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Responding to instability in Iraq's Sinjar district

How a remote area of Iraq
became a transnational conflict
hub, and what this means for
peacebuilding in the Middle East

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Summary

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- Intense and violent competition to control the tiny border district of Sinjar in northwestern Iraq continues to have significant implications for Middle East security and stability. Recent escalation between the US and Iran-allied armed groups – including attacks carried out by both sides in Iraq, Syria and Jordan – demonstrates the danger posed by activities across these borders. Despite the territorial defeat of Islamic State (ISIS) in 2015, Sinjar remains trapped in a cycle of perpetual violence, and much of the local population has not returned home. Armed groups, such as the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which helped liberate the district from ISIS, now cooperate and compete for control over the area. This situation allows these transnational actors to provide military support to allies in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Türkiye.
 - The rise and fall of ISIS fundamentally transformed Sinjar: previously the object of a national territorial dispute between the government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), it has now become a transnational conflict hub. Part of this transnationalism has what can be described as an 'outside in' dynamic, in which Sinjar attracts external actors seeking to compete for authority. Sinjar's mountainous topography and distance from national capitals also mean that armed groups seeking to access Syria to target the wider region have a secure military transit route available to them. As a consequence, transnationalism in Sinjar also has an 'inside out' dimension, with contestation for the district spilling over and perpetuating violence for populations not only in Sinjar itself but across the region.
 - In response to the conflict in Sinjar, the Iraqi government and its international allies continue to pursue policy and programmatic responses that take a nationally focused approach, from brokering agreements between domestic actors to building physical walls that attempt to consolidate national boundaries. But the reality of the matter is that Sinjar has become an arena in which the formal boundaries of nation states mean little. Acknowledging this fact is critical to understanding the dynamics and drivers of armed violence in the district and the entire region, and in turn to enabling policymakers to respond more effectively to these conditions.

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- This paper argues for a transnational approach to tackling instability in Sinjar. This should aim to include the PKK and the PMF, along with their local allies, in a renegotiation of the Sinjar Agreement – an accord between the Iraqi central government and the KRG to stabilize Sinjar and allow the district's displaced residents to return home. In exchange for being part of a future political settlement, the PKK and the PMF need to be compelled to agree to the strengthening of local institutions and the development of accountability mechanisms that ensure the rule of law. Resolving the conflict in Sinjar has the potential to reduce regional instability.

01

Introduction

Ongoing conflict in Iraq's Sinjar district poses a threat to national, regional and international stability, and has prevented thousands of internally displaced persons from returning to their homes.

The tiny district of Sinjar¹ in northwestern Iraq's Nineveh governorate is far from the centres of power, and may seem too remote to have much impact on the geopolitics of conflict across the Middle East. However, its recent transformation from a nationally disputed territory to a transnational conflict hub has put the district at the centre of the current escalation of armed violence across the region.

Despite its liberation from Islamic State (ISIS) in 2015, the district has remained engulfed in violence. Most of Sinjar's people are unable to return to their homes and are still displaced in temporary camps located in the neighbouring Kurdistan Region of Iraq. This includes over 280,000 Yazidis from Sinjar who still live at camps in Iraqi Kurdistan's Duhok governorate.²

Powerful external armed groups now compete, often violently, for authority in Sinjar, which they then use to gain influence and to support allies in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Türkiye. One such armed group is the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a militant political group fighting for the rights of Kurds in Türkiye and across the region. Türkiye has been engaged in a decades-long battle with the PKK, and has designated the PKK as a terrorist organization. The PKK's status in Sinjar led Türkiye to carry out air attacks targeting PKK positions in the district.³ Since 2020, Türkiye has

¹ Sinjar district is comprised of a number of towns and villages. The main towns include Sinjar central district and Al-Qahtaniya – located south of the Sinjar mountains – and Khansour and Snuni – located north of the Sinjar mountains.

² Rudaw (2023), 'Nearly 300,000 Yazidis remain in Kurdistan camps: official', 6 December 2023, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/06122023#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThe%20number%20of%20Yazidis%20living,Region's%20endowment%20ministry%2C%20told%20Rudaw.>

³ Ismail, A. and Masri, L. (2023), 'As Turkey intensifies war on Kurdish militants in Iraq, civilians are suffering', Reuters special report, 10 October 2023, [https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/iraq-turkey-airstrikes.](https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/iraq-turkey-airstrikes)

significantly increased its bombing of the area. The district has also witnessed violent clashes between local militia groups aligned with the PKK and the Iraqi federal forces (both in 2019 and 2022).⁴ The May 2022 clashes resulted in the re-displacement of thousands of Sinjar's citizens who had only just returned.⁵

The district has also become attractive to Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an umbrella group of paramilitary organizations that came together to fight ISIS.⁶ The PMF and its Iranian allies view Sinjar as a key transit hub that enables them to connect to other regional allies, including the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Some PMF groups, such as Kataib Hezbollah, operate across Sinjar and Iraq's borders with Syria as part of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, which violently challenges US influence in the region. On 29 January 2024, Islamic Resistance in Iraq launched a drone attack that killed three US soldiers along the Jordan–Syria border. The US has frequently targeted these PMF groups with military force at their primary transnational hub: al-Qaem, an Iraqi town on the border with Syria. In response, PMF groups increasingly prefer the mountainous topography and seclusion of Sinjar as a base from which they can pursue authority in the region.

Consequently, the district has become one of the most volatile and securitized areas in the region, connecting conflicts in and across four countries: Iraq, Syria, Türkiye and Iran. Armed clashes have the potential to spill over and extend beyond these countries and deeper into the Levant, with Iran-allied armed groups – opposed to Israel's military occupation of Palestinian territories – threatening to target Israel with rockets fired from Sinjar's mountains.⁷

Sinjar's troubled post-ISIS transition has attracted considerable national and international funding and attention. At the local level, programmes with international support have focused on facilitating reconciliation between the district's diverse population,⁸ which is made up of Yezidis (a Kurdish-speaking religious minority that is the district's largest community), Kurds, Sunni Arabs and Shia Arabs.

In 2020, the Baghdad government and the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG) in Erbil signed the Sinjar Agreement. The agreement called for a new administration and security structure to stabilize Sinjar and allow its displaced residents to return home.⁹ The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) pushed for this deal. However, the agreement was never implemented.

⁴ Middle East Monitor (2019), 'Military: 2 Iraqi soldiers killed in clashes with Kurdish PKK', 17 March 2019, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190317-military-two-iraqi-soldiers-killed-in-clashes-with-kurdish-pkk>.

⁵ Al Jazeera (2022), 'Estimated 3,000 people flee armed clashes in northern Iraq', 2 May 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/2/thousands-flee-after-clashes-erupt-in-iraqi-sinjar-2>.

⁶ Mansour, R. (2021), *Networks of power: the Popular Mobilization Forces and the state in Iraq*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/02/networks-power>.

⁷ Mamouri, A. (2023), 'Deep Dive: How Iran's Arab allies have prepared for war with Israel', Amwaj Media, 8 December 2023, <https://amwaj.media/article/deep-dive-how-iran-s-arab-allies-have-prepared-for-war-with-israel>.

⁸ An example of a programmatic endeavour to address the conflict in Sinjar through fostering communal peace is the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) support for Sinjar's House of Coexistence, a local initiative founded to 'bridge the gap between Yezidis and Muslims in Sinjar'. See, USAID (undated), 'Ninewa After ISIS: Communities Embrace Reconciliation', <https://www.usaid.gov/news/ninewa-after-isis-communities-embrace-reconciliation>.

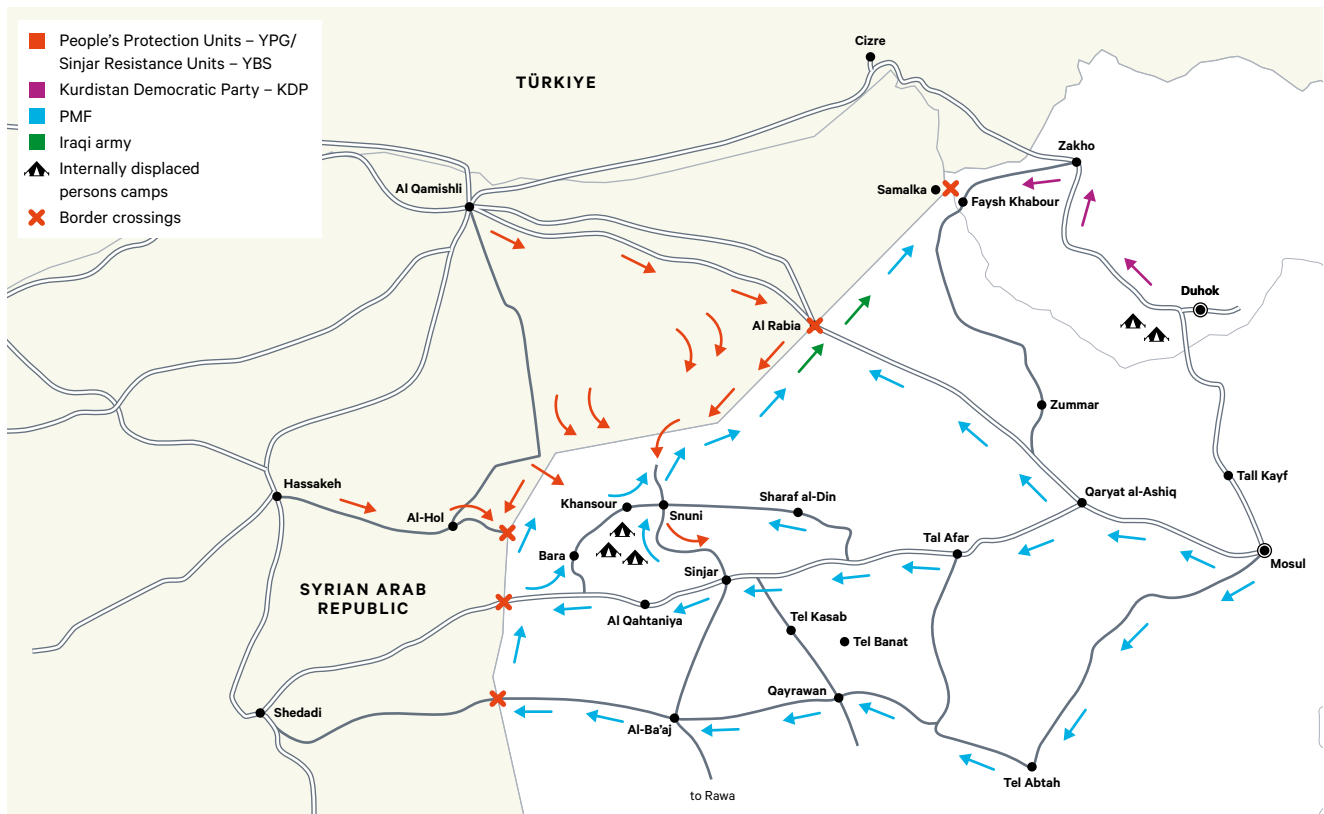
⁹ International Crisis Group (2022), *Iraq: Stabilizing the Contested District of Sinjar*, Middle East Report N°235, Brussels: International Crisis Group, <https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/235-iraq-sinjar.pdf>; Snell, J. (2020), 'Baghdad, Erbil reach security, administrative agreement on Sinjar district', Al-Monitor, 13 October 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/10/iraq-erbil-kurdistan-kg-baghdad-sinjar-nineveh-yazidis.html>.

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Why has this agreement not been implemented? What explains the policy community's struggle to address the ongoing conflict in Sinjar and its regional implications? One reason for this is that local and national policy and programmatic approaches often miss a key structural condition of the instability in Sinjar today: transnational conflict. This paper argues that Sinjar has become an arena of competing actors and geographies that transcends the bounded terrain of nation states. This dynamic has significant consequences not only for those inside Sinjar but also for those far away but connected to the conflict that spills over. These impacts and relationships can be described as reflecting both 'outside in' and 'inside out' mechanisms, as illustrated in Figure 1. From the 'outside in', external actors, such as the PKK and the PMF, compete for military, economic, political and ideological authority in Sinjar. And from the 'inside out', this competition and violence spills over across countries in the region.

Figure 1. Positions of different armed actors in Sinjar, 2018



Source: International Crisis Group (2018), *Winning the Post-ISIS Battle for Iraq in Sinjar*, Middle East Report Number 183, p. 23, https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/183-winning-the-post-isis-battle-for-iraq-in-sinjar_0.pdf.

National borders tend to dictate how policymakers respond to conflict, even if that conflict is known to be transnational. For instance, the UN's insistence that Sinjar is still an Iraqi conflict, requiring mediation with national actors, overlooks transnational influence. In a more literal example of sticking to the borders, since 2020, the Baghdad government has embarked on building a physical wall along

sections of the Iraq–Syria border.¹⁰ But the wall has not stopped armed groups from moving unfettered between the two countries. Instead, the wall has had an impact on local communities on both sides of the border, for example, by limiting everyday access to basic goods. This paper thus examines the transnational character of the conflict in Sinjar with the aim of exploring a transnational approach that can complement national and local initiatives.

This research paper is part of the Iraq and the Levant case study investigated by Chatham House for the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme. The paper relies on primary sources collected through in-person and telephone interviews with leaders and members of the main organizations involved in the conflict in Sinjar, as well as with community leaders, ordinary citizens and independent analysts on both sides of the border in Sinjar and Syria. The authors conducted 40 research interviews between April and September 2023. This paper complements primary research with empirical information and analysis from secondary sources, including satellite images specially commissioned by Chatham House through XCEPT and Satellite Applications Catapult, descriptions of events offered in local and international media, as well as policy reports and academic scholarship.

¹⁰ Tastekin, F. (2022), 'Is Turkey behind border wall, Iraqi deployment in Sinjar?', Al-Monitor, 3 May 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/turkey-behind-border-wall-iraqi-deployment-sinjar>.

02

Post-2003 Sinjar: From a national to a transnational conflict

The occupation of Sinjar by ISIS in 2014 brought external actors, such as the PMF and the PKK, to liberate the district and fundamentally shifted the nature of the conflict from a national to a transnational dispute.

Following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the 2005 Iraq constitution, Sinjar became part of the country's 'disputed territories' – a stretch of land that extends across the north of Iraq from Diyala governorate at the border with Iran to Sinjar at the border with Syria. In addition, the disputed territories also include part of Salah al-Din governorate, Kirkuk governorate and the Nineveh Plains region of Nineveh governorate. Successive Iraqi governments since 2006 have failed to resolve these issues due to their refusal to collaborate with the KRG in implementing Article 140 of the 2005 constitution.¹¹ As a result, Sinjar became an arena in which the Baghdad government and the KRG competed for authority. Like the other disputed territories, Sinjar's population is diverse, including Yezidis,

¹¹ Article 140 of Iraq's 2005 constitution laid out a road map for determining the status of the disputed territories. The road map specified three phases for implementation that included normalization, a census and a referendum on Kirkuk and other parts of the disputed areas. See, International Crisis Group (2020), *Iraq: Fixing Security in Kirkuk*, Middle East Report Number 215, <https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/215-iraq-fixing-security-in-kirkuk.pdf>.

Kurds, Sunni Arabs and Shia Arabs.¹² The KRG considers Yezidis to be Kurds (a view many Yezidis reject) and has thus sought to annex Sinjar to the territories under its control.¹³ In the aftermath of the US-led invasion in 2003, the KRG moved into Sinjar and took control of administrative authorities in the district. The government of Iraq rejected the KRG's claim on Sinjar and unsuccessfully attempted to assert federal authority over the district.¹⁴

At this time, the KRG strived to take advantage of the Iraqi government's weakness.¹⁵ The remote Sinjar district held a special geostrategic and political significance for the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the dominant political party within the KRG. Sinjar is located near Iraqi Kurdistan's Duhok governorate, which is a KDP stronghold and a critical hub for trade with Türkiye. Notably, Sinjar's population constitutes a substantial voting block that is key to securing parliamentary seats at the national level, and thus greater political power.¹⁶ The KDP therefore endeavoured to enhance its security presence and political base in Sinjar by maintaining its Peshmerga forces in the area, and by co-opting many leaders and members of the Yezidi community through patronage – such as by offering jobs and other economic benefits.¹⁷

The rise of ISIS, and its takeover of Sinjar, changed the nature of the dispute. In the face of ISIS's August 2014 offensive on Sinjar, the Iraqi security forces stationed there quickly collapsed. For its part, the KDP-aligned Peshmerga withdrew without any prior warning to Sinjar's population.¹⁸ The Iraqi military collapse and the hasty KDP withdrawal paved the way for ISIS to occupy the district and conduct a genocide of Yezidis.¹⁹ Both the government of Iraq and the KRG proved incapable, unable and unwilling to protect the Yezidis against ISIS. Their inaction, in the eyes of many Yezidis, still greatly undermines the credibility and legitimacy of both governments.²⁰

The ISIS occupation of Sinjar generated responses from international actors, like the US, as well as armed actors, such as the PKK and the PMF, both of which travelled to Sinjar to fight ISIS. Backed by US air power, the KDP returned to northern Sinjar a year after its withdrawal and helped regain control of the district in November 2015.²¹ But the KDP was not the only actor involved

¹² Abouzeid, R. (2018), *When the weapons fall silent: Reconciliation in Sinjar after ISIS*, European Council on Foreign Relations, https://ecfr.eu/publication/when_the_weapons_fall_silent_reconciliation_in_sinjar_after_isis.

¹³ Many Yezidis reject the KDP's view and treatment of them as Kurds, and there has been a movement towards an independent Yezidi identity within the community. See: Ali, M. H. (2020), 'The identity controversy of religious minorities in Iraq: The crystallization of the Yazidi identity after 2003', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 47(5), pp. 811–831, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2019.1577129>.

¹⁴ Huson, E. (2017), 'The Battle to Unearth Iraq's Mass Graves', *Foreign Policy*, 1 June 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/01/the-battle-to-unearth-iraqs-mass-graves-isis-yezidi-kurds-baghdad>.

¹⁵ International Crisis Group (2018), 'Winning the Post-ISIS Battle for Iraq in Sinjar', Middle East Report N°183, Brussels: International Crisis Group, https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/183-winning-the-post-isis-battle-for-iraq-in-sinjar_0.pdf.

¹⁶ For instance, during the 2021 national elections, the KDP won all four parliamentary seats reserved for Sinjar, enhancing the KDP's bargaining position in Baghdad in the post-election government formation. Research interview with two KDP-aligned MPs from Sinjar, under the condition of anonymity, May and June 2023, Duhok and Erbil.

¹⁷ International Crisis Group (2018), *Winning the Post-ISIS Battle for Iraq in Sinjar*.

¹⁸ Van den Toorn, C. (2014), 'How the US-favored Kurds Abandoned the Yazidis when ISIS Attacked', *The Daily Beast*, 14 April 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-the-us-favored-kurds-abandoned-the-yazidis-when-isis-attacked>.

¹⁹ UK Parliament (2023), 'UK acknowledges Yazidi genocide by Daesh/Islamic State', <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/uk-acknowledges-yazidi-genocide-by-daesh-islamic-state/>.

²⁰ Several Yezidi interviewees expressed distrust in the Kurdish Peshmerga and the Iraqi Army, and accused the two of abandoning them and exposing them to ISIS's brutality. Research interviews, under the condition of anonymity, Sinjar, April–August 2023.

²¹ International Crisis Group (2018), *Winning the Post-ISIS Battle for Iraq in Sinjar*.

in the operation to defeat ISIS. In 2016, while the central government concentrated its main forces on liberating the city of Mosul, also in Nineveh governorate, it deployed the PMF to fight and remove ISIS from southern Sinjar.²²

The PMF was formed in 2014 from several existing Shia paramilitary groups in response to the rise of ISIS. These groups, individually and collectively, were and are transnational in their own right. Several of them have strong relations with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). After the collapse of national and KDP forces in 2014, the PMF was the first security actor on the frontline to defend Iraq against ISIS as the latter approached the outskirts of the capital city of Baghdad.

Meanwhile, the PKK, whose forces arrived in Sinjar from northern Syria and from the group's bases in the mountainous regions of Iraqi Kurdistan, also played a role in the fight against ISIS. The removal of ISIS was followed by the emergence of a fragmented security terrain with armed forces aligned with the KDP, the PMF and the PKK taking positions in different areas of Sinjar.²³

The withdrawal of the KDP from the district in the aftermath of the KRG's 2017 independence referendum paved the way for the PKK and the PMF to become the most powerful players in Sinjar.

The defeat of ISIS ushered in a new era of multifaceted competition for control over Sinjar between various actors including the KDP, PKK,²⁴ PMF and the central Iraqi government. Within this context, the KDP, which sought to regain its pre-ISIS dominant position in Sinjar, faced strong challenges from the PMF and the PKK.²⁵ While central authorities still lacked a meaningful presence in Sinjar after the defeat of ISIS, the Iraqi government (the National Security Council) agreed to pay the salaries of the PKK local allies to counter KDP ambitions in the district.²⁶ The withdrawal of the KDP from the district in the aftermath of the KRG's 2017 independence referendum paved the way for the PKK and the PMF to become the most powerful players in Sinjar.²⁷

This new reality meant that the Sinjar question became more than a dispute over territory between a regional government and a federal government. Subsequently, the number of actors party to the conflict increased, and the geographies

²² In the battle for Mosul, the PMF was assigned with clearing ISIS from the areas located between the city and Syrian border, including southern Sinjar. BBC News (2016), 'Mosul Battle: Iraq militias 'cut off IS access to the city', 23 November 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38079602>.

²³ Daoud, S. and Al-Adani, M. (2022), 'Sinjar battles: the conflict of the local forces encouraged by regional interests!', Nirij, 26 May 2022, <https://nirij.org/en/2023/04/09/sinjar-battles-the-conflict-of-the-local-forces-encouraged-by-regional-interests-2>.

²⁴ Salih, M. A. (2016), 'With the Islamic State gone from Sinjar, Kurdish groups battle for control', Al-Monitor, 10 December 2016, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2015/12/iraq-kurdistan-sinjar-liberated-isis-hegemony.html>.

²⁵ International Crisis Group (2018), *Winning the Post-ISIS Battle for Iraq in Sinjar*.

²⁶ Al-Hamid, R. (2017), 'The PKK in Sinjar at the Center of Many Conflicts', policy analysis, Fikra Forum: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 5 July 2017, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pkk-sinjar-center-many-conflicts>.

²⁷ Chulov, M. (2017), 'Iraqi forces drive Kurdish fighters out of town of Sinjar', *Guardian*, 17 October 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/17/iraqi-forces-drive-kurdish-fighters-out-of-sinjar>.

with influence over the outcome expanded. The parties and areas involved in the conflict today are not just local and national, but also external, revealing the 'outside in' nature of the transnational conflict.

Beyond assisting the Baghdad government when their objectives align, the PMF and the PKK have their own reasons for maintaining a presence in Sinjar. The district sits at a strategic crossroad between Iraq, Syria and Türkiye. It borders Syria (only 50 kilometres away from the Syrian border in the west) and is close to the southern borders of Türkiye (only 70 kilometres away from the Turkish borders in the north).²⁸ Sinjar's location provides the PKK and the PMF with a strategic advantage. For the PKK, which fights the Turkish military in southern Türkiye, Sinjar allows the group to connect its areas of operation in Syria's Rojava area and in Iraqi Kurdistan near Türkiye's southern borders.²⁹ Sinjar's mountainous terrain also provides PKK members with a sanctuary from Turkish air attacks. For the Iranian-allied PMF groups, Sinjar provides an alternative route to Syria and Lebanon where they can support the Syrian regime and Hezbollah in Lebanon.³⁰ These groups have even claimed that Sinjar can be used to launch missiles at Israel, in defense of the Palestinian cause, and have escalated their conflict with the US after the Hamas attacks on 7 October 2023 and Israel's subsequent bombardment of Gaza.³¹

These events and developments have collectively helped to give the conflict in Sinjar transnational characteristics. The below timeline, in Figure 2, marks important events that have shaped Sinjar's recent history.

²⁸ International Crisis Group (2018), *Winning the Post-ISIS Battle for Iraq in Sinjar*.

²⁹ Aghwan, A. (2019), 'مدينة سنجار العراقية وتداعيات الموقف الجيو-أمني الإقليمي' [Iraq's Sinjar district and the geostrategic-regional struggle], Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, report, 23 April 2019, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/sites/default/files/articles/documents/2021-03/%20الموقف-%20الجيو-أمني-الإقليمي.pdf>.

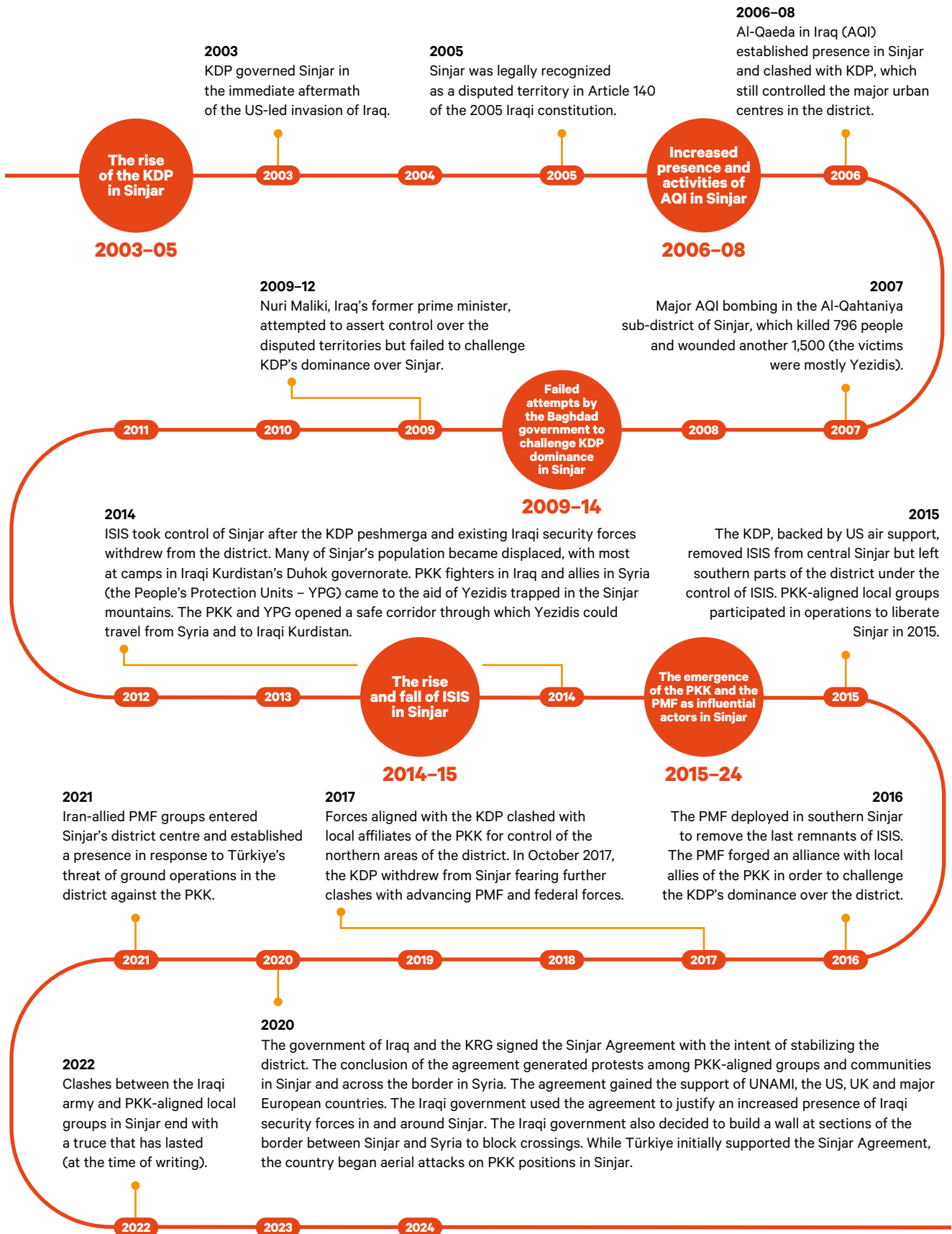
³⁰ Jameel, R. (2020), 'The Iraqi and Kurdish Regional Government's Sinjar Agreement: Consequences for U.S., Turkish, and Iranian Influence and Rebel Rivalries', *Terrorism Monitor*, 18(23), pp. 9–12, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-iraqi-and-kurdish-regional-governments-sinjar-agreement-consequences-for-u-s-turkish-and-iranian-influence-and-rebel-rivalries>.

³¹ Mamouri (2023), 'Deep Dive: How Iran's Arab allies have prepared for war with Israel'.

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Figure 2. Sinjar timeline since 2003



03 Sinjar: A transnational conflict hub

Military, ideological and political authority in Sinjar have also allowed the PMF and the PKK to turn the district into a corridor for moving weapons and fighters between their regional hubs of operations.

Sinjar features ‘outside in’ transnational conflict dynamics in which external groups – the PKK and PMF – have intervened to pursue local authority. The district is also characterized by an ‘inside out’ dimension in which the competition for local power has led to an increase in violence that has spilled over into the region, including neighbouring Syria. The cross-border military supply chains that now run through Sinjar showcase the transnational nature of authority and violence in the district. The main actors in the power networks in Sinjar are detailed in Figure 3.

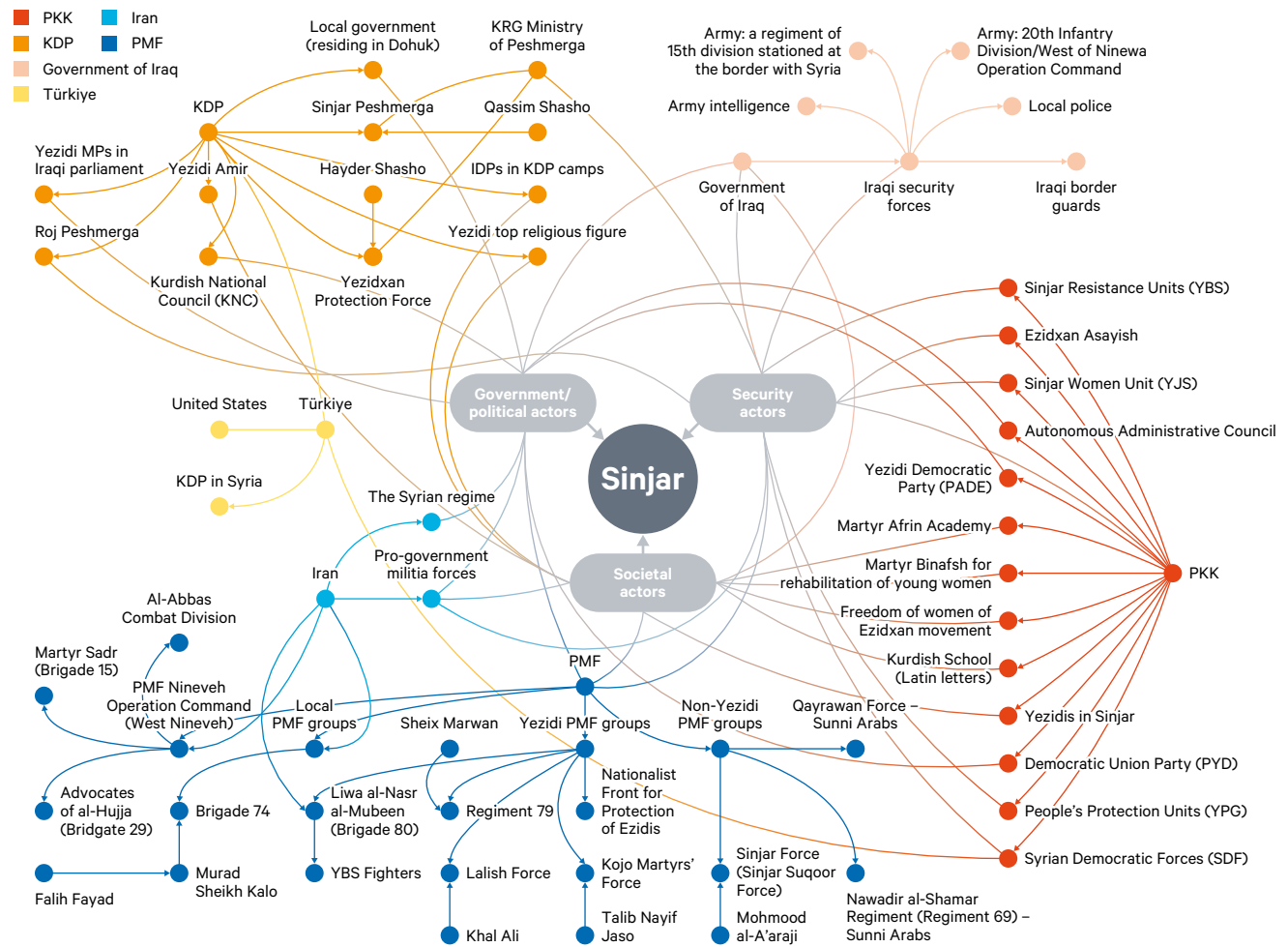
While they share a similar ethnic Kurdish identity, the PKK and the KDP are political rivals that compete for the loyalties of Kurds across Iraq, Syria, Iran and Türkiye.³² They also diverge ideologically: the PKK follows leftist, revolutionary principles and proposes a democratic confederal political arrangement as a solution to the Kurdish struggle in Türkiye and Syria, whereas the KDP calls for a conservative ethno-nationalist state independent of Iraq.

³² Bozarslan, M. (2021), ‘Deadly attacks stoke KDP-PKK tensions in Iraqi Kurdistan’, Al-Monitor, 16 June 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/deadly-attacks-stoke-kdp-pkk-tensions-iraqi-kurdistan>.

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Figure 3. Power networks of the main actors in Sinjar



Source: Compiled by the authors.

The PKK's status and authority in Sinjar is a threat to the KDP,³³ which hoped to use its influence in Baghdad to remove PKK-affiliated groups through the Sinjar Agreement. The PKK sees the KDP as a strong ally of Türkiye, which is determined to defeat the PKK in Sinjar and across the Kurdish-inhabited areas of Iraq and Syria.³⁴ Both sides compete to be the champion of the Kurdish cause and make pragmatic decisions on alliances and strategies.

Meanwhile, the PMF is an Iraqi government institution under the National Security Agency (NSA). However, most of its armed groups operate independently of that chain of command. Power in the Iraqi state is diffused, and the armed groups of the PMF are under the authority of their own political parties and leadership, such as the Badr Organization, Asaeb ahl al-Haq or Kataib Hezbollah.

³³ Wahab, B. (2017), 'Iran's Warming Relations with the PKK Could Destabilize the KRG', Washington Institute Policy Analysis, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-warming-relations-pkk-could-destabilize-krg>.

³⁴ Zaman, A. (2020), 'Washington on the spot as its Syria Kurd allies are drawn into PKK-KDP fight', Al-Monitor, 16 December 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/12/washington-syrian-kurdish-allies-sdf-pkk-kdp-fight-iraq.html>.

At times, the strategies of the PMF are not compatible with those of the Iraqi government. After concluding the Sinjar Agreement in 2020, the central government attempted but failed to remove local allies of the PKK through negotiations. Two years later, in 2022, the Iraqi government tried again to remove PKK-aligned militias, this time with force, but again failed. In both instances, the PMF intervened and brokered a truce between the Iraqi security forces and the PKK-aligned groups. As a result, the PMF incorporated some of the PKK groups and fighters, even providing them with salaries and protection.³⁵ The PMF has also used its influence inside the Iraqi government to block the appointment of a new mayor for Sinjar – a key requirement of the Sinjar Agreement.³⁶ In these instances, the PMF has proven both independent and more influential than the central government.

While the PMF and PKK diverge both ideologically and politically, they have had a tactical alliance since 2016 and often share common goals and common enemies – such as the KDP. Both groups have established deep local roots in Sinjar, through their responses to the Yezidi genocide and by taking advantage of the district's remote location and distance from central authorities in Baghdad. The PKK and PMF have also utilized the geographic location and mountainous terrain of Sinjar to serve their own strategic interests. The cross-border operations of the PKK and the PMF mean that the conflicts in Sinjar and Syria influence one another.

'Outside' transnational authority in Sinjar

The authority of both the PKK and the PMF in Sinjar is based on strong security, as well as ideological and economic ties with the area's remaining local population.³⁷ Due to ISIS's opposition to the Yezidis' non-Islamic religious beliefs, militants killed and kidnapped thousands of members of the community during their offensive on Sinjar (around 500 men were killed,³⁸ while 7,000 women and girls were forced into sexual slavery³⁹). ISIS's attack also drove most of the Yezidi community out of Sinjar with many of them (estimated at 280,000 people⁴⁰) still living as internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Iraqi Kurdistan's Duhok governorate. ISIS's depopulation of the district paved the way for the PKK and the PMF to establish power and influence in Sinjar.

³⁵ Ali Saleem, Z. (2024), *The competition for control in Sinjar: How external actors and local interests inhibit the Sinjar Agreement*, LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series, https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/121399/1/MEC_paper_82_competition_for_control_in_sinjar.pdf.

³⁶ International Crisis Group (2022), *Iraq: Stabilizing the Contested District of Sinjar*.

³⁷ That Sinjar is home to influential transnational actors is not a new phenomenon. Due to the weakness of the authority of the central government in the remote district following the US invasion of Iraq, transnational actors such as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and ISIS were able to establish a presence in Sinjar. These Sunni extremist organizations were able to find support among Sinjar's disgruntled Sunni community and used the district as a transit hub for moving fighters and weapons between their areas of operations in Iraq and Syria. See, Hamilton, E. (2008), *The fight for Mosul*, Institute for the Study of War, <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/reports/Iraq%20Report%208.pdf>; Ali, A. (2015), *Five Takeaways for Sinjar Operation*, Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS), https://auis.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/IIR%20Report%202_0.pdf.

³⁸ Human Rights Watch (2014), 'Iraq: ISIS Executed Hundreds of Prison Inmates', 30 October 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/10/30/iraq-isis-executed-hundreds-prison-inmates>.

³⁹ Van Zoonen, D. and Wirya, K. (2017), *The Yazidis: Perception of Reconciliation and Conflict*, Erbil: Middle East Research Institute, <http://www.meri-k.org/publication/the-yazidis-perceptions-of-reconciliation-and-conflict>.

⁴⁰ Kaválek, T. (2017), *Competing Interests in Shingal District: Examining the PKK-linked Structures, Defusing Tensions*, Erbil: Middle East Research Institute, <http://www.meri-k.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Shingal-Report.pdf>.

Groups such as the PKK and the PMF are often considered non-state or hybrid actors because they do not conform to Westphalian notions of the state,⁴¹ in which state power is confined largely to formal government institutions. However, the lack of this formal status should not distract from the state authority that such groups maintain over populations and government institutions.⁴² Authors who write on rebel governance, for instance, argue that these groups use military, political, ideological and economic means to obtain and keep their authority.⁴³ Looking at public authority is important because it reveals a critical lens through which to understand the motivations and power that such groups enjoy. As external actors, the PKK and the PMF rely on a mix of social and political authority to govern Sinjar with greater influence than any formal government or other state.

The PKK

The PKK announced in 2018 that it would withdraw from Sinjar following calls from the central Iraqi government, which was under pressure at the time from Türkiye.⁴⁴ But the group still enjoys military, political, ideological and administrative authority in the area. Part of this comes through locally formed armed and political organizations that are largely made up of members from the Yezidi community.⁴⁵ These PKK-affiliated organizations operate across the various towns and villages of the district and derive legitimacy from their role in protecting members of their community from ISIS.⁴⁶

Militarily, the PKK commands the loyalties of a number of influential armed groups. In 2014, the PKK sent fighters from both Iraq (from the PKK's stronghold in Iraqi Kurdistan's mountainous borders with Iran and Türkiye) and northern Syria (from the Kurdish dominated areas – known as Rojava – where the PKK's allies among Syrian Kurds rule in the de facto Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria) to the Sinjar mountains in order to protect Yezidis fleeing the ISIS offensive. The PKK fighters saved many Yezidis by opening a corridor in the Sinjar mountains through which Yezidis were escorted to Syria and then to Iraqi Kurdistan.⁴⁷ Other Yezidis remained in Sinjar and were organized by the PKK into

⁴¹ Haddad, F. (2020), 'Iraq's popular mobilization units: a hybrid actor in a hybrid state', in Day, A. (ed) (2020), *Hybrid Conflict, Hybrid Peace: How Militias and Paramilitary Groups Shape Post-Conflict Transitions*, United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, <https://unu.edu/cpr/project/hybrid-conflict-hybrid-peace-how-militias-and-paramilitary-groups-shape-post-conflict>.

⁴² Mansour, R. and Salisbury, P. (2019), *Between Order and Chaos: A New Approach to Stalled State Transformations in Iraq and Yemen*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/09/betweenorder-and-chaos>; Mansour, R. and Khatib, L. (2021), *Where is the 'state' in Iraq and Lebanon? Power relations and social control*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/04/where-state-iraq-and-lebanon>.

⁴³ Arjona, A. (2018), 'Civilian cooperation and non-cooperation with non-state armed groups: The centrality of obedience and resistance', in Duyvesteyn, I. (ed) (2018), *Rebels and Legitimacy*, London: Routledge; Arjona, A. (2014), 'Wartime Institutions: A Research Agenda', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 58(8), pp. 1360–1389, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002714547904>; Arjona, A. (2016), *Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴⁴ Van Wilgenburg, W. (2018), 'Why did the PKK withdraw from Sinjar?', Ahval News, 28 March 2018, <https://ahvalnews.com/sinjar/why-did-pkk-withdraw-sinjar>.

⁴⁵ The PKK commands a number of Yezidi militia groups such as the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS) and Ezidkhan Security and political organizations such as the Ezidi Freedom and Democracy Party (PADE) and Ezidi Freedom and Democratic Movement (TEVDA). See, Baxtiyar, G. (2017), 'PKK-affiliated political party formed in Shingal', K24, 6 May 2017, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/11408-PKK-affiliated-political-party-formed-in-Shingal->; Daoud, S. and Al-Adani, M. (2022), 'Sinjar battles: the conflict of the local forces encouraged by regional interests!', Nirij, June 2022, <https://nirij.org/en/2023/04/09/sinjar-battles-the-conflict-of-the-local-forces-encouraged-by-regional-interests-2>.

⁴⁶ Several research interviews with PKK-affiliated political activists and fighters, under the condition of anonymity, Sinjar, April–August 2023.

⁴⁷ Stein, A. and Foley, M. (2016), 'The YPG-PKK connection', The Atlantic Council, 26 January 2016, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-ypg-pkk-connection>.

different armed groups including the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS) and Yezidixan Security. These groups played a role in removing ISIS from Sinjar and continue to enjoy the support of many Yezidis in the district who have lost faith in the KDP and Iraqi security forces to protect them against future threats. According to a local official aligned with the PKK, 'I don't trust the Iraqi army and the PMF [due to its central government affiliation]. One day they will get a call from Baghdad to withdraw from Sinjar and will then leave us to terrorists. I only trust the YBS who are locals and will not run away when we are threatened again by ISIS.'⁴⁸

Many of the district's Yezidis express deep appreciation for the role the PKK played in saving them at a time when they were abandoned by both the KDP and the Iraqi government. But the ties that bind the PKK to locals in Sinjar go beyond this recent history and can be seen by the adherence to PKK ideology in Yezidi communities.⁴⁹ In addition to military training, the PKK organizes regular political and cultural activities in Sinjar aimed at proselytizing the political beliefs of the PKK's jailed leader and main ideologue Abdullah Öcalan.⁵⁰ Affinity with these ideas has enabled the PKK to mobilize locals for fighting and for popular gatherings and demonstrations. In February 2022, for instance, protests broke out in Sinjar against a decision by the Iraqi army to remove a poster of Öcalan on a main thoroughfare in the district's centre.⁵¹

The PKK's involvement in Sinjar's war economy has enabled the group to finance its local operations and activities. Members of PKK-aligned groups control parts of the border with Syria and have generated revenues through involvement in and taxing of illegal cross-border trade activities.⁵² According to locals, the PKK funded its locally aligned political and armed groups through profits made in cross-border smuggling. Only some of the PKK-aligned local fighters receive payments from the Iraqi government via the PMF.⁵³

The PKK's influence in Sinjar is also institutional. The PKK continues to exert influence through the governing administration that the group's local affiliates established in Sinjar in 2018. When the KDP withdrew from the district in 2017, it ordered its aligned local administrators and government officials to pull out of Sinjar. This left a power vacuum that was filled by the local allies of the PKK who, with the support of the PMF, established their own administration and appointed local officials across the district.⁵⁴ While it has failed to gain the recognition of the Baghdad government, the local administration has been important for the PKK to assert authority over Sinjar.

⁴⁸ Research interview with local official in Sinjar, under the condition of anonymity, April 2023.

⁴⁹ Dawod, S. (2022), 'Why Sinjar is a growing focal point for Iraqi, regional competition', Amwaj Media, 20 January 2022, <https://amwaj.media/article/why-sinjar-is-a-growing-focal-point-for-iraqi-regional-competition>.

⁵⁰ Muhsin, Y. (2022), 'سنجار العراق: تمرد عسكري لقوات البيشة ام تصدع خطوط المصراعات الإقليمية', [Iraq's Sinjar: A rebellion by YBS or an emergence of the fault lines of regional conflicts], Ahewar, 30 May 2022, <https://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=757688>.

⁵¹ Shafaq news (2022), 'PKK supporters protest the removal of Ocalan poster in Sinjar', Shafaq news, 12 February 2022, <https://shafaq.com/en/Iraq-News/PKK-supporters-protest-the-removal-of-Ocalan-poster-in-Sinjar>.

⁵² Local officials in Sinjar claimed that the PKK-aligned groups were taxing and participating in illegal cross-border trade of food, livestock and fuel to and from Syria and have made financial gains from these activities. Baghdad Today (2020), 'تهريب الأغنام والنفط وقيادات داعش... منطقة آمنة إلى "مفقات" قسد وحزب العمال', [Smuggling of livestock, fuel and ISIS members... Sinjar from a safe area to 'deals' between the SDF and the PKK], 15 December 2020, <https://baghdadtoday.news/119814-.html>; International Crisis Group (2022), *Iraq: Stabilizing the Contested District of Sinjar*.

⁵³ Research interviews with local journalists, politicians and community leaders in Sinjar, under the condition of anonymity, April–August 2023.

⁵⁴ International Crisis Group (2022), *Iraq: Stabilizing the Contested District of Sinjar*.

The PMF

The PMF has also established authority in Sinjar through a system of local alliances. But the force's regional authority is less rooted in ideology⁵⁵ and largely built on military, economic and political ties. Militarily, the PMF is the most powerful actor in Sinjar.⁵⁶ The force exerts considerable security influence through its existing brigades in the areas around Sinjar and via locally aligned armed and political factions.⁵⁷ When it arrived in southern Sinjar in 2016, the PMF encountered Yezidi as well as Sunni and Shia Arab tribes that were threatened by ISIS and thus were looking for support to fight the Sunni militant group. The PMF provided both weapons and training to the members of these communities and helped them liberate their areas. The relationship between these allies lasted beyond the fight against ISIS, with the PMF continuing to arm and finance local factions in Sinjar.⁵⁸

Using its status as a force recognized by Baghdad, the PMF has established its own economic authority in Sinjar via patronage networks that provide employment and access to the Iraqi government. Many young Yezidis and Sunni Arabs have joined local PMF factions to access stable state salaries. According to a Yezidi fighter in the PMF's newly established Brigade 74 (also called Sinjar Brigade), 'In Sinjar, there are few job opportunities outside the security forces. In the PMF, we receive our salaries on a regular basis'.⁵⁹ Reportedly, the Sinjar Brigade (formally approved by the Baghdad government) had plans to recruit 3,000 locals in 2023 – it remains unclear as to whether it achieved this goal.⁶⁰

The PMF's local allies also include the leaders of Yezidi and Sunni Arab communities and tribes. Yezidis who have fallen outside the KDP's patronage network and refused to subscribe to the PKK's ideology have joined the PMF, in part due to the latter's association with the central government in Baghdad. Yezidi affiliates of the PMF have established local influence and prestige through their access to key government institutions and resources in Baghdad.⁶¹ Likewise, the district's Sunni Arab tribal leaders that rejected ISIS rule are now aligned with the PMF and receive both financial resources and protection from the PMF.⁶²

⁵⁵ There is only a small Shia community in Sinjar mobilized through a local PMF regiment – called Sqoor Sinjar – led by Sheikh Mahmood A'arjai. Despite this, PMF groups have sought to project Shia symbolism in a predominately Yezidi inhabited district. See, Porter, L. (2019), 'Why an Iran-backed paramilitary group has rebuilt a shrine in a ruined Iraqi city', Atlantic Council, 19 August 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/why-an-iran-backed-paramilitary-group-has-rebuilt-a-shrine-in-a-ruined-iraqi-city>.

⁵⁶ The pro-PMF Shia militia groups aligned with Iran that have influence in Sinjar include: Badr, Asaeb Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Hezbollah and Kataib Said Shuhada. These groups command local allies and maintain a presence close to Sinjar (in the neighbouring Tel'afar district and other parts of Nineveh governorate). In response to Turkey's threat of invading Sinjar in 2021, militia men aligned with the PMF quickly came to Sinjar and took up positions within different areas in the district. See, Al-Nwab, A. (2021), 'الحشد الشعبي "و الكردستاني": تنسيق في سنجار ضد تركيا', [“The Popular Mobilization” and “the PKK”: Coordination in Sinjar against Turkey’], [https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/الحشد-الشعبي-22%22%22%22-الكردستاني-22%22%22%22-تنسيق-في-سنجار-ضد-تركيا](https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/الحشد-الشعبي-22%22%22%22%22-الكردستاني-22%22%22%22-تنسيق-في-سنجار-ضد-تركيا).

⁵⁷ Diverse groups of Yezidi and Sunni and Shia Arab groups from Sinjar are armed and organized within the PMF's local factions and operate in various areas of the district. See, Daoud, S. and Al-Adani, M. (2022), 'Sinjar battles: the conflict of the local forces encouraged by regional interests!'

⁵⁸ International Crisis Group (2022), *Iraq: Stabilizing the Contested District of Sinjar*.

⁵⁹ Research interview with Yezidi fighter in Sinjar, under the condition of anonymity, May 2023.

⁶⁰ KirkukNow (2023), 'Shingal: PMF recruits locals for new brigade', 11 April 2023, <https://www.kirkuknow.com/en/news/69353>.

⁶¹ International Crisis Group (2018), 'Winning the Post-ISIS Battle for Iraq in Sinjar'.

⁶² Sinjar's Sunni Arabs were subjected to revenge acts at the hands of Yezidi armed groups after the liberation of ISIS. Those who have sided with the PMF have enjoyed both protection and financial support. Phone interview with a Sunni Arab observer from Sinjar, under the condition of anonymity, May 2023.

How military supply chains connect conflicts across and beyond Sinjar

Both the PKK and the PMF see Sinjar as a strategic military hub for their transnational operations, including the movement of fighters and weapons across country borders. In addition to its bases in the mountainous areas of Iraqi Kurdistan at the southern border of Türkiye,⁶³ the PKK has also developed influence and authority in Syria's Rojava, which shares borders with Sinjar and is where the PKK's local Kurdish allies rule.⁶⁴ Rojava's main armed force (the People's Protection Units – YPG), political party (Democratic Union Party – PYD) and governing body (Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria) are all aligned with the PKK.⁶⁵ The YPG constitutes the core of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF),⁶⁶ a key US ally in the ongoing fight against ISIS in Syria.

Both the PKK and the PMF see Sinjar as a strategic military hub for their transnational operations, including the movement of fighters and weapons across country borders.

Meanwhile, as part of Tehran's regional strategy, Iran-allied PMF groups operate in Syria in support of the Assad regime.⁶⁷ Although the PMF and PKK are aligned with opposing groups in Syria, they have continued to maintain their tactical alliance in Sinjar. The activities of PMF groups in Syria have primarily relied on crossing the border at al-Qaem, which is a desert crossing that is increasingly exposed to US airstrikes and disruptions. In comparison, the secluded and mountainous Sinjar hub is an attractive alternative for a more sustainable 'land bridge' that can connect Iran to the groups it supports in and across the Levant.

The PKK's cross-border supply chains

The PKK and its local allies in Iraq and Syria continue to challenge and fight Türkiye in a stretch of land that extends from northern Syria to the mountainous region of Iraqi Kurdistan. To maintain this level of fighting requires access to areas that offer relative safety and transport routes across international borders for weapons and fighters. In this respect, Sinjar's mountains and its location at the border with Syria are particularly beneficial for PKK transnational military activities.

⁶³ Ali, O. (2017), 'The PKK's growing Influence in Northern Iraq: Beyond the Renewed Tensions in Sinjar', *Orsam Review of Regional Affairs*, 61, pp. 1–12, https://www.orsam.org.tr/d_hbanaliz/61eng.pdf.

⁶⁴ Kaya, Z. and Whiting, M. (2017), 'Sowing division: Kurds in the Syrian war', *Middle East Policy*, 24(1), pp. 79–91, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12253>.

⁶⁵ Hevian, R. (2013), 'The Resurrection of Syrian Kurdish Politics', *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 17(3), pp. 45–56, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/meria/v17i3/f_0030055_24316.pdf.

⁶⁶ Van Wilgenburg, W. (undated), 'Syrian Democratic Forces (Syria)', European Council on Foreign Relations, <https://ecfr.eu/special/mena-armed-groups/syrian-democratic-forces-syria>.

⁶⁷ Smyth, P. (2013), 'From Karbala to Sayyida Zaynab: Iraqi Fighters in Syria's Shi'a Militias', *CTC Sentinel*, 6(8), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/from-karbala-to-sayyida-zaynab-iraqi-fighters-in-syrias-shia-militias>.

Sinjar's strategic significance helps the PKK to circumvent restrictions imposed by Türkiye and the KDP on the insurgent group's access to weapons, transit routes and areas of sanctuary in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Tunnels are a key means through which the PKK moves weapons across borders. The PKK transports small arms and light weapons⁶⁸ between Iraq and Syria, via Sinjar, through a network comprising PKK fighters and local smugglers.⁶⁹ The Sinjar mountain range that extends across the Syrian border has facilitated the movement of PKK fighters. Since the group's emergence in Sinjar in 2014, the PKK has constructed tunnels in and around the district that serve not only as conduits for moving weapons across the border to Syria but also function as storage areas and military bases.⁷⁰ According to an Iraq-based observer of the PKK, 'These PKK tunnels are on an entirely different scale compared to the small smuggling tunnels often seen in the media or movies. Some of these tunnels can even accommodate vehicles.'⁷¹ Most interviewees emphasized that the tunnels were used for transporting light weapons – such as sniper rifles, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), automatic guns, TNT explosives, ammunition and night vision equipment – rather than heavy weaponry.⁷² Sources highlighted that the PKK reserved the use of the tunnels for strategic purposes, including the transportation of weapons and high-profile figures and commanders. Other cross-border operations, such as the movement of fighters between Sinjar and Syria, tend to use the more traditional informal smuggling routes.

There is a constant flow of PKK fighters and weapons via Sinjar across the border. An Iraq-based analyst stated:

Fighter movement between Sinjar and Hassakeh [the Syrian Kurdish city controlled by PKK allies] is crucial for PKK commanders to move freely inside and outside the border area, for updates and strategizing. It also allows rotation for members, offering a respite from mountain life and access to urban areas. This transportation is significant for medical treatment or recovery periods, often occurring in Hassakeh.⁷³

The PKK also uses Sinjar as a safe haven for its commanders. As Tomáš Kaválek stated, 'The impassable mountains have numerous caves and complex morphology, rendering many areas inaccessible by vehicle, making them a defensible stronghold

⁶⁸ Sources stated that while the PKK obtained heavy weapons, such as armoured vehicles, from Iraq (confiscated during the fight against ISIS), the group secured light weapons from the black markets in both Iraq and Syria and from the SDF. In respect to the PKK's access to small arms and light weapons in the Syrian black market, a Syrian journalist based in Qamishli stated, 'The massive black market in Syria, a result of conflict and various authorities either participating or turning a blind eye, makes it easy for the PKK to acquire what they need through local intermediaries.' Skype interview with Syria-based journalist, under the condition of anonymity, July 2023.

⁶⁹ In the northern part of Sinjar – near the town of Khansour – the PKK and its local allies engage in sophisticated smuggling networks. Sources indicated that the PKK relies on local smugglers to facilitate the movement of its members between the two sides of the border. A Syrian based independent observer stated, 'These smugglers possess the requisite knowledge, experience and connections. Additionally, blending in with other individuals raises fewer suspicions and even offers a shield against Turkish drone attacks.' Phone interview with analyst, under the condition of anonymity, July 2023.

⁷⁰ Local sources have been unable to pinpoint the exact geographical locations of these tunnels. This is because the tunnels are directly managed by PKK elements, avoiding involvement of the PKK's local allies (such as the SDF) to prevent potential leaks of their locations. This strategic secrecy is critical for the movement's security. While specific tunnel locations remain undisclosed, a common assumption is that they originate not far from the Syrian border with Sinjar, particularly spanning areas between Yaroubia and al-Hol. Research interviews in Syria and Sinjar, under the condition of anonymity, April–August 2023.

⁷¹ Phone interview with an Iraq-based foreign researcher, July 2023.

⁷² Research interviews with Syrian and Iraqi journalists, April–August 2023.

⁷³ Skype interview with a Syrian researcher, under the condition of anonymity, August 2023.

which could easily serve as a (back-up) safe haven for the PKK in proximity to its territories in northern Syria.⁷⁴ Sinjar is also used by the PKK as a hideout for commanders to lay low, particularly those pursued and targeted by Türkiye.⁷⁵

To boost its standing in Syria, the PKK has agreements with local leaders and tribes that inhabit the border regions.⁷⁶ For instance, the Shammar tribe and its armed wing, Al-Sanadid, have become strong local allies of the PKK on the Syrian side of the border.

The PMF's cross-border operations

Sinjar has the potential to be part of a land bridge that enables Tehran and its PMF allies to directly support the Assad regime in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon, by moving weapons and fighters from Iran and Iraq. In Tehran's regional military strategy, PMF groups with influence and authority play a major role. Analysts focusing on Iran's land bridge passing through different Iraqi territories claimed that Tehran's utilization of the Sinjar route was temporary and was compromised by the 'growing partnership between U.S. troops and Syrian Kurdish forces in northeast Syria'.⁷⁷ However, these analysts overlooked two key factors.

Sinjar has the potential to be part of a land bridge that enables Tehran and its PMF allies to directly support the Assad regime in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon, by moving weapons and fighters from Iran and Iraq.

One factor is the potential of the Sinjar mountains to serve Iran's regional strategy. Access to the mountainous area has become a significant priority for the PMF and their allies in Tehran as it provides them with access to Syria and potentially the scope to attack Israel.⁷⁸ An Iraqi military expert has argued that Iran is now in a position to target Israel through its al-Shahab missiles, which have a range of 1,600 kilometres, from Iraqi soil.⁷⁹ In a research interview for this paper, a local journalist from Sinjar said, 'The top of Sinjar mountain is called Chilmiran, which Saddam [Hussein] used to attack Israel through missiles. Many people in Sinjar say that Iran and the PMF want to use the mountain for attacking Israel when they deem this necessary'.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Kaválek (2017), *Competing Interests in Shingal District*.

⁷⁵ Research interviews with Syrian and Iraqi journalists, under the condition of anonymity, April–August 2023.

⁷⁶ Coles, I. (2016), 'In remote corner of Iraq, an unlikely alliance forms against Islamic state', Reuters, 11 May 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-sinjar-idUSKCN0Y20TC>.

⁷⁷ Adesnik, D. and Taleblu, B. B. (2019), *Burning Bridge: The Iranian Land Corridor to the Mediterranean*, Washington: Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, <https://www.fdd.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/fdd-report-burning-bridge.pdf>.

⁷⁸ Weiss, J. L. (2021), 'Iranian-Backed Iraqi Militias Deter Turkish Intervention in Sinjar', *Terrorism Monitor*, 19(14), pp. 8–11, <https://jamestown.org/program/iranian-backed-iraqi-militias-deter-turkish-intervention-in-sinjar>;

Bozarsalan, M. (2017), 'Iran, Turkey have own plans for Iraq's strategic Sinjar', Al-Monitor, 13 November 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/11/turkey-iraq-iran-why-so-interested-in-sinjar-1.html>.

⁷⁹ Rudaw (2017), 'العشيد الشعبي' يتمركز على قمة جبل سنجار الاستراتيجي', [The PMF takes position on the top of strategic Sinjar Mountain], 23 October 2017, <https://www.rudawarabia.net/arabic/kurdistan/23102017>.

⁸⁰ Interview with a local journalist in Sinjar, under the condition of anonymity, May 2023.

The second factor is that the route to Syria via Sinjar is an important alternative to the al-Qaem crossing in Anbar governorate, which has increasingly come under US attack.⁸¹ Furthermore, the al-Qaem crossing is also vulnerable because of the area's recent history of violent Salafi Jihadism. In contrast, the mountainous terrain of Sinjar and the district's diverse population make it a more secure military transit route. Sources indicate that Iran and its allies among the PMF have been involved in moving weapons, including missiles, to Syria from Iraq via Sinjar.⁸² According to a local politician from Sinjar, 'The Iraqi government is present at the border between Sinjar and Syria. But the Iraqi security forces and border guards are incapable of stopping the PMF crossing to Syria.'⁸³

Sinjar's 'inside out' transnational dynamics

The PKK and PMF strategies for turning Sinjar into a military corridor have generated cross-border conflict with implications for the stability and security of the district and the wider region. This shows the 'inside out' dynamics of Sinjar's conflict and its spillover across the region.

For those citizens who have returned to Sinjar, instability is a constant feature of life in the district. The IDPs interviewed for this research stated that those who returned to the district were either fighters or relatives of fighters associated with the PMF and PKK.⁸⁴ A Yezidi IDP stated, 'If I return to Sinjar, I will have to join one of the militia groups to secure a job and support. But this not what I want to do.' He added, 'There is little support for us here [in refugee camps]. But there is safety.'⁸⁵ Some IDPs refuse to return to Sinjar out of fear of Turkish air attacks on PKK-aligned groups in the district.

Policy responses to instability in Sinjar have also impacted the livelihoods of its remaining residents. In seeking to weaken the PKK's influence in the district, the KDP and the Iraqi government have restricted the movement of goods to Sinjar by introducing stringent security measures at checkpoints on major routes from the Kurdish region and the rest of Iraq. These measures, which were intended to target the PKK, have had severe consequences for people's livelihoods and access to basic services and products. One local trader stated, 'Drivers must unload the goods from their trucks many times for screening at several checkpoints and they get delayed. It takes considerably more time to move goods to Sinjar and as a result truck and lorry drivers ask for greater fees. And that adds to the prices of the food products and goods we import to Sinjar.'⁸⁶

⁸¹ Emirates Policy Center (2021), 'Escalation in Sinjar, Iraq: Internal Competition and Geopolitical Consequences', 22 February 2021, <https://epc.ae/en/details/featured/escalation-in-sinjar-iraq-internal-competition-and-geopolitical-consequences>.

⁸² Interviews with local politicians, activists and journalists in Sinjar, under the condition of anonymity, April–August 2023. See also, Emirates Policy Center (2020), 'Why Agreement to Normalize Conditions in Sinjar, Iraq has not been Implemented Yet?', 8 November 2020, <https://epc.ae/en/details/brief/why-agreement-to-normalize-conditions-in-sinjar-iraq-has-not-been-implemented-yet>.

⁸³ Interview with a local politician from Sinjar, under the condition of anonymity, April 2023.

⁸⁴ Interviews with Yezidi activists and community leaders, Duhok, under the condition of anonymity, August 2023.

⁸⁵ Interview with a Yezidi IDP, Duhok, under the condition of anonymity, August 2023.

⁸⁶ Phone interview with a trader from Sinjar, under the condition of anonymity, August 2023.

The restrictions have also limited access to crucial medicines in Sinjar.⁸⁷ The district has poor healthcare and limited access to medicines for chronic illnesses.⁸⁸ Local pharmacists stated that there were deliberate KDP, KRG and Baghdad policies to restrict medical goods going to Sinjar from the rest of Iraq to prevent the smuggling of those pharmaceuticals into Syria.⁸⁹ One local pharmacist stated:

The KRG prevents medicines being imported into Sinjar from Duhok. Meanwhile, Iraqi government checkpoints make it very hard for us to bring medicines from Mosul to Sinjar in needed quantities. The checkpoints on the road between Mosul and Sinjar only permit a small truck of medicines to pass once a month or even two months. This one truck of medicine is distributed across the 30 pharmacies in Sinjar.⁹⁰

In Sinjar, the conflict is further exacerbated by the responses of Türkiye, which has carried out numerous air attacks against the local allies of the PKK in the district. The air attacks have caused severe damage in Sinjar (including the destruction of hospitals) and deepened insecurities for the people living there. A Yezidi IDP stated, 'Sinjar is under constant Turkish attack. How can you live in a place always bombarded by Türkiye? With each Turkish air attack on Sinjar tens of families are re-displaced.'⁹¹

Ultimately, these varying forms of conflict have prevented the return of Yezidi IDPs to their homes in Sinjar years after the liberation of the district from ISIS. IDPs in a camp in Iraqi Kurdistan's Duhok governorate told the authors that the presence of 'multiple parties' fighting for control over their lands was a key impediment preventing them from returning to Sinjar.⁹² One Yezidi IDP from Sinjar stated, 'The condition in Sinjar is not stable. There is no security. I do not take my family back because I fear the many parties and militias in Sinjar. I fear tensions and war. This might happen. Who knows? There is no guarantee another disaster is not going to happen.'⁹³

At times, the conflict in Sinjar has spilled over to neighbouring Syria, demonstrating the district's 'inside out' transnational dynamics. The intra-Kurdish conflict between the PKK and KDP is a case in point. While attempting to re-establish influence in Sinjar, the KDP has also sought to challenge the PKK's dominance in Rojava. Like the PKK, the KDP formed its own aligned militia group – Roj Peshmerga – and a political wing – the Kurdish National Council (KNC) – in Rojava, Syria. The PKK–KDP struggle for control in Sinjar has negatively affected security and political stability in Rojava. The 2017 violent clashes between the PKK's local allies and the KDP-affiliated Roj Peshmerga, near the town of Khansour in Sinjar, resulted in casualties on both sides and quickly led to unrest in Rojava. In response to the clashes in Sinjar, PKK supporters in Rojava took to the streets, demonstrated against the Roj Peshmerga and attacked the offices and supporters of the KDP-aligned KNC in Qamishli and Hassakeh (the main cities in Rojava).

⁸⁷ Interviews with pharmacists in Sinjar, under the condition of anonymity, April–August 2023.

⁸⁸ ACAPS API (2020), *Iraq: The Return to Sinjar*, briefing note, https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20201120_acaps_briefing_note_sinjar_province_iraq.pdf.

⁸⁹ Phone interviews with local pharmacists from Sinjar, under the condition of anonymity, August 2023.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Research interview with a Yezidi IDP from Sinjar, Duhok, under the condition of anonymity, August 2023.

⁹² Research interviews Yezidi IDPs from Sinjar, Duhok, under the condition of anonymity, August 2023.

⁹³ Research interview with a Yezidi IDP from Sinjar, Duhok, under the condition of anonymity, August 2023.

04

Policy implications

International and Iraqi government strategies to resolve the instability in Sinjar, including building border fortifications and the Sinjar Agreement, have ignored the transnational nature of the conflict and risk exacerbating regional instability.

The transformation of Iraq's Sinjar district into a transnational conflict hub has significant implications for regional stability. At the local level, hundreds of thousands of residents are still unable to return home, years after their areas of Sinjar were liberated from ISIS. These IDPs continue to live in dire conditions in camps in the neighbouring KRG Duhok governorate. This reality continues to create tension between the IDPs and the KRG authorities. The longer the IDP crisis continues, the greater the suffering of thousands of Sinjari citizens, and in turn the greater the chances of multiple armed groups becoming further entrenched in the district. The residents who have returned to Sinjar have had to make compromises with the transnational armed groups that now control the area. The securitization of borders and a lack of accountability threaten the everyday lives of returnees in terms of armed conflict, the inability to make ends meet and the lack of access to essential goods.

At the national level, the continuation of the status quo may also further destabilize the already fragile relationship between the KRG and the central government. KRG leaders consistently express frustration with the Iraqi government's inability to implement the various provisions of the Sinjar Agreement.

Critically, as this paper has discussed, Sinjar has also become a key hub that connects several regional conflicts. The flare-up of the Israel–Palestine conflict has spread beyond the borders of those territories to areas including Sinjar, which remains a key hub for the PMF, as well as Iran and its allies, to maintain authority across Iraq and the Levant. PMF groups claim that the mountains of Sinjar are a strategic military position from which their forces could strike Israel. The location also connects the PMF to allies in the 'axis of resistance' to Israel.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ The 'axis of resistance' is an umbrella organization of Iran-aligned armed groups that operate transnationally and include the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen.

Meanwhile, the PKK rely on Sinjar to fight in Syria and in Türkiye. The PKK's presence and activities in Sinjar (building tunnels, moving weapons and fighters across the border between Syria and Iraq, and using the Sinjar mountains as a sanctuary) have already provoked Turkish airstrikes that heightened fears among the residents of the district and prevented IDPs from returning.

In recognition of the crisis in Sinjar, the Iraqi government and its international supporters have devoted significant attention and funds to manage the conflict. However, the existing responses have approached Sinjar as a disputed territory between local and national parties and ignored the post-2014 transnational dimension. This chapter analyses current policy responses and concludes with specific proposals for complementing the Sinjar Agreement with a much-needed transnational element.

The perils of a securitized approach

The Iraqi government has taken a securitized approach to tackle the Sinjar problem, with the aim of ultimately removing the PKK's influence from the district. The central government sees the presence of the PKK in Sinjar and the group's cross-border activities as threats to Iraq's national security. According to an official at Iraq's National Security Agency, 'The PKK rules Sinjar and is entrenched in the district's security and local economy. We see the PKK as a national security threat. The group's presence in Sinjar is unacceptable to us.'⁹⁵ To end the PKK's presence in Sinjar and cut ties between the group's allies on both sides of the border, the government has positioned greater numbers of Iraqi security forces near the district (see Figure 4) and embarked on building fortifications (including a wall) at sections of the border between Sinjar and Syria (see Figure 5).⁹⁶ The wall extends from northwest of Nineveh near the Al-Rabia crossing with Syria to the southwest of Nineveh near the governorate's Al-Ba'aj sub-district – located north of Iraq's Anbar governorate. The wall is 160 kilometre long (the whole Iraq–Syria border is 650 kilometre long) and is part of a system of fortifications that includes a fence and a 3-metre-deep military trench.⁹⁷

But instead of containing the PKK and ending its transnational operations, Baghdad's militarization and securitization of the area have only resulted in greater violence in Sinjar. After construction of the wall at sections of the Iraq–Syria border near Sinjar, clashes erupted in April 2022 between the Iraqi government forces and the PKK-aligned armed groups in Sinjar. Additionally, pro-PKK groups in Sinjar and across the border in Syria organized popular demonstrations against the wall and the Sinjar Agreement more generally.⁹⁸ The wall has thus only served to exacerbate tensions and violence across localities.

⁹⁵ Research interview with an official at Iraq's National Security Agency, Baghdad, under the condition of anonymity, June 2023.

⁹⁶ Al Jazeera (2022), 'Estimated 3,000 people flee armed clashes in northern Iraq', 2 May 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/2/thousands-flee-after-clashes-erupt-in-iraq-s-sinjar-2>.

⁹⁷ Al-Ubaidi, S. (2024), 'Iraqi Official for "Al-Arabi Al-Jadid": This current year will witness end of procedures regarding securing the border with Syria', Al-araby, 27 February 2024, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/واليوم%20الثلاثاء%20الحدود%20الخفاجي%20لوتحديدا%20بلدة%20#:~:text=%20مسؤول%20عراقي%20الحالي%20سيشهد%20نهاية%20إجراءات%20تأمين%20الحدود%20مع%20سورية%20ربيع%20ومدينة%20سنجار>.

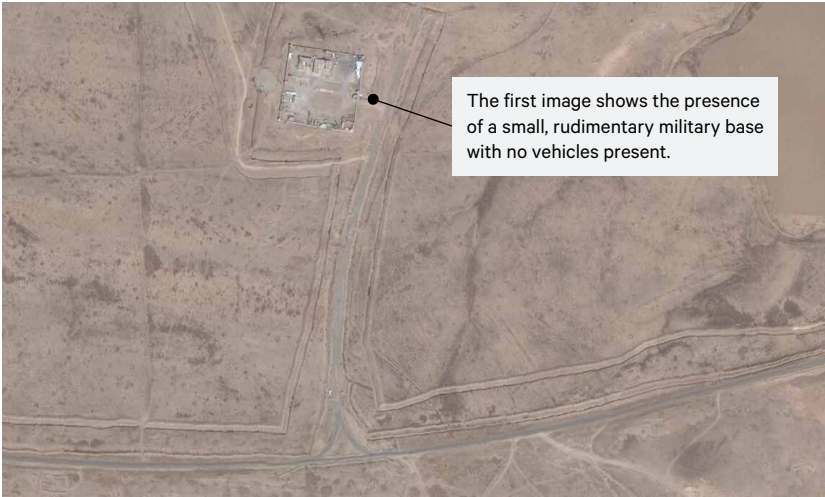
⁹⁸ Tastekin, F. (2022), 'Is Turkey behind border wall, Iraqi deployment in Sinjar?', Al-Monitor, 3 May 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/turkey-behind-border-wall-iraqi-deployment-sinjar>.

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Figure 4. Satellite images showing the growing military presence of the Iraqi security forces near the Sinjar mountains, between September 2018 and August 2023

5 September 2018



5 September 2020



The second image shows the expansion of the military base, with the further construction of both the road and other buildings. The small number of vehicles also suggests an increased military presence.

8 August 2023



The third image shows that considerable expansion has taken place, with the refurbishment of existing buildings and the construction of significant new infrastructure. The expansion in the number of vehicles indicates a significant increase in the military presence at this base.

The road leading to the military base has been improved to facilitate increased military activities.

Source: Satellite images © Maxar Technologies 2023.

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Figure 5. Satellite images showing the steady development of the wall at two points of the border between 2020 and 2023

13 April 2022



27 May 2023



22 November 2020



23 August 2021



Source: Satellite images © CNES (2023), Distribution Airbus DS.

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Critically, the border wall did not change conflict dynamics due to the PKK's entrenchment both in Sinjar and Syria, as illustrated by Figure 6. Thus, the PKK found it easy to re-equip to maintain authority in Sinjar. Sources in Sinjar confirmed that PKK fighters in the district were still receiving weapons and logistics from their allies in Rojava despite the wall's construction.⁹⁹ A local journalist stated:

PKK-aligned fighters have not been affected by Baghdad's blocking of the border with Syria. They constructed tunnels and move between Sinjar and Syria. They bring weapons, fuel and other logistics from areas under the control of the YPG in Syria to Sinjar. The Baghdad authorities and the PMF know about these activities of the [Sinjar Resistance Units] but they turn a blind eye to them.¹⁰⁰

Figure 6. Satellite images showing the progressive development of gaps in the constructed wall at the border between December 2018 and June 2023

15 December 2018



13 June 2023



The second image shows the presence of the border wall crossing the pre-existing smuggling route. Instead of leading to the route being diverted, the wall has been breached at the location of the informal crossing to ensure the route continued to be operational.

Source: Satellite images © Maxar Technologies 2023.

⁹⁹ Research interviews with local politicians, journalists and activists in Sinjar, under the condition of anonymity, April–August 2023.

¹⁰⁰ Phone interview with a local journalist from Sinjar, under the condition of anonymity, August 2023.

Iraqi security officials have claimed that they have stopped illegal crossings at the border between Syria and Sinjar preventing all forms of cross-border activities.¹⁰¹ Despite this, satellite images show that there are gaps in the wall constructed at the border (see Figure 6) that can be used by the PKK and the PMF for moving weapons and fighters.

The Sinjar Agreement

The internationally backed 2020 Sinjar Agreement aimed to stabilize the district through new security, administrative and governance arrangements.¹⁰² The agreement calls for the removal of all armed groups (mentioning the PKK and its local allies by name) from the district and delegates the protection of local security to the federal security forces. It also empowers the government of Iraq and the KRG to select a new mayor for the district ahead of returning the local administration and officials to Sinjar. Finally, the agreement calls for collaboration between the government of Iraq and the KRG on the reconstruction of Sinjar.¹⁰³

But to date, the agreement has failed to shift the dynamics on the ground and stability remains elusive. This failure is largely a result of national and international actors treating the conflict in Sinjar as a domestic issue. Although the agreement gained the strong support of influential members of the international community (i.e. the UN, US and UK), the accord excluded some of the most powerful and influential on-the-ground actors in Sinjar, namely the PMF and the PKK. Crucially, while the PMF is linked to the Iraqi government, its decision-making is autonomous and separate from Baghdad's chain of command. This means that the Iraqi government has little influence over the PMF groups that operate in Sinjar.

As this research has demonstrated, external transnational actors such as the PKK and the PMF have established authority in Sinjar and carved out a military corridor for moving weapons and fighters between Iraq and Syria. Recent attacks on US troops in Jordan show the threat that the cross-border activities of transnational armed groups pose to stability in the region and beyond. The PMF and the PKK place significant value on Sinjar and view it as key to their regional strategies. Both interpret the Sinjar Agreement as allowing the KDP to re-establish influence in Sinjar at the expense of their own strategic interests. In response, the PKK and the PMF have used their influence in Sinjar and, in the case of the latter, relationship with the government in Baghdad to successfully obstruct the security, administrative and governance provisions of the agreement.

¹⁰¹ Video statement by the commander of Iraq's Border Guard Force Brigadier General Hamid Al-Hussieni who claims that they have completely stopped illegal crossings and activities at the border between Sinjar and Syria. Al-Hussieni, H. via YouTube (2022), 'Border guards at advanced stages in constructing the security wall at the border with Syria', 21 September 2022, <https://youtu.be/XMINyLZDZeo?si=SBovAqZPqPLKSrd&t=26>.

¹⁰² Snell (2020), 'Baghdad, Erbil reach security, administrative agreement on Sinjar district'.

¹⁰³ International Crisis Group (2022), *Iraq: Stabilizing the Contested District of Sinjar*.

Bolstering the Sinjar Agreement with a transnational element

To prevent further destabilization and deadly impacts of Sinjar's conflict at the local, national and transnational levels, this paper makes the following policy recommendations to international governments and non-government entities involved in either policy or programmatic stabilization efforts in the area.

- 1. Renegotiate a more inclusive Sinjar Agreement.** The Sinjar Agreement has not been implemented largely because influential transnational actors in the district, such as the local allies of the PKK and the PMF, have been excluded from the discussions.¹⁰⁴ Stability in Sinjar requires an agreement that these factions can support. Therefore, international actors should use their leverage – potentially in the form of security guarantees or programme funding – over the KDP and the Iraqi government to include these transnational dynamics in further negotiations on the agreement. Meanwhile, the local allies of the PKK in Syria – including the core elements of the SDF – need to be committed to any future settlement in Sinjar. Western countries such as the US are well positioned to influence the actions of the SDF, which receives US financial and military support. The US can use this military support in order to disincentivize the SDF's movement of fighters and weapons from and to Sinjar in the service of the PKK's cross-border military activities. Diplomatic representatives of Western countries in Iraq continue to meet with local actors from Sinjar with the aim of influencing the dynamics on the ground in the direction of stability. However, these meetings often exclude local actors aligned with the PKK and the PMF. This exclusion is unlikely to translate to sustainable stabilization policy in Sinjar.
- 2. De-securitize Sinjar and bolster local government institutions.** The Baghdad government has largely viewed the conflict in Sinjar through a security lens. The securitization of the area – through building border walls and placing multiple checkpoints between Sinjar and the rest of Iraq – has had implications for people's livelihoods and economic conditions. Lifting security restrictions on the movement of people and goods to and from Sinjar can help improve economic conditions in the district. International actors should use diplomacy – either bilaterally or through multilateral bodies – to focus not only on security measures but also on improving the livelihoods of the residents of Sinjar and provide greater incentives for IDPs to return.
- 3. Prevent politically sanctioned corruption in Sinjar.** Improving public service provision and reconstruction in Sinjar is key to the return of IDPs to the district. But effective and tangible provision of government services and reconstruction of the district rely on preventing capture of public funds by various parties and factions, including the ruling transnational actors. To prevent politically sanctioned corruption the Iraqi government should set up an accountability working group comprising members of the newly elected provincial council in Nineveh, members of the Iraqi parliament, senior civil servants from the

104 Ibid.

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office of the prime minister, societal and community leaders, and civil society organizations and activists. This group should monitor the reconstruction and public service provision to ensure that funds allocated for reconstruction and service provision in Sinjar do not end up in the hands of political parties and factions seeking to capture public funds. The group should specifically practise close oversight of the actions and operations of government institutions and officials in charge of distributing contracts for government service projects, and ascertain that government contracts are granted to qualified companies. Furthermore, the group should closely follow the operations of assigned companies to ensure that projects, such as roads, schools, hospitals and power stations, are all completed and meet the agreed standards.

List of abbreviations

KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
YPG	People's Protection Units
YBS	Sinjar Resistance Units
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
KNC	Kurdish National Council
PYD	Democratic Union Party
UNAMI	United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces

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Cover image: A concrete wall and fence on the border between Iraq and Syria, view from the Syrian town of Al-Hol in the northeastern Hassakeh governorate, 29 March 2022.

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