

Confidence- and Security-Building Measures in the Nineveh Plains

Michael Knights and Yousif Kallian

July 14, 2017

In the aftermath of Mosul's liberation, the adjacent Nineveh Plains could be a cockpit for new ethno-sectarian conflict or a test case of cooperative security arrangements, with the anti-IS coalition having strong incentives to ensure the latter.

The battle to liberate Mosul from the Islamic State began in the Nineveh Plains, the belt of multiethnic and cross-sectarian farming villages spread across the northeastern approaches to the city. This was the direction from which Iraq's security forces and the U.S.-backed coalition began their liberation of the city in October 2016. Nineveh Plains areas such as Qaraqosh, Tal Asqaf, Tal Kayf, Bashiqa, and Bartella were under Islamic State (IS) control for twenty-seven months, almost as long as Mosul itself. Now, seven months after its liberation, the Nineveh Plains is still largely depopulated and is divided between Iraqi government and Kurdish forces, along with their proxy militias from the local Christian and Shabak communities.

The area desperately needs the U.S.-led coalition to help develop confidence- and security-building measures that can reduce the risk for clashes between the forces, improve security coordination, support reconstruction, and thus pave the way for repatriation of internally displaced persons from camps in the Kurdistan Region. The relatively peaceful nature of intercommunal relations in the Nineveh Plains means that intervention stands a good chance of success if it is attempted before militias poison relations between local communities.

Contested Control of the Nineveh Plains

The Nineveh Plains is subtly different from Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundary (DIB), the area that was controlled by Saddam Hussein's Iraq until 2003 but which the Kurdistan Region claims should be administratively reunited with Iraqi Kurdistan. Ancient Christian towns and farming communities dot the plains, mixed in with old Arab settlements and Yazidi and Kurdish communities. Micro-minorities such as the Kakai and the Shabak live in the Nineveh Plains, the only place in the world inhabited by the latter. Although the Nineveh Plains is mostly part of Nineveh province, a federal-administered governorate headquartered in Mosul, the Kurds have long expressed their willingness to extend protection to any communities on the plains that wish to join the Kurdistan Region.

When the Islamic State attacked Mosul in June 2014, the Nineveh Plains was controlled by a polyglot patchwork quilt of security forces. (That August, IS extended full control over the plains). Kurdish security forces exercised effective control over the Christian areas using Kurdish intelligence personnel, Kurdish-paid Christian militias, and an Iraqi army garrison made up largely of Kurdish troops answering to the Kurdistan Region leadership. Federal Iraq provided the police forces, and Baghdad was beginning to experiment with sponsorship of Shabak militias, exploiting fears of the Shia Muslim Shabak community, which was generally excluded from Kurdish protective arrangements and was regularly attacked by IS. Though the Nineveh Plains looked calm to outsiders, the area had a dark undercurrent: the Shabak people felt abandoned, and Christians fretted over the high birth rates of local Muslims as well as the influx of Kurds.

Today's security arrangements are simply an amplified version of the pre-2014 situation, with some unpleasant new twists. Indeed, numerous security forces now share the policing of the depopulated ghost towns of the Nineveh Plains:

- Kurdish Peshmerga and Zerevani forces hold a fortified line that encompasses towns such as Tal Kayf, Bashiqa, and Bartella.
- Iraqi Army 16th Division troops control checkpoints on the Mosul-Erbil highway and on Mosul's outskirts.
- Iraqi police nominally maintain responsibility for the police districts in the Nineveh Plains.
- The 1,000-strong Babylon Brigade is part of the al-Hashd al-Shabi (Popular Mobilization Units, PMU), the volunteer forces paid by Baghdad. Led by Christian militiaman Rayan al-Kildani and focused in the northern Tal Kayf area, the brigade is not actually local but rather comprises Shabak people and Shia Arabs brought by the Iran-backed Badr Organization from outside Nineveh at the end of the battle for the Nineveh Plains.
- The approximately 500-strong, predominantly Christian Nineveh Plains Protection Units (NPU) is nominally under the PMU umbrella but operates independently of the PMU leadership in Baghdad. The NPU received U.S. training and nonlethal equipment from a U.S.-based nonprofit named the Nineveh Plain Defense Fund. The NPU fought alongside U.S.-led coalition and Iraqi forces in the battle for the Nineveh Plains and now undertakes checkpoint security in eastern Christian areas such as Qaraqosh and Bartella.
- The 1,500-strong Nineveh Plains Guards (NPG) is a Kurdish proxy force connected to the Chaldean Syriac

Assyrian Popular Council, a political party founded by Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) member Sarkis Aghajan. It focuses on the northern area from Bashiqa to al-Qosh, next to Mosul Lake.

- The approximately 500-strong Nineveh Plains Forces (NPF) is another Kurdish proxy group, this one aligned with the Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party, again focused on the northern area.
- The Dwekh Nawsha (Syriac for "one who sacrifices") is connected to the Assyrian Patriotic Party, both of which are concentrated in the northern part of the Nineveh Plains.

Given the lack of a coordination mechanism, tensions between the security forces will likely boil over in the coming months, potentially resulting in armed clashes and, at the very least, preventing effective action to prevent Islamic State militants from dispersing from liberated Mosul into the area.

Reconstruction and Resettlement

The fight against the Islamic State is not the only rationale to create a better-organized security architecture in the Nineveh Plains. Many refugees in the Kurdistan Region were waiting for their children's exams to finish in June before considering a move back to the plains, but now the pressure to return is growing. According to local leaders canvassed by the authors, 90,000 people out of the Nineveh Plains' pre-2014 population of 120,000 are still displaced. Opinion polling suggests that 41 percent of Christian displaced persons from the Nineveh Plains want to return, but thus far only 3,365 Christians have returned to their homes. One reason is war damage: Aid to the Church in Need, a not-for-profit committed to rebuilding the Nineveh Plains, has estimated that 12,970 homes must be rebuilt, at a likely cost of more than \$200 million. Thus far, however, only 232 houses are currently being renovated. Even if rebuilding can be started, no mass resettlement will occur without public trust that the security forces can protect the returnees and that such forces will not fight each other. There is still great public fear of an IS resurgence, and little faith that Kurdish or Iraqi security forces will succeed now where they failed in 2014.

Coalition Role in Rebuilding Trust and Stability

The Nineveh Plains offers fertile ground for the development of U.S.-backed confidence- and security-building measures. This is because while the relationships between the security forces in the area are bad, they are not yet *too bad* to cooperate. If local actors can be empowered, they are likely to opt for coordination because the Nineveh Plains is a very small place and their families, homes, and communities are at stake. If outside actors such as Badr and the KDP dictate events, then the Nineveh Plains may simply become a proxy battlefield populated by national forces that need not bear the costs of the conflict. Outside forces (such as militiamen brought from beyond the Nineveh Plains) should be excluded from local security arrangements wherever possible, perhaps being displaced by local men. In Kirkuk, tensions have been partly reduced between the PMU and local forces by establishing understandings that local men were welcome to join the PMU but that outsiders -- whether as individuals or whole units -- should not be allowed to serve in the area.

This principle, emphasizing enlistment of locals, should be a cornerstone of security architecture in the Nineveh Plains, and it may be popular. It is the best way to reduce the negative reaction Kurds have toward the PMU in the area, and might even pave the way for Kurdish proxy forces such as the NPG, NPF, and Dwekh Nawsha to be folded within the PMU in the same way that the NPU has been. Like a lot of Sunni tribal PMU forces, the NPU receives its wages from Baghdad but enjoys localized command and control that operates semiautonomously from Iran-backed PMU leaders such as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy PMU commander and a U.S.-designated terrorist.

The Nineveh Plains would be an ideal setting for a system akin to the Combined Security Mechanisms, implemented by the U.S. military in 2009-11 to create trilateral U.S.-Iraqi-Kurdish patrols, checkpoints, and headquarters. Prior to 2014, one weakness of the local security arrangements was the limited insight that pro-Kurdish and pro-Baghdad forces had regarding each other's movements and activities. Furthermore, the capable Kurdish forces did not enter Shabak areas or protect them. Shabak communities could gain great reassurance from joint patrols, checkpoints, and headquarters involving Kurdish Asayesh intelligence officers, local PMU forces, and Iraqi army or police units. This could reduce the growing tendency of the Shabak to look toward Iran-backed groups such as Badr for support.

Michael Knights is a Lafer Fellow with The Washington Institute and author of its report [How to Secure Mosul](#). He has worked in all of Iraq's provinces and spent time embedded with the country's security forces. Yousif Kallian is a former research assistant at the Institute who has previously worked with Chaldean, Syriac, Assyrian, and Yazidi organizations.