

Competing Interests in Shingal District: Examining the PKK-linked Structures, Defusing Tensions



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NGO registration number. K843

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Competing Interests in Shingal District:

Examining the PKK-linked Structures, Defusing Tensions

MERI Policy Report

Tomáš Kaválek

June 2017

The Middle East Research Institute

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Acknowledgments

Above all, I would like to thank all the interviewees and people I had discussions with on the topic for dedicating their time, sharing local knowledge and personal insights.

I would like to thank Dlawer Ala'Aldeen for his help in facilitating the project and for his valued and insightful feedback.

A special thanks goes to Khogir Wirya, Dave van Zoonen and Irene Costantini for their thorough and helpful feedback, suggestions and overall support for this project. Deep gratitude is also owed to Maisie Cook for her proofreading and editing of the report. Last but not least, thanks goes to Mohammed Othman for his technical support, cover and for putting the final report together. Another thanks goes to Qasim Botani for his map designs.

I would also like to thank other members of MERI for their feedback, fruitful discussions and operational support.

This report would not have been possible without the help of the people mentioned above. It suffices to say the opinions expressed are those of the author alone.

Photos obtained from npr.org (by Alison Meuse) and photo-backhaus.de (by Sebastian Backhaus)

Glossary of Terms

AINA – Assyrian International News Agency

ANF – Fırat News Agency (Ajansa Nûçeyan a Fıratê)

DBK – Kurdish Supreme Committee (Desteya Bilind a Kurd)

DSkH – Degtyaryeva-Shpagina Krupnokaliberny (Degtyaryev-Shpagin Large-Calibre), Soviet-origin heavy machine gun

GoI – Government of Iraq

HPÊ – Yezidi Protection Force (Hêza Parastina Êzîdxanê)

HPG – People's Defence Forces (Hêzên Parastina Gel)

HPŞ – Shingal Protection Force (Hêza Parastina Şingal)

HRW – Human Rights Watch

ICG – International Crisis Group

IDP – Internally displaced person

IHEC – Independent High Electoral Commission of Iraq

IOM – International Organization for Migration

IS – Islamic State

KCK – Group of Communities of Kurdistan (Koma Civakên Kurdistan)

KDP – Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê)

KNC – Kurdish National Council (Encûmena Nîştimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê)

KRG – Kurdistan Regional Government

KRI – Kurdistan Region of Iraq

MERI – Middle East Research Institute

PADÊ – Yazidi Party for Freedom and Democracy (Partiya Azadî û Demokrasiyê ya Êzidiyan)

PKK – Kurdistan Worker's Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê)

PUK – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Yekîtiya Nîştimanî ya Kurdistanê)

PYD - Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat)

RP – Rojava Peshmerga

RPG – Rocket-Propelled Grenade

SDF – Syrian Democratic Forces

TEVDA – Yazidi Democratic movement (Tevgera Êzidiyan a Demokratîk û Azad)

TEV-DEM – Movement for a Democratic Society (Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk)

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UN HRC – United Nations Human Rights Council

UN-Habitat – United Nations Human Settlements Programme

USIP – United States Institute for Peace

YBŞ – Sinjar Resistance Units (Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şengalê)

YJA-Star – Free Women’s Units (Yekîneyên Jinên Azad ên Star)

YJÊ – Yezidi Women’s Units (Yekîneyên Jinên Êzidxan)

YPG – People’s Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel)

YPJ – Women’s Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin)

YPJ-Şengal – Women’s Protection Units-Şengal (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin-Şengal)

Executive Summary

This report concerns the political and security situation in the district of Shingal after the summer of 2014. Specifically, it focuses on the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) presence in the area. In August 2014, the Peshmerga forces hastily withdrew from Shingal district due to the IS (Islamic State) advance. The Yazidi population of the district was then exposed to atrocities at the hands of IS. These events damaged trust between the Yazidi population and the KRG (Kurdistan Regional Government). The PKK entered the stage in Shingal district and aided Yazidis at the onset of IS' advance. It capitalised on its image of being the saviour of Yazidis and promptly began to build governance and armed structures in the district. The area has thus become an arena of competition between the KRG (especially the Kurdistan Democratic Party – KDP) and Baghdad. PKK's increasing presence challenges the KDP's strong influence in the district. The ongoing power struggle in Shingal district also takes place against a background of wider regional competition.

The report utilises Zachariah Mampilly's theoretical framework in order to analyse the effectiveness of rebel governance. It is argued that the model used for PKK-linked political and armed structures in Shingal district follows the PKK's governance model as it is established in PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan's ideological works and is currently in place in Rojava, run by PKK-affiliated actors. Furthermore, building upon Anna Arjona's typology of rebel governments, it is asserted that the PKK-linked governance in Shingal district has become, since the summer of 2014, increasingly effective and entrenched despite certain shortcomings stemming mainly from lack of resources to satisfy all the needs of the population. Ultimately, the PKK-linked civilian governance structures represented by the Self-Administration Council and the armed structures of the Sinjar Protection Units find fertile ground among the Yazidi population for their project of self-administration and self-defence for Yazidis in Shingal district. The PKK-linked forces' influence goes beyond a mere military presence and thus poses a new reality in which the PKK-linked forces are indeed actors which must be taken into consideration in future political arrangements in Shingal district.

While outlining the competing interests in the district of Shingal, the paper provides a set of recommendations to the PKK, the PKK-linked actors in the district, the KRG, the GoI, Turkey, and the US with an aim of promoting stabilisation and the well-being of the local population. The best case scenario would include at least partial demilitarisation of the situation in the district while shifting the competition for the population between the GoI, the PKK-linked forces and the KRG into a non-violent domain, instead focusing on trying to win the hearts and minds of the population. Competition within the scope of Iraqi law with an aim of generating as much genuine popular support as possible in the upcoming elections in Iraq is the way forward. In the long-term, the PKK-linked forces should engage in democratic electoral competition with the KRG and aim for integration into governance and administrative structures as per Iraqi law. Both sides could then work on improving their standing electorally.

1. Introduction

After the Islamic State (IS) took large swaths of Iraqi territory in 2014, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK¹, in Kurdish, *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*) also entered the stage in Shingal district (Sinjar in Arabic) and began to build up its presence with its own strategic interests in mind. In August 2014, when the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) Peshmerga forces withdrew from Shingal district in the face of the IS advance, consequent mass killings of Yazidis resulted in an estimated 5,000 deaths and up to 7,000 individuals, mostly women and children, being abducted by IS. An estimated 3,200 of these remained missing as of June 2016 (Beck, 2016; UN Human Rights Commission, 2016). These atrocious events have become a major source of Yazidi grievance towards the KRG (Interview no. 21). The PKK-linked forces, mainly from northern Syria, promptly moved in during August 2014 and created a corridor to aid Yazidis fleeing IS who sought refuge in the Shingal mountain range (see a detailed account in van den Toorn, 2014).

Shingal district is a disputed territory between the government of Iraq (GoI) and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) according to Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution (Kane, 2011). However, since 2003, the KRG has invested a considerable amount of resources in establishing authority over Yazidis in Shingal district in order to increase the chances of its ultimate incorporation into the KRI. The district has been under the security control of the KRG since 2003. The PKK's growing presence has been met with strong opposition, especially from the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Moreover, there is a long-term rivalry between the KDP and the PKK over their influence among the Kurdish population (Dalay, 2015; or International Crisis Group, 2015: 5-15). Demands for the PKK-linked forces to withdraw from the area have intensified over time with KRG's Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani suggesting in December 2016 that the KRG might resort to military force against the PKK in Shingal district (Zaman, 2016). On 3 March 2017, clashes between the KDP forces and the PKK-linked forces occurred near the town of Khanasor resulting in several deaths and many wounded (Rudaw, 2017a).

The area's instability, magnified by conflicting interests and the proximity of potentially hostile forces, makes it a flashpoint in the post-IS equation in Nineveh. The ongoing power struggle in Shingal district takes place against a background of wider regional competition. The KRG's complex power dynamics, the long-time problematic relationship with the Shia leadership in Baghdad (see for example Anderson & Stansfield, 2009; Nader et al., 2016: 30-43), the PKK's regional ambitions, and Iranian and Turkish ambitions in the region all exacerbate the situation.

Given the overlap of interests in Shingal district and wider allegiances in the current regional upheaval in Iraq and Syria, two distinctive 'camps' can be identified (see also Kaválek & Manis, 2016). The first camp consists of the KDP and Turkey, while the second consists of the PKK, the GoI, Iran, and partially the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The US, on the other hand, balances its relationship with different actors within both camps. Meanwhile, the government in Baghdad has financially backed the PKK-established militia Shingal Protection Units (YBŞ, in Kurdish, *Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şengalê*) since June 2015 (Rudaw, 2016a).

1 Following a series of organisational changes within the PKK, the 'PKK' itself was officially abolished in 2002. Instead, the Group of Communities of Kurdistan (KCK) was established in 2003 (see Posch, 2016). The KCK serves as an umbrella organisation for the PKK-linked political parties and their armed wings in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. Nonetheless, the term PKK still remains widely used. As Akkaya and Jongerden (2011) point out, a very complex structure in each country (and in diaspora) was established which embodies not only political parties and their armed wings, governance and administrative structures but also various civil society organisations and even professional unions. To avoid unnecessary confusion in this study, the term 'PKK' is used as a general term, both for the political and armed structures and their activities across the region. When it is useful for further clarity, names of the specific regional political and armed affiliates are used.

Turkey repeatedly threatened to intervene if the district were to become another safe haven for the PKK (Ugurlu, 2016). Turkish warplanes have already targeted the PKK-linked forces in Shingal district in air raids on 25 April 2017 (Rudaw, 2017c). At the same time, Turkey hoped that the Trump administration would divert from its support for the PKK-linked forces in Syria (Zaman, 2017a; Daily Sabah, 2017). However, it appears that the Trump administration continues to back the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)² and its advance towards IS' Syrian stronghold, Raqqa (Balanche, 2017; Kajjo, 2017). Moreover, the US Congress approved Trump's decision to provide the SDF (which is dominated by the PKK's Syrian affiliate, the People's Protection Units - YPG) with further arms on 8 May 2017 (Pecquet, 2017). A long-anticipated visit by President Erdoğan to the US on 16 May also confirmed that the US will continue with its plan to arm the SDF despite President Trump's promise to support Turkey in its fight against the PKK (Tremblay, 2017). In turn, the YPG has played a key role in building the PKK's presence in Shingal district (see Cagaptay & Tabler, 2015; Ustun, 2016).

The PKK-linked actors in Shingal have been building a similar governance model to areas in northern Syria under the control of PKK-affiliates (for more detailed accounts of Rojava's governance see for example Sary, 2016; Federici, 2015; or Aldarwish, 2016). Assessing the effectiveness and entrenchment of the PKK's governance in Shingal, as well as explaining the PKK's behaviour towards the population, is crucial for understanding security and political dynamics in the district. If the PKK-linked governance structures are shown to be both effective and entrenched, as well as able to find fertile ground among Yazidis, their presence poses a new reality, in which the PKK-linked forces are indeed actors which must be taken into consideration in future political arrangements in Shingal district.

This study utilises Mampilly's (2011) and Arjona's (2014) framework for analysing the effectiveness (and entrenchment) of rebel governance. Building upon the theories of Kalyvas (2006), Metelits (2009; 2010), and Wood (2003) it also seeks to explore whether and why the PKK-linked actors opt for contractual or coercive behaviour towards the civilian population. The paper opens by introducing a framework for analysis of rebel governance and continues with a basic overview of Shingal district in the post-2003 period. Secondly, it provides an overview of the gradual build-up of the PKK's presence from the early 2000s until the events of August 2014, which left a significant power vacuum promptly filled by the PKK. Thirdly, it explains the nature of PKK's structures and their roles as they crystallised after August 2014. The nature of these structures is explained against the background of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's model of democratic autonomy in Rojava (Sary, 2016; Knapp & Jongerden, 2014). Building upon the new reality of the PKK's presence in Shingal district it then suggests a possible way forward. While outlining the competing interests in the district of Shingal, the paper provides a set of recommendations to the PKK, the PKK-linked actors in the district, the KRG, the GoI, Turkey, and the US with an aim of promoting stabilisation and the well-being of the local population.

The findings in this report are based on a series of interviews conducted both in the KRI (mainly Erbil and Dohuk) and Shingal district between November 2016 and March 2017, as well as the author's observations during field trips in Shingal district. In order to cope with the challenge of the multiple contradicting perspectives surrounding the current situation and recent history of Shingal district, the sample of respondents reflects a balance of pro-KDP, pro-PUK, and PKK-linked actors, as well as non-political, unaffiliated key informants from the local Yazidi community. Given the political sensitivity of the issues discussed during interviews, several respondents requested to remain anonymous (see the List of Interviews at the end of the text).

2 The SDF is a coalition dominated by the PKK's Syrian affiliate YPG, People's Protection Units, in Kurdish, Yekineyên Parastina Gel).

2. Framework for Analysis of the PKK-linked Forces' Governance in Shingal District

During the 2000s, there has been a surge in academic literature focusing on different aspects of the micropolitics of civil wars (see Schlichte, 2009; Tarrow, 2007). Based on an in-depth understanding of the micro-level of civil wars, researchers sought to understand dynamics of violence towards civilians (Kalyvas, 2006) or conditions for collective action in support of insurgents (Wood, 2003). They also examined the nature of insurgent-built structures and practices that regulate the insurgents' relationship with the population, labelled in the literature as 'rebel governance' (Mampilly, 2011; Kasfir, 2005; 2008; Arjona, 2014; 2016). As Péclard and Mechoulan (2015: 5) note, researchers acknowledged that insurgents "do not simply destroy political orders. They contribute to shaping and producing them." Huang (2012: 8) defines rebel governance as "a political strategy of rebellion in which rebels forge and manage relations with civilians – across civil wars".

Kasfir (2008: 4-5) further argues that rebel governments only form if the insurgent organisation gains control over a territory that contains civilians, and decides to create or encourage civilian structures. Along with Mampilly (2011), it can be argued that the long-term success of insurgents depends on their ability to rule which in turn grants legitimacy to their rule. In Weber's (2009) terms, insurgents seek to transform raw power (*Macht*) into domination (*Herrschaft*) which is based on recognition of authority rather than solely on the use of force.

Arjona (2014: 1374-1375; 2016) distinguishes between three types of social order crafted by insurgents: disorder, rebelocracy and aliocracy. Disorder occurs when there is no social contract between insurgents and the population, and both locals and combatants fail to abide by a set of defined rules (this is not the case with the PKK in Shingal district). Rebelocracy occurs when insurgents broadly intervene in the social order and regulate activities beyond providing security or 'taxation'. In line with Arjona's aliocracy (2014), if insurgents only maintain a monopoly on violence Mampilly (2011: 17) labels it 'partially effective governance'. Insurgents often rule through a pre-existing political party, or through organisations that have been infiltrated, co-opted, or even created by the insurgents, like unions or 'civil society organisations'. In aliocracy, on the other hand, insurgents intervene minimally and rather limit their engagement to maintain a monopoly on violence and extract resources from the population.

Thus, the additional puzzle is whether the PKK-built governance structures are mature, entrenched and effective (resembling rebelocracy), or whether they exist only 'on paper' and the governance type is rather aliocracy. Mampilly (2011: 17) offers a useful theoretical framework for assessing the effectiveness (to which the study adds maturity and level of entrenchment) of rebel governance. If the following conditions are met, the governance model can be labelled rebelocracy. These lenses are utilised with reference to the case of Shingal district in order to determine which type of insurgent rule is exercised there.

1. Insurgents must have a force capable of policing the population, providing security and ensuring a monopoly on violence.
2. A dispute resolution mechanism (creating a parallel system or similar institutionalised dispute resolution mechanisms) is in place and the population utilises it.
3. Insurgents provide other public goods beyond security such as education, healthcare, and basic services such as water, electricity etc.
4. Feedback mechanisms to foster civilian participation in rebel governance (through local councils, town meetings, insurgent-tied political parties) are, according to Mampilly (2011: 17), useful to examine but he does not consider these essential for assessing effectiveness of rebels' governance efforts since even in a rather alioocratic model of governance, the insurgency could provide services and have some mechanisms for dispute resolution in place. However, it can be argued that if insurgents allow for the participation of civilians in the decision-making processes, it increases their legitimacy in the eyes of the population and it may add to the effectiveness and longevity of their governance (see also Kasfir, 2005).

3. The Puzzle of Coercive and Contractual Behaviour

Kalyvas (2006) and Metelits (2009; 2010) investigate the conditions under which insurgents opt for coercive behaviour towards civilians and under which they opt for a more contractual approach in an effort to win the 'hearts and minds' of the population. Metelits (2009: 674) argues that insurgents opt for more coercive behaviour if they face "(...) rivals that extract from the same pool of resources indicat[ing] competition." Active rivalry occurs if rival insurgent groups or political actors are tapping into the same constituency and competing for a population's allegiance. In the case of Shingal, the PKK is mainly facing the rivalry of the KRG (especially the KDP) and to a lesser extent, Baghdad.

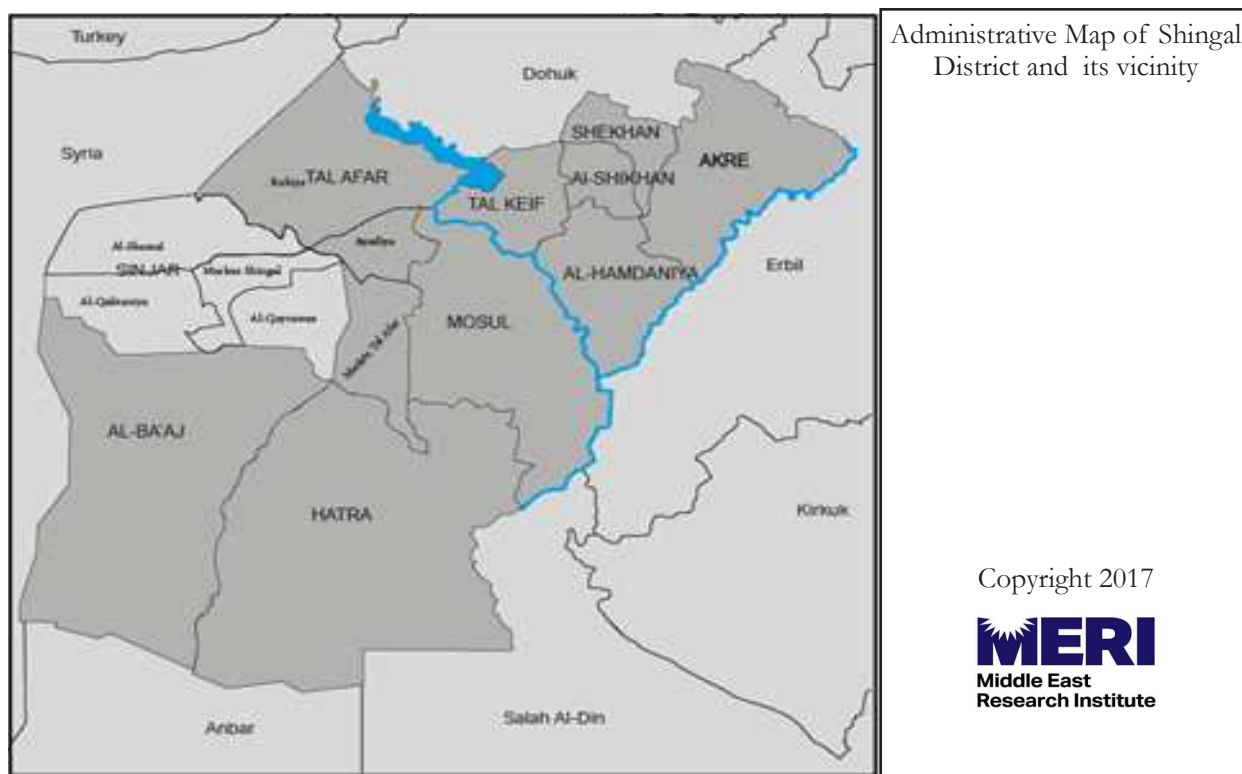
Péclard and Mechoulan (2015: 24) assert that narratives of economic, social, political and cultural marginalisation play a crucial role in the 'manufacturing of consent' which is based on the mobilisation of these grievances and promises by insurgents to address them. Wood (2003: 225), building upon her study of insurgency in El Salvador, notes that conventional material benefits could not often explain populations' support for insurgency, instead many opted for support if they "(...) came to interpret insurgency as justified by the injustice of existing social relations and state violence, and to interpret its costs, even the highest of them, as meaningful sacrifices".

4. The Situation in Shingal District

The district of Shingal is divided into three sub-districts: al-Shamal (the North), Markaz Shingal (the district's centre and its surroundings), and finally, southeast of the mountain range, al-Qayrawan. In the past, the disputed sub-district of al-Qahtaniya southwest of the mountain range belonged to Shingal district, yet it now falls under the al-Ba'aj district (Wing, 2011; see Map no. 1: Administrative map of Shingal district and its vicinity).³ While there are no precise figures, the

³ While all of these sub-districts are considered to be disputed territories, United States Institute for Peace (USIP) concludes that KRI's claims are supported by mixed evidence rather than strong, and in the case of al-Qayrawan only weak (Kane, 2011).

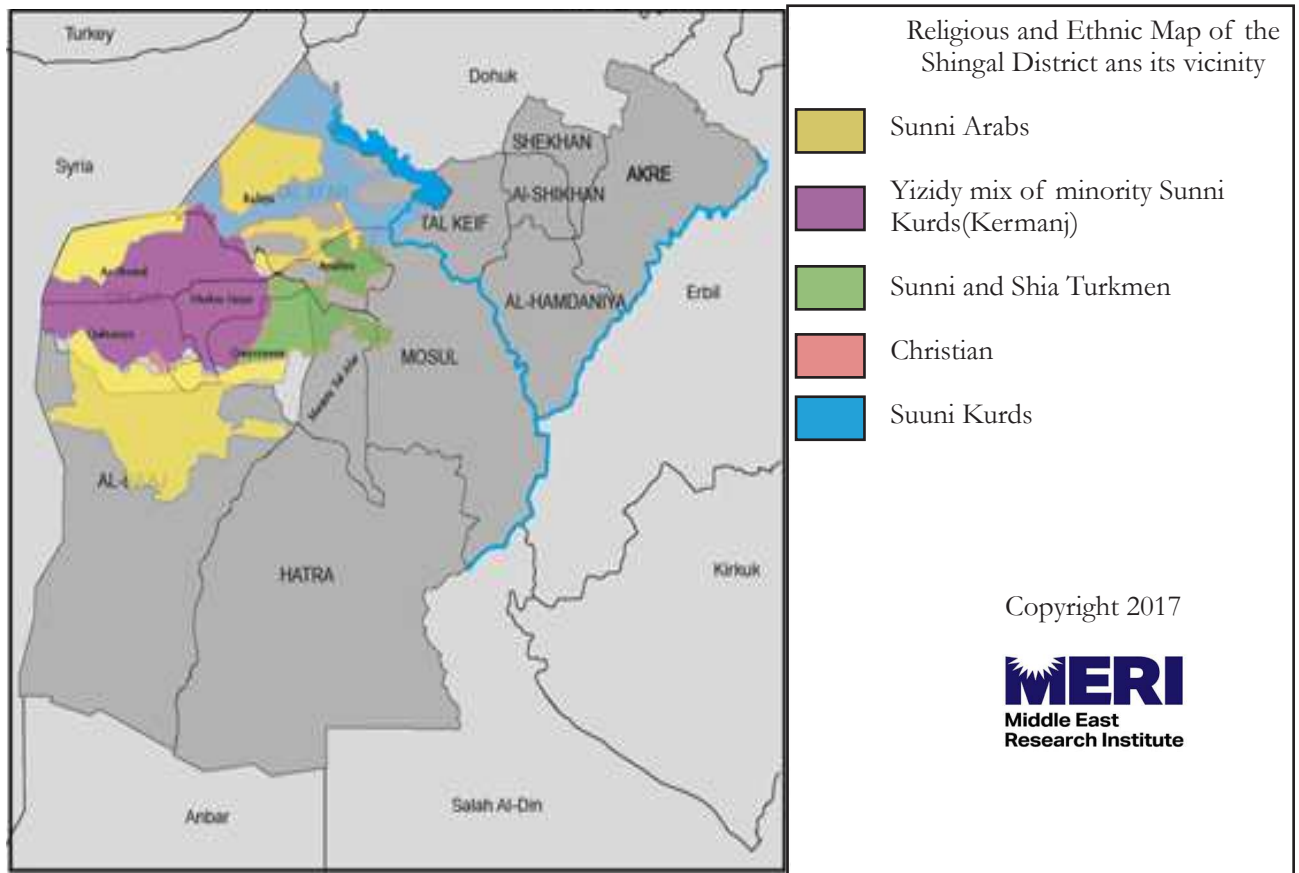
district of Shingal was inhabited by an estimated 350,000 people prior to 2014 (IOM, 2011: 1).⁴ The majority of the population of Shingal district is Yazidi⁵, however, approximately one-third is Sunni Muslim (Arabs or Kurds) (IOM, 2011: 1). Notably, northwestern and southeastern areas are also inhabited by Sunni Arabs and a small number of Sunni Turkmen. While the major Arab tribes in the district are Shammar, Mitewait, and Jayaish; Kurdish Sunni tribes residing in the area are called Kermanj (PAX for Peace, 2016: 27; see also Map no 2: Ethnic and religious composition of Shingal district and its vicinity).



Map no. 1: Administrative map of Shingal district and its vicinity.

⁴ Note that these numbers are estimates since the last census was conducted in 1987 and Yazidis were then forced to register as Arabs (Savelsberg, Hajo & Dulz, 2010: 104).

⁵ Yazidis are Kurdish-speaking people and are considered the second largest religious minority in Iraq after Christians. Yazidism is an ancient monotheistic religion that according to Domle (2013: 68-69) combines elements of old natural religions such as Mithraism, Zoroastrianism and even Manicheism (see also Minority Rights Group, 2014). Yazidi society is strictly divided into social and religious castes with a secular leader for all Yazidis, currently mir (Prince) Tashin Said Beg, and a religious leader, currently Baba Sheikh (Domle, 2013: 67). It is a closed society and it is not permitted to marry outside of one's caste, or outside of the community. Similarly, marriages outside of the Yazidi community or conversions are strictly forbidden (for more details on Yazidi religion and society see Açıkyıldız, 2014; and Asatrian & Arakelova, 2014). The community is subjected to various negative prejudices due to the secretive and closed nature of the Yazidi faith, and Yazidis are often viewed as heretics or even 'devil worshippers', especially by Sunni conservatives (Minority Rights Group, 2014).



Map no 2: Ethnic and religious composition of Shingal district and its vicinity.

Even under Saddam’s regime the district was tremendously underdeveloped, relatively poor and agriculture-focused, with a lack of infrastructure and services. Moreover, since the mid-1970s, Yazidis were forced to relocate from their original villages in the mountains into collective villages such as Bara, Sinuni, Khanasor, or the town of Shingal itself. The so-called ‘modernisation project’ was security-motivated, and formed part of the anti-Kurdish campaign aimed at preventing Yazidis from potentially supporting the Kurdish rebellion of Mullah Mustafa Barzani (see Savelsberg, Hajo & Dulz, 2010). In the following years, Saddam’s regime launched a campaign of ‘Arabisation’ - bringing in Arab settlers to Yazidi areas – which continued in several waves up until the 1990s (ibid.). The issue of the land that was confiscated from Yazidis during Saddam’s rule remains to be resolved in a systematic manner since the ambiguity in land ownership fuels the conflict even now (UN-Habitat, 2015). In the post-2003 period, the district has remained underdeveloped with only minor investment in infrastructure by either the GoI or KRG.

So far, neither the KRG nor Baghdad has shown a willingness to commit resources that would translate into substantial investment in the development and reconstruction of the district, precisely because its status is disputed. The main reason is that there is no guarantee that the region will ultimately fall under one or other authority. In contrast, in another majority-Yazidi area, Sheikhan – where the Yazidi secular and spiritual

leaderships reside (Domle, 2013: 67) – the level of KRG’s investment was more substantial over the years (ICG, 2009: 31). Sheikhan is also counted among the disputed territories but due to its geographic proximity to the KRI’s provinces and to the KRG’s de facto unchallenged control, its grasp over Sheikhan is stronger (Kane, 2011: 17-21).

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, in 2005 some 550,000 Yazidis resided in Iraq, more than two-thirds in Shingal district itself (UNHCR, 2005: 6).⁶ The precise number nowadays is unknown, but it is surely significantly lower with many Yazidis having emigrated. It is estimated that some 250,000 Yazidis, almost the whole Yazidi population of Shingal district, fled the area facing IS advance in the summer of 2014 (UN Habitat, 2015: 4). Out of these some 133,000 fled from the northern sub-district of al-Shamal itself. In November 2015, it was reported that some 275,000 IDPs (including the non-Yazidi population) sought refuge in the KRI either in camps or among the population. According to the International Organization for Migration, only marginally over 29,000 had returned to the district as of February 2017 (IOM, 2017: 11), which is not a significant increase compared to 24,000 returnees in September 2016 (IOM, 2016: 11). It is in fact a strikingly low number considering the majority of the al-Shamal sub-district had already been recaptured by the Peshmerga, aided by the US-led Coalition and the PKK, by late 2014. The district centre itself, the town of Shingal, was fully retaken in November 2015. According to Khalaf Salih Faris, the director of public relations of the PKK-linked Self Administration Council (in Kurdish, Meclisa Avaker a Şingalê, or in short, the Meclis⁷), as of the beginning of 2017 there were 50,000-60,000 people living in Shingal district in total, and among these around 5,000 people live on the mountain range itself, mainly in provisional camps or in small villages in the northern part such as Kolka or Kursî (Interview no. 12). Southern parts of sub-districts al-Qayrawan and al-Qahtaniyah are largely abandoned since some of these areas either remain under IS control, or are unsafe due to their proximity to frontlines with IS as of March 2017 (Institute for the Study of War, 2017).

With an estimated 6,000 homes thought to have been destroyed in Shingal district, the level of destruction remains extensive (UN-Habitat, 2015: 1). So far, no systematic reconstruction efforts have taken place (partly due to lack of return among IDPs). However, the author’s observations during trips to Shingal district in January and March 2017 suggest that construction material is being shipped in and individual rebuilding efforts sporadically occur, especially in eastern parts of the al-Shamal sub-district. The level of basic services such as the electricity and water supply remains low and has been mentioned, aside from security-related factors, as discouraging people from returning on a mass scale (Interview no. 5).

The geographic position of Shingal district makes it a strategically important area with a mountain range that oversees the border with Syria in the north and the main supply route from Mosul to Syria in the south. The impassable mountains have numerous caves and complex morphology, rendering many areas inaccessible by vehicle, making them a defensible stronghold which could easily serve as a (back-up) safe haven for the PKK in proximity to its territories in northern Syria (Interviews no. 3 and 4). For the KRG, it is the westernmost frontier of the disputed territories. The proven oil and gas reserves in Shingal district are modest but there are reportedly some 400 unexploited oil wells, mainly in the north. No systematic surveys have been conducted since the 1960s, but the unproven oil and gas reserves could be substantially large (ICG, 2009: 22). With this possibility on the table, assuming control over the district becomes even more desirable.

⁶ Note that these numbers are again estimates with different figures circulating. For example, the US Department of State’s numbers from 2012 suggest based on Yazidi leaders’ estimates that there are 500,000-700,000 Yazidis in Iraq (Department of State, 2012: 2).

⁷ The term ‘Meclis’ is used as a short reference for the Self-Administration Council. This term is used among the Meclis members and also appears in the Latin transcription of the Kurmanji Kurdish name for the institution.

4. 1 The KRG's Developing Presence in Shingal District after 2003

Soon after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, the KRG⁸ began to gradually build up its armed and political presence in the district mainly in the form of extensive patronage networks (see also PAX for Peace, 2016: 20). According to one interview, at the outset the KDP relied on Yazidi tribal structures and leaders, such as Mahma Khalil (now mayor of the town of Shingal), or Sheikh Shamo (now MP in the Kurdistan Parliament), while trying to commit them to the KDP (Interview no. 3). Patronage networks linking the Yazidi elite to the KDP were gradually created. The KDP's party branches in towns and villages were established, while the KDP provided incentives through the KRG for Yazidis to join these structures, for example in the form of public employment opportunities (*ibid.*; see also Musings on Iraq, 2014). While Yazidis were rarely recruited into the Peshmerga prior to 2014⁹, many Yazidis opted to join the Iraqi security forces, either the Iraqi military or the Federal Police, to sustain their livelihood (Interviews no. 3 & 11). As one respondent revealed, with the Kurdish Asayish (internal security service) the situation was slightly different. The KRG gradually recruited Yazidis into the Asayish force which served as a form of patronage network since recruitment was subjected to selection on the basis of affiliation with the KDP and decided largely by KDP's branch leaders (Interview no. 3). Despite the Iraqi security forces being based in the district, their role was rather passive and they did not interfere in local affairs or challenge the KRG's dominance or the Peshmerga or Asayish presence. The KRG also built a parallel education structure with schools teaching in Kurdish under the KRG curricula, operating alongside schools run by the Iraqi Ministry of Education teaching in Arabic under the Iraqi curricula. It was suggested that various strings were attached to loyalty to the party, for example people had been encouraged to send their children to Kurdish schools instead of the Arabic ones under the Iraqi Ministry of Education (*ibid.*).

In turn, municipality and mayoral offices and their workers in the district of Shingal were being paid by the government in Baghdad. The KRG, however, has kept decisive influence over district and sub-district administration (Interview no. 3 & 12). The KDP's party branches have a say in choosing public employees and selecting allied mayors through their control over the Nineveh Provincial Council.¹⁰ In other cases, leaders of KDP's local branches overshadow mayors' authority (Interview no. 3). Nevertheless, the GoI still has a presence in Shingal district, although it generally has not challenged the KDP's influence over the area and a mutual agreement of coexistence and power-sharing appears to be in place.

The KRG has been actively promoting the Kurdish ethnic identity of Yazidis living in disputed territories, especially in the post-2003 period (see also Musings on Iraq, 2014; Savelsberg, Hajo & Dulz, 2010). Consequently, the Yazidi leadership was increasingly caught between the KRG and Baghdad and ended up increasingly politically divided (ICG, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2009; PAX for Peace, 2016: 20-21). For example, in 2005, Ameen Farhan Jijo, with his political party Yazidi Movement for Reform and Progress, had already begun promoting the idea of the separate identity of Yazidis (ICG, 2009). In response, the Yazidi secular leader mir Tahsin Said Beg, and the religious leadership represented by the Baba Shaikh family sided with the KRG. As Maisel (2008: 5) notes, one of the principal agents for promoting the Kurdish identity of Yazidis is the Lalish Cultural Center based in Dohuk, which has branches in many Yazidi towns. Its leaders

⁸ Mainly the KDP, but the PUK also has a presence in Shingal district, albeit limited compared to the KDP.

⁹ Even nowadays, Yazidi Peshmerga units under the command of Qasim Shesho are reportedly underequipped compared to Kurdish Peshmerga (see also van den Toorn, 2016).

¹⁰ The Kurdish-led coalition Brotherhood and Coexistence Alliance list won 12 seats in 2009 and 11 seats in 2013 elections out of 39 seats in the Council (IHEC, 2013; Farrell, 2009).

are also tied to the KDP (ibid.). The issue of which identity is primary for Yazidis (religious or ethnic) is, however, contested. Some argue that being a Yazidi automatically implies that one is a Kurd (Interview no. 5). Others promote the Yazidi identity as a separate one, while some claim Yazidis are related to Kurds (Interview no. 7). Prior to August 2014, the idea of prioritising ethnic Kurdish identity over religious identity was not completely rejected by Yazidis (especially in the context of the previous Arabisation policies of Saddam's regime).

Also, as one interviewee suggested, being closely aligned with the KRI, possibly even becoming its legal part, was largely not discounted by Yazidis prior to 2014 (Interview no. 21). The Yazidis of Shingal district were traditionally connected to Nineveh and Mosul itself in terms of either employment or study. With the deteriorating security situation in Nineveh, particularly in Mosul in the post-2003 period, the rise of Sunni extremists who label Yazidis as 'devil worshippers' and attacks against Yazidis, they increasingly shifted their engagement towards the KRI (ICG, 2009; Maisel, 2008; Interviews no. 7 and 4). Now many Yazidis study at KRI universities and take on jobs and business opportunities in the KRI.

The above described approach of the KRG to the district¹¹ accompanied with suppression of dissent among Yazidis, especially during election time, appears to have yielded results gradually as can be seen from election results which show a gradual growth of votes for Kurdish parties in the district (Human Rights Watch, 2009; van den Toorn, 2013; Interview no. 3; see also electoral results in Kane, 2011: 19).

4.2 The PKK in Shingal District Prior to August 2014

The presence of PKK-linked forces in Shingal district can be divided into two periods (2004-June 2014, and July 2014 onwards). In the first period, the PKK-linked actors' presence and appeal was rather limited and did not find very fertile ground among the Yazidi population, meaning that they remained a relatively marginal force in the district. In the early 2000s, the PKK began to establish a myriad of political structures in the region, including in Syria, Iran, and Iraq. Part of this initiative included the establishment of the Yazidi Democratic Movement (TEVDA, in Kurdish, *Tevgera Êzidiyan a Demokratîk û Azad*) in 2004 which marks the first period of the PKK presence in Shingal (Interview no. 15). As Taştekin asserts, the PKK was the main but not the sole force behind the TEVDA (Taştekin, 2015).

Khidher Domle, expert on minorities in Iraq, notes that in the 2005-2011 period, the TEVDA lacked substantial popular support among the Yazidi population in Shingal district (Interview no. 3; also no. 4). While some sources suggest that the PKK had been penetrating Shingal since the late 1990s¹², the TEVDA was the first institutionalised overt structure created. Taştekin (2015) asserts that the TEVDA became a legally registered political party in Baghdad in 2005 (Taştekin, 2015). According to Haji Hassan, a member of the Yazidi Party for Freedom and Democracy (PADÊ, in Kurdish, *Partiya Azadî û Demokrasiyê ya Êzidiyan*), it was in fact not registered or eligible to compete in elections which led the leadership of the TEVDA and several other groups to replace it with PADÊ in June 2016. The process to register PADÊ in Baghdad has been underway in order to ensure that it will be able to compete in the upcoming elections scheduled for 2018 (Interview no. 15; Rojnews, 2016). The TEVDA, however, kept communication channels open with Baghdad.

According to Khidher Domle, an increased presence of the PKK-linked actors and structures had already begun after 2012 with the Syrian conflict (Interview no. 2). A small number of Shingali Yazidis joined the YPG ranks and received political and weapons training, citing the need to protect the Yazidi population

¹¹ The KRG strategy is not unique to Shingal district, but also occurs in other disputed territories (see for example Musings on Iraq, 2014).

in Syria against Islamist rebels. For example, the head of the Meclis, Khidher Salih, is Shingali Yazidi but reportedly went through PKK training in Syria (Interview no. 1). Nonetheless, support for the TEVDA or the PKK's ideology has not been substantial among Yazidis in Shingal district (Interviews no. 2 & 4).

The YBŞ commander, Sardasht Şengalî, disclosed that after the fall of Mosul in June 2014, they were already anticipating a threat to Yazidis from IS and sent a number of people to receive training in Rojava, in the border town of Şirik (Interview no. 17). These fighters then crossed the border in August 2014. Thus, by August 2014, there was already a core force of Yazidis trained by the PKK-linked forces in Rojava. As Sardasht Şengalî noted, these individuals are now holding senior positions within the YBŞ (Interview no. 17). Additionally, there are some Yazidis who have been affiliated with the PKK or the YPG since before 2014.

Subsequently, the PKK-linked forces began to establish a firmer presence, including building additional armed and political structures starting in early 2015, which is described in detail in the following sections.

12 However, Taştekin (2016) notes, building on interviews with the PKK members, that there has been some PKK presence in Shingal district from as early as 1993.

5. August 2014: KRG's Dominance in Shingal District Challenged

The above-described equilibrium between the KRG and the GoI in Shingal district was significantly altered after August 2014 with PKK entering the area. After Mosul fell to IS in June 2014, and Iraqi security forces collapsed and fled south (including those garrisoned in Shingal district), the Peshmerga remained the sole armed force in the district (Demir, 2015). Prior to August 2014, local police units, elements of the 2nd Army Division, and the 3rd Federal Police Division were stationed in Shingal district (Abbas & Trombly, 2014; see also the detailed account of the security situation in Mosul and Nineveh by Knights, 2016). Currently, Iraqi Army bases remain abandoned and damaged and only a few Federal Police units are garrisoned in the area, such as in al-Shamal sub-district (in Sinuni area) and the town of Shingal (author's observations).

The hasty withdrawal of approximately 10,000 Peshmerga from the area¹³ in August 2014 left the Yazidi population exposed to IS' atrocities and subsequently became subject to various explanations (Ekurd, 2014; Barber, 2017). Competing explanations usually cite a lack of weaponry and preparedness on the side of the Peshmerga, or an element of surprise by IS as reasons for the Peshmerga forces' initial withdrawal (Interview no. 5; see Coles, 2014). It became a source of grievance among Yazidis toward the KRG and mainly the KDP (for a highly critical narrative of the KDP, see Demir, 2015; Ezidi Press, 2016).

Despite the fact that the Peshmerga participated in retaking the territory in later months, many among the Yazidi community feel that they were abandoned by the KRG (and in part also by the GoI) which they claim did not make enough effort to protect them from IS' atrocities (Interview no. 21). Some interviewees dismissed the criticism of the KRG as propaganda crafted by the PKK-linked actors, and/or the Baghdad government (Interview no. 5). Hoshyar Siwaili, head of the KDP Foreign Relations Office, also concurred that the PKK-linked forces deliberately try to distance the people of Shingal from the KRG (Interview no. 9). The underlying fact is that the trust is largely shaken between Yazidis and the KRG, regardless of whether these views are grounded in fact (for example Interviews no. 8 & 21; see also PAX for Peace, 2016).

Following IS advance during the summer of 2014, the PKK-linked forces seized a window of opportunity and opened a corridor to the mountain. The YPG fighters were pushing from Syria, and a small number of HPG (PKK's armed wing in Turkey, People's Defence Forces; in Kurdish, Hêzên Parastina Gel) fighters were reportedly already active on the Shingal mountain defending Yazidis (Taştekin, 2016; Interview no. 4). The PKK quickly capitalised on these efforts as well as on a rapid humanitarian aid dispatch to the area from Rojava and established itself as the 'saviour of Yazidis', finding a fertile ground for its ideas of Yazidi self-defence and self-administration of Shingal district (Interviews no. 1 & 4). Respondents across the Kurdish political spectrum (PUK, KDP) and even politically non-aligned Yazidis generally labelled the PKK's initial military support as positive and highlighted the common struggle of the Peshmerga and the PKK side-by-side against IS. Nonetheless, tensions between the two gradually heightened with a breaking point coming in November 2015 (Bozarslan, 2015; 2017; van den Toorn, 2016; Interview no. 4 & 6).

13 Other sources suggest that the number of Peshmerga in Shingal district and its vicinity (Zummar) was around 11,000 (Demir, 2015).

In November 2015, the town of Shingal was retaken, following which the KRG repeatedly called for the PKK to withdraw from the town and the district itself. Moreover, the KDP views the administrative structure of the Meclis and the YBŞ as an outsider actor affiliated with the PKK and stressed the need for them to come under KRG law (Interview no. 9). The PKK, however, has become increasingly entrenched, controlling western parts of the Shingal district (in al-Shamal sub-district, the town of Khanasor and areas west of it, and south of the mountain range, the town of Majnuniya and areas west of it). Additionally, the PKK has garrisons intermingled with KRG forces' bases east of these towns, and it upholds a strong presence in the mountain range itself (author's observations; for the map of control of terrain in Shingal district as of March 2017 see Institute for the Study of War, 2017)

6. Building a Presence in Shingal District in Line with Öcalan's Democratic Autonomy

In the turbulent years following PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's capture in 1999, the PKK went through a series of organisational and ideological changes which were gradually reflected in his writings (Öcalan, 2011; for a more thorough analysis, see Posch, 2016). Öcalan, strongly influenced by American radical leftist thinker Murray Bookchin, with whom he engaged in written communication, introduced to the PKK his ideas of 'democratic autonomy' and 'democratic confederalism'. His model poses an alternative for the nation state and ultimately alternative societal organisation (Biehl, 2011; 2012; see also Bookchin, 1994). While doing so, he diverts from the goal of establishing a 'greater Kurdistan' ruled by Marxist-Leninist principles and presents an "(...) autonomous bottom-up communal self-organization as an alternative to the state-oriented doctrines of both liberal capitalism and Bolshevik communism." (Leezenberg, 2016: 677)

Some speak positively about the governance model of 'democratic autonomy' and even label it as a 'new radical democratic model' (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2012; Knapp & Jongerden, 2014). Other researchers note the often authoritarian nature of its practice in Syria (Sary, 2016; Khaddour, 2017; Aldarwish, 2016). Leezenberg (2016: 671) notes that apart from the PKK's enduring Leninist vanguardism the "(...) contradictions between ideology and practice (...) also arise because (...) the ideology itself remains ambiguous or implicit on the question of party organization and the legitimacy of armed resistance." In reality, the governance structure of 'democratic autonomy' in Syria is strongly top-down and security-dominated with actors with a PKK background having a decisive role and leaving very little space for opposition (Zaman 2017b; Sary 2016; Khaddour, 2017; Interviews no. 10 & 20).

Posch (2016) also elaborates on the PKK's post-1999 ideology and its underlying totalitarian nature while thoroughly examining the so-called 'KCK Contract' (Group of Communities of Kurdistan, in Kurdish, Koma Civakên Kurdistan), published in 2005, which serves as a core organisational document of the 'new PKK' (for a Turkish version see KCK Sözleşmesi, undated). One might argue that in Rojava PKK's practices of governance and organisation of armed and civilian structures come the closest to ideas outlined in the KCK Contract and in Öcalan's writings (see for example Sary, 2016; Sheppard, 2016; Zaman, 2017b).

Based on the 'KCK Contract' (especially articles 27-30) and the governance model in place in Rojava, four levels of civilian administration and a further two levels of armed structures divided into military and internal security structures can be identified (Posch, 2016; for an overview of civilian and armed structures in Rojava and Shingal district see Table no. 1).

At the international level, there is the Group of Communities of Kurdistan (KCK) which serves as an umbrella structure for PKK political branches in Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey (although both Yazidi parties follow Öcalan's ideology, the TEVDA and subsequently the PADÊ have not been officially part of the KCK). The KCK serves at the same time as a political and military leadership structure, based in the Qandil mountain in the KRI. The KCK's Executive Council is currently headed by Cemil Bayik and his co-chair Bese Hozat (Çagaptay & Unal, 2014).

6.1 The PKK-linked Civilian Structures in Syria and Shingal District

Country Level

At the country level, if the PKK-linked actors manage to assume control over territory they engage in establishing administrative structures. In Syria, the TEV-DEM (Movement for a Democratic Society, in Kurdish, Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk) was established in December 2011 (Sary, 2016). The TEV-DEM also serves as a somewhat united political front of various parties and organisations, crafting an image of political plurality although it is dominated by the PKK's Syrian branch PYD (ibid.). Finally in March 2016, after a series of rebranding¹⁴, the whole project was labelled as the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria with the capital in Qamishli (van Wilgenburg, 2016; Ayboga, 2017; Sherko, 2016). The Democratic Autonomous Administration is led by the Executive Council which serves as a quasi-government and consists of people assigned to specific portfolios such as justice, defence, education, health etc. (see Khalaf, 2016).

A similar organisation, the Self-Administration Council – in short, the Meclis – was established in January 2015 in Sardasht in the Shingal mountain range, following a similar blueprint to the TEV-DEM and its Democratic Autonomous Administration. The assembly chose 27 people and from these 7 people assumed roles in the Executive Committee (which may be viewed as a quasi-cabinet) (Amed & Serhat, 2015). According to Khalaf Salih Faris, the director of public relations of the Meclis, the establishment of the Meclis was supported by the PKK, but the idea of creating an institution to coordinate the military and political efforts of Yazidis has been discussed since September 2014 originated from local actors rather than being imposed by the PKK (Interview no. 12).¹⁵ The centre of the Meclis remains in Sardasht. At the central level, it consists of six main committees (defence, diplomacy, mobilisation, finance, women and youth) out of which some are responsible for different practical aspects of administration and service delivery, such as electricity, water and sanitation, education, healthcare, and legal affairs (Kongra Kurdistan, 2015). At the local level, the Meclis has its branches in towns and villages such as Khanasor, Dohula, Borik or Sinuni (Interviews no. 12, 14 & 19). There is a similar division of responsibilities as at the central level and local branches of the Meclis coordinate their efforts with the central Meclis in Sardasht (Interviews no. 14 & 19). Members of the Meclis both at the central and local level acknowledge that they follow and take inspiration from Abdullah Öcalan's ideology of democratic autonomy. On the other hand, as Khalaf Salih Faris and others noted, the Meclis does not seek to replicate Rojava's project in Shingal district in its totality (Interviews no. 12 & 14). From the interviews, it seems that the main focus is on self-administration (and employing the governance and administrative experience from Rojava) and self-defence (building the indigenous Yazidi-dominated security force, the YBŞ), rather than on other aspects of PKK's radical leftist ideology.

It has been consistently argued both by interviewees from the Meclis (civilian administration) and military forces (the YBŞ) that they seek to proceed with their self-defence and self-rule within the scope of Iraqi law (Interviews no. 12, 13, 14 & 17). Specifically, they recalled Articles 112, 115, 116, 122, 123 of the Constitution, which allow for the creation of governorates with respect to the principle of decentralisation, and Article 125 which guarantees administrative, political, cultural and educational rights for minorities (Iraqi Constitution, 2005; see also Salloum, 2017). According to Khidher Mardos, deputy head of the Meclis, the GoI has been receptive towards these ideas and both representatives of the Meclis (namely its head,

14 In July 2012, the TEV-DEM reached an agreement with the Kurdish National Council (KNC, in Kurdish, Encûmena Niştîmanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê, ENKS), which is a coalition of Kurdish opposition parties in Syria, about the establishment of the Supreme Kurdish Committee (DBK, in Kurdish, Desteya Bilind a Kurd) (ibid.). The Supreme Kurdish Committee served as a conceptual vehicle for administrative and governance efforts in Rojava. However, by 2013 the DBK had become dominated by the TEV-DEM and the KNC left (ibid.). The DBK was later abandoned and rebranded as the Democratic Autonomous Administration in January 2014 (which is dominated by the TEV-DEM).

15 In one of the interviews it was mentioned that in September 2014, Haidar Shesho [PUK member and commander of the HPÊ (Yezidi Defense Units, in Kurdish, Hêza Parastina Êzîdxanê)] was discussing these ideas along with other actors, including TEVDA (Interview no. 12).

Khidher Salih) and the YBŞ (its commander Sa'îd Hassan Sa'îd) engage in talks with the central government (Interview no. 14). The underlying message is that the Meclis views itself as an embryonic governance and administrative structure that in the future should serve as a base for a governorate administration established within the scope of Iraqi law. Effectively, this means that both the Meclis and the YBŞ wish for Shingal district to become a governorate and view the GoI rather than the KRG as an actor willing to deliver on this project. Arguably, this runs counter to KRG's ambition of incorporating the disputed Shingal district into the KRI. According to Hoshiyar Siwaily, head of the KDP Foreign Relations Office, the KDP's policy has been to give the people of Shingal district a choice regarding administrative arrangement of the area, which he does not believe the majority of people ultimately wish to fall under the GoI authority (Interview no. 9). Interviewees suggested that Meclis structures are open to all people who wish to participate, including non-Yazidis (if they have not in the past fought against Yazidis). On the other hand, it was acknowledged that the dominant force within Meclis structures is actually a Yazidi party, the TEVDA (or since June 2016, its successor, the PADÊ) (Interviews no. 12 & 14). The dominance of the TEVDA (or the PADÊ) in the Meclis was underscored in several other interviews (Interviews no. 1, 14 & 15), despite the myriad of rather small and marginal political parties and movements participating in its establishment including the KCK, the Communist Party, Partiya Êzîdîyen Peşveru (Party of Progressive Yazidis), and the Tevgera Êzîdîya (Movement of Yazidis) (Kongra Kurdistan, 2015).

In that sense, the Meclis seems to follow a similar political model to Rojava, in which there is only a limited pluralism within the TEV-DEM as it is dominated by groups which are strongly loyal to Öcalan's ideology. In June 2016, during the assembly of several political parties of some 700 people, the PADÊ was created under the chairmanship of Qahtan Ali and with some 29 people in its leadership council, which effectively replaced the TEVDA (Interview no. 15; Rojnews, 2016). The PADÊ is dominated by former TEVDA members and also embodies the smaller party the Free Yazidi Assembly and some other marginal actors. Its flag is now often flown in areas with a Meclis presence such as Khanasor, Sardasht, and Dohula (author's observations).

As one interviewee noted, Shingali Yazidis have little say in the strategic decision-making of PKK-linked structures. Key decisions are made either by Shingali Yazidis with a longer history with the PKK (such as Sa'îd Hassan Sa'îd, the former head of the TEVDA, leader of the YBŞ), or by outsiders, often from Syria (Interviews no. 1 & 3). On the other hand, the Meclis and the YBŞ seem to have gathered significant popular support among the Yazidis for the project of autonomy and self-defence of Yazidis in part because the idea of self-administration and self-defence that the PKK-linked actors advocate for strongly resonates with the Yazidi population (Interview no. 21; general message picked up by the author in the vast majority of interviews conducted between September 2016 and March 2017 in the KRI).

Regional Level

At the regional level in Syria 'cantonal' administrations are established. In the case of Syria, the cantons are Jazirah, Kobanî and Afrîn. The district of Shingal is, on the other hand, a rather small area in which this level of governance is missing and the Meclis assumes the role of the main political and governance structure of the country and 'cantonal' level at the same time.

Local Level

In Öcalan's model, the lowest unit at the local level is a 'commune', which is organised into villages, towns or neighborhoods and usually consists of 30-400 households (Anderson & Egret, 2016). These 'communes' or local councils have boards which are tasked with "services, economy, Kurdish language teaching, organizing lectures, self-defence, reconciliation and justice" (ibid.). Local councils serve as PKK cells whose task is to organise affairs at the local level, resolve disputes, help with service provision and ultimately also spread the PKK ideology among the population. In theory, representatives of local councils should then organise themselves in higher-level councils (city, district) and further at the 'cantonal' level (see Anderson & Egret, 2016).

Governance and organisation in Rojava appears to remain faithful to a Marxist-Leninist top-down cohesive approach terms of administration of the areas under its control and is largely privy to members of the PKK-linked (or loyal) parties and organisations. However, it is consistently argued that at the lowest level in Rojava, in local councils, there is considerable space left for participation and taking autonomous action, for example with regards to local infrastructure projects, and the councils are often receptive to people's needs and wishes (see for example Knapp & Jongerden, 2014).

In Shingal district, the Meclis has local branches for certain towns and in some cases adjacent smaller villages, such as in the case of the Meclis in Borik which also undertakes its activities in Şorka village nearby (Interview no. 19). Local branches of the Meclis in Khanasor, Borik, Duhola and Sinuni follow a similar division of labour into committees as the central level. In general, there appears to be a certain level of coordination and communication between the local branches of the Meclis and the central Meclis which in turn takes into consideration reports and requests and dedicates or redistributes resources and manpower (Interview no. 19).

As it was suggested in one of the interviews, decision-making within civilian structures remains security-dominated, following a similar pattern to the TEV-DEM in Rojava (Interview no. 1; see also Khaddour, 2017; Sary, 2016). Under Öcalan's governance model, the overlap of political and military structures at the international level (KCK) also continues at lower levels. Despite the creation of civilian governance, the administration still follows a top-down decision-making process strongly influenced by armed structures. Also, the PKK-linked commanders outline strategically important decisions and either exist outside the official governance structures, or occupy senior positions within the administration themselves (Interview no. 10; see also Sary, 2016; Khaddour, 2017).

6.2 The PKK-linked Armed Structures in Syria and Shingal District

Country Level – Military Structures

Once the PKK manages to assume firm control over a territory, an armed wing of the respective PKK-affiliated political party, in the case of the PYD in Syria it is the YPG and the YPJ (the Women's Protection Units, in Kurdish, Yekîneyên Parastina Jin), should, in theory, assume the role of a quasi-army which answers to newly established civilian administration (the TEV-DEM in Syria). However, as suggested by an interviewee with long-term direct experience with the Rojava administration, in reality it is rather a result of the continuous domination of military structures and PKK veterans' ('kadros') tight grip over the civilian structures at the expense of the PYD i.e. civilian structures (Interview no. 10; see also Kaddour, 2017). The narrative of the YPG as the military branch of the administration in Rojava has been additionally strengthened by the establishment of the SDF in October 2015. This step was aimed at dispelling Rojava's armed forces' image as the PKK-linked YPG and, secondly, tried to further distance it from its heritage as PYD's armed wing and bolster its role as 'Rojava's military' (see for example Lund, 2015). Sources also suggested that since the SDF was established, YPG fighters increasingly attempt to portray themselves as members of the SDF (Interview no. 20). The SDF, however, continues to be dominated by the YPG (ibid.).

In the case of Shingal, a similar blueprint can be observed. After August 2014, the YPG and the HPG units bolstered their military presence. At the same time, the YBŞ was established as a PKK-trained Yazidi militia with an aim of creating an indigenous Yazidi self-defence force in Shingal. As noted earlier, the core of the YBŞ was already trained after June 2014 in Rojava. Additional Yazidi men and women subsequently received military and ideological training in the Jazirah canton under YPG supervision. In January 2015, a female unit originally named YPJ-Şengal (in other words, YPJ's wing in Shingal) was established and later rebranded as the YJÊ (Yezidi Women's Units, in Kurdish, Yekîneyên Jinên Êzîdxan) in October 2015 (Dicle Haber, 2015; ANF, 2015).

Estimates of the YBŞ and the YJÊ combined numbers vary between 1,500 and 2,500 (Abduallah, 2014; Rudaw, 2016c).¹⁶ Another number given by the YBŞ commander Sardasht Şengalî suggests that the YBŞ and the YJÊ combined comprise around 3,000 fighters (Interview no. 17). The YJÊ itself contains around 200 women in their ranks (Interview no. 18). Out of these 3,000 some 500-600 fighters are volunteers, thus not receiving any salary either by choice or because their families are wealthy (Interviews no. 17). A PUK leader from Shingal district, Jamil Khidher, noted that currently the vast majority of the footsoldiers in the YBŞ are Yazidis from the district (Interview no. 4). Baghdad has supported the salaries of some 1,000 YBŞ fighters since June 2015. However, according to sources from the YBŞ and the Meclis, this support has been withheld for some 3-4 months as of March 2017 (Interview no. 17). The reason given was KRG's pressure on Baghdad, demanding the cessation of financial support for the YBŞ as a pre-condition for the KRG's support for the Mosul operation (Interview no. 12 & 17). On 15 March, a delegation consisting of Khidher Salih, chairman of the Meclis, and Sa'îd Hassan Sa'îd, leader of the YBŞ, was in Baghdad negotiating on the matter, however specific results of these talks are not known to the author (Interview no. 12). The remainder of the finances reportedly come from either local people or the numerous Yazidi diaspora mainly based in Europe (Interviews no. 12 & 17). However, Khidher Domle suggested in interview that for the past six months comparably fewer people have been flocking to join the YBŞ ranks (Interview no. 2).

While in the beginning, the YBŞ itself only had light arms, the bulk consisting of AK-47s, currently its

¹⁶ These numbers were given in 2014 and 2016 respectively.

armament appears to be more advanced (Interview no. 17). According to YBŞ commander Sardasht Şengalî, it acquired a considerable amount of vehicles and weapons over the course of the campaign against IS. The YPG also gave the YBŞ a starting arsenal consisting of two Humvees, several pickups, and three DShK machine guns. Some cars were also provided by the population for the YBŞ to utilise (ibid.). The author's observations also suggest that YBŞ fighters (especially more senior ones, not youth that often man checkpoints inside the PKK-linked forces' controlled territory) also have advanced equipment including pickups mounted with DShKs; Humvees; US M4 assault rifles with optics; sniper rifles; communication systems; military-grade binoculars; ballistic protection; RPGs; hand grenades; and light infantry machine guns.

While in 2014 and 2015 the bulk of fighters were trained in Syria, currently there are YBŞ training facilities in Shingal district, established with the assistance of the PKK, namely an 'academy' for military and political training (Interview no. 17). Taştekin noted in November 2016 that Dewrese Evdi Academy (named after a legendary Kurdish fighter) had been established (Taştekin, 2016). He also concurs that the bulk of the instructors are Yazidis who previously served either with the Iraqi Army or within the Peshmerga forces (ibid.).

The YBŞ has, in contrast to for example the YPG's presentation as an armed wing of the PYD, never been officially presented as the armed wing of TEVDA. It is instead presented as an indigenous Yezidi force established with the support of the PKK. Sources, however, suggest that just as in the case of the YPG/YPJ in Syria, YBŞ and YJÊ senior cadres who make the decisions are often veterans either from the YPG or the HPG, even if some of them are Yazidis from Shingal (Interview no. 1 & 4).

Country Level – Internal Security Structures

Once the administration is created, internal security forces – the Asayish – are also established. The purpose of the Asayish is to serve as a force policing the population and safeguarding core areas. Specialised units within the Asayish are also being established, such as the counter-terrorism units in Rojava (see for example ANF, 2016a; Youtube, 2016). A similar force, the Yazidi Special Unit, was reportedly established in Shingal district in January 2017 (Rudaw, 2017b). In Shingal district, units of the Asayish Êzidxan have been established to assume the role of the internal security force, however, as it will be argued further, they are in a rather embryonic stage compared to the Asayish in Rojava for now.

THE PKK-LINKED POLITICAL STRUCTURES IN SYRIA AND SHINGAL DISTRICT		
Level	Syria	Shingal district
International level	Group of Communities of Kurdistan (KCK)	
Country level	Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) the dominant force is the Democratic Union Party (PYD)	The Self-Administration Council (Meclisa Avaker a Şingalê) the dominant force is the Yazidi Party for Freedom and Democracy (PADÊ)
Regional level, i.e. 'cantonal' level	Democratic autonomous administration of Jazîra, Kobanî and Afrîn 'cantons'	Shingal is considered one 'canton', therefore, the regional level is non-existent
Local (communal) level	Local councils in villages, local councils in towns, neighbourhoods of cities	Local branches of the Meclis in towns and villages
THE PKK-LINKED ARMED STRUCTURES IN SYRIA AND SHINGAL DISTRICT		
Level	Syria	Shingal district
International level	Group of Communities of Kurdistan (KCK)	
Country level (military structures)	People's Protection Units (YPG) and the female wing Women's Protection Units (YPJ)	Sinjar Protection Units (YBŞ) and the female wing Yazidi Women's Units (YJÊ)
Country level (internal security structures)	Asayish, including special units (e.g. counter-terrorism forces)	Asayish Êzîdxan, including special units (e.g. counter-terrorism forces, such as Yazidi Special Units established in January 2017)

Table no. 1: Overview of the PKK-linked political and armed structures in Syria and Shingal district.

7. Assessing the PKK-linked Governance in Shingal District

Kasfir's (2008: 4-5) preconditions for an insurgent government to form are clearly met in the case of Shingal district (control of a territory inhabited by a population and a decision to create civilian structures). The PKK assumed control over parts of Shingal district in August 2014; this territory contains civilians (despite only a fraction of the pre-IS war population having returned so far); and the PKK-linked forces follow its ideological model of democratic autonomy in Shingal district in which building governance structures to regulate the relationship with civilians is a crucial imperative (Öcalan, 2011; Interviews no. 12, 13, 14, and 19).

7.1 Policing the Population

The YBŞ and the Asayish Êzîdxan maintain a monopoly on violence in areas under their sole control, or where they dominate. In the areas of mixed control such as in Sinuni, Duhola, Borik or Shingal town itself they coexist with the KRG's security structures and apparently both sides have managed not to engage in violence for the most part. According to representatives from both the Meclis and the YBŞ itself, they are still existentially dependent on the YPG and the HPG since they fear that if these forces would disengage from Shingal district, the YBŞ and the Meclis would not be able to sustain possible counter-action from the KDP trying to restore its presence and influence in the district (Interviews no. 13 & 14). It is clear that the YPG and the HPG (and their female wings', the YPJ and the YJA-Star, Free Women's Units, in Kurdish *Yekîneyên Jinên Azad ên Star*) fighters are strongly present in the area. The author's observations during field trips to Shingal district also confirm that both the YPG/YPJ and the HPG/YJA-Star flags are still frequently flown, especially north of the mountain range and on strategically important places such as at the top of the Shingal mountain itself, at the former US military outpost, at both southern and northern entrances to the mountain valley, and in a large base in Bara, west of Khanasor. To sum up, despite the fact that the YBŞ has grown in numbers, training, and armaments, it still remains strongly reliant on the YPG/YPJ and the HPG/YJA-Star.

Arguably, the presence of the HPG and the YPG and their female wings in Shingal district could disrupt YBŞ' and the Meclis' monopoly on violence in the area, since, as noted by the YBŞ commander, they take their orders from Rojava (Interview no. 13). However, this has not been the case to date as their interests and goals have so far overlapped. Moreover, from the author's observations, it seems that the HPG/YPG is present in Shingal district as a defence force and engagement with the local population itself is gradually passed on to the YBŞ and the Meclis.

Additionally, the Asayish Êzîdxan has been established in Shingal district to assume the role of an internal security force, with distinctive patches on their uniforms highlighting their allegiance to the Meclis and the Asayish and distinctively marked vehicles (author's observations in Khanasor; Interview no. 14). Also, in January 2017, the Yazidi Special Unit was reportedly established to assume the role of a 'counter-terrorism force' (Rudaw, 2017b). As noted in one of the interviews, local police are not present in the area anymore, thus the Asayish Êzîdxan assumes their role in Khanasor, and partly in Sinuni, Borik and the town of Shingal (Interview no. 14). Only a small number of Iraqi Federal Police have a presence in the town of Shingal or in Sinuni, however they assume the role of a stationary force, manning checkpoints and small bases and do not seem to be engaged in the ordinary tasks of policing the population (author's observations). In areas under KRG control, the KDP Asayish assumes this role.

There seems to be a division of responsibilities between the military force (the YBŞ and the YJÊ) and the Asayish Êzîdxan. The force is comparatively smaller than the YBŞ and according to the YBŞ commander, Sardasht Şengalî, is only between 100-200 strong (Interview no. 17). Units of the Asayish Êzîdxan regularly patrol the streets of Khanasor (author's observations). According to one interview, Asayish Êzîdxan units oversee the general internal security in towns like Khanasor and the civilian population turns to Asayish members if needed (Interview no. 14). In Rojava, the Asayish structure is strongly entrenched and engaged not only with security-related activities but also with civilian bureaucratic activities, such as issuing building permits and regulating trade, further blurring the lines between civilian and armed structures (Sary, 2016: 12; see also Khaddour, 2017; Khalaf, 2016).

In the case of Shingal district, the Asayish Êzîdxan seems to be in a rather embryonic stage, solely assuming the role of policing force. However, attempts to institutionalise the internal security force, in the absence of local police paid by the central government, indicate Meclis' ambitions to build a fully-fledged, overarching administration. Also, the fact that the Asayish Êzîdxan units are present in all places in which the Meclis established itself (including mixed-controlled areas with the KRG such as Borik), indicates that the Meclis itself considers developing a quasi-police force as part of its governance activities.

7. 2 Dispute Resolution Mechanisms

A parallel court system has not been created by the Meclis in Shingal district. According to Khalaf Salih Faris, director of public relations of the Meclis, such an undertaking would not be easy and there have not been attempts by the Meclis to establish such a court system (Interview no. 12). People still therefore rely on the central government's court system. On the other hand, since the physical access to these courts has been severely restricted due to the IS presence in Nineveh, there appear to have been attempts within the Meclis to provide some form of substituting dispute resolution mechanisms. The central Meclis in Sardasht has a branch dedicated to legal affairs and similar legal branches are also in place within the local branches of the Meclis (Interviews no. 14 & 19). It seems that people turn to the Meclis structures if they have a dispute to be resolved.

Interviews did not suggest that the Meclis have an ambition to create a parallel court system, as exists in Rojava (Khalaf, 2016). It rather seems that it tries to mediate and resolve disputes within the population ad hoc since in the current circumstances there is a lack of access to the GoI's court system. On the other hand, it is clear that the Meclis is determined to provide a substitute dispute mechanism on the ground at least for the time being. Such efforts highlight its ambition to deliver an overarching system of services and administration to the population.

7. 3 Providing Public Goods

Members of the Meclis structures have an ambition to provide various public services spanning from water, electricity, garbage disposal, and the distribution of humanitarian support to bureaucratic activities. However, they also disclosed that their capacity to satisfy all of these needs, not to mention to undertake larger reconstruction projects, is limited due to a lack of resources (Interview no. 12 & 14). Humanitarian and other material aid is largely supplied by the administration in Rojava which has continued to send its support until the present day (Interviews no. 1, 14 & 19). Some smaller projects have been implemented such as to support the revival of the agricultural sector, to dig up some 70 wells in the district, to give out sheep to poorer families in the area in order to boost sustainability and to start-up the local economy

(Interview no. 14). While conducting day-to-day service provision in the areas administered by the Meclis, coordination between the central and local Meclis branches seems to be in place in terms of discussion of larger projects with the respective committee of the central Meclis and requesting resources, workers or specific equipment.

Aside from the above-mentioned services, up to 30 schools were opened in the areas dominated by the PKK-linked forces (ibid.). These new schools brought their curricula from Rojava and teach in Kurmanjî dialect utilising the Latin alphabet. The situation regarding the education system, however, remains highly complex since apart from newly opened schools, there are still schools administered by the Iraqi Ministry of Education, teaching in Arabic and at the same time schools administered by the KRG and teaching Kurmanjî Kurdish (in Arabic script) (Interview no. 8 & 12). Khalaf Salih Faris, director of public relations of the Meclis, noted that he was personally advocating for a unified schooling system in the district, especially considering that transfers from old schools to Latin schools prove difficult for children (Interview no. 12). Husein Haji Nevso, head of the Borik Meclis, also highlighted that children from Borik attend either the federal government's or the KRG's schools since no new Kurdish Latin schools have been opened in Borik. However, some children attend Kurdish Latin schools in the nearby Shingal mountain, in Kolka village. Aside from Latin schools, an 'academy' was opened in order to provide political and military training within the scope of the PKK's ideology (Interview no. 19).

According to Khidher Mardos, deputy head of the Meclis, there are 33-35 people in the Khanasor Meclis which form small groups (committees) responsible for certain issues (such as public services, or education). One person is appointed to monitor projects and tasks (such as collecting garbage) and also coordinate with the respective committee in the central Meclis in Sardasht (Interview no. 14). At the local level, the Meclis operates as a municipality office in some instances with paid employees at their disposal. In the case of Khanasor, the Meclis employs about 100 people; aside from that a small portion of people (around 10) are still receiving a salary from the central government (ibid.). In other words, the Meclis seeks to substitute existing governance structures which no longer operate in a systematic manner in Khanasor since the sub-district administration is based in KDP-held parts of Sinuni.

Interviews with members of the Meclis both at the local and the central level in Sardasht suggest that all of the Meclis members from local branches convene approximately once a month in the mountain to discuss more general issues and strategies (Interviews no. 12 & 14). At the same time, more frequent meetings of committees responsible for certain issues occur. At the local level, the entire local branch of Meclis usually convenes once a week and aside from that, people in the respective committee meet regularly.

Additionally, the Meclis reportedly does not have a close working relationship with the Baghdad administrative structures since, despite being paid by the central government they are strongly dominated by the KRG, namely the KDP (Interview no. 12). The Meclis structures are largely the only currently working administration in areas under the PKK-linked forces' control. Khalaf Salih Faris, director of public relations of the Meclis, revealed that the ambition of the Meclis is to gradually emerge as a fully-fledged municipality administration with branches in all towns and villages, with the central Meclis in Sardasht serving as a kind of parliament (Interview no. 12).

The Meclis also operates in areas of mixed control such as in Duhola and Borik. In Borik, a town of 3,000-4,000 people, the Meclis seems to operate on a rather rudimentary level, having only been established in February 2017. Husein Haji Nevso, the head of the Borik Meclis, highlighted that their focus is currently on delivering basic municipality services such as fixing the roads, buying and operating public generators,

providing water supplies, cleaning the streets and distributing aid from Rojava (mainly basic foodstuff) (Interview no. 19). While in Khanasor, the Meclis employs some 100 people responsible for services and administration, in Borik, the Meclis does not have permanent employees, rather relying on a pool of people that can be hired temporarily, or have needed equipment such as trucks (Interviews no. 14 & 19). Contact with the central Meclis in Sardasht occurs regularly and projects are consulted with the centre. Husein Haji Nevso noted that if there is a need for a larger workforce, more investment or equipment, the request is sent to the central Meclis and the Meclis dispatches needed resources. Additionally, the Meclis in Borik administers the nearby village Şorka (Interview no. 19). The Meclis in Borik seems to be in a rather incipient stage although the overall system of administration and procedures has already been established.

Meclis' ability to satisfy all of the needs of the population or commit to large scale reconstruction or infrastructure-building efforts is rather limited due to relative lack of resources. However, the administrative system, division of responsibilities and coordination between local branches of the Meclis and its centre in Sardasht is already institutionalised. In the longer-term, however, it is at best questionable whether the Meclis could provide a similar level of service to the KRG or the GoI (if they decide to do so). The administration, at the same time, remains highly dependent on the Rojava. Compared to the relatively centralised central government administration concentrated at the sub-district or district level (namely in Sinuni or the Shingal town), Meclis' administrative efforts seem to be more locally oriented and build their local branches in specific towns.

7. 4 Feedback Mechanisms for Civilian Participation

The central Meclis in Sardasht was established in January 2015 by the 'constituent assembly' of some 200 people from which the people were chosen to fill the Meclis committees and the Executive Council (Hawar News Agency, 2015; Rudaw, 2015; Interview no. 12). The dominant political force behind this effort remains the PKK-linked political party TEVDA (since June 2016 rebranded as the PADÊ). Even at the local level, Meclis members admitted that the bulk of their members are tied either to the PADÊ or are sympathetic to the project of self-rule and self-defence. Meclis flags can be seen flown next to PADÊ flags on the same buildings in the district (author's observations). At the local level, members of the Meclis branch are chosen (non-elected) in town or village meetings by the people living in the area and participating in these efforts.

It is claimed by the Meclis members that their structures are open to everyone, even non-Yazidi figures, which have not in the past fought against Yazidis (for example Interview no. 14). The Arab population which stood against IS (mainly the Shammari tribe living in the western part of the district) cooperates with the PKK-linked forces militarily (Coles, 2016). According to a YBŞ commander, the Baghdad-backed Arab militia, al-Nawadir Force, maintains a good relationship with the YBŞ (Interview no. 13). However, there are no reports indicating that the Meclis would attempt to exercise its administrative activities in these majority-Arab areas in the westernmost part of the district. So far, it seems that the Meclis structures have been largely constituted by the Yezidis (or, as noted earlier, by non-Iraqi figures tied to the PKK). The YBŞ itself remains strongly Yazidi-dominated. The Kurdish Sunni YBŞ fighter Rustum (originally from Sulaimaniyah) disclosed that there some 50 non-Yazidi fighters within the YBŞ (Interview no. 16).

In that sense, it seems that the model of administration follows a similar pattern to Rojava (Sary, 2016; Aldarwish, 2016; Khaddour, 2017), by only allowing for a very limited plurality and having one dominant political force loyal to the PKK's ideology and cause (in this case, the TEVDA in the past and now, the PADÊ). The YBŞ commanders highlighted that they coordinate efforts with the Meclis in monthly meetings and respect the Meclis' decisions (Interview no. 13 & 17). However, other interviewees also disclosed that

the administration remains rather military-dominated with the PKK-linked commanders often calling the shots on strategic decision-making, while some of them are not even Yazidis from Shingal district or from Iraq itself (for example Interview no. 1). In the end, given the strong dependency of the Meclis and the YBŞ on the Rojava administration economically and on the YPG and the HPG militarily it is no surprise that these actors maintain an influence over the administration and armed structures in Shingal district.

On the other hand, the administration seems to be receptive towards the population's needs in terms of service provision. During interviews, Meclis members were revealing their plan for organising elections for offices in the Meclis administrative structures, but it remains to be seen whether the Meclis will be able to pass through the stage of a one-party dominated institution into a more overarching and inclusive administrative and governance structure.

7.5 Gradually Entrenching Rebelocracy

Utilising Arjona's (2014; 2016) typology of insurgent engagement with the population, the YBŞ and the Meclis form a rebelocracy which strikes a social contract with the population, intervenes in the social order, and conducts activities beyond exercising a monopoly on violence. Considering that the Meclis was only created in January 2015, it has already made significant progress in becoming an institutionalised administration in the otherwise largely ungoverned territory in Shingal district.

The Meclis tries to deliver services to the population covering a wide range of issues spanning from food provision, to education, healthcare, and municipal services. Considering that investment into reconstruction and providing services has been sporadic at best both by the KRG and the GoI, such efforts are appealing to the population. According to the deputy head of the Meclis, Khidher Mardos, the Baghdad administration in the town of Shingal and in Sinuni is dominated by the KDP and it does not largely engage in towns under the PKK-linked forces' control, like Khanasor (Interview no. 14). Even in shared control areas such as Borik, interviews suggest that the KDP-dominated administration in Sinuni has been actually doing very little in terms of reconstruction or running day-to-day affairs and providing services to the 3,000-4,000 people now residing in the village (Interview no. 19). Hoshyar Siwaily, head of the KDP Foreign Relations Office, noted that potential conflict prevents people from returning, and the situation does not allow for international organisations to become involved in aiding the area on a larger scale. Moreover, the KRG is facing economic issues which strongly affect the KRG's ability to support the district (Interview no. 9). He also added that the KDP welcomes indigenous administrative initiatives and is keen on working with them, however, they cannot be directly tied to the PKK (*ibid.*).

Applying Mampilly's (2011) framework it can be argued that the governance of the Meclis has become increasingly effective and entrenched despite some continuous shortcomings. It has the means to police the population, including through internal security forces, the Asayish Êzîdxan, although the division between the military and the 'law enforcement' is still developing. There are also some dispute resolution mechanisms in place which aim to partially substitute a lack of access to the court system of the GoI. The Meclis provides public services beyond security despite it only having limited resources and not being able to satisfy all of the needs of the people. The overall system of governance is standardised with a clear division of responsibilities within the Meclis and its local branches in the form of separate committees. Additionally, feedback mechanisms at the local level are in place and participation in Meclis activities or within the YBŞ and the YJÊ is encouraged, which in turn to some extent promotes ownership of the population over the whole project. However, as noted above, important decisions largely remain with the PKK-linked people within the hierarchy. If the maturity and entrenchment of the governance structures built according to the

same ideological blueprint in Rojava are compared to each other, it can be argued that the system in Rojava is more institutionalised and overarching.

Members of the Meclis disclosed in interview that their ambition is to continue to improve the Meclis' capacities and structure. Ultimately, the Meclis wants to play the role of a fully-fledged governorate administration if its goal for Shingal district to become a governorate under the GoI authority to be realised (Interviews no. 12 & 14). The main challenge, however, remains the lack of resources for reconstruction and for sustaining salaries for the administration, especially in the case of more displaced people returning.

8. Explaining the PKK-linked Forces' Contractual Behaviour in Shingal District

8.1 The PKK-linked Forces' Hearts and Minds-Oriented Approach

Interviewees did not mention any systematic coercion over the population. It appears that there are other contextual factors that prompt the PKK to rely on an approach which aims at winning the hearts and minds of the population (Interview no. 1-6). Therefore, the puzzle is why the PKK in general opts for contractual rather than coercive behaviour, even facing the rivalry predominantly with the KDP in Shingal district and how it seems to have considerable popular support among Yazidis despite the KDP being able to provide higher material rewards through its patronage networks in Shingal.

The PKK-linked actors regularly provide the population with humanitarian aid – basic foodstuff shipped in from Rojava - which began in August 2014 but still continues (Interviews no. 1, 14 & 19). It also opened several clinics, one of which is operating in Sardasht in the mountain range (Interviews no. 2 & 12, author's observations). As one interviewee suggested, this aid is not conditional on direct participation in the Meclis structures, membership in a pro-PKK political party, or employment within YBŞ, it even tries to extend this assistance into areas under KRG (or mixed) control. The PKK-linked structures also engage in highly symbolic actions such as handing out flowers to Yazidi families, choosing Wednesday as a free day which is the holy day for Yazidis etc. (Interview no. 1) The Meclis came a long way in providing administrative and public services to the population in a systematic manner, despite, as the Meclis members acknowledged, not having the resources to satisfy all of their needs.

On the other hand, there are reports of recruitment of underage boys and girls into the PKK-linked forces' ranks (Human Rights Watch, 2016b). HRW also describes cases in which the PKK exercised pressure on families who wished to get their children back to their homes. Recruitment of underage youth is naturally frowned upon by Yazidis (Interview no. 1). The PKK's ideology and attempts to spread it leave many Yazidis indifferent and unconvinced by their propaganda since many elements of the radical leftist ideology are alien to Yazidis (such as attempts to convince people to follow the PKK's favoured faith, Zoroastrianism, over Yazidism) (ibid.). In one interview, it was suggested that while there is no systematic coercion, there has been a growing feeling of tension and pressure on Yazidis from the PKK-linked forces (Interview no. 5). Khidher Domle suggested in March 2017 that for the past six months or so, as the situation in the district became tenser the Yazidi population has become more ambivalent. Some disagree for example with imposing the Rojava curricula with the Latin alphabet in schools (Interview no. 2). Other interviews suggested that people have become uneasy with the plans which the PKK has for Shingal district and the mountain which could potentially bring more conflict to the district (Interviews no. 2, 4 & 7). Members of the Meclis and the YBŞ suggested that while they respect Abdullah Öcalan's ideology, they do not wish to implement an exact copy of it in Shingal district (Interviews no. 12 & 14). The underscored focus in the interviews was indeed on

the elements of ideology promoting creating self-defence and self-administration and building upon the experience from Rojava in Shingal district (within the scope of Iraqi law, in coordination with the GoI). As one interviewee noted, a slightly different message is communicated to Yazidis themselves and in the pro-PKK media outlets such as Ronahi TV (Interview no. 2). The message conveyed to Yazidis in meetings and gatherings underlines that the PKK actors are here to help Yazidis with building self-defence and self-administration, nothing will be imposed upon them and ultimately Yazidis will decide their future political and administrative arrangements themselves. However, in the pro-PKK media outlets, it is clearly voiced that they wish to implement the PKK's ideology as a whole (*ibid.*; the consistent message picked up by the author by the PKK-linked written media, such as Rojnews, or ANF).

As established above, the PKK's ideology continues to be totalitarian in nature, leaving only limited space for dissent or opposing ideas (see also Aldarwish, 2016; Khaddour, 2017). The experience on the ground in the PKK-linked administration in Rojava also supports this fact. There are reports of repressive measures towards political opposition (namely the KNC), and forced participation in the PKK-linked structures (ARA News, 2016a; Sary, 2016; Khalaf, 2016; Interview no. 10). Thus, in the longer-term, if the PKK-linked forces would follow a similar pattern over time in Shingal district, it would likely meet with opposition, especially considering that the PKK's radical leftist ideas are contradictory to the traditional and conservative Yazidi society.

The PKK-linked actors have so far largely bet on persuasion to convince people to participate in their governance projects, organising meetings and councils at a local level to ensure that their message is actively communicated to the populace. According to Metelits' (2009) theory on insurgent behaviour, the insurgent groups opt for more coercive behaviour if they find themselves in competition over the same constituency with other actors (whether this is the state or a rival non-state group). In Shingal district, the PKK-linked actors indeed face the KDP as their main rival which has been attempting to renew its grasp over the district and over the population. Moreover, the KDP can potentially offer more material rewards and benefits to Yazidis who (re-) pledge their loyalty to the KRG structures in the district. Additionally, individuals and their families who joined the Meclis, or the YBŞ and the YJÊ face restrictions on their movement to the KRI (to which many Yazidis turn for advanced healthcare, business, studying or simply a more comfortable living) and often even harassment at the hands of the KRG's security apparatus (Interviews no. 3, 7 & 12). At first glance, considering only strictly pragmatic payoffs, it would seem rational for Yazidis to turn to the KRG. But the Meclis, the YBŞ, and other PKK-linked forces seem to have considerable popular support. Many Yazidis remain pragmatic and cases where for example one family sends a son to the YBŞ and another serves with the Peshmerga are not uncommon (Interview no. 1). According to Khidher Mardos, deputy chairman of the Meclis, the KDP offers an employment opportunity if the people cut their ties with Meclis or the YBŞ and it does attract some people, especially those who wish to enter the Peshmerga forces led by the Yazidi commander Qasim Shesho (Interview no. 14). Hoshyar Siwaily, head of the KDP Foreign Relations Office, also noted that over time some 300 YBŞ fighters left its ranks and joined Qasim Shesho's Peshmerga (Interview no. 9).

Elizabeth Wood (2003: 225) suggests that conventional material benefits alone cannot always explain why a significant portion of the population would support an insurgent group. Based on case studies and in depth-field work she asserts that if the population largely views insurgents and their efforts as just and, on the other hand, views insurgents' rivals as unjust actors towards which they harbour major grievance, they opt for supporting insurgents even at significant cost. This seems to be the case in Shingal district. Based on various interviews with Yazidis both in the Shingal district and in Dohuk over the course of the research, it

appears that the project of self-administration and self-defence championed by the PKK-linked structures finds fertile ground among number of Yazidis. This argument can also be supported by the fact that apart from the PKK vision for the area, the KRG offers the only alternative. Its image remains, however, damaged given the shaken trust between the KRG (especially the KDP) and Yazidis and the prevalent idea that Yazidis must from now on rely on themselves.

8. 2 KDP's Heavy-handed Approach

The KDP still appears to rely on its pre-2014 strategy of fostering support among Yazidis by communicating its message through the Yazidi elite in combination with utilising its patronage networks. The message stresses that Shingal district's future lies with the KRI (see for example Ekurd, 2016d). The KDP seems determined to maintain strong influence over the Yazidi leadership and its actions. For example, when the son of the Yazidi spiritual leader Samir Baba Sheikh travelled in January 2017 to Tehran along with some representatives of the YBŞ as a part of the Hashd al-Shaabi delegation, he subsequently apologised for his participation and reaffirmed support for the KRG (Goran, 2017a). At the same time, KDP Yazidi politicians, such as Vian Dakhil strongly criticised the visit (Dolamari, 2017). Hoshyar Siwaily, head of the KDP Foreign Relations Office, however, maintains that the KDP's policy is to give the people a choice in determining the administrative arrangements of the district in the form of a referendum (Interview no. 9).

Simultaneously, a rather heavy-handed approach is pursued through imposing an on-off economic blockade of Shingal district (Human Rights Watch, 2016a). One interviewee noted that while some goods arrive to the district, even to the PKK-linked forces'-controlled areas, it is restricted and certain goods such as medical supplies are not allowed to go through (Interview no. 1; see also Niqash, 2016; Ekurd, 2016b). One Meclis official also suggested that while there is some dependency on the KRI, trade is very problematic since who is able to ship certain goods to the district basically depends on contacts with and bribery of the KDP officials (Interview no. 12). There have been reports of harassment of people who joined the YBŞ and their families, also Meclis representatives are barred from entering the KRI, or their families are harassed if they remain in the KRI (Interviews no. 3, 7 & 12; see also van den Toorn, 2016).

It was mentioned that Yazidis question their secular and religious leaderships' authority due to the continuous advocacy for the KRG despite the events of August 2014 (Interview no. 8). One interviewee, however, noted that respect for these leaders is still present, albeit at a lower level than prior to 2014 (Interview no. 7). One respondent's perspective was that the relationship between the community and the Yazidi secular and religious leadership (and the KRG) was rather one of a pragmatic nature since, as noted earlier, siding with these brings significant material benefits for the population (Interview no. 1; see also ICG, 2009: 32-33).

Another instance of the KDP's coercive approach is the case of Haidar Shesho and his Yazidi Protection Force (HPÊ, in Kurdish, Hêza Parastina Êzîdxanê)¹⁷. Haidar was tied to the PUK and his project was for a while backed by Baghdad. At the same time he coordinated his efforts with the YBŞ and the to-be Meclis (Interview no. 3 & 12). He advocated for creating an indigenous self-defence force for Yazidis, for which, according to one interview, he tried to get support both from the KRG and the GoI, while the latter was more receptive to his project (Interview no. 12). However, in April 2015 Haydar Shesho was briefly detained by KDP security forces. Upon his release, Haydar denounced his ties to Baghdad and announced that he would not maintain a militia outside of the control of the Ministry of Peshmerga (Kavâlek, 2016). Since then, Haydar's militia has had a rather limited presence on the ground. While he still promotes building a Yazidi force, he noted in a conference in Sulaymaniyah on 8 March that this force must be within the

¹⁷ His force was originally established in the summer of 2014 as the Shingal Protection Force (HPŞ, Hêza Parastina Şingal) but was renamed the HPÊ in November 2015 (Ezidi Press, 2015).

Ministry of Peshmerga (Shesho, 2017). In March 2017, it was announced that some 1,000 HPÊ fighters were officially incorporated into Peshmerga structures (Goran, 2017b). Haidar is also a nephew of Qasim Shesho, senior commander of Yazidi units within the KDP Peshmerga. Interviewees widely believed that Haidar Shesho was coerced by the KDP, and his sudden change of position following his detention by the KDP security forces evades alternative explanation (for example Interview no. 3).

Yazidi KDP member, Sheikh Shamo, underlined that the PKK is the “biggest threat to Yazidis” (Interview no. 6). He further added that Yazidis are simple people and believed the PKK, but that now that they have seen their true face they are have reservations towards their presence. Also, he asserted that the PKK deliberately used the shock following Peshmerga withdrawal and the feeling of danger in propaganda while fostering support for its cause (ibid.). In another interview, it was also suggested that the PKK is tapping into the suffering of Yazidis to craft an image of betrayal by the KRG (Interview no. 5). One way or another, the PKK-linked forces seem to be winning the battle for the hearts and minds of the Yazidi population and while many have are not deeply convinced by the whole PKK’s ideology, the grievance felt towards the KRG and especially the KDP is strong and deep-seated. Moreover, recent developments during March 2017 further tarnished the KDP’s reputation. An attempt to take Khanasor by force while using the KDP-controlled Syrian Kurdish force the Rojava Peshmerga (RP) was strongly criticised even by politically unaligned Yazidis (various interviews with Yazidis in Shingal district, March 2017; on the event itself, see Kaválek, 2017). The RP are viewed by Yazidis as a foreign force and the move was seen as an attempt (pushed for by Turkey) to dislodge the PKK-linked forces from the district, thus sacrificing the well-being of the Yazidi population in pursuit of the KDP’s interests in Rojava (ibid.; Interview no. 7; various interviews with Yazidi population in Shingal district in March 2017).

Ultimately, given the strong grievances against the KDP, and the coercive approach that it employs, the KDP does not seem to be a serious competitor for the hearts and minds of the Yazidi population, at least for now. Expert on minorities in Iraq, Khidher Domle, was convinced that the trust in the KRG can be gradually restored, especially if the district is engaged by the KRG as a whole and not largely unilaterally by the KDP (Interview no. 2). A hearts and minds oriented strategy combined with investments in the district should occur. One interviewee added that prior to 2014, many Yazidis were receptive towards being engaged with the KRI, and with the worsening security situation in Mosul and Nineveh in general, the district had stronger ties to the KRI (Interview no. 3, also no. 7 & 12). He further asserted that most people do not support the PKK ideology and its structures in their totality but rather see it as the best option available. Interviews with people from the Meclis revealed that while the trust is broken with the KRG, the KRG does not even try to communicate a similar message to Baghdad regarding enabling Yazidis to have self-defence and self-administration forces. Currently, they believe that Baghdad is much more receptive and can offer a better deal, guaranteed by the Iraqi law and the Constitution, while the KRI does not even have an approved constitution or laws enabling autonomy (Interviews no. 12 & 14).

9. Competing Interests in Shingal District

The following sections outline competing interests in Shingal district against a background of wider regional competition between local and regional actors. The dynamics in Shingal district are influenced by the wider security and political dynamics in the region. Brief analysis of these dynamics provides a necessary basis for producing realistic policy recommendations in the conclusion.

9.1 Camp 1: The KDP and Turkey

The KRG (and especially the KDP) has invested a considerable amount of energy into bringing the district of Shingal under its de facto control since 2003. Prior to 2014, KDP's grasp over the district was largely unchallenged by the central government or other political actors. After August 2014, the KDP's authority in recaptured territories was challenged by the PKK's increasing presence on the ground including the creation of its own administration, and security forces. The district of Shingal is a prized area overseeing the border with Syria with a highly defensible mountain range, thus the KRG, the GoI, and the PKK wish to play a role there (or the latter two at least want to provide a counterweight to KRG's strong influence). The KDP opposes the PKK's presence and ideas of self-administration and self-defence for Yazidis which would effectively mean downgrading KDP's grasp over Shingal district.

Turkey's main challenge in its vicinity is the expansion of the PKK, which has been able to fill the vacuum in northern Syria and establish its own administrative system. Moreover, the PKK-linked forces have gained significant public sympathy in the international arena due to their fight against IS in Syria and improved their standing by balancing their cooperation and relationship with the US, the Syrian regime, Russia, and Iran (see Clawson, ed. 2016). Meanwhile, Turkey hopes that the new Trump administration will divert from its support to the PKK-linked forces, but it seems that the latest Turkish visit in the US bore no fruit (Zaman, 2017a; Daily Sabah, 2017). The Trump administration continues to back the SDF and its advance in IS' Syrian stronghold, Raqqa (Balanche, 2017; Kajjo, 2017). Turkey repeatedly voiced concerns about the PKK's activities in Shingal district and threatened to intervene in October and again in December 2016, since in Turkish president Erdoğan's words, Ankara will not allow for Shingal to become a second Qandil (PKK's long-term base in the mountain in the KRI) (Ugurulu, 2016; Ekurd, 2016c). On 26 April 2017, Turkish warplanes conducted air raids which targeted bases and facilities of the PKK-linked forces in the district (Rudaw, 2017c). Ankara fears that the entrenched PKK presence in Shingal district would further bolster its position in the region and provide another mountainous safe haven from which it would be difficult to dislodge. Moreover, Turkey, further to its long-term bases in the KRI (Kasapoglu & Cagaptay, 2015), established a military base in Bashiqa, north of Mosul in late 2014 (Ali & van den Toorn, 2015). The Turkish deployment has repeatedly been a source of friction between the Iraqi government and Ankara. In this regard, Turkey's interest in dislodging the PKK from Shingal district overlaps with KDP's desire to keep a decisive grasp over the district and the Yazidi population, which the PKK directly challenges (see also Kaválek & Manis, 2016).

9. 2 Camp 2: The PKK-linked Forces, the GoI, the PUK, and Iran

The PKK-linked forces seized a window of opportunity in 2014. They quickly recruited Shingali Yazidis into their ranks and in general they have pursued building governance and administrative structures that go beyond their armed presence on the ground. Such efforts dedicated to building a presence and fostering popular support among Yazidis indicate that the PKK aims for a long-term presence in Shingal district. The PKK-linked forces argue that they are assisting Yazidis with building autonomy and self-defence in the Shingal district in order to protect the population, which has been the main rationale behind its stay (see ANF Türkçe, 2015; Ekurd, 2016a; ANF, 2017; Interview no. 1).

Controlling the Shingal mountain range and its surroundings enables control of routes to Syria and ultimately serves as a 'back-up safe haven'. The PKK are also successfully playing the role of the 'saviour of Yazidis', undermining the position of the KRG, especially the KDP, and further boosting sympathies abroad for their project. The PKK's leadership, including Murat Karayilan, denied that the PKK was planning to establish a 'second Qandil' in the Shingal mountain range in late December 2016 arguing that it is geographically unsuitable for such efforts (Rudaw, 2016b). However, evidence gathered from various interviews (Interviews no. 1, 2 & 4) suggests that significant efforts to build a more permanent presence in the mountain range have been underway, including construction of bases and caves (Interview no. 3; author's observations). Secondly, some interviewees noted that the mountain itself is highly complex, with many parts hard to reach and numerous caves (Interviews no. 3 & 6), which, as established by classical counterinsurgency theorists such as David Galula, indeed makes it a suitable safe haven for insurgents (Galula, 1964).

The GoI has not directly challenged the KDP's growing influence in Shingal district in the post-2003 period. However, it has still maintained its armed and political presence in the district. While Baghdad faces pressing security challenges it does not mean that it has no interest in claiming authority in disputed areas, the district of Shingal included. On the contrary, the Iraqi Shia leadership extends sympathetic messages to the Yazidi community and meets with representatives of the YBŞ and the Meclis (Interview no. 4 & 7; for Grand Ayatollah Sistani's support for Yazidis see for example Ijtihad, 2014). Baghdad views the PKK's political efforts as a useful counterweight to the KRG's influence over Shingal district. The level of communication between the Iraqi Shia leadership and the PKK itself increased after the Syrian war started according to an ICG report (ICG, 2015). Baghdad's interests regarding Shingal district are backed by Iran for its own national security reasons (i.e. preventing break-up of Iraq) (see also Kaválek & Manis, 2016: 4-5).

We might also argue that the PUK (not only in Shingal district) at least partially falls into the second camp of actors whose interests in the region considerably overlap along with Baghdad, Iran, and even the PKK, especially during the current political deadlock with the KDP which complicated the relationship between the PUK and the KDP. The PUK has maintained a good relationship with the GoI and Iran and has a comparably better relationship with the PKK than the KDP (see also ICG, 2015).

9.3 The United States

The US is trying to maintain its partnership with Turkey and the KRG while at the same time backing the PKK-linked forces of the SDF in Syria which have gradually become the principal US-backed actors on the ground in Syria against IS. It is important to note that while the PKK is according to the US a designated terrorist entity, its Syrian offshoot is consistently not regarded as such (US Department of State, 2017; Martin & Kozak, 2016). Ongoing discussion centres on whether the US will further back the SDF with more advanced and heavier weaponry including larger scale deployment of US troops to assist the SDF in the Raqqa operation (Al-Jazeera, 2017; Gordon & Barnard, 2017; van Zoonen, 2016). So far it seems that Trump's administration continues to financially and militarily support the PKK's affiliate in Syria, the YPG, despite Turkey continuously objecting to this relationship and pushing for its own operation against IS in Raqqa while excluding the YPG-dominated SDF (Al-Monitor, 2017).

On the other hand, US officials responded to the KDP's and Turkey's concerns regarding the PKK-linked forces in the region by highlighting that according to the US "the PKK should play no role in Shingal" and that the US believes that its presence prevents reconstruction and normalisation (ARA News, 2016b). At the same time, the US appears to be in favour of renewed negotiations between the KDP-backed Syrian Kurdish opposition Kurdish National Council (KNC) and the PKK-linked administration in Syria. On 27 February, a delegation of KNC leaders, including its chairman Ibrahim Biro, arrived in Washington for talks on Rojava Peshmerga return to Syria (ARA News, 2017). A power-sharing agreement between the two would also placate Turkey which views KDP as its ally (and the KNC is backed by the KDP), even more so if the KDP-backed Syrian Kurdish force, the Rojava Peshmerga, could move back to Syria as a result. Such a move is strongly opposed by the PKK-linked administration in Rojava. However, it seems that the US has opted for backing the SDF and refuses to support RP's return to Syria for now.

10. Concluding Remarks and the Way Forward

The presence of the PKK-linked forces and its governance structures has become considerably entrenched and has found reasonable popular support on the ground. In Arjona's (2014) words, the pursued model of governance is rebelocracy which occurs when insurgents go beyond merely keeping a monopoly on violence and instead insurgents broadly intervene in the social order and provide services. The Meclis with its local branches has become the principal conceptual vehicle for the PKK-linked actors' governance and administrative efforts. The dominant political party the PADÊ was established in June 2016 as a more inclusive successor of the TEVDA with an aim of becoming the main political party (largely) following Öcalan's ideology and being eligible for registration in Baghdad and thus to compete in elections. It also opts for contractual behaviour rather than systematic coercion of the population and capitalises on its image as a 'saviour of Yazidis'.

The key finding is that PKK-established structures are increasingly entrenched in Shingal and it is unlikely that their support will suddenly diminish. The PKK-linked forces' presence in Shingal is a new reality which should be taken into consideration when forming post-war political arrangements in the area rather than being downplayed or denied.

The Meclis, the YBŞ and the YJÊ claim to pursue their goals of self-defence and self-administration within the scope of Iraqi law, whilst aiming at upgrading the status of Shingal district to a governorate. The YBŞ is also registered as a legitimate part of the Hashd al-Shaabi. However, the presence of the PKK-linked armed actors in Shingal district, especially the YPG and the HPG and their female wings, continues to create friction with their enemies in the region, namely Turkey. The KDP also considers the PKK-linked forces as their long-term rivals and additionally wishes for Shingal district to be part of the KRI or at least to renew its monopoly in the district as prior to 2014. Thus, the Meclis' and the YBŞ' efforts and their contact with Baghdad are clashing with the KRG's and in particular the KDP's interest. As noted in the interviews, these efforts are also coordinated with representatives of Turkmen from Tal Afar and Christians from the Nineveh Plains as the Meclis wishes to ideally form a federal region consisting of these three governorates (Interview no. 14). On 3 March 2017, the joint statement of representatives of these groups was issued calling for the creation of such a unit named the 'al-Rafidein Region' (Al-Rafidein Coalition, 2017; see also Salloum, 2017).

Competition between the PKK-linked forces and the KDP already experienced its first violent manifestation on 3 March 2017, when the KDP-affiliated forces attempted to enter the town of Khanasor which is under the PKK-linked forces control. In the meantime, tensions remain high. Given the complex situation and the competing interests of various actors over Shingal and its wider vicinity, including in other disputed territories and Syria, there is little promise that the situation will become stable and an overarching agreement clarifying the situation in Shingal district will be reached anytime soon. The most likely scenario is that Shingal district will remain a disputed territory, posing a fault line for the foreseeable future. The situation will continue to be blurry and both the KRG and the GoI will be reluctant to seriously commit to reconstruction and the improvement of the Yazidi population's situation.

In the current complex environment, the best case scenario would include at least partial demilitarisation of the situation in the district while shifting the competition for the population between the GoI, the PKK-linked forces and the KRG into a non-violent domain, instead focusing on trying to win the hearts and minds of the population. Competition which aims to do this, rather than trying to dominate the area in security terms, is a preferable shift of approach. The KRG, the PKK-linked forces and the GoI should

pursue an agreement under which both sides accept that normalisation and demilitarisation of the situation in Shingal district could be achieved through legal competition short of violence. Competition within the scope of Iraqi law with an aim of generating as much genuine popular support as possible in the upcoming elections in Iraq is the way forward. In the long-term, the PKK-linked forces should engage in democratic electoral competition with the KRG and aim for integration into governance and administrative structures as per Iraqi law. Both sides could then work on improving their standing electorally. The subsequent electoral gains can then be used in the future by the competing actors as a strong argument for pursuing their visions for Shingal district.

11. Recommendations

The following recommendations to relevant local and international actors aim at promoting the stabilisation of Shingal district and, in general, the well-being of the Yazidi population. The main argument is that if the local players (the GoI and the KRG, mainly the KDP) wish to keep a foothold in the district they must in the end convince the Yazidi population of the benefits of such a relationship and restrain from coercive measures in order to ensure their standing in the area in the long-term. Given that the most likely scenario is that the district will remain disputed for the foreseeable future and an area in which competing interests between the GoI, the KRG, the PKK, Turkey and Iran are manifested, the situation in the area is likely to be uncertain.

One potential undesirable outcome would be a series of military confrontations between the local actors with a goal of fully taking over control of Shingal district, which would be at the expense of the Yazidi population, they would further destabilise not only the situation in the district but also most likely provoke wider regional confrontation. Such an armed conflict would likely involve a level of support from actors like Turkey, the GoI, Iran and even the US. Moreover, such a move would also severely tarnish their reputation both abroad and domestically.

Instead a non-violent approach, aiming at winning genuine local support within the scope of Iraqi law should be adopted. Ultimately, the status of Shingal district as a disputed territory should be resolved in an agreement with both the GoI and the KRG. As a by-product, the situation of the Yazidi population on the ground could improve and they may benefit from the local and national actors engaging in competition for their hearts and minds even if the status of the district remains unresolved.

To the KDP:

1. The KDP should acknowledge the current reality in Shingal district and that the PKK-established governance structure played an important role in stabilising the district in the 2014-2017 period. Even if the YPG and the HPG would disengage from the district, their political presence which also stems from popular support would most likely continue.
2. The KDP should take into account that open armed confrontation would tarnish its reputation abroad and among the Kurdish population and further lose its standing among the Yazidis. Instead, the KDP should start building confidence via credible steps towards demilitarisation and engagement in constructive dialogue.
3. In the short-term, the KDP should:
 - refrain from deploying the Rojava Peshmerga in the Yazidi-populated centres to increase pressure on the PKK-linked forces in Rojava. Such moves drag competition between the KDP and the PKK in Syria into the Shingal equation.
 - refrain from engaging in negative publicity against the PKK-linked actors and approach them in negotiations for a non-violent political settlement.
 - engage in genuine dialogue with the PKK-linked actors and the GoI in order to demilitarise the situation.
4. In the mid-term, the KDP should be open to seeking an agreement between the PKK-linked forces, the GoI and the KRG (ideally further guaranteed by international actors) on demilitarisation of the situation and transforming the competition into a non-violent one within the scope of the law in the electoral arena.
5. The KDP should carefully consider the problem of its popularity among Yazidis. Continuation of the post-2003 strategy of crafting patronage networks and providing personal material benefits to win support among Yazidis can hardly successfully continue. Instead it should target the community as a whole in a hearts and minds-oriented strategy. Such a commitment and real steps to improve the Yazidi situation and the overall economic situation in the district itself can help in regaining the trust and support of the Yazidi population.
6. In the long-term, once an agreement is reached, the KDP should support fair and genuine political competition.

To the PKK:

The PKK and its affiliated groups should reciprocate the confidence building and demilitarisations steps that were recommended to the KDP.

7. The PKK leadership should take into account that a larger-scale armed confrontation in Shingal district would end up harming Yazidis and damage the favourable image it has managed to build since 2011. It could end up losing public support in the international arena as well as popularity and support among the Kurds in the region. Indeed, Kurdish infighting (birakuji) is highly unpopular and the PKK would hardly be able to uphold a convincing message to an audience beyond its sympathisers that the blame for escalation rests only with its opponents.

8. In the short-term, the PKK should:

- engage in negotiations with the KRG with an aim of demilitarising the situation in the district.
- be open to compromise on power-sharing and engage actively in seeking a pathway which address mutual interests with other stakeholders.
- encourage peaceful and negotiation-based settlements and call on its own linked actors to refrain from engaging in negative publicity.

9. In the mid-term, the PKK should provide a clear time framework for disengagement of the HPG and the YPG from Shingal district. An agreement should be reached between the PKK-linked forces, the GoI and the KRG (ideally further guaranteed by international actors) on demilitarisation of the situation and competition within the scope of the law in the electoral arena.

10. In the long-term, it should be made clear that the PKK-linked actors want to be ultimately integrated into legal, political and governance structures in the district. It should gain popular support and exercise its influence through electoral competition within the scope of the law.

11. Ultimately, the PKK leadership only have limited resources at their disposal to commit to reconstruction or the economic and infrastructure improvement which is much needed in the long-neglected district. The PKK-linked actors' efforts could be undermined by not improving economic and living conditions in the district. After all, the district of Shingal has been increasingly engaged with the KRI in terms of trade, education, healthcare and business opportunities since 2003. Without a good working relationship with the KRG, the population of the district would further suffer from being cut off from KRI cities and.

To the Meclis and the YBŞ/YJÊ:

The PKK-linked Meclis and the YBŞ have their responsibilities on the ground to make sure Shingal remains stable and avoids deepening conflicts. They played a crucial role in normalisation in the district after 2014, providing much-needed services and governance. However, to build confidence and demonstrate good will, they should:

12. pursue integration into political and governance structures in the district within the scope of Iraqi law rather than their institutions running in parallel to the district administration.

13. pursue building their administrative and governance structures within the scope of Iraqi law and in coordination with the GoI and the KRG.

14. negotiate with the KRG and prepare for the departure of YPG's, HPG's and their female wings. This will help the situation in the district to head in the right direction for demilitarisation and moreover for political and peaceful competition between the various local and national actors. Moreover, the risk of intervention from Turkey and possible subsequent counteraction by Iran or the GoI would be lowered.
15. work towards promoting integration of other ethnic and religious groups (namely Sunni Arabs and Kurds) in their structures (as per Iraqi law) to boost their legitimacy and inclusiveness.
16. realise that without at least a working relationship with the KRG, the district of Shingal can hardly be economically sustained since it is closely interconnected with the KRI.

To the PUK:

The PUK should:

17. capitalise on its relatively good relationship with the PKK, the GoI and Iran, and use its communication channels to promote negotiations between the local actors.
18. promote a joint approach to the district for a lasting solution. In this way, the PUK can boost KRG's credibility in approaching Shingal district. The PUK is a partner of the KDP in the KRG and it should

To Turkey:

19. If Shingal district's status is upgraded to a governorate under the authority of the Federal government, there is little reason for the YPG and the HPG to remain in Shingal district. The disengagement of the YPG and the HPG should, at least partially, address Turkey's concerns.
20. In the short-term, Ankara should restrain from further escalating tensions militarily which would most likely lead to a regional conflict with both GoI and Iranian forces participating.

To the US:

The US has already been engaged, sending signals to both that it does not wish for confrontation. If the US wishes their allies on the ground to focus on combatting IS and stabilisation rather than clashing with each other, these efforts should be intensified. They should:

21. use its leverages and mediate between the KDP, PKK-linked forces and GoI for a deal since all these parties are the US' principal anti-IS allies in the region.
22. serve as an acceptable guarantor of a negotiated agreement over Shingal district between these actors. Yazidis themselves view the US as a suitable guarantor of such an overarching agreement.
23. give assurances to Turkey that its concerns regarding limiting the PKK-linked forces' presence in Shingal district are addressed.

To the GoI:

24. The GoI should engage in negotiations about special arrangements for Shingal district and ultimately resolving its disputed status. At the same time, it should provide a clearer time-specific plan for this endeavour. In the long-term, it should properly implement the law on decentralisation and subsequent legislature.

25. The PKK-linked actors seem keen on pursuing their project within the scope of Iraqi law and remain under central government authority which gives Baghdad a considerable upper hand over the disputed district of Shingal compared to the pre-2014 period. However, it should in parallel also provide adequate resources and investments in order to promote reconstruction and economic stabilisation of the district.

26. It should also be aware that the district of Shingal has become closely interconnected with the KRI and cutting this contact would undermine overall well-being in the district. Therefore, it should seek an agreement with the KRG which would allow for maintaining this connection.

List of Interviews

Interview no. 1: anonymous interview with a politically unaffiliated Yazidi activist, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

Interview no. 2: Khidher Domle, expert on minorities in Iraq, 17 February 2017, Erbil.

Interview no. 3: anonymous interview with a politically unaffiliated Yazidi from the Shingal district, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

Interview no. 4: Jamil Khidher, Yazidi PUK leader in Shingal district, 23 February 2017, Dohuk.

Interview no. 5: anonymous interview with a Yazidi with links to the KDP, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

Interview no. 6: Sheikh Shamo, Yazidi KDP leader, 23 February 2017, Dohuk.

Interview no. 7: anonymous interview with three politically unaffiliated Yazidis from Shingal district, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

Interview no. 8: Nasir Kiret, Yazidi activist from Shariyah, 24 February 2017, Dohuk.

Interview no. 9: Hoshyar Siwaily, head of the KDP Foreign Relations Office, 30 March 2017, Erbil.

Interview no. 10: anonymous interview with humanitarian worker, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

Interview no. 11: anonymous interview with two politically unaffiliated Yazidis from Shingal district, September 2016-March 2017, the KRI.

Interview no. 12: Khalaf Salih Faris, director of public relations of the Meclis, 14 March 2017, Sardasht.

Interview no. 13: Dijwar Faqir, spokesman of the YBŞ, 14 March 2017, town of Shingal.

Interview no. 14: Khidher Mardos, deputy chairman of the Meclis, 15 March 2017. Khanasor.

Interview no. 15: Haji Hassan, member of the PADÊ, 15 March 2017, Khanasor.

Interview no. 16: Rustum, Kurdish Sunni YBŞ fighter, 15 March 2017, Khanasor.

Interview no. 17: Sardasht Şengalî, senior commander of the YBŞ, 15 March 2017, Khanasor.

Interview no. 18: Jîyan Êzîdxan, commander of the YJÊ, 15 March 2017, Khanasor.

Interview no. 19: Hussein Haji Nevso, head of the Meclis in Borik, 15 March, 2017, Borik.

Interview no. 20: anonymous interview with a journalist, undated.

Interview no. 21: Dave van Zoonen, MERI researcher conducting research on Yazidis, Erbil.

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