administrative and security framework in the district, the Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government, and in coordination with the UN Mission, in order to benefit from international support and achieve stability and construction, have agreed to the following:

#### **1. The Administrative Pillar:**

- A. Selecting a new independent, professional, honest and acceptable district mayor [*qa'im maqam*] according to constitutional and legal mechanisms;
- B. After nominating the district mayor, nominees for other administrative positions shall be considered by the joint committee set up for this purpose, provided that questions of professionalism, integrity and the district's social structure are taken into account.

#### **2. The Security Pillar:**

- A. Security within the district shall be maintained exclusively by the local police, national security and intelligence services. All other armed formations shall be moved out of Sinjar district;
- B. Strengthening security in the district by recruiting 2,500 members to internal security forces in Sinjar, while insuring equitable participation of the people of Sinjar in the IDP camps;
- C. Putting an end to the presence of the PKK in Sinjar district and the areas surrounding it. The organisation and its affiliates shall have no role in the region.

#### **3. The Reconstruction Pillar:**

A Joint Committee shall be established comprising the Federal Government and Kurdistan Regional Government in order to rebuild the district, in coordination with the provincial administration of Ninewa governorate. The committee's level and the details of its tasks shall be identified by the Federal Prime Minister and KRG Prime Minister.

4. For the purpose of following up on the provisions of the administrative and security pillars, a joint field committee shall be set up consisting of the relevant bodies of the two parties in order to follow up on the implementation of the agreement's provisions.

Representative of Kurdistan Regional Government

Rebar Ahmed Khalid

Minister of the Interior

(Signature)

October 1, 2020

Representative of the Federal Government

Hamid Rasheed Flayeh

Vice-president of the National Security Service

(Signature)

October 1, 2020



## Annex to the Agreement

Table of actions for following up on the Agreement's implementation to restore stability and normalise conditions in Sinjar district

| No. | Task                                                                                                                                                                      | Implementing party                                                                                                                                             | Remarks                                                                                             |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | Choosing a new mayor [ <i>qa'im maqam</i> ]                                                                                                                               | – Joint Committee<br>– Ninewa governor                                                                                                                         | According to legal and constitutional contexts                                                      |
| 2   | Considering other administrative positions in Sinjar district                                                                                                             | – Joint Committee<br>– Ninewa governor<br>– Sinjar mayor                                                                                                       | According to legal and constitutional contexts                                                      |
| 3   | Responsibility for security within Sinjar district                                                                                                                        | – Sinjar police department<br>– National security service<br>– National intelligence service<br>In coordination with security services in the Kurdistan region |                                                                                                     |
| 4   | Moving all armed formations and illegal groups outside the borders of Sinjar district                                                                                     | – Joint Operations Command<br>– Popular Mobilisation Forces                                                                                                    |                                                                                                     |
| 5   | Appointing 2,500 members in the internal security forces in Sinjar, in coordination with the KRG                                                                          | – Federal Prime Minister's Office<br>– Federal Ministry of Interior                                                                                            | 1,000 members from the current Sinjar population and 1,500 from Sinjar district's IDPs in the camps |
| 6   | Security vetting of candidates for appointment as per paragraph 5                                                                                                         | Joint Committee                                                                                                                                                | Excluding PKK members and affiliated formations                                                     |
| 7   | Putting an end to the PKK presence in Sinjar district and areas surrounding it and ensuring that the organisation and its affiliates have no role in the region           | Joint Forces Command                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                     |
| 8   | Setting up a Joint Field Committee for the purpose of following up the implementation of the administrative and security pillars                                          | Joint Committee                                                                                                                                                | Representatives of security services in the Federal Government and KRG                              |
| 9   | Setting up a Joint Committee from the Federal Government and KRG in order to rebuild Sinjar district, in coordination with the local administration of Ninewa governorate | – Federal Prime Minister's Office<br>– KRG Prime Minister's Office                                                                                             |                                                                                                     |

*Crisis Group translation from the original Arabic.*

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## Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

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

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. The ideas, opinions and comments expressed by Crisis Group are entirely its own and do not represent or reflect the views of any donor. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Canadian Department of National Defence, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Global Affairs Canada, Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, United Arab Emirates (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy), United Nations Development Programme, United Nations World Food Programme, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and the World Bank.

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**May 2022**

## Appendix D: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2019

### Special Reports and Briefings

*Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy*, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

*Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020*, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.

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*Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021-2022*, Special Briefing N°6, 13 September 2021.

### Israel/Palestine

*Defusing the Crisis at Jerusalem's Gate of Mercy*, Middle East Briefing N°67, 3 April 2019 (also available in Arabic).

*Reversing Israel's Deepening Annexation of Occupied East Jerusalem*, Middle East Report N°202, 12 June 2019.

*The Gaza Strip and COVID-19: Preparing for the Worst*, Middle East Briefing N°75, 1 April 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Gaza's New Coronavirus Fears*, Middle East Briefing N°78, 9 September 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Beyond Business as Usual in Israel-Palestine*, Middle East Report N°225, 10 August 2021 (also available in Arabic).

*The Israeli Government's Old-New Palestine Strategy*, Middle East Briefing N°86, 28 March 2022 (also available in Arabic).

### Iraq/Syria/Lebanon

*Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South*, Middle East Report N°196, 25 February 2019.

*The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib*, Middle East Report N°197, 14 March 2019 (also available in Arabic).

*After Iraqi Kurdistan's Thwarted Independence Bid*, Middle East Report N°199, 27 March 2019 (also available in Arabic and Kurdish).

*Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East*, Middle East Report N°204, 31 July 2019 (also available in Arabic).

*Iraq: Evading the Gathering Storm*, Middle East Briefing N°70, 29 August 2019 (also available in Arabic).

*Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria*, Middle East Report N°207, 11 October 2019 (also available in Arabic).

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*Ways out of Europe's Syria Reconstruction Conundrum*, Middle East Report N°209, 25 November 2019 (also available in Arabic and Russian).

*Steadying the New Status Quo in Syria's North East*, Middle East Briefing N°72, 27 November 2019 (also available in Arabic).

*Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon*, Middle East Report N°211, 13 February 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Silencing the Guns in Syria's Idlib*, Middle East Report N°213, 15 May 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Pulling Lebanon out of the Pit*, Middle East Report N°214, 8 June 2020 (also available in Arabic).

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*Syria: Shoring Up Raqqa's Shaky Recovery*, Middle East Report N°229, 18 November 2021 (also available in Arabic).

*Syria: Ruling over Aleppo's Ruins*, Middle East Report N°234, 9 May 2022 (also available in Arabic).

### North Africa

*Decentralisation in Tunisia: Consolidating Democracy without Weakening the State*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°198, 26 March 2019 (only available in French).

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*Relaunching Negotiations over Western Sahara*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°227, 14 October 2021 (also available in Arabic).

*Steering Libya Past Another Perilous Crossroads*, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°85, 18 March 2022 (also available in Arabic).

*Saïed's Tunisia: Promoting Dialogue and Fixing the Economy to Ease Tensions*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°232, 6 April 2022 (only available in French).

#### **Iran/Yemen/Gulf**

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*The Iran Nuclear Deal at Five: A Revival?*, Middle East Report N°220, 15 January 2021 (also available in Arabic and Farsi).

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*The Iran Nuclear Deal at Six: Now or Never*, Middle East Report N°230, 17 January 2022 (also available in Arabic).

*Brokering a Ceasefire in Yemen's Economic Conflict*, Middle East Report N°231, 20 January 2022 (also available in Arabic).

*Truce Test: The Huthis and Yemen's War of Narratives*, Middle East Report N°233, 29 April 2022 (also available in Arabic).

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