THE RETURN OF THE STATE AND INTER-MILITIA COMPETITION IN NORTHERN IRAQ

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Iraqi federal police enter old city Mosul cinema, 17 April 2017 © Kainoa Little

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Abstract

In the wake of the end of the war against Islamic State (IS), the Iraqi state redeployed in the north of Iraq in October 2017. This redeployment functions through the establishment of economic and security networks, run by local militia elites and coopted by the major national-level Shia parties. In the lead-up to the May 2018 parliamentary elections, this new socio-political reality is the key to how post-IS Iraq will evolve.

INTRODUCTION

The war against Islamic State (IS) provided the Iraqi state with a historic opportunity to reestablish its authority in the northern “disputed territories”, where, since 2003, it had been challenged by Kurdish forces and Sunni Arab insurrectionary movements. This return of the state has primarily been conducted through the militia groups dubbed the “Popular Mobilisation” (al-hashd al-sha‘bi), that are primarily made up of local youth and tied to the major national-level Shia political parties. The state’s redeployment is exclusively conducted on a security basis, and through delegation to political players who enjoy great autonomy. It therefore involves the generalization of a militia-based political model. This model appears to constitute the primary obstacle to the stabilization of both institutions and of the state’s relationship to its citizens. The scarcity of means granted for public services contributes to an institutional vacuum that benefits a new elite, made up of militia leaders who prevailed in the North as a result of the war. The armed groups originating in the hashd lead the local security apparatus and economic networks, getting into position to harness reconstruction aid. They also prevent the insurrection from re-forming itself in the region. These groups, however, are currently entering the stage of investing the political field in Northern Iraq. On the eve of the first post-IS elections in May 2018, this situation is most likely to see them assert long-term control over local governance structures, and thereby become autonomous vis-à-vis their sponsors in Baghdad. In theory, these new local elites are auxiliaries of the central state. The latter, however, exercises increasingly formal control over them. Their medium- and long-term durability is liable to fan the flames of political and identity-based conflicts, and thus favor the return of an organized armed resistance.

1. This article is based on fieldwork and interviews conducted in Iraq since the summer of 2017.
The central state’s formal supervision over the “Popular Mobilization” militia movement against IS was institutionalized and legalized in November 2016. This created a windfall effect and set armed groups into a competition that operates on two levels.

Firstly, running a militia within the framework of the Popular Mobilization enables its leaders to penetrate a given territory, and to govern it by controlling state institutions in the name of the “price paid by the martyrs” who fell in the battle against IS. The return of the central state in Northern Iraq therefore operates alongside a dynamic in which the militias take over public institutions and embezzle the funding allocated to these institutions. Each sub-district has become the sphere of influence of a given militia that is itself tied to a national-level political party, foremost among them the Badr Organization. In Tikrit for instance, the local militia group controls the post of Health Director for the city, enabling it to embezzle the budget allocated by the Health Ministry. Should the central state attempt to put a stop to such extortion, the militias call on their networks in Baghdad to block any enquiry.

Secondly, the relationship between these militias and the local population is conducted through a process of cooptation of notables by militia leaders. These notables are the local representatives of the Popular Mobilization, and are supposed to represent the local population. The militias make special efforts to institutionalize these relations, whether by setting up committees or by incorporating these notables into public institutions.

The prospect of the May 2018 elections, and of international funding for reconstruction, has accelerated this dynamic of militias reconverting into local governance.

Control over institutions and supervision over the local population are articulated differently, according to which of two distinct types of politico-militia groups in Northern Iraq is involved. On the one hand, in the belt of Shia Turkmen villages south of Kirkuk, in the Nineva Plain and the region around Sinjar, the presence of local political structures and of executives in sufficient number provides Baghdad with representatives who can be mobilized immediately, and around whom it can build up an effective militia apparatus. Militia-formation then operates through a process of cooptation of local Shia youth by the national-level political sponsors who recruit them, foremost among them the Badr Organization. On the other hand, in Arab Sunni areas, this type of supervision has proved harder, given the lack of local representatives who may be mobilized on the basis of identity-based solidarity—a dynamic that has persisted since the onset of the US occupation and the beginning of the insurrection in 2003. In these areas, the state is compelled to sub-contract militia activity to Arab Sunni executives, who have for many years been exiled in Baghdad and who lack any fine-grained understanding of the field. These new cadres are considered “foreigners” by the local population. They prevail through authoritarian methods, via criminal networks, under cover of military operations against IS.

In the disputed territories, the politics of cooptation and inter-militia competition are bringing about internal restructuring within each ethnic and/or religious group. The political elites of the Christian inhabitants of the Nineva Plains, north of Mosul, now depend upon the cooptation strategy set up by Baghdad. Such is the case of Rayan al-Kildani, a political leader in the Nineva Plains. Al-Kildani was until recently an unknown. He allied with the most powerful factions within the hashd (the Badr Organization in particular) and obtained their support in order to set up his militia, the Babylon Brigades. This militia is supposedly “Christian”—but it also mobilizes some local Shia Shabak youth.

In Sinjar, pro-Baghdad Yezidi community leaders have also managed to use the support of Shia militias in order to prevail locally. The return of the local population is, however, restricted by the limited aid that the militias receive from Baghdad—since the central state has not yet freed up funds to restore public services and to ensure the return of the Yezidi community. In this context, criticism from the Yezidi community towards their new leadership is increasing. One sticking point derives from the fact that economic resources, and the national reconstruction fund in particular, are managed by the Nineva Governorate Council, in which Yezidis are a minority. For the time being, reconstruction funds are primarily allocated to the city of Mosul, while Sinjar and the Nineva Plains are neglected.

The primary difficulty in the Sunni Arab-majority districts is the lack of representative structures and the gap between the political elites who took refuge in Baghdad and the local population that was so harshly affected by the war. This gap has led the central state to recruit Sunni Arab militia leaders close to Da’wa, the main Shia party, in order to ensure security in these areas. Such leaders have been far removed from these areas since 2014, if not since 2003. Regardless, they lay claim to their local credentials in order to obtain Baghdad’s support in establishing control, through setting up Sunni...
Arab armed groups. In Hawija, for instance, south of Kirkuk, two Sunni Arab brigades affiliated with the Badr Organization control the district. These are the Hashd al-Zab and the Hashd al-Wasfi, the latter so named after its commander, Sheikh Wasfi al-Asi. The Hashd al-Wasfi was created thanks to Mohammed Tammin, a former Education Minister, who set up channels between Sheikh Wasfi and the Prime Minister’s Office. Between them, these two brigades gather around 5,000 fighters from Hawija. As is the case with the armed groups belonging to the Popular Mobilization, these fighters receive a monthly salary of 500-600 US dollars. In Hawija, the two brigades reign supreme over Hawija. The local population is entirely under their thrall, and traders must pay a specific protection tax to these militias in exchange for protection. Several sources report murders committed by these militias should the traders refuse. Clearly, then, these Sunni Arab leaders have little local mooring, and they dominate primarily through their use of force.

A NEW ECONOMY OF VIOLENCE

Two major consequences derive from the return of the state described above, by way of sectarian militias who are often also involved in parallel criminal activities. The first is a faster demographic homogenization of the local population. The second is the destruction of the local economy. On the one hand, since 2014, the front line against Daesh moving forward led to the destruction of Sunni Arab villages in the mixed zones in the disputed territories. In these conditions, the rate at which Sunni Arab inhabitants return is very low, since they fear arbitrary arrest and extortion. These local communities lack any local political representation, and endure regular racketeering on the part of militia who have no hesitation in engaging in pillage under cover of security operations. Since the Iraqi army retook Kirkuk in October 2017, this policy has also targeted the region’s Kurdish inhabitants. The homogenization of the disputed territories’s population makeup, to the benefit of Shia Turkmen, is thereby enshrined, and seems to be reaching a point of no return.

On the other hand, the economy of each district is harshly affected by these demographic and political changes. The war’s destruction of the rural world and population flight prevent a return to agricultural activity, the region’s primary resource. In the cities, land prices have sunk over 50%, and the tertiary sector is struggling to take off again. Given these conditions, living standards have sunk. The primary source of revenue has become that of public sector employees and militia, whose consequence is the destruction of the private economic sector and of part of the middle class.

The political players who emerged from the militifica-tion process are taking advantage of the opportunity given them by the disappearance of social and economic elites to develop criminal economic networks and to take control of the economy. The mixed town of Tuz Khurmatu is an especially revealing case study of this dynamic. Since the withdrawal of Kurdish forces, the new strongman of this mixed Kurdish and Turkmen town is one of the Badr Organization’s top commanders in the region, who hails from the town and was a member of Badr before 2014. He has managed to form an armed group made up of Turkmen Shia locals, and uses this personal militia to develop drugs- and arms-trafficking networks and to loot. His men are also an effective surveillance network against any competing group. In October 2017, the withdrawal of Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) forces gave this militia access to the Kurdish neighborhoods of the city. In these circumstances, the drugs trade, which was harshly suppressed and scarcely existed prior to 2014, has become both a low-risk proposition and a highly lucrative one—in particular thanks to the development of local manufacturing of such hard drugs as methamphetamine.

CONCLUSION

In the lead-up to the May 2018 elections, attempts to constitute Sunni political groupings have contributed to deepen and to legitimate the repressive practices of militia leaders towards the Sunni population—even while they have directed the campaign towards strictly identity-based stakes, and reduced the possibilities for trans-community coalitions in the disputed territories. In practice, Sunni-led parties have largely lost their credibility. The leaders who have dominated the political stage since 2003, such as Salim al-Juburi, Iyad al-Allawi and Saleh al-Mutlaq, never managed to harness the various protest movements in Western Iraq between 2010 and 2014. Further, they proved unable to defend an alternative position during the war on IS. Key political figures in the North, such as Usama al-Nujayfi, Jamal Karbuli and Khamis Khanjar, also seemed unlikely to mobilize politically—all the less so given that local Sunnis could boycott the polls in large numbers. In this context, the elections risk entrenching the power of local politico-militia leaders who seized the opportunity of the war against IS to set up small armed groups through coopting local youth and establishing their authority over crony repression and racketeering practices.

3. Interviews conducted in Kirkuk governorate in the course of several fieldtrips in 2017.