

# Turkmen in Tal Afar

## Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict



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# **Turkmen in Tal Afar**

## **Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict**

**MERI Policy Report**

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Photo obtained from [wikimapia.org](http://wikimapia.org)

# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the military defeat of the Islamic State (IS) in Mosul city, the task to liberate Tal Afar continues to loom large. The fall of Tal Afar to IS on 16 June, 2014 has severely damaged the already strained Sunni/Shia relations in the area, as well as Turkmen relations with other ethno-religious communities. Most of Tal Afar's Sunni and Shia population were displaced during the crisis. However, some Sunni Turkmen decided not to flee and remained in Tal Afar. Although much is still unclear, it is widely believed that a number of Sunni Turkmen from Tal Afar joined IS and stand accused of having committed war crimes in their name. Reconciling communities and repairing social ties are critical needs in ensuring stability and preventing the onset of renewed cycles of violence in the future. Such processes however, can only be advanced through consultation with local populations regarding their needs and vision for the future. The focus of this report is therefore on Turkmen perceptions of needs, opportunities, and obstacles to reconciliation within their own community as well as with other communities.

The report finds that Turkmen from Tal Afar overwhelmingly conceptualise reconciliation as a security objective that is important for enabling the safe return of the displaced. At least in the short term therefore, participants prioritised reconciliation between the Sunni and Shia Turkmen over reconciliation with other communities living elsewhere.

Interviews revealed strongly overlapping views on how sectarian violence had emerged and escalated in the past, and how it should be addressed in the future. Because reconciliation in Tal Afar requires communities to reject and actively combat extremist ideologies, the process must encompass mechanisms to enable these communities to resist the influence of radical organisations. According to the majority of both Sunni and Shia participants, the first step in this process is the inclusion of Sunnis in the security sector. Creating an inclusive, formal security sector comprised of all elements of society is seen as the main need for enabling reconciliation in the future.

Serious issues of distrust, however, appears to stand in the way. The process of building trust between Sunni and Shia Turkmen faces additional challenges stemming from the fact that both communities continue to perceive each other as serving an exogenous agenda. While Shias suspect Sunnis of alignment with Turkey, Sunnis for their part see the Shias as an extension of Iranian interests in the area. Nonetheless, both communities clearly labelled security sector reform as the first step in stabilising the area after liberation, and expressed the hope that any process would not be thwarted by external actors.

In terms including Sunnis in the security sector, Shias expressed concerns about infiltration of government institutions by extremist elements. This obstacle can partly be overcome by recruiting Sunnis in the force tasked with liberating Tal Afar. For the Shias, Sunni participation constitutes a vetting mechanism which can identify those who are committed to peaceful relations and oppose extremist ideologies. Sunni inclusion in the operation to liberate Tal Afar will also increase inter-group contact and cooperation, thus contributing to the formation of shared experiences and long-term objectives.

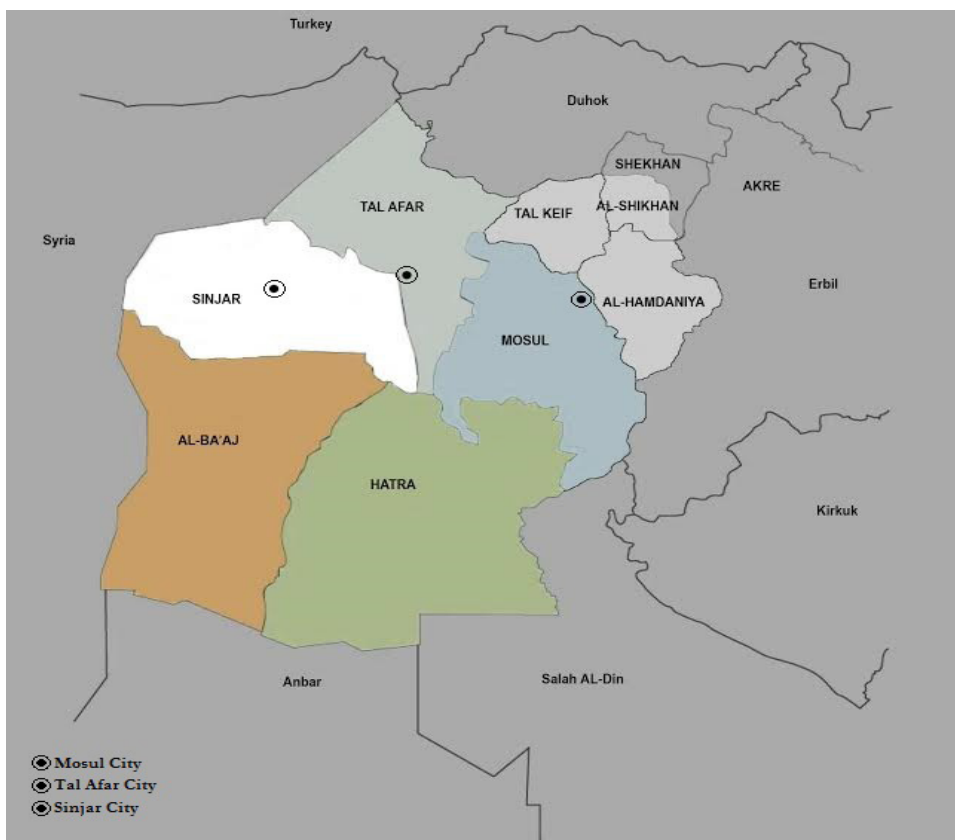
Although intra-community reconciliation is clearly prioritised over reconciliation with other communities, participants also reflected on ways to improve relations with the neighbouring Eyzidi community. The liberation of Tal Afar will present opportunities for doing so. Criminal investigations into the crimes committed by IS as well as other actors should be initiated promptly. Sunni tribal leaders must strongly condemn crimes committed by members of their tribe and cooperate closely with law enforcement to ensure accountability can be imposed. However, it is equally important to publicise positive stories of Turkmen from Tal Afar who have risked their own lives to resist IS and help free some Eyzidi captives. Highlighting these accounts can serve an important role in countering perceptions of collective guilt towards the Sunni Turkmen community in Tal Afar.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

The fall of Tal Afar to the Islamic State (IS) has severely damaged the already strained Sunni/Shia relations within the local Turkmen community, as well as inter-community relations with other ethno-religious communities. Approximately 60-70% of Turkmen in Tal Afar district is Sunni, with the remainder adhering to Shia Islam. In addition to its majority-Turkmen population, Tal Afar is also home to Sunni Arab and Kurdish communities. Its main urban centre, Tal Afar town, is home to a mix of Sunni and Shia Turkmen.

Tal Afar was one of the first cities in Iraq to be affected by sectarian violence after Saddam Hussein's regime was toppled in 2003. In Tal Afar, the dramatic shift in power that had occurred in Iraq's capital reverberated strongly. Many Sunni Turkmen suddenly found themselves deprived of employment, representation and decision-making power. Sunni-based extremist organisations such as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQ-I) wishing to mount a resistance against what they perceived an illegitimate foreign occupation hence found a fertile ground for recruitment. Tal Afar became a hotbed for the Sunni insurgency which would engulf the country for years to come. The violence committed over the course of this insurgency impacted not only intra-community relations between Shia and Sunni Turkmen. Inter-community relations with other groups such as the Eyzidis in neighbouring Sinjar also suffered severely as religious extremism swelled.

IS took control of Tal Afar on 16 June 2014, only a few days after its dramatic capture of Iraq's second-largest city; Mosul. Most of Tal Afar's Sunni and Shia population were displaced during the crisis. Some Sunni Turkmen however decided not to flee the area and remained in Tal Afar. Although much is still unclear, it is widely believed that a number of Sunni Turkmen from Tal Afar joined IS and stand accused of having committed war crimes in their name. As part of IS' self-styled caliphate, Tal Afar quickly became



Map of Nineveh Province and surrounding areas

of strategic importance due to its location along a highway which connects IS' two main cities – Mosul and Raqqa, Syria. The area also served as a launching pad for IS' gruesome attacks on Eyzidis in August 2014. Tal Afar town was reportedly used as a main slave-trade centre from which captured civilians were dispersed across IS-held territory (Callimachi, 2015; Starkey, 2014).

At the time of writing, parts of Tal Afar district, including its main town, are yet to be liberated by Iraqi and Coalition forces. However, as IS forces are gradually being pushed back and areas are liberated, challenges inherent to stabilisation and emerging processes of return are becoming increasingly apparent. Reconciling communities and repairing social ties are critical needs in ensuring stability and preventing the onset of renewed cycles of violence in the future. Such processes can only be advanced by carefully taking into account local perceptions of target communities. Therefore, this report focuses on Turkmen perceptions on needs, opportunities, and obstacles for reconciliation within their own community and with other communities. Perceptions of conflict and reconciliation have been collected through semi-structured, key informant interviews and focus group discussions during which indirect questions seek to prompt participants in conceptualising notions such as security, justice and reconciliation. Participants were also asked about their views on the main needs, obstacles and entry-points for a process of reconciliation with other communities.

The study was conducted in collaboration with and funded by the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) as part of a larger research project titled 'Perceptions on reconciliation and conflict among minority groups in Northern Iraq'. Field research was conducted in the period from December 2016 to January 2017. Over the course of six weeks, MERI researchers consulted over 35 members of the Turkmen community in Tal Afar through both Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). This report constitutes an adaptation of findings previously submitted to USIP. By publishing the findings of this study now the Middle East Research Institute (MERI) aims to help inform future peacebuilding efforts in Iraq. Participant names are not disclosed as interviews and focus groups were conducted on the basis of anonymity.

The report finds that Turkmen from Tal Afar overwhelmingly conceptualise reconciliation as a highly-valued security objective, thus prioritising intra-community reconciliation over reconciliation with other communities in the immediate to short term. Safe return for displaced people from Tal Afar is not deemed possible without addressing some of the divisions and deep-seated distrust currently characterising the relationship between the Sunni and Shia Turkmen communities in Tal Afar. Reflecting the priorities as they were relayed to researchers by the respondents of this study, the onus of this report is on reconciliation between Sunni and Shia Turkmen. Notwithstanding, an important section is also dedicated to needs for improving Eyzidi-Turkmen relations. The final section presents policy recommendations addressed to community leaders, national and international policy-makers.



## 3. FINDINGS

### 3.1 Local Perceptions on the Sunni-Shia Conflict From 2003 to 2014

After the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, Tal Afar was one of the first areas to be affected by sectarian violence. After a brief period of stability in which an interim tribal council governed Tal Afar with relative success, sectarian violence quickly ensued after the U.S. entered the area in 2004. The rise of Al-Qaeda sparked a Sunni insurgency that primarily used violence as a means of opposing the shifting power dynamics. This development was further fuelled by the empowerment of Shia Turkmen in Tal Afar who now enjoyed backing from the central government in Baghdad as well as, indirectly, neighbouring Iran. On the one hand, extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda constituted a pull factor drawing the Sunni Turkmen away from participating in the new government, while parts of the Shia leadership on the other hand did not refrain from pushing the Sunni population out of the public sector – in particular the security sector. This dynamic resulted in a seemingly unstoppable vicious cycle of marginalisation and insurgency that held Tal Afar in its grip and culminated in IS' capture of the area in June 2014. The following sections map out the sequence of events as they unfolded in the eyes of the interviewees.

### 3.2 Rise of Al-Qaeda and the Sunni Insurgency in Tal Afar

For around one year following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Tal Afar was governed by a council composed of tribal and community leaders drawn from both religious denominations. The council was formed to fill a vacuum left after the Baathist regime was evicted. Although certain communal tensions arose during the mandate of the council, both Shias and Sunnis laud its role in governing their area and generally agree that it was a successful model.

After 2003, there was a 10-month state of chaos; no army, no police. Still, it was alright. A local council was formed by the tribes of Tal Afar. They ran the region regularly for 10 months before the Americans got there, even when murders took place, they prevented further damage and solved these problems in a tribal fashion.

▸ **Teacher (Shia)**

After the demise of Saddam Hussein, there was an administrative vacuum in the area. The vacuum was filled by the people of Tal Afar. The only people who actually protected governmental properties were the people of Tal Afar. I was one of them. We formed a committee from tribal leaders and others to protect the money of the bank there. We took the money and saved it somewhere and we later gave it back to the government.

▸ **Civil Servant (Shia)**

The relative stability, however, did not last as the new situation started to affect the balance of power between the two communities. According to interviewees, fissures between the Sunni and Shia Turkmen formed due to a number of reasons. The first and the most impactful reason which is commonly given is the ascent of Shias to power and governance at the central level after 2003. Interviewees explained that generally Sunnis in Tal Afar were in opposition to the presence of the U.S. forces in Iraq. They perceived the U.S. administration as allowing the Iranian government to exert increased influence over the system of governance in Iraq, making it difficult for Sunnis to maintain loyalty towards the new government. Furthermore, opponents of the Baathist Regime came back to the political scene after 2003 and were assigned to positions of power while affiliates of the Baath party were excluded. This radical shift in the balance of power generated concern for the future within the Sunni Turkmen community, some of whom resorted to violence as a form of resistance.

After 2003, those who were in the opposition came back and were given positions of power. So, those people wanted to compensate those who suffered from Saddam's oppression due to their opposition to his policies. This generated a sense of discomfort by the side of those who were Baathist or pro-Baathis. They started to make problems because they were thinking that the Shias will be in power and that now they will be oppressed. So, they threatened resorting to violence.

▸ **Academic (Shia)**

The problem after 2003 is that we did not accept the reality. After 2003 the Sunnis did not agree with the new political dynamics that emerged and resorted to armed conflict. And what was even more shocking was that the Shias did not manage to contain that, rather they made it worse. They formed their own militias and they managed to let's say officially stand against the Sunnis.

▸ **Tribal leader (Sunni)**

With the increase of Shia control over the system of governance in Iraq, the Sunnis grew unsettled. This climate paved the way for extreme groups such as AQ-I to further infiltrate the Sunni community and capitalise on their grievances. In addition, several Sunni discussants pointed to the negative impact regional influences had on the reality on the ground in Tal Afar. They argue that Iran wanted to change the demography of Tal Afar to undermine the Sunni Muslims living in Mosul. The Shia participants, on the other hand, denied this claiming that the Sunnis simply could not adjust to the new dynamics following the invasion in 2003 and resorted to violent means of opposition.

Extremist ideology, however, did not emerge out of thin air after 2003. The second factor causing the rise of extremism in Tal Afar according to interviewees relates to certain members of the Sunni community who held extremist views well before 2003. These were mainly individuals who had studied abroad, returned to the community and served as a pull factor for radical groups in the post-2003 environment. They capitalised on Sunni discontent to promulgate their mindset amongst their neighbours. Much to the aggravation of the precarious dynamics in Tal Afar, the city became an easy focal point for foreign insurgents because it straddles a long stretch of the Iraq-Syrian border that allows for easy access from abroad.

Al-Qaeda members who brought their ideology were few and came from Libya and other areas. They were few possibly less than 10. They were students and teachers from those countries.

▸ **Tribal Leader (Sunni)**

They [Al-Qaeda] were foreigners. They came from Turkey, Germany and Russia. They would not show themselves and would try to win the youth.

▸ **Participant in FGD (Sunni)**

Al-Qaeda's branch in Iraq expanded its presence in Tal Afar under the banner of 'The Resistance' against the U.S. occupation. Under this guise, Sunni insurgents began executing attacks on international forces as part of AQ-I. They later expanded their targets to include anyone they deemed U.S. 'collaborators', including Sunni and Shia interpreters and anyone else who worked with the foreign troops. They also carried out attacks against local security forces. Taking advantage of their religious narrative, AQ-I resorted to tactics aimed at undermining the local government with the aim of establishing a government congruent with their version of Islamic religion. They were moderately successful in generating support amongst the less educated Sunni Turkmen given the tribal community in Tal Afar and their religious pliability, according to interviewees.

The Sunnis were divided along two lines; one was backing and the other objectionable to the new government. At first Al-Qaeda was preaching to the people and that is how they influenced and got them on their side. They even managed to control entire neighbourhoods such as Alsarai area which is a Sunni area.

▸ **Civil Activist (Sunni)**

Sunni extremists were mainly the uneducated and from the lowest class of the society. Extremists were generally the most ignorant people from both societies; Shias and Sunnis.

▸ **Civil Servant (Shia)**

The issue is that the majority of the community is uneducated and would be easily influenced.

▸ **Focus Group Discussion**

As AQ-I expanded its hold on Tal Afar, distrust between the Shia and Sunni communities mounted. Instead of investing in opponents of AQ-I within the Sunni community to ameliorate the divisive environment, the dynamics took a sharp turn for the worse when U.S. forces replaced the Sunni chief of police with a member of the Shia community. Most of the Shias and the Sunnis interviewed agreed that tensions between the two communities heightened after this adjustment as it fed into the narrative AQ-I was promoting among the Sunni community. As a result, the Sunnis felt alienated further and the insurgency grew larger while the local police department gradually morphed into a force exclusively comprised of Shia Muslims. The new police chief recruited only Shias into his force on the grounds that Sunnis were not reliable and likely to be affiliated with AQ-I. Thus, while AQ-I contributed to the marginalisation of the Sunnis by targeting those who collaborated with the government, some Shias pushed this development further by continuing the empowerment of their own community at the expense of the Sunni component. Interviewees agreed that distrust was the main reason behind a general unwillingness to attempt to bring moderate Sunnis into the fold.

Divisions within the community got worse when a Shia person became the head of the police department. That was in the middle of 2004. Before him, a Sunni was the head. He was detained by the US because he was not able to control the security in Tal Afar. The US at the time thought they should appoint a Shia in order to contain Al-Qaeda. In reaction to this move however, Al-Qaeda's opposition grew labelling the head of the police as sectarian.

▸ **Civil Servant (Shia)**

### 3.3 Caught Between a Rock and a Hard Place

From 2005-2007, amidst a growing Sunni insurgency, Shias accused the Sunnis of harbouring extremists. At the same time, AQ-I threatened the Sunni community to leave the national security forces or risk being targeted for retaliation as collaborators. With a security sector unable to provide adequate levels of protection, the Sunnis growing ever more fearful of attacks started leaving the police force en masse, further undermining the inclusiveness of the sector. Meanwhile, Shia militias emerged and further deepened the sectarian divide in Tal Afar.

The charged and divisive atmosphere entrenched animosity between the Sunni and Shia communities to the extent that neighbourhoods in Tal Afar town became increasingly segregated along sectarian lines. Shias moved to Shia-controlled parts of Tal Afar which were enclosed with Bremer walls. In clear revelation of the waning trust between the communities, I.D. badges were issued for Shia inhabitants of areas to allow for ease of access – and to constrain movement of others. The Shia-dominated security forces, including the militias, did not extend a helping hand to the beleaguered Sunnis whose areas were now firmly in the grips of AQ-I. This further undermined trust between the communities as Sunni Turkmen could no longer inform on Al-Qaeda activity without being able to rely on security forces.

The Shias left the Sunni areas. Voluntarily out of fear or sometimes forcefully. So areas became less and less mixed. Everybody went to their own areas. The Shias became targets of Al-Qaeda, as did the Sunnis who

were still part of the security apparatus at that time. The Shias started to surround their areas with T-walls and concrete blocks, and at the same time issued badges to indicate to people that they are Shia in order to get access to those areas easier.

▸ **Civil Servant (Shia)**

If you were a Sunni in Tal Afar, you would possibly live next to a Sunni extremist. The government was weak and could not provide security to the Sunnis. Anything you do that is against the extremist, he would throw a grenade into your place at the least.

**Civil Servant (Shia)**

The problem was that the state did not attend to our concerns for security. The Shias did not incorporate or protect them. Then, the Sunnis realised that there were names given on purpose to Al-Qaeda of those people who were trying to become part of the security forces. So the Sunnis were afraid of both the government and Al-Qaeda at that time.

▸ **Local politician (Sunni)**

In March 2007, a major escalation of hostilities occurred when a suicide bomber driving a truck filled with explosives exploded himself in a Shia neighbourhood killing 152 and wounding 347 (Rubin, 2007). The bloody incident was followed by Shias taking vengeance on the Sunnis. Reportedly, 70 Sunni Turkmen were killed by the Shia police force with single shots to the head. Shia interviewees did not deny what happened in the aftermath of the explosion. They claim that the sheer magnitude of the blast and the devastation it caused justified the affected to seek revenge. They also blame the Sunnis for allowing radical groups to nestle within their community and ultimately cause such horrendous acts. The Sunni leadership, on the other hand, use the revenge killings as support for their accusation that the Shias used local institutions, such as the police, to commit violence against the Sunnis. March 2007 clearly revealed the level of antipathy between the two groups that had developed at the time.

A notorious explosion occurred in Tal Afar when in 2007 a big truck exploded in Alwahda district, a mixed area. The victims included people from both Sunni and Shiite, around 500 injuries and martyrs. In return, the security forces and the Shiite militias got revenge and killed more than 70 Sunnis in the same district within one hour by going knocking on doors of Sunnis and shooting the men in front of their families.

▸ **Tribal Leader (Sunni)**

According to some respondents, the Sunni Turkmen did revert back to the Shia local security forces, but it was too late; distrust between the communities had risen to unprecedented levels by then and the police force consisted exclusively of Shias. Although interviewees from both sides seem to agree that these dynamics rendered the Sunni community vulnerable and isolated, and were the main drivers for the erosion of trust between the communities, some of the Shia interviewees did also express the view that many Sunnis in Tal Afar simply carry an extreme ideology. They see this ideology as the main cause of violence and see further proof for this assertion in the numbers of Sunni Turkmen who stayed when IS invaded Tal Afar.

The majority [of Sunnis] was supportive of the terrorist groups ideologically and in practice. In addition, around 90% of the Sunnis joined IS..Only 10% of them left Tal Afar and when IS invaded the city.

▸ **Civil Servant (Shia)**

In conclusion, it appears that in Tal Afar both AQ-I and the Shia reaction acted in a complementary fashion to further the exclusion of Sunnis from local governmental institutions, chiefly the security sector. It is essential that reconciliatory attempts highlight the vulnerability of the Sunni community during AQ-I presence so as to curb generalisation regarding their supposed adherence to an extreme ideology. An important resource and potential entry-point for this process will be the Shia community leaders who understand and recognise the difficult position the Sunni community found itself in during that time.

### 3.4 A Positive Step Forward

The situation in Tal Afar markedly improved from 2009 onwards. The majority of the discussants on both sides seemed to agree on how this improvement was achieved. According to several interviewees, 900 Sunni recruits were incorporated into the local police force as they had previously been part of the American-backed Sunni Awakening Movement. This increased trust between local communities and the security forces, significantly improving the capacity of the police force to provide security for all citizens of Tal Afar.

The security situation improved by 95% from 2009 onwards, and this was because of the Awakening Movement and the incorporation of a number of Sunnis in the security apparatus. During that period from 2009-2014, a lot of reconstruction and rehabilitation happened. It worked to the point where you would see people you hadn't seen for years and you would go to their events and they would come to yours. It was a time not only of physical reconstruction but also of relationships as well.

▸ **Tribal leader (Shia)**

In the midst of 2008 and the beginning of 2009 when 900 Sunni police officers were accepted in the security apparatus there the situation started to improve gradually. Tal Afar became relatively secure compared to some of the other regions and that was because of the engagement with the Sunnis.

▸ **Civil Servant (Sunni)**

The security improved because the Army and the police became powerful by the incorporation of the Sunnis. Prior to that there were no Sunnis in the security apparatus.

▸ **Participant in FGD (Sunni)**

Most key informants from both the Shia and Sunni side agreed that the incorporation of 900 Sunnis into the local police department contributed significantly to the improvement of security conditions in Tal Afar. However, a few interviewees mentioned such a process was not the reason behind the improved security. Rather, they perceived the fact that the police force had increased its presence around that time, and had gained experience from combatting the insurgency in the preceding years, as the two main factors explaining their improved capacity in providing security. Notwithstanding, inter-community relations improved significantly from 2009 onwards up until 2014 when IS invaded the city of Tal Afar. Interviewees explained this turn of events to have taken them by complete surprise and lamented the loss of gains steadily built up over the previous years.

No, the improvement did not happen because of the incorporation of the Sunnis. It happened because of the reconciliatory debates. After the security forces got rid of the direct pressure from Al-Qaeda, they [Sunnis] said that they had no police members, and it was all occupied by Shiites. That's why 900 Sunnis returned to service.

▸ **Civil Servant (Shia)**

Observing communal relations between the Sunni and Shia Turkmen from 2003-2014, a repeating pattern of rapid deterioration and slow recovery appears. In the middle of 2004, the relationship between Shias and Sunnis suffered and it took around five years to experience tentative improvement. In 2014, inter-communal ties took another severe blow of which it will undoubtedly take years to recover.



### 3.5 The Fall of Tal Afar and its Aftermath

Despite some efforts to resist IS' advance militarily, the town of Tal Afar fell on 16 June 2014. It marked an abrupt end to a period in which inter-community relations between Sunni and Shia Turkmen had markedly begun to improve. IS' take-over of Tal Afar led to the displacement of approximately 500,000 individuals from Tal Afar district (REACH Initiative, 2014). The Geneva International Centre for Justice estimated that around 50,000 Sunni Turkmen remained trapped in the city of Tal Afar (GICJ, n.d.). The vast majority of Tal Afar's population fled and sought refuge in Sinjar, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), Shia-majority areas in the south of Iraq such as Basra, Karbala, Baghdad, and Najaf, Turkey and opposition-held territory in Syria.

A number of interviewees stated that, after an unsuccessful attempt to thwart IS' advance, Turkmen initially fled to the neighbouring district of Sinjar in search of refuge. They stayed there for a few weeks until it became clear that their areas would not be liberated in the near future. At that point, Shia Turkmen generally fled to other Shia-majority areas in the south and middle of Iraq while Sunni Turkmen sought to resettle in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Kirkuk, Turkey and opposition-held territories in Syria.

When IS came, people immediately fled to Sinjar and that's where they stayed for a couple of months. In the unfinished buildings, houses, and other places... The people there, especially the Eyzidis, they were very supportive and responded honourably to the influx of displaced people by welcoming and sheltering them.

– **Shia tribal leader from Tal Afar.**

Several interviewees also relayed worrisome accounts of atrocities committed in a prison near Tal Afar. They claimed that, as IS advanced and security forces including Shia militias retreated, Shia members of local security forces stopped by the prison and summarily executed approximately 50 Sunni prisoners. At the time, IS often released Sunni prisoners from detention facilities they captured (The Economist, 2014). Upon capturing the detainment centres, IS would separate the Sunni prisoners from the other inmates, after which many were released while non-Sunni prisoners were murdered (Human Rights Watch, 2014b).

Although none of the interviewees claimed to be a first-hand witness to the alleged crimes, their statements match reports previously published by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International (Amnesty International, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2014a). However, it should also be noted that one Shia tribal leader denied these allegations and instead claimed it was IS who killed the Shia prisoners detained in the Tal Afar prison. Although IS has executed Shia prisoners in other prisons around Iraq (Nebehay, 2014), this does not appear to have happened in the case of the Tal Afar prison. Notwithstanding these controversies, it is safe to conclude that the alleged crimes committed in the prison by either one party constitute an important grievance among the community. For them to move forward, it is crucial they see these incidents properly investigated, and accountability restored.

As the Iraqi army and police, including Shiite militias, withdrew and fled the area they committed a horrible crime: They killed 50 Sunnis who were in a prison close to a police centre. They killed them and left the city. Of those 50 who were killed, probably only 4 or 5 were terrorists but the rest was charged for simple issues such as traffic violations or simple misconduct. This was the situation of moderate Sunnis; they were killed from three sides: Sunni extremists, the authorities and the militias.

– **Sunni tribal leader**

During IS' occupation, the district of Tal Afar and especially its urban centre soon gained a prominent role as part of IS' self-declared caliphate infrastructure. Strategically located along a highway connecting Mosul to Syria and therefore Raqqa, Tal Afar town quickly became critical for enabling mobility and transport through IS-held territory. The town also served as a launching pad for IS attacks on Eyzidi areas in Sinjar

just two months later. It is further believed that, due to its geographic location, Tal Afar town was used by IS to trade captured Eyzidi women and transport them to other areas held by IS such as Raqqa and Mosul (Starkey, 2014; Callimachi, 2015). At the time of writing, parts of Tal Afar district have been recaptured by a combination of Iraqi security forces, Kurdish Peshmerga, and units of the Popular Mobilisation Force (PMF). The main town, however, still remains under IS control.

### 3.6 Liberating Tal Afar

After an initial line of questioning concerned with the recent history of Tal Afar and respondents' views on ways in which tensions had escalated in the area and why, a second line of questioning was aimed at uncovering views regarding the way forward. The discussion inevitably centred first around who should be involved in liberating Tal Afar from IS, and in what capacity. It is worth pointing out that both Shia and Sunni interviewees expressed a shared concern for revenge killings and other acts of reprisal during the liberation phase. However, different views emerged as to what actors would be most likely to commit such acts.

Many Sunni interviewees asserted they were opposed to any involvement of Shia militias, either part of or outside the state-sanctioned PMF, in the liberation of Tal Afar city. Such militias, in their view, were part of the problem which had developed after 2003 and should therefore not return to the area. Sunni tribal leaders also explained that, when Iraqi Prime Minister Hayder al-Abadi called upon both Shia and Sunni tribal leaders to meet in Baghdad and discuss the liberation of Tal Afar, the Sunni Sheikhs had refrained from attending. In their view, the decision to allow Shia militias to participate in the liberation was a *fait accompli* and, had they attended the meeting, their people would have accused them of condoning the approach.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, some non-tribal, non-politically affiliated Shia interviewees agreed that participation of Shia militias in the liberation of Tal Afar could lead to problems in the future.

The main concern among Sunnis regarding Shia militias was that, as these militias are generally comprised of fighters from areas in the south far from Tal Afar, this would encourage carelessness or acts of revenge as those responsible for any wrongdoing would know they could escape accountability or any form of retaliation by simply returning home. Some interviewees instead argued for the Peshmerga as a neutral force which would be best positioned to liberate the remaining areas, while others preferred the Iraqi army and federal police to lead the operation.

Our main worry is that the Shiites in the Hashd al-Shaabi [PMU] are not from Tal Afar, but from areas in the south of Iraq... The Shiite people from Tal Afar know they have a future stake in Tal Afar, so they would not think of any revenge acts because in the future Sunnis might do the same. But people from outside do not think that way and that is worrying us.

▸ **Local Sunni council member**

The security forces should be the only side that decide who supported IS and who did not. No other entity should interfere in their work. The Hashd should not be allowed to enter the city of Tal Afar. They should stay at the border of Tal Afar. This would also allay fears from the side of the Sunnis.

▸ **Shia Activist, Baghdad**

Contrastingly, while a number of Shiite community leaders expressed the same concern for revenge acts, they view the fact that many militia members come from elsewhere as positive and argue in favour of their participation. If Tal Afar town were to be liberated solely by local forces, they argue, the chances for revenge

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<sup>1</sup> This meeting was reportedly scheduled to take place in Baghdad in October, 2016.

acts would increase as members of liberating forces would be confronted with personal loss and grievances which could lead to some fighters losing composure and disregarding orders. The validity in the logic of both of these arguments underlines the very real threat of revenge killings and other acts of reprisal to occur, thus highlighting the necessity to mitigate this challenge to stability in the future.

My fear is that there are people now seeking revenge, and they are going to seek revenge from the innocent people because those who joined IS are going to leave the area while those who are innocent remain.

▸ **Shia advisor to Nofal Hammadi**

When I want to go back and see my house blown up or find relatives killed, I would be upset and this would urge me to take revenge. Many Sunni houses are also destroyed and there are lots of Sunnis who suffered a lot, sometimes even more than the Shias.

▸ **Shia civil activist, Baghdad**

The Hashd al-Shaabi force is one of the Iraqi forces that have been sanctioned by the Iraqi Prime Minister. They are now official. They are there either to get killed or to liberate the area. But, as they are people from outside Tal Afar, they should not stay after liberation.

▸ **Shia tribal leader**

Importantly, however, the insistence on Shia militia participation does not seem to preclude the participation of local forces entirely. In fact, several Shiite interviewees demanded that Sunnis from Tal Afar should participate in the liberation. Those interviewees suggest that only by participating in the fight against IS the Sunni Turkmen can decisively exonerate themselves from the crimes committed ‘in their name’. Sunni participation could in turn lay the groundwork for the formation of a representative and inclusive security force to be responsible for security after liberation – an objective which will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

I have not so far seen any initiative from the Sunnis to participate in the liberation of Tal Afar. The Shias have always said the Sunnis should participate in the liberation because doing so would bring about loyalty towards Tal Afar in the future... The first step to achieve balance of power in the security apparatus should be made by the Sunnis and that step should be participation in the liberation process.

▸ **Shia activist, Baghdad**



## 3.7 Stabilizing Tal Afar

### 3.7.1 Security and return

Interviewees and focus group participants overwhelmingly agreed that security after liberation constitutes the main priority in encouraging the return of the displaced from Tal Afar. More importantly, both Sunni and Shia Turkmen agree that the only way to achieve lasting security and stability in Tal Afar is by establishing a balance power between the two groups, and that this can only be realised by including Sunnis in the security sector – in other words, by avoiding the mistakes made after 2003. The return of Shia militias after the liberation would therefore be imprudent. Several interviewees explained they would see this as a negative development as it threatens to empower one community over the other, thus undermining prospects for stability.

Stability depends on the force that is going to hold the territory after liberation. The Sunnis hold great concern towards the Hashd al-Shaabi, and that is understandable. I am Shia, but even if the Shia forces take hold of the area, the situation will remain unstable and chaotic, and I would not go back. We must realise that we cannot live there without the Sunnis.

▸ **Shia political leader**

All Iraqis have fears towards the militias. The government should dismantle them. We should have one army. At the moment, I don't see any initiatives towards that direction and this makes me afraid of going back after liberation. But I have no choice, what if the local government here decides to force us to go back? Where shall I go? I would have no choice.

▸ **Sunni participant in FGD, IDP in Kirkuk**

Although the importance of having an inclusive, non-sectarian security force was universally recognised by respondents, it appears that achieving this objective requires both communities to overcome a deep-seated mistrust of each other. Beneath the best intentions professed by community leaders, both sides suspect each other of serving an external agenda. Shia interviewees voiced suspicions about Sunni loyalty towards Turkey and that Sunnis harbour extremist elements of Al-Qaeda and IS. Sunnis in turn suspect the Shias of pursuing Iran's agenda in Tal Afar. This agenda, they maintain, is shared by Baghdad and aims at consolidating power in the hands of Shias and changing the demography of region. Shia militias are seen as the primary tool used to advance this process.

I think we have developed some fear for each other. Both sides think that if one assumes power they would oppress the other.

▸ **Sunni participant in FGD, Kirkuk**

Some meetings have taken place between Sunni and Shia tribal leaders where needs for post-IS stabilisation in Tal Afar were discussed. During these meetings, Sunni representatives voiced their demands for a 50/50 inclusion in the post-liberation public sector, most importantly the security sector. Furthermore, they argue this representation should not be reflected in mere numbers but include positions at higher levels of decision-making, if a true balance of power is to be achieved. Shia tribal leaders, for their part, express support for this demand but voice concerns about infiltration of the public and security sectors by members of extremist organisations such as Al-Qaeda or IS. These groups have in the past sought to infiltrate public institutions and used Sunni Turkmen employees to advance their own agenda, either through co-optation or coercion. In the absence of a strong security network capable of enforcing necessary vetting procedures and providing protection for anyone seeking to inform on extremist organisations, such tactics proved highly effective in the past.

The Shia tribal leadership has therefore voiced a number of demands. Most importantly, they demand strict guarantees that new Sunni recruits are not members of any terrorist organisation and do not adhere to an extremist ideology. As a way of proving this, Shia tribal leaders request the Sunni tribes to actively fight IS and participate in the liberation of Tal Afar, and to disown members within their community who they know have ties to IS. Shia Turkmen request the names of these individuals to then be handed over to whatever security forces are active in the region. Although progress along these lines has been made a number of obstacles currently remain in place. This issue is further discussed in the following section 3.4.2 transitional justice.

If the Sunnis could guarantee that none of them will in the future become IS then there is no problem with their representation. I don't think they will be rejected in this case but they cannot and do not want to identify who of their community are the terrorists.

▸ **Shia tribal leader**

Interviewees clearly identified that addressing the security concern is the main priority in the immediate future. Not only are these concerns shared by Sunni and Shia Turkmen alike, both sides also acknowledge that security for all cannot be provided by a security sector made up of members from only one community, and that the only way to build an effective security sector is through inclusion and fair representation of both communities. However, mutual distrust appears to be the main obstacle as community leaders from both sides suspect the other of serving the agenda of external actors<sup>2</sup>. They also suspect that external actors like Al-Qaeda, IS, Turkey, Baghdad or Iran are likely to interfere and derail any local process seeking to build a compromise.

In our view, any force linked to Baghdad could be easily turned into a political tool to implement an exogenous agenda... The Hashd al-Shaabi is per definition, by law, linked to Baghdad and their presence would lead to the reincarnation of IS in some other form.

▸ **Member of Nineveh Provincial Council, Sunni**

International interference into our affairs by external actors such as Turkey and Iran is of major concern to us.

▸ **Displaced tribal leader, Shia**

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<sup>2</sup> To an extent, this is correct as foreign interest in the Tal Afar region has intensified. For an extensive discussion on foreign actors and the security complex of Nineveh, see: Manis, A. & Kavalek, T. (2016) The Catch-22 of Nineveh: The Regional Security Complex Dynamics Between Turkey and Iran. Available at: <http://www.meri-k.org/publication/the-catch-22-in-nineveh-the-regional-security-complex-dynamics-between-turkey-and-iran/>

### 3.7.2 Transitional Justice

Another theme that was discussed at length with respondents was the issue of post-liberation justice. Interviewees were asked to picture their desires for the future, what the role of justice was in that future and, usually, which actors ought to be involved in the process and in which capacity. Although some commonalities emerged, respondents from different backgrounds put forward a wide range of suggestions and measures needed to build a better, shared future for the people of Tal Afar.

Interviewees generally conceptualised justice in terms of the need to impose accountability on perpetrators through criminal trials. Although this form of ‘retributive justice’ was clearly prioritised, several Sunni interviewees did also mention other issues related to ‘social justice’ such as representation and inclusion as important to address. Considering retributive justice, interviewees clearly prioritised criminal punishment for violent crimes over ‘restorative’ compensation for material losses. In fact, several interviewees argued it might be a lost cause to try and get financial compensation for lost property from IS perpetrators. Interviewees instead felt the central government should seek to compensate such losses to allow displaced people to return and get on with their lives.

We should compromise on the Shia side. If the government allows the rule of law to take its course, the Shias should compromise on minor things like property damage and compensation. Compensation for material matters like damage to land and other properties can be demanded from the government... I cannot ask the culprit because they might have been killed or they are from a different country. How could I do that?

But anything related to death should be given to the courts and they should decide about this. This would be a source of great satisfaction to us victims.

– **Shia civil servant, Duhok**

Compensation should be the remit of the government and the tribal system should not intervene at all. The procedure requires field visits, an investigation, documentation and financial resources that the tribes do not have. It is something purely related to the role of the government.

– **Shia IDP, Duhok**

In holding perpetrators of war crimes to account through criminal trials, Shia interviewees reiterated their demands that Sunni tribes should disclose the names of those who joined IS and hand them to the authorities. Sunni community leaders for their part expressed a general willingness to cooperate in this process. However, they did voice a number of concerns:

Firstly, they preferred to work with the national security forces on this and not the Shia militias as they expressed a distrust regarding their intentions, objectivity and treatment of suspected IS members. Secondly, they claimed that in the past, suspected terrorists would often disappear after being arrested. Suspected members of Al-Qaeda would be transported to Baghdad only to never return, their families deprived of any information as to their fate. At the same time, several Shia and Sunni interviewees reported that prior to 2014 many terrorists would get arrested and sentenced to serve a prison sentence in Mosul. While there, convicts would often be able to quickly obtain a release through corruption by using a “wasta”<sup>3</sup> or bribe. This situation has clearly led to an erosion of trust between the communities and judicial institutions. While some Sunnis expressed a distrust of the national judicial system, the distrust of Shias appears to be geared mainly towards the provincial institutions in Mosul.

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<sup>3</sup> A “wasta” is a political connection with someone in a position of power that can be one used for personal gain.

Whenever they would detain someone for any charges, he would be taken to Baghdad within a couple of days and he would not return.

↳ **Sunni participant in FGD, IDP in Kirkuk**

A criminal court should be established in Tal Afar, that would judge in front of the people instead of transferring detainees to Mosul.

↳ **Shia, civil engineer, Baghdad**

For these reasons, several interviewees from both sides suggested the establishment of a special court charged with investigating and persecuting crimes committed during the war against IS. They also stressed the importance of some level of international involvement in the transitional justice process, either in the form of oversight over the proceedings or direct, technical support for investigations. The issue of international involvement proved to be contentious, however, as several interviewees were also opposed to the idea. During the focus group with Sunni Turkmen, some participants voiced opposition although most participants supported a degree of international involvement. Ultimately, the majority of interviewees agreed the central government in Baghdad should have ownership and take the lead in the process.

Judges don't need to be exclusively from Tal Afar, but we need some sort of neutral third-party. International supervision would be the best, and members in charge of any committee cannot be appointed by either Haider al-Abadi or Atheel Nujaifi [former governor of Nineveh]. The international community should appoint them.

↳ **Shia activist, Baghdad**

I don't think our local courts can deal with the issue of justice. The UN could oversee and assist in the process.

↳ **Participant in FGD**

There is no need for international oversight. The process could involve a local third party like the KRG or Baghdad. We should also avoid the role of tribal leaders.

↳ **Shia NGO worker, Baghdad**

It is better to have a special court with international investigators. Internationals do not accept any biases towards any community. But the Iraqi and local courts are influenced by different factors.

↳ **Shia IDP in KRI**

Another issue raised by Sunni interviewees was the challenge of dealing with family members of IS fighters. A distinction must be made between those who joined IS in person and those who did not. Some interviewees suggested that an official government statement outlining the government's stance towards families of IS members would help clarify the distinction between the innocent and guilty. In contrast to the tribal system, Iraq's civic judicial system deals with crimes on an individual basis. The tribal system, however, assigns the family of a criminal equal responsibility for the crime – in particular when the perpetrator himself is absent. For this reason, most community leaders, including tribal leaders, agreed that any process of retributive justice should be handled by the state, rather than tribes.

I am against solving issues through the tribal way. A modern country or state cannot be run by the tribes. You have to have rule of law and established institutions.

↳ **Sunni tribal leader and Hashd force commander**

I am against tribalism and I don't think tribes should have a role in providing justice after liberation. Tribalism only deals with issues through oppression and interest. Any solution found through tribalism will come at the expense of the other community.

↳ **Sunni member of the Nineveh Provincial Council**

Interviewees also asserted that a difficult distinction must be made between those who joined IS voluntarily, and those who were forced to do so. Amnesty was mentioned as an option for those who joined IS involuntarily and did not commit any crimes. Other relevant distinctions that could be made through court proceedings and/or truth-seeking mechanisms is the role played by suspected IS leaders, organisers and henchmen. Distinctions could also be made between those who can be labelled as mere ‘beneficiaries’ of violent crimes and those who perpetrated them. Beneficiaries in this case would include those who looted empty homes or traded in stolen goods. Shia and Sunni interviewees suggested the Sunni tribes could assist in the justice process by providing accurate information on known IS collaborators and strongmen. It should be noted that a minority of Shia interviewees expressed the view that all Sunni Turkmen who currently remain in Tal Afar must be IS sympathisers or collaborators, denying therefore that a degree of distinction is necessary to pursue justice.

The issue is about differentiating between who is IS and who is not. The Sunnis themselves know who are the collaborators but there are people who might have become part of IS under duress. Those people should be freed and given amnesty.

▸ **Civil servant (Shia)**

Those who joined IS but did not get involved in killing people should be forgiven. An amnesty should be granted to them. It will be very difficult to differentiate between those who joined IS under duress and did not commit crimes and those who did. That is why the UN should assume this responsibility.

▸ **Sunni participant in FGD, IDP in Kirkuk**

Importantly, a firm demand from the Sunni Turkmen community is that any process of transitional justice should not concern itself only with crimes committed by IS. As blood was spilled between the two communities prior to IS’ invasion, perpetrators of crimes from both sides should be punished for any wrongdoing, they argue. Any process that excludes crimes committed by other actors risks being perceived as the execution of mere victor’s justice, a form of renewed oppression jeopardising a peaceful way forward by undermining the legitimacy of the process as a whole. Any judicial process should therefore extend to militia operations as well, some argue.

Do you think that the only criminals in this are the ones who joined IS? There are so many who wear the outfit of the security forces and kill people without justification. What about them? Aren’t they criminals all the same?

We are all happy to coordinate with the government in identifying who joined IS. Such people should be given to the courts and tried. The tribes could assist in this process. The tribal leaders should meet and reconcile, and the Shiite tribal leaders should also identify those criminals who killed our people.

▸ **Two Sunni participants in FGD, IDP in Kirkuk**

The other thing that is important concerns the militia members. What would you do if militia members went and killed others? How do we hold them accountable for what they do, and what they have done?

▸ **Sunni tribal leader**

As a follow-up to criminal trials, interviewees were often prompted to consider alternatives that could complement and further advance the process of transitional justice and reconciliation in their eyes. In response, interviewees would speak about the need to recognise the victims of IS. This recognition of suffering on the part of the victims is something that is not always recognised in court proceedings as criminal trials tend to focus more on the actions of perpetrators and laws that were violated, rather than on the harm done to victims. A number of interviewees therefore mentioned a memorial or Remembrance Day to mark the defeat of IS and the end of the war as important for advancing the reconciliation process.

A memorial or a day of remembrance is a very nice idea. This would help the communities to come together and stand united, by remembering the past and the pains they have gone through. This would also keep everybody constantly aware of what happened to their communities and maybe remain united in the future against such threats.

▸ **Shia community leader**

When we get rid of IS, that is a big day for us, for Iraq. And it could be made a Remembrance Day. ISIS caused a lot of despair and loss. They have destroyed the heritage of this country. This could be one loyal step towards all the victims of IS.

▸ **Shia IDP**

### 3.7.3 Turkmen-Eyzidi Relations and Long-Term Reconciliation

Over the course of this study it became clear that, where reconciliation is concerned, improving intra-community relations among Turkmen is strongly prioritised over repairing damaged relations with other communities. Interviewees often had to be prompted to speak about the strained inter-community relations such as those between the Turkmen and Eyzidi communities. Even then, respondents would only do so after extensively discussing the (in their eyes) far more salient intra-community problems. This can be partially explained by the fact that even though the distance between Tal Afar and Sinjar may seem small on a map, inter-group contact has become increasingly rare as communities became more compartmentalised and segregated in recent years. This is in contrast to the mixed and adjacent Shia/Sunni neighbourhoods and areas in Tal Afar. The displaced Turkmen interviewed unequivocally perceived improving intra-Turkmen relations as the main priority to facilitate safe returns and to prevent the onset of a renewed cycle of violence and vengeance.

The Shiite-Sunni issue is more urgent than the Sunni-Eyzidi issue, because the former problem exists within each family. We face this problem every day so after liberation this should be prioritised. People from Tal Afar will go back to their area and Eyzidis will go to theirs and there is a distance between us.

▸ **Local council member, Sunni**

Nevertheless, the role Tal Afar has played in IS' violent conquest of many other places in Iraq, including majority-Eyzidi areas such as Sinjar and its surroundings, has severely and negatively impacted Eyzidi-Turkmen relations. After IS took control of Tal Afar, it was used as a base to launch attacks on Eyzidi areas and became a notorious marketplace for IS' slave trade.

According to Sunni Turkmen, this situation has instilled an inaccurate picture of their community's role in the crimes against the Eyzidis. They argue it was not the people from Tal Afar who attacked, murdered and kidnapped Eyzidis in Sinjar. Instead, they claim, it was members of the Sunni Arab community in Mosul and the Arab villages surrounding Eyzidi towns who committed crimes such as the massacre in Kucho<sup>4</sup>. Interviewees would concede that women were often taken to Tal Afar while stressing that this does not constitute guilt for the entire community. Furthermore, they claim to know many Sunni Turkmen who remained in Tal Afar and have risked their lives in order to save Eyzidi women and assist families in reuniting with their abducted family members. Thus, the view that all Sunni Turkmen from Tal Afar who remained are radical Islamists who committed crimes against the Eyzidi community is not accurate. One Shia interviewee indeed declared that, in an attempt to exonerate and distance themselves from the wrongdoing, displaced

<sup>4</sup> IS militants who had encircled the Eyzidi village of Kucho gave its inhabitants an ultimatum for converting to Islam. When, on the 15th of August (2014), the deadline passed and villagers still refused to convert, IS entered



Shia Turkmen may have helped to instil this false image by immediately pointing to the Sunni Turkmen when news of the crimes first emerged.

The problem is that there is an unrivalled view towards the people of Tal-Afar because most Eyzidi women were brought to Tal Afar.

▸ **Sunni district council member**

The problem is that the Eyzidi community now strongly believes that their women and girls were kidnapped and raped by the people from Tal Afar. But the reality is that IS does not differentiate and we from Tal Afar were also victimised by IS. The other problem is that the Shias actually made the problem worse by conveying the message that ‘it was the Sunnis that did that to your girls, not us’.

▸ **Political leader, Shia**

The Sunni tribal leaders could have gone on TV when that happened, or met with their leaders to explain that they were also victims. But that did not happen, and now the area is being liberated, it is too late. The Sunnis did not, and still do not strongly condemn IS crimes. They are afraid because they do not have their own force to protect them so they cannot condemn the extremists.

▸ **Advisor to Nofal Hammadi, Shia**

Interviewees suggested two entry-points for improving the relationship between the Turkmen and Eyzidi communities. The first was by highlighting positive stories about the role some Turkmen have played in trying to save Eyzidi captives. Interviewees told researchers there are many such stories, however, as Tal Afar town is still under control of IS, the identities of the individuals involved cannot yet be made public. Only after the complete liberation of Tal Afar is it possible for these individuals to be acknowledged for their efforts. Sunni interviewees expressed the hope that such stories would demonstrate diversity among the Turkmen population and decisively demonstrate that not all Sunni Turkmen are IS sympathisers.

The second way in which relations can take a turn for the better is if Eyzidis would recognise the suffering of the Sunni Turkmen community. If the Eyzidis saw how many were displaced, lost their homes and family members, or otherwise suffered while living under IS, they would be more inclined to work with the Turkmen community leaders at improving relations.

We asked the provincial council to convene a meeting between us and them to discuss their views and what happened to us as well, because we need to show how victimised we are. IS does not represent Sunnis or Islam and this message has to be conveyed to the Eyzidis as well.

▸ **Local council member, Sunni**

In terms of transitional justice, it is unlikely that criminal trials alone will succeed in successfully addressing the perceived needs for improving relations. Such trials would turn the spotlight on actions taken by perpetrators rather than focusing on the story of victims. They would highlight the Turkmen who may have committed crimes, and neglect to tell the story of Turkmen who have suffered. Trials are also unlikely to bring to the fore the positive role some members of the Turkmen community have played in trying to fight IS from the inside nor will they significantly contribute to a shared recognition of each other’s suffering.

Instead, other mechanisms of transitional justice better able to address these issues should be considered to complement criminal trials. Non-judicial mechanisms aimed at uncovering broader narratives can be employed to place the stories and experiences of victims at the centre. Such efforts can make an important contribution to reconciliation by demonstrating the existence of a shared suffering that transcends ethno-

religious boundaries. They can also be used to uncover individual experiences and positive roles played by the Sunni Turkmen community in Tal Afar. This is important as it can help overcome apparent psychological barriers to reconciliation such as exclusive victimisation among victim groups and perceptions of collective guilt.

Finally, it appears that some level of communication does take place between the leadership of the two communities. Interviewees told researchers about a meeting that had taken place in Iran between representatives of the religious leadership of the Eyzidi community and tribal leaders of the Turkmen aimed at reconciling the recent past. Interviewees told researchers that during this meeting, Eyzidis insisted on a tribal solution requiring tribes to 'extradite' members of their tribe complicit in the crimes or, if the IS member had been killed, their next of kin. The Turkmen leadership, favouring a solution embedded within the framework of government institutions and the law refused this as an option and the meeting was finalised without coming to an agreement.



## 4. CONCLUSION

The long history of sectarian violence in Tal Afar has left deep cleavages within the Turkmen community. The central role Tal Afar played first in the Sunni insurgency and later in the expansion of the IS caliphate has also damaged relations between the Turkmen and surrounding minority communities. When IS took over Tal Afar in June 2014, the vast majority of the local population was displaced. For many displaced Turkmen, advancing reconciliation between the Shia and Sunni component of their community is perceived to be of major importance for ensuring post-liberation stability. Therefore, they see improving intra-community relations as more pressing than repairing damaged relations with other communities such as the Eyzidis in neighbouring Sinjar.

Any process of reconciliation between Sunni and Shia Turkmen has to capitalise on the considerable overlap that exists in views regarding how sectarian violence in the past emerged, escalated and should be addressed. In the immediate term, the main mechanism through which to combat sectarian violence and religious extremism is the inclusion of Sunnis in the security sector. This inclusion has to be reflected not only in a nominal Sunni presence but also in positions of higher decision-making capacity. If reconciliation requires the Sunni Turkmen community to reject extremist ideologies, then reconciliation inherently means enabling the Sunni Turkmen community to resist and combat radical organisations. It is about placing the community in a position where it can denounce, reject and combat extremist organisations. This was the central logic underpinning American support for the Sunni Awakening Movement in the past, and it still applies to today's context. Creating an inclusive, formal security sector comprised of all elements of society and able to provide security to all citizens of Tal Afar should therefore be the main goal in the short term.

The main obstacle towards achieving this appears to be concerns regarding infiltration of government institutions by extremist elements. This obstacle can partly be overcome by recruiting Sunnis in the force tasked with liberating Tal Afar. Their participation could provide a starting point in the formation of an inclusive security force capable of providing security for the local population after liberation. For the Shias, Sunni participation constitutes a vetting mechanism as it can clearly identify those who are committed to peaceful relations and oppose extremist ideologies. Sunni inclusion will also increase inter-group contact and cooperation, and contribute to the building of trust between the two communities.

An additional mechanism for building trust between the two communities is for Sunni tribal leaders to cooperate with the authorities and provide intelligence concerning known IS members from their community. Again, this would help prevent infiltration of the new security institutions by extremist organisations, therefore enabling the formation of an inclusive security sector representative of the local community.

However, the process of building trust between the Sunni and Shia Turkmen will face significant challenges in the sense that both communities continue to perceive each other as serving exogenous agendas. The Shias are suspicious of Sunni intentions and suspect them of aligning with Sunni extremist organisations such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. They also perceive the Sunni Turkmen community as a proxy of Turkey in its ongoing geopolitical struggles against Iran and Baghdad. The Sunnis for their part perceive the Shia Turkmen to be executing a Baghdad/Iran-led agenda aimed at marginalising the Sunnis and changing the demography of Tal Afar, consolidating local decision-making power in the hands of the Shia Turkmen. Nonetheless, the Turkmen community in Tal Afar has clearly identified a shared way forward and expressed the hope that any potential attempt from these exogenous actors to thwart progress will not be successful.

Finally, although intra-community reconciliation appears to be prioritised, important opportunities to improve the relationship between the Eyzidi and Turkmen community that will emerge following Tal

Afar's liberation should not be squandered. After the liberation of Tal Afar, crimes committed by the people from Tal Afar must be promptly investigated and individuals prosecuted. However, it is equally important to highlight and communicate positive stories of individual Turkmen saving Eyzidi women and helping families to reunite. This will help to counter Eyzidi perceptions of collective guilt towards the Sunni Turkmen community in Tal Afar. In addition, Sunni tribal leaders must strongly condemn crimes committed by members of their tribe and cooperate closely with law enforcement to ensure punitive justice processes can take effect. The following section therefore presents a series of recommendations pertaining to both reconciliation processes.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

### Justice & Reconciliation

1. The Tal Afar tribal leaders need to work with the authorities to provide information on IS members and those who may have committed crimes in their name. This will mitigate concerns regarding infiltration by extremists and advance the process of transitional justice by helping to distinguish IS members from innocents.
2. Any process of transitional justice should avoid an exclusive focus on crimes committed by IS. Accountability mechanisms for crimes committed before, during and after liberation must apply in equal measure and focus to all warring parties.
3. An international, neutral organisation should provide oversight over and technical support to the post-IS judicial process enhancing both its capacity and neutrality in the eyes of the local population.
4. Political developments in Baghdad tend to have a significant effect on community dynamics in Tal Afar. Therefore, any reconciliation efforts at the local level need to be embedded in, and complemented by, a broader reconciliation strategy at the national level.
5. A reconciliation and unity symbol such as a memorial or Remembrance Day recognising the suffering of all communities and acknowledging victims from all backgrounds as well as those who fought IS and contributed to its defeat would greatly advance the process of reconciliation.

### The security sector

6. An international, neutral third-party should oversee and provide technical assistance to a reform process within the security forces at the national level. This process should take into account lessons learned from previous attempts such as the largely failed integration of the Sunni Awakening forces.
7. Sunni Turkmen should be recruited into the national, formal security forces prior to liberation and actively participate in the operation to liberate their areas from IS. Doing this will both satisfy Sunni demands for inclusion and alleviate Shia concerns regarding infiltration of the security forces by jihadist organisations.
8. A joint Shia/Sunni military committee should be established to oversee the liberation process in Tal Afar. This committee would monitor and report to the central government as well as to parliament on actions taken by liberating forces whether these are conventional or popular mobilisation forces.
9. To build trust between local security structures and the population, an inclusive security force representative of all components of Tal Afar needs to be established and take control over the security situation in Tal Afar post-liberation.
10. Accountability mechanisms for the police force should be expanded on and improved to further institutionalise operations such as raids and arrests, their justification, and aftermath.

### Eyzidi-Turkmen relations

11. To improve Eyzidi-Turkmen relations, examples of Sunni Turkmen from Tal Afar who have helped Eyzidis escape IS should be highlighted in such a way and at a time that does not endanger the individuals in question. This would also facilitate Sunni/Shia reconciliation.

12. Trust between the Eyzidi community and the institutions involved in the process of transitional justice is crucial for advancing reconciliation. The involvement of international actors providing oversight and technical assistance to these institutions is important for building trust and signalling a level of neutrality. The international role should also include an explicit reporting duty towards committees raised from particular communities and victim groups, including the Eyzidi community.
13. To improve Eyzidi-Turkmen relations, a truth-seeking mechanism capable of collecting accurate accounts and establishing a broad narrative concerning the developments in Tal Afar should be established. This would also facilitate Sunni/Shia reconciliation.

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