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THE COMPETITION FOR CONTROL IN SINJAR

HOW EXTERNAL ACTORS AND LOCAL
INTERESTS INHIBIT THE SINJAR AGREEMENT

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The Competition for Control in Sinjar: How External Actors and Local Interests Inhibit the Sinjar Agreement

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Abstract

Located in western Iraq's Nineveh Governorate, Sinjar is arguably the most volatile of the country's territories, disputed between the Government of Iraq (GoI) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). In 2020, the GoI and the KRG signed the Sinjar Agreement in a bid to stabilise the district, but it is yet to be implemented. This paper examines the factors that have contributed to upholding the status quo in Sinjar, thus preventing change through the implementation of the provisions of the Sinjar Agreement. It argues that generating change has been made difficult by intense competition between local, national and regional actors seeking to control Sinjar. While the implementation of the Agreement is difficult under the current conditions, the Iraqi government and the international community are advised to take measures to reduce the security and governance challenges faced by the people of Sinjar as a result of the continuing status quo.

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Executive Summary

Iraq's contested district of Sinjar has remained volatile years after its liberation from ISIS in 2015. While parts of the district still lie in ruins, large sections of the population of Sinjar live as Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs) in the Kurdish Region of Iraq. Since October 2017, there has been a government vacuum in Sinjar, with those elected locally operating from the neighbouring Duhok Governorate. Sinjar is also extensively militarised with large numbers of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), as well as armed militias aligned with national and transnational actors, operating in the area. This militarisation, which has resulted in intermittent violence and invited Turkish air attacks, has created deep insecurities for Sinjar's residents and prevented IDPs from returning. A 2020 agreement between the Government of Iraq (GoI) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), dubbed the Sinjar Agreement, concerned with stabilising Sinjar and returning IDPs, has not yet been implemented.

With a focus on the period since Prime Minister Muhammed Shia' Sudani came to power, this study examines the factors that have prevented the implementation of the Sinjar Agreement and thus the stabilisation of Sinjar. It argues that an intense competition for control among influential national and transnational actors has continued to prevent attempts to stabilise the area. The fate of Sinjar is entangled with political, economic and geostrategic interests of national and regional actors that the GoI under Sudani holds little leverage over. Therefore, it is too optimistic to believe the Sudani government will be able to alter security and political dynamics in Sinjar in the direction of stability in the near future and on the basis of this agreement.

The study proposes the following recommendations for influencing the security, governance and reconstruction dynamics in Sinjar towards stability:

1. Advocate for integrating fighters of the local militia groups aligned with the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) in the federal security forces. Fighters from the Sinjar Protection Units (YBS) and Ezidخان Security – militia groups made up of Iraqi citizens from Sinjar – should be given the option of joining the ISF which comprises of the army, police and other federal security agencies. This step comes with the risk of those fighters maintaining ties with the PKK while operating within formal Iraqi security institutions, but there are greater risks associated with leaving the current situation to continue with PKK-aligned groups operating independently or through loose alliances with the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) and Iran. If the Iraqi government is interested in avoiding further violence at the cost of its legitimacy and the stability of Sinjar, it has to accept the risk of integrating fighters with ideological affinity to a transnational insurgent group. The Iraqi government will have leverage to disassociate members of the YBS and Ezidخان Security from the PKK when these fighters are part of an Iraqi security institution.
2. Work on filling the government vacuum by forming a local power sharing government. Effective provision of public services in Sinjar depends on re-establishing public authority in the district. The Iraqi government and interested members of the international community should double down on their efforts to form a local government inclusive of representatives of all local factions and communities. A local power sharing arrangement may prove fragile and prone to corruption but will be a better alternative to the continuation of the current power vacuum.
3. Establish oversight mechanisms in order to ensure funds allocated to Sinjar are not going to be wasted on corruption and party capture. The Baghdad government needs to form oversight bodies comprising members of parliament, community leaders, local NGOs and media to monitor reconstruction and project implementation alongside members of Nineveh's provincial council elected during the December 2023 provincial elections. This may help in ensuring funds allocated to the reconstruction of Sinjar will not be captured by influential actors and their local affiliates seeking economic and political gains in the district.

Introduction

During an event commemorating the ninth anniversary of ISIS's genocidal attack on Sinjar's Yazidi community on 3 August 2023, the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Nechirvan Barzani, called for the implementation of the Sinjar Agreement between the Government of Iraq (GoI) and the KRG. Barzani stated that the implementation of the agreement 'will pave the way for the return of the Internally Displaced People (IDPs) to Sinjar' (Rudaw, 2023). Barzani is also the first vice president of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the dominant party in the KRG, that led the negotiations culminating in the Sinjar Agreement, which has so far not been implemented (Snell, 2020).

Located in the West of Iraq's Nineveh Governorate, Sinjar is arguably the most volatile part of the country's territories, disputed between the GoI and the KRG. Almost eight years since its liberation from ISIS in 2015, large sections of Sinjar's population still live as IDPs in Iraqi Kurdistan's Duhok Governorate. There has been a government vacuum in Sinjar since October 2017, while large parts of Sinjar's central district – destroyed during the fight against ISIS – still lies in ruins. Sinjar is also extensively militarised, with large numbers of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) as well as armed militias tied to the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) and the KDP operating in the area. The PKK's presence and influence in Sinjar has invited Turkish air attacks targeting the PKK's local allies as well as infrastructure such as hospitals, adding to the suffering and insecurity of its civilians (Amina & Lena, 2023).

The KDP leadership is growing frustrated with the GoI's failure to enforce the Sinjar Agreement, that government officials in Baghdad formally committed to. During his term in power between 2020 and 2022, Iraq's former Prime Minister, Mustafa Kadhimi, enforced little of the agreement's administrative, security and reconstruction provisions (International Crisis Group, 2022). Kadhimi's successor, Prime Minister Muhammed Shia' Sudani, has repeatedly confirmed his government's commitment to the implementation of the Sinjar Agreement in coordination with the KRG since he assumed power in October 2022 (Saleem, 2023). But there have been little changes to the security, political and governance dynamics on the ground in Sinjar more than a year after Sudani assumed office.

This paper examines the factors that have contributed to upholding the status quo in Sinjar, thus preventing change through the implementation of the provisions of the Sinjar Agreement. It argues that generating change has been made difficult by intense competition between local, national and regional actors seeking to control Sinjar. Findings are based on interviews with a wide range of political and government actors, as well as community leaders and independent observers from Sinjar. All interviewees are anonymised for safety reasons. The study also benefited from information and ideas about the conflict in Sinjar found in Arabic, Kurdish and writing found in international media as well as in policy reports.

The Politics of the Sinjar Agreement

Through the Sinjar Agreement, the GoI and KRG sought to jointly address Sinjar's security, administrative and infrastructural issues by re-establishing public authority, devising a new security arrangement and embarking on reconstruction processes in the district.¹ Officials from both governments claimed that the agreement would prepare the ground for the return of the IDPs to Sinjar, (Shafaq, 2020) but why has an agreement aimed at achieving stability and serving citizens' interests not yet been implemented?

Simply put, the agreement has faced serious political obstacles in its implementation because it seeks to alter the balance of power in a district intensely contested by the PMF, the PKK, and the KDP. The PMF and the PKK, effectively in control of Sinjar since 2017, have viewed the agreement as a political instrument in the hands of the KDP to regain control in the district at their expense. Both actors have, therefore, used their influence on the ground and in Baghdad to prevent the implementation of the agreement, specifically through the PMF who enjoy strong backing of influential Shi'a parties and factions.

In the wake of the KRG's ill-fated referendum in 2017, the KDP was removed from Sinjar and left with little influence on the ground. But the administrative, security and governance provisions of the agreement provided the KDP with potential opportunities and tools to gradually regain influence. By all accounts, the Sinjar Agreement was unlikely to materialise in the post-2017 period. For the first time since 2003, the GoI was able to impose control over Iraq's disputed territories with no intention of allowing the KDP/KRG to re-emerge as an influential actor in those territories.

But two factors made the unlikely agreement possible. The first was pressure by influential members of the international community on the GoI to stabilise Sinjar in coordination with the KDP, and return the IDPs to the district. The largest numbers of Sinjar's IDPs are from the districts Yezidis brought to global attention due to ISIS's genocidal campaign on the religious minority in 2014. The US, UK, UN Assistance Mission for Iraq and significant European powers felt obliged to help the Yezidis by demanding the GoI ensure the safe return of the community to their home district. This concentration of the largest numbers of IDPs in Iraqi Kurdistan's Duhok province under the KDP/KRG has provided the latter with leverage and relevance in the return process and in the future of Sinjar.

The second factor that helped the agreement was the presence of former Prime Minister Kadhimi, with whom the KDP leadership maintained close ties. The KDP used Kadhimi's term in office as an opportunity to conclude the Sinjar Agreement in order to advance its interests in Sinjar. The KDP, for instance, preferred a security arrangement for Sinjar in which the federal security agencies rather than armed groups of its rivals among the PMF and the PKK were in control of the district. While it did not order the return of the KDP/KRG *peshmerga* forces to the district, the agreement called for removing armed groups aligned with the PKK and the PMF from Sinjar and replacing them with federal security forces (Snell, 2020). Aware of the KDP's political designs, the pro-Iran PMF factions and the PKK stood against the agreement (Emirates Policy Centre, 2020).

¹ An Arabic version of the Sinjar Agreement can be read here: 'Document: text of agreement for stabilising and normalising conditions in Sinjar', *Rudaw*, 10 October 2020, [Arabic]. Available at: <https://www.rudawarabia.net/arabic/kurdistan/1010202008>

The Competition for Sinjar

In essence, the struggle between the PMF, the PKK and the KDP for Sinjar has hindered the implementation of the Sinjar Agreement and the stabilisation of the district. But what makes Sinjar so valuable for these actors? Those involved in the struggle for Sinjar value the district for strategic, political and economic reasons. Sinjar sits at a strategic crossroads between Iraq, Syria and Turkey (International Crisis Group, 2018). Sinjar's location is particularly significant for the pro-Iran PMF groups and the PKK. The district allows the pro-Iran PMF factions² and their allies in Tehran to move weapons and fighters to Syria and Lebanon, where Iran and its allies among Iraq's Shi'a militia factions back the Assad regime and Lebanon's Hezbollah (Weiss, 2021). The PMF sees Sinjar as a military transit route, in part due to the fact that their existing access to Syria via Anbar province has been exposed and increasingly come under US air attacks (Tastekin, 2022).

Sinjar holds similar strategic value for the PKK which purports to fight the Turkish government on behalf of Turkey's sizable Kurdish population. Control over Sinjar allows the PKK to connect its areas of operation in the northern parts of Syria and Iraq to the southern borders of Turkey, providing the PKK with a strategic advantage over Ankara (Jameel, 2020). Given the strategic significance of the area to this insurgent group, the PKK is unlikely to abandon its control over Sinjar without major violence. In 2022, for instance, the PKK responded violently to the GoI's decision to build a wall in the border area between Sinjar and Syria, an attempt to cut ties between the group's allies on both sides of the border (Salm, 2022).

Sinjar has also constituted a source of finances for the PMF and the PKK through illegal cross-border smuggling and trade. Both groups have controlled informal crossings along the border area between Sinjar and Syria which has witnessed an increase in smugglings of food, livestock, fuel, and medicines since 2014 (Aghwan, 2019). The financial gains from the cross-border smuggling activities have reportedly helped the PKK maintain influence in Sinjar by funding some of its local militia and political organisations tied to the group.³

The PMF and the PKK believe that the re-emergence of the KDP in Sinjar as an influential actor will jeopardise their strategic and economic interests in the district. They have both sought to protect the post-2017 status quo by preventing the return of the KDP to the area and its influence. The KDP, on the other hand, demonstrated ambitions to annex Sinjar to the territories under the KRG. Annexing Sinjar, a part of Iraq's disputed territories claimed by the Iraqi Kurds, will expand the region under the KDP-dominated KRG, and will bolster the KDP's nationalist legitimacy in the eyes of the Kurdish population of Iraq. Politically, the population of Sinjar constitutes a substantial voting bloc that provides the KDP with significant electoral backing and eventually greater influence in the Baghdad government. All three members of parliament from Sinjar that secured seats in the Iraqi parliament during the 2021 national elections were KDP nominees. This electoral backing expands the KDP's national influence and enables the party to claim the legitimacy of acting on behalf of Sinjar and its population (Bozarsalan, 2021). Finally, the KDP seeks to regain influence in Sinjar in order to access political finances via capturing public funds and securing government contracts and investment projects in the district.

² The key pro-Iran Shi'a militia groups that have established influence in Sinjar include Badr, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), and Kata'ib Hizbolla (KH).

³ Several interviewees from Sinjar claimed that the PKK secures the funds and salaries of some of its local fighters and activists from finances the group accesses through smuggling activities between Sinjar and Syria.

All three actors involved in the competition for the district have defended their interests by entrenching themselves in Sinjar and within its population. The PKK, for instance, exerts security and political influence through local militia groups and political organisations formed during and after the fight with ISIS. These groups are made up of local Yezidis and militia factions like the Sinjar Protection Units (YBS) and Ezidxan Security. They are ideologically aligned with the PKK and maintain a presence across the different towns and villages of the district (Dawood, 2022). The PKK-aligned groups derive their legitimacy from the role they played in protecting the Yezidis and liberating Sinjar from ISIS. Like the PKK, the PMF has formed several local militia factions of its own, consisting of Yezidis as well as Sunni and Shi'a Arabs, and tied these to the PMF Commission in Baghdad. But the PMF exerts greater security control over Sinjar via the existing national PMF factions in the areas around the district.

Unlike the PMF and the PKK, the KDP projects little security influence in Sinjar. For example, the KDP-aligned local *peshmerga* are inactive and restricted to a certain area in the district. Nevertheless, the KDP leverages its ties to Sinjar's Yezidi community to shape the future politics and governance of the district. In the post-2003 period, the KDP built extensive patronage networks among Sinjar's Yezidis by offering members of the community jobs, access to financial resources and political backing (International Crisis Group, 2018). Thanks to the party's sizeable political finances and dominant position in the KRG (Saleem & Skelton, 2020), the KDP has been able to continue maintaining its Yezidi patronage networks that have translated into Yezidi electoral backing of the KDP. But recent electoral gains by the local allies of the PKK and the PMF during the December 2023 provincial elections show that the KDP's political base in Sinjar is also being challenged.⁴

The Sudani Government and the Sinjar Agreement

In their search for a broad-based, power-sharing government that could be dominated, the Shi'a influential parties – gathered under the umbrella of the so-called Shi'a Coordination Framework – integrated the KDP into the government they formed after the 2021 national elections. The price paid by the members of the Shi'a Coordination Framework for the KDP's inclusion was a political deal agreed that included among other demands of the KDP, the implementation of the Sinjar Agreement (Salm, 2023). Following the terms of the political deal on which his government was formed, Prime Minister Sudani publicly announced his commitment to implementing the agreement in coordination with the KDP. This section assesses the extent to which the Sudani government has been able to practically implement the security, administrative and governance aspects of the Sinjar Agreement.

Security

A key challenge to stability in Sinjar is insecurity rooted in the militarisation of the area through which the PKK, PMF and KDP recruited Sinjar's Yezidis, Arabs and Kurds in multiple and competing militias operating across the district. This militarisation has prevented the rebuilding of public authority in Sinjar and operated as a barrier to the return of many IDPs. The Sinjar Agreement came to address the roots of insecurity by removing politically aligned militias and centralising the security portfolio through federal security

⁴ Two Yezidi candidates (one aligned with a local PMF faction and the other with the PKK-affiliated Democratic and Freedom Party) secured seats in Nineveh's provincial council during the elections.

forces. But the weakness of the GoI – the main implementing party of the agreement – vis-à-vis powerful militia groups backed by influential parties in Baghdad, has prevented the implementation of the security aspect of the agreement. While they are formally tied to the state, the PMF is only nominally under the command of Iraq's Prime Minister. Instead, the force is controlled by, and serves the political and geostrategic interests of, Baghdad-based influential Shi'a parties and figures.

The security provisions of the agreement envision an arrangement for Sinjar under which the PMF and PKK-aligned groups are removed from Sinjar, with the district placed under the control of the federal security agencies (the National Security Service and Intelligence Services) and the local police. Under Sudani however, the PMF and PKK-affiliated armed groups have continued their presence and activities in Sinjar, indicating a lack of plan and pressure from the Sudani government to remove those groups from the district. Sudani maintains better relations with the pro-PMF Shi'a parties and factions than Kadhim, but like Kadhim, Sudani lacks a powerful political party or parliamentary faction of his own, and was brought to office by the pro-PMF Shi'a parties. He is, therefore, unlikely to act against the vital interests of the pro-Iran Shi'a parties.

For the pro-Iran PMF groups (and for the PKK), security and politics in Sinjar is inter-linked, tying their future role and protection of interests to maintaining control over security forces of their own in the district. They, therefore, refuse to remove their armed allies from the ground. There is a general recognition by local politicians and observers that Sudani is not going to risk his own position as Iraq's PM by challenging the security influence of the PMF in Sinjar (Interviews in Sinjar, April–July 2023). A member of parliament from Sinjar stated, 'Sudani will refrain from attempting to remove the armed militia of the PMF from Sinjar. He will avoid confrontation with the PMF that has the power to challenge Sudani's position as Iraq's PM' (Interview in Erbil, June 2023).

In fact, the Sinjar Agreement has had worked to strengthen the resolve and determination of the PMF to remain in Sinjar. For the PMF leadership, leaving Sinjar is not an option. According to the Head of the PMF Commission, Falih Fayadh, the PMF's presence in Sinjar is the same as the Iraqi state's presence. During an April 2023 television interview, Fayadh stated that 'the state is present in Sinjar in many forms, including in the form of the army, the PMF and the police' (Youtube, 2023). Most recently, the PMF has taken measures to further entrench itself within Sinjar by forming a new brigade in the district, formed out of the existing PMF local factions (Alrafidain, 2023). With its base in the vicinity of Sinjar's central district (author observation in Sinjar, April 2023), Brigade 74 further formalises the presence of the PMF's local factions in the district and allows them to recruit more locals within their forces.

More importantly, the Sinjar Agreement has brought the PMF and the PKK into closer collaboration. The two actors are not natural allies as they hold contradicting ideologies and pursue incompatible political and geostrategic goals. But they have come together in a stronger alliance against the agreement, which they see as serving the interests of a common rival: the KDP. This alliance includes the incorporation of fighters of the PKK's main local militia – the YBS – within the PMF's local force, providing the group with state salaries and cover. But the PMF's actions contradict the GoI's goal of 'ending the PKK's influence in Sinjar' as stated by an official from the National Security Agency (Interview in Baghdad, May 2023).

The incorporation of the YBS into the PMF has not ended their loyalty and ties to the PKK, even though PMF commanders claim otherwise. The head of the new PMF brigade in Sinjar, for instance, stated that they ‘dismantled the previous local PMF regiment made up of YBS fighters and included them in the new brigade on the basis of their loyalty to the PMF’ (Interview in Mosul, April 2023). But the PKK-affiliated groups’ tactical alignment with the PMF, for example by gaining access to state salaries and cover, should not be mistaken for these groups abandoning their ideological and political ties to the PKK. It is also worth noting that only 250 fighters of the YBS are incorporated into the PMF. While they emphasise their ‘Iraqiness’, members of the PKK-aligned groups proudly express their deep appreciation for the PKK and the role it played in saving the Yezidis from ISIS at a time when the community was abandoned by both the KDP and the government in Baghdad (Interviews in Sinjar, April–July 2023). A top member of the PKK-affiliated Yezidi Democratic and Freedom Party (PADE) stated:

Let it be known to everyone that the PKK gave martyrs to protect us and liberate us from ISIS. And if the Iraqi army attacks us because of our appreciation to the PKK, we will defend ourselves. (Interview in Sinjar, July 2023)

The GoI is, thus, left with little influence over the PMF and PKK-aligned groups in Sinjar. While it has control over large sections of the ISF in Sinjar, Baghdad’s use of force to remove the PKK’s affiliated militias may cause major violence and further undermine Baghdad’s legitimacy among the district’s Yezidi community (Saleem, 2023). Meanwhile, the GoI currently has no clear plan to integrate the fighters of the YBS and Ezidxan Security into the ISF except for asking these groups to pledge allegiance to the Iraqi government. A Baghdad government official stated:

The Iraqi state is with the Yezidis. But when Iraqi citizens take up arms on behalf of a foreign actor like the PKK [this] is something that we cannot accept. The Yezidis need to be loyal to the Iraqi government. (Interview in Baghdad, May 2023)

Integration of PKK-aligned groups into the ISF will not necessarily end the PKK’s influence in Sinjar. The local affiliates of the PKK propose their inclusion in the PMF – as an intact group with access to salaries and state legitimacy – as a model for incorporation in the ISF. In relation to the future of the Ezidxan Security, a leading member of the PKK-aligned group stated:

It is not an issue to which Iraqi Security Force our fighters in Ezidxan Security for instance will be integrated and under which title [sic]. We do not mind if they are going to be a regiment or brigade tied to the NSA or the police force. What we demand is that they need to be integrated in[to] the ISF as they are, and remain and serve in Sinjar. (Interview in Sinjar, July 2023)

This form of integration allows the PKK-aligned groups to maintain influence over their armed fighters and utilise them for their own political purposes, at least in the short run.

Public Authority

As part of its commitment to the Sinjar Agreement, the Sudani government has sought to fill the government vacuum in Sinjar by appointing a new mayor for the district in collaboration with the KDP-dominated KRG (Interviews in Baghdad and Sinjar, May–July 2023).

At the time of writing, a new mayor for Sinjar has not been appointed and the district continues to function under dual administration, with the PKK/PMF-aligned self-administration operating in the district but not recognised by provincial and federal authorities in Mosul and Baghdad respectively, and the elected, but KDP-aligned, local administration operating from Duhok.

The competition for controlling Sinjar has prevented the re-establishment of local authority in the district. The KDP seeks to appoint one of its affiliates as mayor, as well as trying to put in place local government officials and administrators who are sympathetic to the party. The PMF and PKK-aligned groups on the ground oppose the appointment of a KDP nominee as a mayor, saying that previous KDP-aligned mayors only served the political and economic interests of the Kurdish party (Interviews in Duhok & Sinjar, April–July 2023).

For the KDP, PKK and the PMF, the local government is a valuable prize for symbolic, political and economic reasons. Control over the local government signifies one's ownership of Sinjar and a symbol of rule in the eyes of local, national and international actors. In addition, having control over top positions in the local government allows for expanding one's local patronage networks and political base by fulfilling favours to local citizens. Furthermore, having one's affiliates in key positions within the local government facilitates access to public finances due to the role government officials play in allocating government funds and contracts.

The success of the Sudani government in appointing a mayor based on the terms of the Sinjar Agreement requires the support of both PMF and PKK-aligned groups. Without such support, it is hard for a KDP-nominated mayor to be approved by the PMF, as the PMF is consulted in Baghdad's process of approving individuals nominated by the KDP for the mayoralship position (International Crisis Group, 2022). It would also be difficult to effectively operate in a district dominated by the PMF and PKK-aligned armed factions. Thus, re-establishing public authority in the future requires compromise from all the competing actors.

Reconstruction & Governance

The Sinjar Agreement calls for the reconstruction of Sinjar, which sustained large damage during the fight against ISIS. The Sudani government needs funds and collaboration from the federal government in Baghdad, the provincial government in Mosul, Sinjar's KDP-aligned local government operating from Duhok and the KRG. The Sinjar Agreement also gives the KRG a role in the reconstruction of Sinjar. Under Sudani, 50 billion Iraqi Dinars were allocated for the reconstruction of Sinjar and other areas in the Nineveh Plains (Economy News, 2023).

While the allocated funding has been criticised for being too little compared to the size of the destruction sustained by Sinjar (Interviews in Sinjar, June 2023 & Almadapaper, 2023), it remains to be seen whether the Sudani government will be able to ensure the necessary collaboration between different levels of the Iraqi government, to use the allocated funds to rebuild Sinjar. So far, the struggle for Sinjar has operated as the main obstacle to the reconstruction of the district (HRW, 2023). This is mainly due to the fact that different levels of the Iraqi government (relevant federal ministries, the provincial government in Mosul and the elected local government of Sinjar), with the power to allocate funds and propose and implement reconstruction and service projects in Sinjar, are penetrated or captured by competing political actors. Given this, political calculations of influential actors, rather than

public interests, have largely determined the policies of government institutions in Sinjar since the liberation of the district in 2015 (Interviews in Sinjar & Mosul, April–July 2023). In light of the lack of strong local and national oversight mechanisms, funds allocated for the reconstruction of Sinjar are likely to be captured by the contending political parties.

Conclusions

Sinjar and its population have been the victims of an intense power struggle for control among the KDP, the PMF and the PKK. This struggle for domination has prevented the implementation of the Sinjar Agreement and the stabilisation of the district. The pro-Iran PMF factions and the PKK, convinced that the provisions of the agreement seek to advance the interests of their rival – the KDP – at the expense of their own interests, have used their influence on the ground and within the Iraqi state to prevent the GoI from implementing the agreement. Even though he has publicly committed himself to the agreement, Sudani has not been able to implement its provisions, particularly the agreement's security aspects, due to his inability to challenge and confront the same forces that brought him to office in the first place. The KDP was able to include the implementation of the agreement in the political deal on the basis of which the current government was formed. But the KDP's weakness vis-à-vis the pro-Iran PMF factions and their powerful backers in Baghdad means the party lacks the means and leverage to force the implementation of the agreement anytime soon.

It remains to be seen whether the government of Prime Minister Sudani will be able to re-establish local authority and start reconstructing the district. But without addressing the proliferation of Yezidi militias tied to influential actors competing for power and resources, it is hard to believe that re-instated government officials will be able to operate to serve public interests, and that government funds will be effectively spent on re-building Sinjar. The existence of politically aligned militias in the context of tense competition for power and resources could ignite further violence against the already brutalised Yezidi community that the Sinjar Agreement is supposed to help and protect.

The difficulties facing the implementation of the Sinjar Agreement does not mean that the people of Sinjar should be left alone. To prevent further violence and improve governance in Sinjar, the Iraqi government and concerned members of the international community are advised to take a number of steps. Firstly, local fighters aligned with the PKK should be integrated into Iraq's federal forces. This step will entail the risk of those fighters maintaining loyalties to the PKK while operating within formal Iraqi security institutions. But the Iraqi government will have more leverage to disassociate those fighters from the PKK when they are part of the Iraqi government forces. Secondly, the Baghdad government and the international community should end the vacuum in Sinjar by stepping up their effort to form a power sharing government inclusive of all local factions and parties. Excluding parties and factions with local influence is likely to paralyze the functions and operations of government officials in Sinjar. Finally, the Iraqi government needs to prevent corruption and waste of funds allocated to reconstruction and service provision of Sinjar. This may require establishing oversight bodies comprising members of parliament, community leaders, local NGOs and media to monitor reconstruction and project implementation alongside members of the provincial council elected during the December 2023 provincial elections.

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Cover Image

Iraqi army soldier stands next to graffiti left by an affiliate of the Kurdistan Worker's Party, or PKK, which had recently withdrawn from Sinjar, 4 December 2020.

Source: AP Photo/Samya Kullab/Alamy

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