

The Jurf al-Sakhar Model: Militias Debate How to Carve Out a New Enclave North of Baghdad

by [Amir al-Kaabi \(/experts/amir-al-kaabi\)](#), [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#), [Hamdi Malik \(/experts/hamdi-malik\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Amir al-Kaabi \(/experts/amir-al-kaabi\)](#)

Amir al-Kaabi is an Iraqi expert on Shia militant groups in Iraq and Syria.



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



[Hamdi Malik \(/experts/hamdi-malik\)](#)

Hamdi Malik is an Associate Fellow with the Washington Institute, specializing in Shia militias. He earned his doctorate at the school of social, political and global studies, Keele University. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria. He is the coauthor of the Institute's 2020 study "Honored, Not Contained: The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces."



Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [Militia Spotlight \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight)

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Tactical disagreements among "resistance" leaders underline their competition for prime real estate and local partners near the capital.

On February 16, an attack by Islamic State (IS) remnants killed four Iraqi army soldiers in Tarmiyah, a notorious subdistrict just north of Baghdad that has experienced consistently higher than average numbers of terrorist incidents since 2003. The deaths occurred when the army raided an IS cell that was planning to target Shia pilgrims on local roads, spurring the terrorists to detonate a suicide vest intended for use against civilians.

A day later, [Hossein Moanes \(/node/17022\)](#)—the head of [Harakat Hoquq \(/node/17048\)](#), the political arm of the Iran-backed militia [Kataib Hezbollah \(/node/16641\)](#) (KH), a U.S.-designated terrorist organization—tweeted the following: "Terrorism incubators in some areas around Baghdad will threaten the security and safety of our people every now and then if they're not extracted from ground similar to Jurf al-Sakhar...The success of the [Popular Mobilization Forces, or PMF] in holding ground must be taken advantage of, and this is the responsibility of the commander-in-chief of the armed forces." Moanes was essentially saying that the 2014 depopulation of Sunnis from Jurf al-Sakhar and its conversion into a KH principality might be replicated in Tarmiyah (Figure 1). Similar calls were made by KH-affiliated commentator Abbas al-Ardawi on Dijlah TV in August 2021, when six PMF personnel were killed in Tarmiyah.

Another statement on the IS attack was issued on February 18 by Nasr al-Shammari, assistant secretary-general of the Iran-backed militia [Harakat](#)

Hezbollah al-Nujaba (/node/16716) (HaN): "We believe that the best solution to deal with the terrorist cells in Tarmiyah lies in the political decision first, and that the sector is to be fully shared between Iraqi army units and the [PMF] represented by the 12th Brigade, as happened in the previous liberation operations to launch a wide cleansing campaign with the participation of the Tarmiyah Mobilization Force and volunteers from the people of the area who are constantly being targeted by the remnants of IS terrorist gangs" (Figure 2). Notably, the 12th Brigade is HaN's PMF unit.



Figure 2: Nasr al-Shammari calls for PMF control of Tarmiyah, February 18, 2023.

Shammari followed up on the theme of working with local Sunni auxiliaries when he

spoke on **Asaib Ahl al-Haq's**

al-Ahad TV (/node/17268) on February 19. He noted that "terrorism can't

operate in Tarmiyah unless there are incubators" in the local population, then warned that "the statements about copying the experience of Jurf al-Sakhar in Tarmiyah did not come from responsible parties" (Figure 3).

This episode is full of interesting insights into rivalries between the country's various *muqawama* (resistance) militias, as well as their evolving courtship of local Sunni partners and the Iraqi military. First, it shows KH and HaN sparring over a lucrative piece of terrain.

HaN is quite explicitly

criticizing KH's brutal depopulation approach at Jurf al-Sakhar and couching its statements in a way that may appeal to local Sunnis in Tarmiyah. HaN is also taking a soft approach to gaining a more prominent role in Tarmiyah's security—apparently in support of the two local army brigades at first, but with strong potential to end up directing those brigades itself over time.

Like Jurf al-Sakhar, Tarmiyah is full of rich pickings: prime Baath estates and farmlands astride key routes for trucking and pilgrims. HaN would like to dominate the northern route between Baghdad and Samarra in the same way KH dominates the southern approaches to the capital and associated pilgrim routes. The HaN approach is deliberately more attuned to today's conditions, when Sunnis are being coopted rather than cleansed from areas of PMF control. ❖

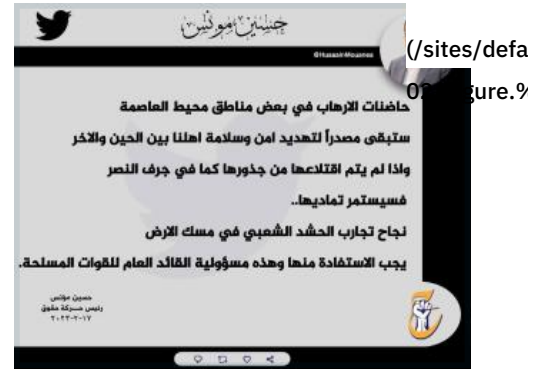


Figure 1: Hossein Moanes calls for using the Jurf al-Sakhar model in Tarmiyah, February 17, 2023.



Figure 3: Nasr al-Shammari underlines the need for local Sunni auxiliary forces in Tarmiyah, as opposed to the depopulation strategy used in Jurf al-Sakhar, February 19, 2023.

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