

Normalizing Security in the Nineveh Plains

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Iraq's Prime Minister Adel Abd'al-Mahdi issued a new executive order on July 1 that prohibits certain unauthorized activities being undertaken by elements of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, or Hashd al-Sha'abi in Arabic). In combination with similar comments made by Abd'al-Mahdi on June 18, the government expects PMF units to follow government orders and has banned them from maintaining unauthorized bases and economic money-making schemes. The decree notes that "the existence of any armed faction operating secretly or openly outside these instructions is forbidden, and is to be considered outside the law and accordingly prosecuted."

The Nineveh Plains is ground zero for Abd'al-Mahdi's instructions. As long ago as July 15, 2017, the Iraqi prime minister (Haider al-Abadi at the time) began trying to put the militias in the newly-liberated Nineveh Plains under government control. On August 2, 2018, Abadi signed executive order 1388 that required that the PMF to remove its forces from Mosul city and the Nineveh Plains, and transfer all PMF forces in Nineveh to the operational and administrative control of the army-led Nineveh Operations Command. In March 2019, Iraq's current Prime Minister Adel Abd'al-Mahdi reiterated the order. At the time of writing, in July 2019, these actions have not been taken. Two small militias, the PMF 30th Brigade (Liwa al-Shabak/Quwat Sahl Nineveh) and PMF 50th Brigade (Kata'ib Babiliyun) have thumbed their noses at two successive prime ministers.

The ethno-sectarian patchwork in the Nineveh Plains is clearly complex, but the crux of the issue is fairly simple: the PMF 30th and 50th brigades do not want to follow orders from the Iraqi prime minister, and nor do they want to give up lucrative money-making opportunities and Mafiosi-like power at the local level. They are a test case for whether Prime Minister Adel Abd'al-Mahdi has the authority and the serious intent to bring arms under the control of the state. If two tiny militias—under 2,500 fighters combined, at most—can ignore the Iraqi government—while still drawing payrolls from that government—what chance does Adel Abd'al-Mahdi have of bringing larger, foreign-backed militias under state control?

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM WITH MILITIAS IN THE NINEVEH PLAINS?

The PMF units in the Nineveh Plains cannot simply be asked to "go home," to use the clumsy and nonsensical formulation of former U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. They are home, being that Liwa al-Shabak is manned largely by the Shabak minority (who only live in the Nineveh Plain and eastern Mosul city), while Kata'ib Babiliyun is partly manned by local Christians from the Nineveh Plains. Instead, the call for re-deployment is much more fine-tuned at a local level, and the key issue is that forces are led differently and act differently.

LIWA AL-SHABAK

In the case of the PMF 30th Brigade (Liwa al-Shabak/Quwat Sahl Nineveh), the core problem is that the 1,000-1,500-strong force is disrupting Christian resettlement and getting mixed up in large-scale business operations that are expressly prohibited by the Iraqi prime minister's new order. It would be no surprise if the unit garrisoned Shabak areas like Bazwiyah and numerous other towns on the eastern periphery of Mosul city, north and south of the Mosul to Erbil highway. But Liwa al-Shabak goes much further: it has also set up its headquarters in the depopulated Christian town of Bartella.

I worked in that area back in the 2011-2014 period, and I know full well that Shabak hamlets exist as close as 500 metres west of Bartella, yet the town itself was always Christian and there was always a lot of mutual suspicion between the communities. Today, Liwa al-Shabak fighters have taken over property in Bashiqa, looted houses, and intimidated locals. This has prevented resettlement by Christians and Arabs, and blocked the ability of donor nations from visiting Bartella (notably U.S. government representatives).

Liwa al-Shabak has also fallen into lucrative bad habits. They control the main trade highway between Mosul and Erbil, carrying all manner of goods to Mosul markets and serving as the main reconstruction artery. Their vehicle checkpoints provide significant money-making opportunities. As Reuters reported, their traditional connection to eastern Mosul suburbs and mechanics quarters have placed them in pole position in the scrap metal market, a massive industry due to the high levels of destruction in the city. In Mosul city on February 3, Liwa al-Shabak

troops also took the unauthorized step of harassing a U.S. military foot patrol that was doing a government-authorized joint perimeter patrol outside its base.

KATA'IB BABILIYUN

The case of the PMF 50th Brigade (Kata'ib Babiliyun) is very different. In the case of Liwa al-Shabak, there is no doubt that the troops and their leaders are local men. Kata'ib Babiliyun is a predominately outsider force that is pretending to be a local Christian unit. This 1,000-strong force is located in eastern Mosul city and an area northeast of Mosul called Batnaya. Many of its fighters are non-Christians from Baghdad's Sadr City, Muthanna, and Dhi Qar. Creating the widespread sense that an outsider non-Christian faction has hijacked local security forces, Kata'ib Babiliyun deters the return of many displaced persons to eastern Mosul and the northern Nineveh Plains.

It is led by a Christian fighter from Baghdad called Rayan al-Khaldani, who previously fought in Shia militias in Baghdad during the civil war-like sectarian cleansing of the city. Khaldani is a fervent loyalist of Islamic Revolution Guard Corps Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani and PMF deputy chairman Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, both U.S.-designated terrorists. He celebrates each Quds Day with alacrity. Unsurprisingly, Khaldani is on very poor terms with the Christian leaders and population of the Nineveh Plains, including the widely respected Louis Raphaël Sako, the Patriarch of Babylon of the Chaldeans and head of the Chaldean Catholic Church.

STEPS THAT NEED TO BE TAKEN

At the time of writing, a frenetic process of negotiations and pressure campaigns is underway to reduce friction between these two militias and local minorities. It is indicative of the weakness of the Iraqi state—and the unhelpful stance taken by PMF leaders like Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis—that the Iraqi state needs to exert huge effort to convince a mere two to three thousand men to fall under state authority.

The coming weeks will show whether real changes have occurred, or whether the Iraqi government has been neutralized by small militias and is instead trying to save face by claiming success. Markers of real success would include the removal of Liwa al-Shabak forces from Bartella town, and the removal of their checkpoints from the Mosul to Erbil highway. The removal of non-local members of Kata'ib Babiliyun, including Rayan al-Khaldani, would also be a positive sign. To backfill any gaps, the Nineveh Operations Command and its subordinate Iraqi Army 16th division should receive small reinforcements to take change of the main highway. The Nineveh Protection Units and other Christian units should return to Bartella and Batnaya.

A joint security mechanism should be established in the Nineveh Plains to bring all the above forces together in one arrangement, including Liwa al-Shabak. Remaining local members of Kata'ib Babiliyun should be recognized. Ideally, all the Shabak and Christian forces in the Nineveh Plains—plus some Yezidis, Kurds, Arabs, and Kakai—should be merged into a new force. This could be a new Federal Police brigade, army brigade or Emergency Police regiment.

If taken rapidly, these steps could show observers inside Iraq and outside that the government in Baghdad is truly in charge. Iraq's Prime Minister Adel Abd'al-Mahdi is known for the grace of his words, but less so for the boldness of his actions. This small test case is one way to restore some balance to this equation.

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