



# Displacement and Iraq's Political Marketplace:

## Addressing Political Barriers to IDP Return

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## INTRODUCTION

At the peak of the fighting between Iraqi forces and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2017, at least 5.8 million people were forced to flee their homes.<sup>1</sup> As fighting subsided, some 4.78 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) returned. However, the pace of return has now slowed, leaving an estimated 1.28 million IDPs at risk of protracted displacement: as of October 31, 2020, there are approximately 253,000 IDPs located in camps and another 924,000 IDPs in private or informal housing arrangements.<sup>2</sup> Iraq's IDP population is comprised of diverse groups with equally diverse intentions: the majority wish to return if the conditions are conducive; others prefer to integrate where they are; and still others prefer to resettle in a third location within Iraq.<sup>3</sup>

1 "Iraq Displacement Crisis: 2014-2017," International Organization for Migration (IOM), October 2018. Available at: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/IOM-Iraq\\_Displacement\\_Crisis\\_2014-2017.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/IOM-Iraq_Displacement_Crisis_2014-2017.pdf).

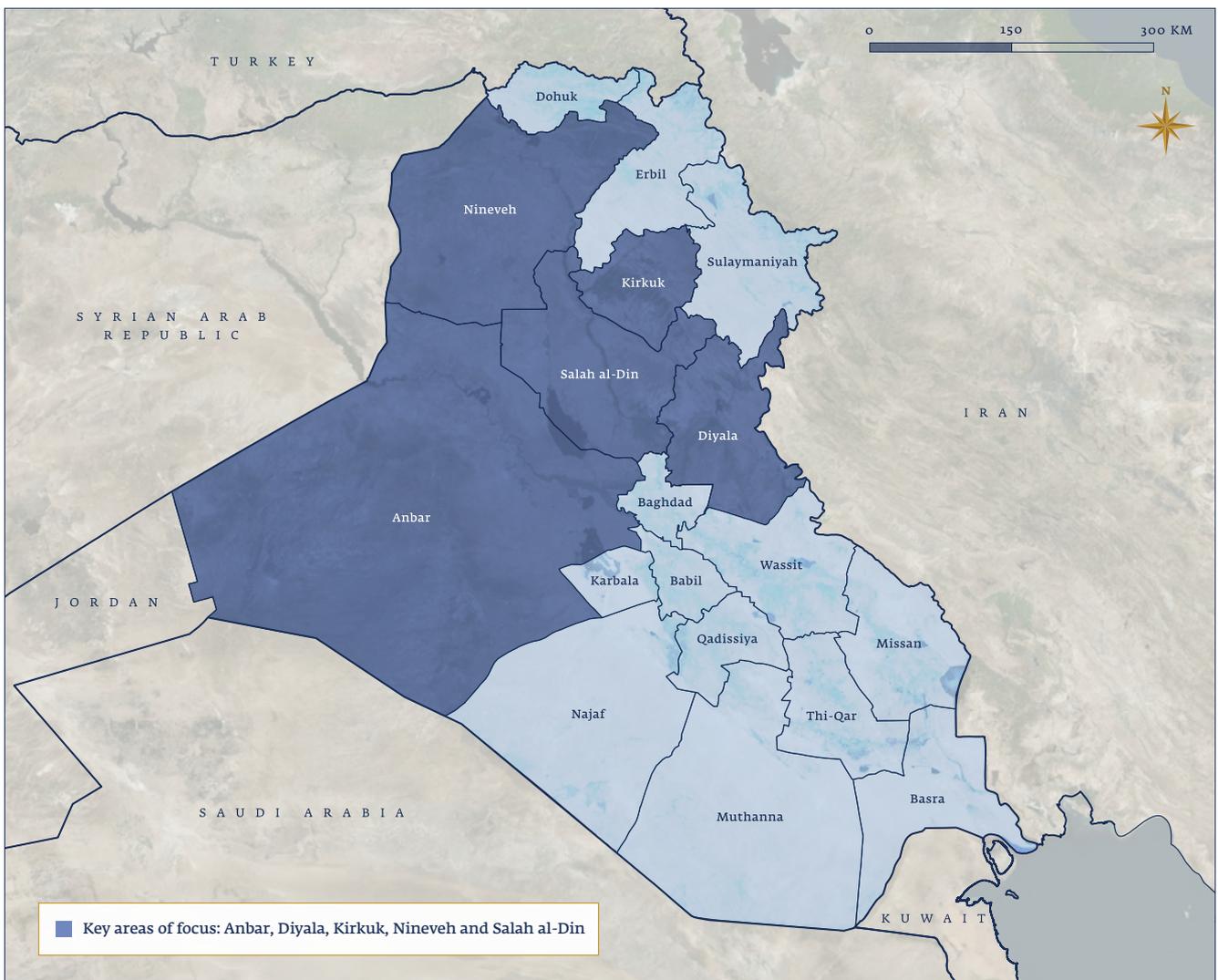
2 "Iraq Master List Report 118: September-October 2020," IOM. Available at: [http://iraqdtm.iom.int/images/MasterList/20201123323773\\_DTM\\_118\\_Report\\_September\\_October\\_2020.pdf](http://iraqdtm.iom.int/images/MasterList/20201123323773_DTM_118_Report_September_October_2020.pdf).

3 See IOM's "Integrated Location Assessment" tool, which shows that the short-term intention of 80% of IDPs is to stay in their current location, while the long-term intention of 60% of IDPs is to return to their place of origin. Available at: <http://iraqdtm.iom.int/ILAS>.

Currently available research on the return of IDPs to their areas of origin in Iraq typically identifies material and social factors as key barriers that prevent or hinder IDP return. For instance, in the annual “Integrated Location Assessment” by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) which surveys IDPs and returnees on their perceptions regarding return, IDPs cited lack of job opportunities (73%), lack of access to services (68%), and damage and destruction to housing (62%) as the main obstacles to return.<sup>4</sup> Other obstacles to return include collective blame, tribal disputes, and concerns about safety and security.<sup>5</sup>

Missing from the existing body of research, however, is the larger political context that creates or drives these obstacles: namely, how specific political actors or political strategies influence—or even determine—which obstacles to IDP return exist, how often these barriers arise, and how difficult they are to overcome. This study addresses this gap in knowledge by examining how political dynamics in various provinces solidify or mitigate obstacles to IDP return.

Map 1: Provinces included in the study: Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Nineveh, Salah al-Din.



- 4 "IOM Integrated Assessment Part 4," IOM, March 2020. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iom-iraq-integrated-location-assessment-part-4-june-2019>.
- 5 "The Long Road Home: Achieving Durable Solutions to Displacement in Iraq: Lessons from Returns in Anbar," Norwegian Refugee Council, Danish Refugee Council, and International Rescue Committee. February, 2018. Available at: [www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/the-long-road-home/the-long-road-home.pdf](http://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/the-long-road-home/the-long-road-home.pdf).

In order to understand how political factors drive obstacles to IDP return, this study contextualizes protracted displacement within the provincial “political marketplace,” a term referring to the arena of competition over power among political and security actors, which is mediated through violence, transactional exchanges, and state capture.<sup>6</sup> This study examines the political marketplace in five Iraqi provinces<sup>7</sup>—Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Nineveh, and Salah al-Din—each of which was occupied by ISIS during the recent crisis. This research reveals how a variety of political actors leverage displacement and IDP return as a form of currency. Ultimately, the study demonstrates how competition among political actors, and strategies that emerge within the political marketplace, interfere with the options and autonomy that IDPs have to resolve their own displacement. In sum, this method of analysis reframes the issue of IDP return from merely a technical problem to one that is fundamentally political.<sup>8</sup>

At the outset, it is also worth distinguishing “political marketplace analysis” (PMA) from “political economy analysis” (PEA). Although the differences are subtle and there is much overlap,<sup>9</sup> PEA typically seeks to establish the “rules of the game” that drive the positions of different political actors. In contrast, PMA applies when the interests held by political actors are fluid, and the rules of the game—indeed, the players and actors themselves—are in constant flux, such as in post-war contexts. To account for this fluidity, PMA always views the political field through a historical lens, in order to capture changes over time. This study focuses on 2003-2020, in order to track the shifts in alliances and interests since the start of the US-led military campaign, and to reflect on the ever-shifting set of power dynamics that humanitarian actors may face on the ground.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study pursues the following research questions:

### 1 Analyze the Political Marketplace

Who are the key power-wielding actors and entities at the province level in the targeted areas? What are the primary political and economic objectives of these actors?

### 2 Analyze the Impact of the Political Marketplace on Displacement

How does the political marketplace affect specific groups of IDPs? What negative threat or positive currency does the return, or continued displacement, of certain groups of IDPs have for distinct political and security actors? What interests and levers of power are shaping events on the ground?

### 3 Assess Political Marketplace Solutions to Displacement

Through what policy interventions can the International Organization for Migration (IOM), other international organizations, and the Government of Iraq (GoI) incentivize political and security actors to support IDPs to resolve their displacement (whether through return, integration, or relocation), and to create the conditions necessary for sustainable return? What are the conditions that incentivize distinct political and security actors to facilitate the conditions necessary for sustainable return, or alternatively to obstruct, or undermine it?

6 Alex De Waal, “Understanding ‘The Political Marketplace’ and the Roots of Persistent Conflict,” *Fletcher Security Review* 2, no. 1, January 27, 2015.

7 The subnational structure within Iraq includes synonymous reference to both “governorates” and “provinces,” of which there are a total of 19. While other citations use the former term, authors here will adhere to the latter term.

8 This study builds upon broader research on the political marketplace in Iraq. In a recent examination of the failure of reconstruction in Mosul, a political marketplace analysis identified competition and collusion between specific Popular Mobilization Forces (PMFs) over the provincial administration and local economy as a key driver of the city's slow and chaotic rebuilding of infrastructure. See: Zmkan Saleem and Mac Skelton, “The Failure of Reconstruction in Mosul: Root Causes from 2003 to the Post-ISIS Period.” IRIS Policy Report, American University of Iraq, Sulaimani: Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS), June 10, 2020a. Available at: <https://auis.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/IRIS%3AKAS%20report%20-%20The%20Failure%20of%20Reconstruction%20in%20Mosul.pdf>.

9 Alex Duncan and Gareth Williams, “Making Development Assistance More Effective Through Using Political Economy Analysis: What Has Been Done and What Have We Learned?” *Development Policy Review* 30 no. 2, 2012. p. 133-148.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach. Researchers undertook:

- A literature review of the relevant academic and policy literature, including desk study analysis of the relevant data and materials from governmental and non-governmental bodies. The review covers academic as well as policy literature relevant to the research questions since 2003, offering a robust historical perspective on the political dynamics of displacement. The desk study involves analysis of publicly available and privately shared documents and datasets, in addition to local Arabic and Kurdish news media reports.
- Fifty (50) semi-structured interviews during field visits to the provinces under analysis. Interviewees included the following key stakeholders:
  - Political and security actors such as national and provincial government officials, district and subdistrict government officials;
  - International diplomatic, humanitarian and development actors with an IDP portfolio;
  - IDPs and returnees themselves from the targeted provinces.
- Network-oriented knowledge sharing between Iraq analysts who continuously monitor political and security developments across the five provinces included in this study.

One methodological challenge was that IDPs often preferred to speak obliquely about political and security dynamics during interviews due to fear of reprisals and intimidation. As the interview data will show, many IDPs referred to “fear” and “lack of security” in general terms rather than directly citing the forces and actors that generated, or are driving, conditions of displacement. To address this challenge, the research team adopted open-ended and semi-structured

questions that gave IDPs the opportunity to respond in whatever way they felt comfortable; interviewers made no attempt to push IDPs toward greater specificity unless it was freely offered. For instance, when asked about the various factors contributing to remaining in protracted displacement, a Nineveh interviewee noted, “You know, security in Nineveh is very weak. I’m scared to go home.”<sup>10</sup> At this point, the interviewer did not probe further. However, other interviewees did elaborate on particular security actors and dynamics, blaming relatively non-controversial actors such as “*daesh*” or “the tribes” while omitting mention of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMFs)<sup>11</sup> or state forces that occupy their districts and block returns. Because of limitations associated with assessing political marketplace dynamics from the standpoint of IDPs, research methodology also included interviews with political and security actors and practitioners from international organizations as well as local news media analysis.

## STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

The following chapters focus on the provinces of Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Nineveh, and Salah al-Din, with each chapter exploring dynamics in a single province. Chapters are broken into three parts, corresponding to the research questions above. 1) Authors map the key political and security actors, their respective interests, and the levers that exist to influence each actor (subhead “Understanding the Political Marketplace”). This section uses PMA and does not delve deeply into linkages to the displacement context. Importantly, the description of the political marketplace is rooted in a historical perspective (2003-2020) in order to show the extent of fluidity in the political system. 2) The analysis then uses the lens of PMA to understand the barriers to IDP return and other major displacement/return patterns (subhead “Displacement Trends Shaped by the Political Marketplace”): Whose

10 Interview with IDP from Nineveh province by IRIS research team, Erbil, September 1, 2020.

11 The PMFs refer to the collection of armed groups originally formed to combat ISIS. Today many PMF brigades effectively act as the armed branches of political parties. They hold territory across the post-ISIS areas.

interests are affected by allowing or denying IDP return? How is the balance of power affected? How do certain actors use displacement to further their own interests? 3) Each chapter ends by identifying ways that policymakers might influence key stakeholders, within the specific political landscape of each province, to thereby increase the likelihood of IDP return (subhead “Political Marketplace Approaches to Addressing Displacement”).

The paper concludes with consolidated findings and trends across all five provinces and offers overarching

considerations for policymakers. While these recommendations provide a path forward on certain policy challenges, authors acknowledge the limitations of this study. The analysis is by no means exhaustive. For each of five provinces, the study examines a targeted set of displacement trends and focuses on a select geographical area. As such, the intent is to offer a snapshot of the political marketplace in each province and its impact on displacement, which will provide international organizations—as well as further research initiatives—with sufficient information to apply this model more widely.



*IDP Camp in Khanaqin*

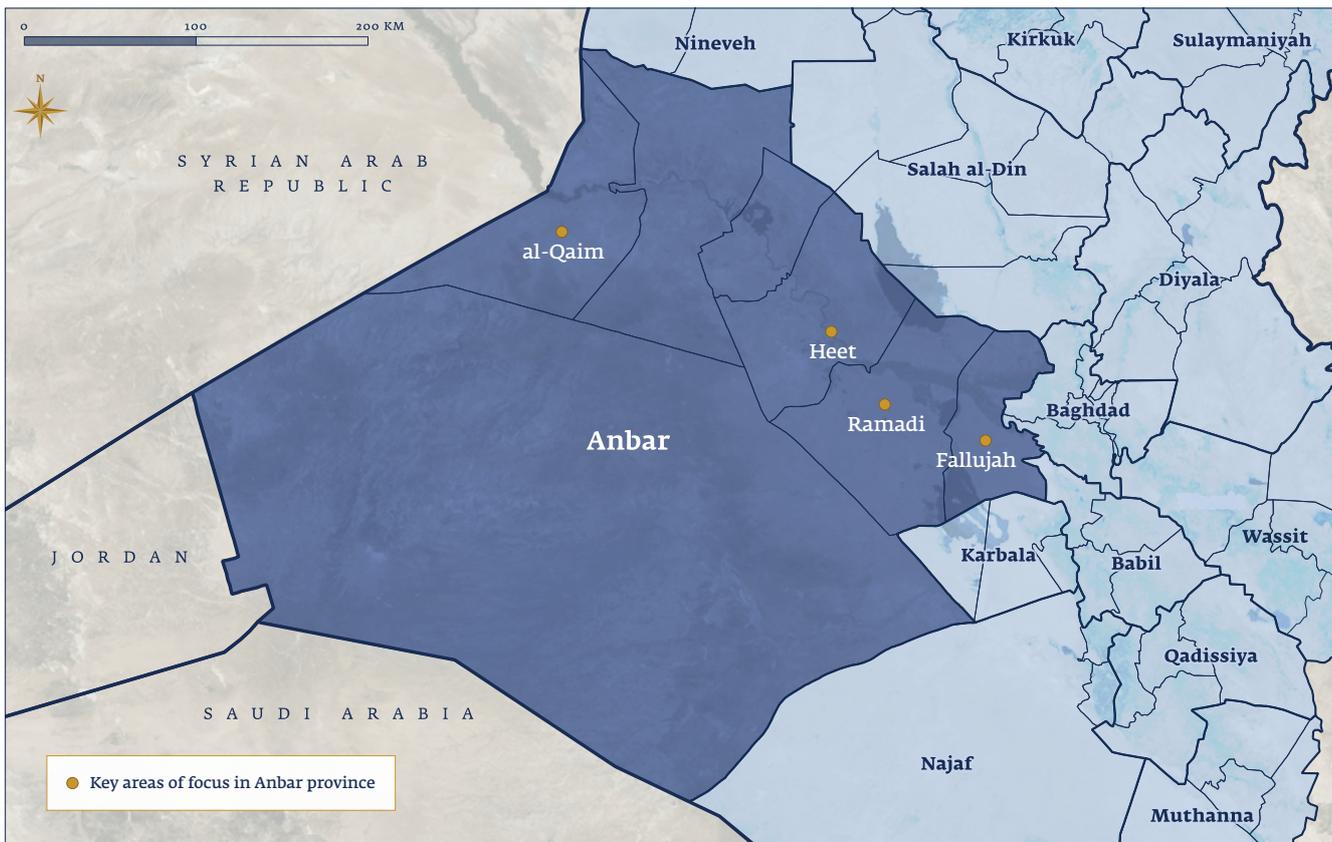
## ANBAR PROVINCE

Anbar is an overwhelmingly Sunni Arab province situated west of Baghdad. The first mass displacements related to the ISIS conflict transpired here. Fighting began in Anbar in January 2014, when approximately 85,000 Anbari residents became IDPs. Subsequent military operations in May 2015 produced further displacement as well as some initial returns. The operations to retake Ramadi intensified later that year, resulting in an additional 30,000 IDPs in December 2015 and January 2016. In June 2016, a campaign to retake the city displaced another wave of residents from Fallujah. With the winding down of the military conflict in Anbar, returns were steady by November 2016. Yet by late 2018, the rates of return levelled off significantly.<sup>12</sup> To this day, sizable populations of

IDPs originally from Anbar remain in Erbil (69,000), Sulaymaniyah (23,000), Baghdad (16,000), and in other parts of Anbar itself (26,000).<sup>13</sup>

Within Anbar, the peripheries of the province are facing the most significant and ongoing barriers to return—al-Qaim to the west, and the Anbar/Baghdad borderlands to the east. A political marketplace analysis will show the reasons for this regional concentration. This chapter will detail how the consolidation of power in the hands of Mohammed al-Halbousi in the major urban centers (e.g., Ramadi, Fallujah) has enabled consistent and sustainable IDP returns within that zone; however, the fragmentation of the political and security field at the peripheries of the province renders IDP return dynamics more precarious.

Map 2: Key areas of focus in Anbar



12 "2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Iraq," United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) December 16, 2018. Available at: [www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2019\\_hno\\_irq\\_28122018.pdf](http://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2019_hno_irq_28122018.pdf).

13 "IOM Iraq Mission: Displacement Tracking Matrix: Return Index Coverage," International Organization for Migration, January-February 2020. Available at: <http://iraqdtm.iom.int/archive/ReturnIndex.aspx>.

## UNDERSTANDING ANBAR'S POLITICAL MARKETPLACE

### Main Political Actors

#### *Mohammed al-Halbousi's Al-Taqadom Party*

Halbousi has leveraged the governorship, speakership, and connections with the Iran-aligned national parties and PMFs to become the province's dominant political actor, particularly in Ramadi and Fallujah, his electoral and administrative bases. He essentially controls the province's key government positions and also holds influence over the Anbar Operations Command (AOC).<sup>14</sup>

#### *Jamal Karbouli's Al-Hal Party*

The wealthy Karbouli rose to power by side-lining the Iraq Islamic Party (IIP; see below) and placing Halbousi in power. Recent tensions with Halbousi<sup>15</sup>—and by extension with the Iran-aligned parties—have diminished his sway.

#### *The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMFs)*

The PMFs, particularly those groups<sup>16</sup> with strong linkages to Iran, maintain a heavy presence in the eastern provincial borderlands (e.g., Baghdad Belt and areas bordering Babil) as well as the western areas toward the border with Jordan and Syria. While Halbousi has a political relationship with the PMFs, his influence is not strong enough to make demands on sensitive issues related to IDPs.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Tribal Factions*

Anbar's tribes have taken up arms and engaged in formal politics at several key moments since 2003. As a reflection of their potential for political power, they coalesced in 2007–2013 into what was called the “Awakening Movement” and gained influence in the local government.<sup>18</sup> More recently, they have become key allies for the dominant political actors in the province (i.e., Halbousi and Karbouli), participated in liberation operations, and engaged in alliances and deals with the PMFs.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Iraq Islamic Party (IIP)*

The IIP held the governorship 2005–2009, and again 2014–2017. During this period, the IIP was the main entity presiding over the provincial administration. While the IIP was marginalized, first by Karbouli and then by Halbousi's rise, the party retains a following among the province's intellectuals and the religious elite, particularly in the western areas.<sup>20</sup>

14 Phone interviews with local government and security officials by IRIS research team, Anbar, September 1–October 5, 2020.

15 “Al-Halbousi and Karbouli Struggle Over Governorship Positions in the Governorates and are Mobilizing to Win the Sunni Leadership Position,” *Alsafer News*, April 24, 2019. Available at: <https://al-safer.com/?p=17508>.

16 Throughout the paper, the term “groups” is used instead of “brigade” when applied to PMFs because fighters do not always operate within clearly defined and organized command structures.

17 Phone interviews by IRIS research team with local government and security officials, Anbar, September 1–October 5, 2020.

18 Led by Abu Risha, the “Awakening Movement” in Anbar gained significant influence in the local government from 2007 on. During the 2009 local elections, the Awakening Movement secured eight seats in the local council, and formed a power-sharing local government with other Sunni Arab parties led by Salih Mutlag and Jamal Karbouli. The power-sharing government excluded the IIP and secured the position of the governorship for Muhammed Qasim al-Fahdawi, an affiliate of the Awakening Movement. In the aftermath of the war with ISIS, the position of Abu Risha and his Awakening Movement were significantly weakened, largely due to Risha's decision to side with the Sunni protests of 2012–2014 against then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government. See: “Western Iraq,” Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 2009. Available at: [www.understandingwar.org/region/western-iraq](http://www.understandingwar.org/region/western-iraq).

19 During the fight with ISIS, the majority of Anbar's tribes decided to fight alongside the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the PMFs against the Sunni extremist group. Towns and cities such as al-Baghdadi, Haditha, Rawa, Anna, and al-Qaim received weapons and financial support from the ISF, PMF, and even the US forces stationed in the province. After defeating ISIS, the loyalties of the tribes have been divided, with some maintaining ties with different PMF factions while others have become allies of Sunni parties and figures such as Halbousi and Karbouli. Phone interviews by IRIS research team with several key local government and security officials, Anbar, September 1–October 5, 2020.

20 Wael Nehme, “Political Struggle Threatens to Split Anbar into Two Governorates,” *Almada Paper*, September 4, 2019. Available at: <https://almadapaper.net/view.php?cat=221194>.

## Key Dynamics in the Political Marketplace

### *IIP's Control over Provincial Administration; Fragmentation of Security Apparatus (2003-2014)*

The 2003 US-led military campaign eviscerated the Baath Party and much of the traditional Anbari political elite with it. As a result, in the local elections that took place shortly thereafter, the IIP was the only political party to participate from Anbar. Thus, in the decade following 2003, politics in Anbar were dominated by the IIP which held nearly all the major positions across Anbar's administrative bodies, including the governorship.<sup>21</sup> Although the security terrain was highly fragmented, with control disputed by diverse actors including al-Qaeda, the US military, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), and tribal forces associated with the Awakening Movement, the IIP was able to retain relative dominance over the formal administrative bodies throughout this period. The most significant challenge to IIP's control came in 2007, when the largest tribes in the province came together to challenge the IIP under the banner of the Awakening Movement,<sup>22</sup> thereby gaining the largest share of seats on the provincial council during the provincial elections of 2009.<sup>23</sup> However, the IIP staged a comeback and regained hold of the provincial administration in 2014.<sup>24</sup>

### *The Rise of the al-Hal Party and the PMFs (2014-2017)*

The IIP's hold on administrative power would finally come to an end in the aftermath of the conflict with ISIS. Jamal Karbouli's al-Hal Party was able to leverage its tribal connections and immense commercial wealth to topple the IIP in the provincial administration.<sup>25</sup> With al-Hal's backing and Karbouli's political finances, the young and charismatic Halbousi came into the governorship position in 2017.<sup>26</sup> The Karbouli-Halbousi alliance was strengthened by access to significant reconstruction funds from the Government of Iraq (GoI) and the international community which aimed to reconstruct the province after the war with ISIS.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, with the powers of the governorship in their hands, they were able to begin a purge of IIP affiliates from the local government.<sup>28</sup> This period also coincided with the rise of the Iran-aligned PMFs and their dominance over isolated, but strategically important, areas of the province. Both Karbouli and Halbousi were politically savvy enough to understand that post-ISIS governance would require alliances with the Iran-aligned political parties and the PMFs; and as a result, different geographic areas of influence emerged, with Karbouli and Halbousi controlling the center of the province, while the PMFs became the dominant

21 The IIP was the only Sunni Arab party that participated in the provincial elections of 2005 in Anbar and secured 29 of 41 seats in the local council. The rest of the local individuals that secured remaining seats allied themselves with the IIP after the election, and allowed the party to control key positions in the local government and fill the local institutions across the province with its own members and followers. Even though turnout during the elections was extremely low in the province, the IIP became the dominant local government actor in Anbar until 2007. See: Michael Knights and Eamon McCarthy, "Provincial Politics in Iraq: Fragmentation or New Awakening?" Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Available at: [www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/provincial-politics-in-iraq-fragmentation-or-new-awakening](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/provincial-politics-in-iraq-fragmentation-or-new-awakening).

22 Nirmeen Hamid, "Anbar's Islamic Party and Tribes Vie for Power," Niqash, December 12, 2008. [www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/2358/](http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/2358/).

23 "Western Iraq," Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 2009. Available at: [www.understandingwar.org/region/western-iraq](http://www.understandingwar.org/region/western-iraq).

24 The IIP-affiliated provincial council member Suhaib al-Rawi was able to replace Ahmed Dulaimi in 2014 and became Anbar's governor. Al-Rawi's governorship was first contested by Ahmed Abu Risha's Awakening Movement, and later by the al-Hal Party. See: "A Possible Confrontation Between the Islamic Party and the Awakening May Dissolve Anbar's Provincial Council," Almada Paper, June 20, 2016. Available at: <https://almadapaper.net/view.php?cat=152517>.

25 "ISIS Leaves Behind a Raging Sunni Struggle over Anbar," Rawabet Center for Research and Strategic Studies, September 11, 2017. Available at: <https://rawabetcenter.com/archives/51444>.

26 Kamal Ayyash, "New Attempts to Change the Balance of Power: Will Halbousi be Able to Change the Political Map in al-Anbar Province?" Niqash, September 6, 2019. Available at: [www.niqash.org/ar/articles/politics/5986/](http://www.niqash.org/ar/articles/politics/5986/).

27 Controlling government funds and contracts have been at the heart of the political struggle in Anbar. See: Zaid Salem and Muhammed Ali, "Iraq: Fears of a Suggestion for Splitting Anbar into Two Governorates," Al-Araby al-Jadeed, September 2, 2019. Available at: [www.alaraby.co.uk/محافظة-الأنبار-إلى-محافظةين](http://www.alaraby.co.uk/محافظة-الأنبار-إلى-محافظةين).

28 Ayyash, "New Attempts to Change the Balance of Power."

security actors in the strategic peripheries (particularly al-Qaim and the Baghdad Belt).<sup>29, 30</sup>

### ***The Rise of Halbousi and Solidification of PMF Sphere of Influence (2018-2020)***

In 2018, Halbousi ascended from his position as Governor of Anbar to Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament, making him a fully-fledged national figure with deep relationships across all political factions.<sup>31</sup> At this juncture, Karbouli calculated that further alignment with the Baghdad-based blocs (e.g., the Construction Alliance) might imperil his support among the Sunni Arab populace in Anbar and elsewhere, and therefore he broke his alliance with Halbousi. In doing so, Karbouli explicitly turned against the broader Shia-majority political alliance,<sup>32</sup> charging that they had mistreated Anbar's IDPs, and were responsible for thousands of disappeared persons.<sup>33</sup> Ultimately, Halbousi gained from Karbouli's tactical shift, pulling nearly all of Karbouli's members of parliament (MPs) into his own new political bloc, the al-Taqadom party.<sup>34</sup> <sup>35</sup> Today, Halbousi's dominance in the province is the product of this intense political struggle. As Speaker, Halbousi is allied with multiple MPs (including defectors from Karbouli); he also exerts strong influence over the current governor of Anbar. Even still, Halbousi's power is contested. Significant portions of the province fall under the security control of various PMFs, which have vested interest in holding this territory for the foreseeable future and are unlikely to negotiate their dominance away, despite the loose alliance with Halbousi at the national level.

## **Levers of Power**

### ***Coercive Force***

Coercive force in Anbar is organized around three axes; each is geographically concentrated and operates with varying degrees of political backing and agency.

- The Iran-aligned PMFs are concentrated at the western and eastern provincial peripheries. Backed by powerful Baghdad-based parties and the Iranian government, these forces have close to full operational freedom in these areas. Although the ISF is also stationed here under the AOC, PMFs such as Kataib Hezbollah and their commanders are firmly in control and are able to refuse orders given by the AOC when necessary. Control over checkpoints and border crossings gives the PMFs access to revenues and control over the movement of persons.
- In the center of the province, the ISF secures the major roadways and cities in coordination with the governor and Halbousi. Different sections of the ISF are present: the Iraqi army including the Commandership of Anbar Operations and the Commandership of the al-Jazeera and Badiyah, Intelligence Services in Anbar, Anbar Emergency Police Regiments, National Security Agency, and the Federal Police.<sup>36</sup> The PMFs generally do not interfere with ISF operations and Halbousi's influence over these areas.

29 Harith Hassan and Kheder Khaddour, "The Transformation of the Iraq-Syrian Border: From a National to a Regional Frontier," Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, March 31, 2020. Available at: <https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/03/31/transformation-of-iraqi-syrian-border-from-national-to-regional-frontier-pub-81396>.

30 Mustafa Habib, "The Cold War On The Border: US And Iran Face Off in Former Extremist-Held Iraqi Town," Niqash, May 31, 2018. Available at: [www.niqash.org/en/articles/security/5916/](http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/security/5916/).

31 Ayyash, "New Attempts to Change the Balance of Power."

32 Muhammed Sabah, "Karbouli Leaves al-Binaa Coalition Because of the Speaker of Parliament," Almada Paper, April 13, 2019. Available at: <https://almadapaper.net/view.php?cat=217850>.

33 Aktham Saifa al-Din, "Renewed Calls for Militant Factions to Leave the Cities," Al-Araby al-Jadeed, April 25, 2020. Available at: [www.alaraby.co.uk/-إخراج-تجدد-دعوات-إخراج-الفصائل-السليحة-من-المدن-العراقية-الحرية](http://www.alaraby.co.uk/-إخراج-تجدد-دعوات-إخراج-الفصائل-السليحة-من-المدن-العراقية-الحرية).

34 "Detail on Halbousi's New Party is Revealed: Civilians that Include 38 Members of Parliament and in 7 Governorates," Mawazin News, April 21, 2019. Available at: [www.mawazin.net/Details.aspx?jimare=43555](http://www.mawazin.net/Details.aspx?jimare=43555).

35 "Deputies-Resentful of the Construction and Reform Coalitions-are Close to Announcing 5 New Blocs," Almada Paper, April 23, 2019. Available at: <https://almadapaper.net/view.php?cat=218121>.

36 Phone interviews by IRIS research team with local government and security officials, Anbar, September 1-October 5, 2020.

- The ISF recruited a portion of the Sunni tribal forces in Anbar during the military campaign against ISIS (via the Ministry of Defence) and has continued to maintain an operational relationship with these tribal forces, including forces associated with the al-Bu Nimr, al-Abed, and al-Bu Fahd tribes.<sup>37</sup> These tribal forces are concentrated in the western portions of the province and can only operate with the blessing of Kataib Hezbollah and other influential PMF groups.

### ***Patronage and Cash-based Co-optation***

As Anbar consists of a loose collection of tribes with diverging interests, forming a political coalition of any strength requires extensions of patronage, whereby patrons reward those within their alliance with favorable treatment, goods, services, or other benefits. These patronage networks are sustained via three primary sources:

- Appointment to the post of Governor allows the relevant individual or party to bolster patronage networks through access to jobs, government contracts, and other resources associated with the governorship. From 2003-2014, when the IIP held this position, it used the governorship to expand patronage among Anbar's educated class and tribes.<sup>38</sup> The same can be said for al-Hal via Halbousi who leveraged his appointment as Governor—and particularly, access to post-ISIS provincial reconstruction funds—to expand his patronage network, and therefore influence, in Anbar. With the governorship now firmly under Halbousi's influence, the post holds significant sway over patronage relations in the province.

- Commercial sources of financing have become more important to sustaining patronage networks in recent years. For example, as part of his efforts to sideline the IIP, Jamal Karbouli used his sizable commercial fortune to buy the loyalty of local politicians and tribal leaders. Equally, al-Hal's ability to replace Anbar's IIP governor in 2017 with the party's own candidate at the time (Halbousi) is widely attributed to Karbouli's deep pockets and capacity to pay off provincial council members.<sup>39, 40, 41</sup> While al-Hal is no longer at the center of provincial politics, due to the split with Halbousi, the party's access to commercial resources renders the bloc an ongoing, undeniable political and economic force—with the potential to act as a spoiler on sensitive IDP issues.

- Particularly in the post-ISIS era, informal economic deals and rent seeking at border crossings and checkpoints have become a third vital method of sustaining patronage networks in Anbar. In particular, the Iran-aligned PMFs have capitalized upon their territorial position at the borders of the province to take advantage of such sources of funds.

### ***Alliances***

Political influence in Anbar requires both strong local and national alliances. Halbousi is part of the pro-Iran Construction Alliance (تحالف البناء) in the Iraqi parliament, which includes PMF leaders such as Hadi Ameri and Qais Khaz'ali.<sup>42</sup> This alliance has benefited Halbousi, as Speaker, in engaging leaders of the PMF forces in Anbar regarding sensitive displacement and return issues. The Speaker's vast influence

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Sam Dagher, "Tribal Rivalries Persist as Iraqis Seek Local Posts," The New York Times, January 19, 2009. Available at: [www.nytimes.com/2009/01/20/world/middleeast/20anbar.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/20/world/middleeast/20anbar.html).

<sup>39</sup> Baraa al-Shammari, "Struggle in Anbar Could Result in Expanding the Militias and the Return of Daesh," Al-Araby al-Jadeed, May 20, 2017. Available at: [www.alaraby.co.uk/%22داعش-%22يعود-وتهدد-بعودة-المليشيات-وتهدد-بعودة-داعش](http://www.alaraby.co.uk/%22داعش-%22يعود-وتهدد-بعودة-المليشيات-وتهدد-بعودة-داعش).

<sup>40</sup> "The Battle of Exchanging Accusations Continues...Suhaib al-Rawi: Jamal Karbouli Bargained with Me Over the Position of Governor," The Baghdad Post, August 7, 2017. Available at: [www.thebaghdadpost.com/ar/Story/42322/الحافظ-على-منصب-الحافظ-الراوي-صهيب-قائمة-الاذمات-قائمة-صهيب-الراوي-جمال-الكربولي-ساومني-على-منصب-الحافظ](http://www.thebaghdadpost.com/ar/Story/42322/الحافظ-على-منصب-الحافظ-الراوي-صهيب-قائمة-الاذمات-قائمة-صهيب-الراوي-جمال-الكربولي-ساومني-على-منصب-الحافظ).

<sup>41</sup> "The Market for Selling MPs Closed at Half a Million Dollars and the Governor of Anbar Sold his Seat to the Karbouli for a Million and a half Dollars," Awajel Press, September 13, 2018. Available at: <http://awajelpress.com/دو-نصف-مليون-على-نصف-مليون-دولار-اغلقت-سوق-النواب-اغلقت-سوق-النواب>.

<sup>42</sup> Jeremy Hodge & Anand Gopal, "The Rise of the New Sunni Elite in Iraq: The Case of Fallujah", Conflict Research Programme/LSE, November 16th, 2020. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/crp/2020/11/16/the-rise-of-the-new-sunni-elite-in-iraq-the-case-of-fallujah/>.

over MPs cannot be discounted as an important lever of control.<sup>43</sup> By the same token, the PMFs' presence in strategic areas of the province is cemented by the fact that they enjoy the backing of powerful Baghdad-based parties as well as of the Iranian regime. As the next section shows, the relative strength of the PMFs' ties to external backers proves decisive in shaping IDP affairs in PMF zones of control.

## DISPLACEMENT TRENDS SHAPED BY THE POLITICAL MARKETPLACE

### Blocked Returns and Severe Conditions for Returnees at the East/West Peripheries of Anbar

Blockages to IDP return as well as severe conditions for returnees have been concentrated at the peripheries of Anbar—specifically, in the western borderlands (al-Qaim) and eastern areas in proximity to the provincial borders with Baghdad and Babil (Amiriyat Al-Somood, Karma, and the Baghdad Belt).<sup>44</sup> Moreover, these are the areas where returnees are most likely to face challenges in terms of insecurity and poor conditions of social cohesion.<sup>45</sup> A political marketplace analysis suggests that severe conditions for IDPs and blocked returns are generally highest in Anbar in areas where valuable political and economic assets for the PMFs are most concentrated, and where the governor and Halbousi are least influential. The following sections provide more detail.

#### *Presence and Superior Leverage of PMFs at the Peripheries*

The peripheries are inhospitable to returnees due to the presence and superior leverage of the PMFs. In interviews with IDPs from these areas, respondents

explicitly blamed “security” and “militias” as their key obstacles to return. Although ISF forces operate in these zones, they do so without any capacity to execute final decisions regarding the movement of IDPs, and it is common for return documents issued by the governor or AOC to be rejected by PMF entities. The far eastern parts of Anbar's Fallujah district are under the control of the AOC in name only, as the Baghdad Operations Command (which is more closely tied to the PMFs) exerts greater influence in that zone.<sup>46</sup> The Head of District in Amiriyat al-Somood noted that IDPs from his district could not return, even though they are “free of terrorism” because his district is “under the control of armed groups that fall under the umbrella of the PMF and Kataib Hezbollah.”<sup>47</sup> Similarly, an advisor to the governor noted that in al-Qaim, the PMFs create problems with IDP return because they “have the greatest influence, and they have a different security strategy than the army or other security forces, such as police or emergency regiments.”<sup>48</sup> Halbousi and the AOC occasionally intervene in negotiations over IDP return to these areas; however, their agency in overcoming hurdles is limited in comparison to actors such as Kataib Hezbollah. The asymmetry in leverage is largely a product of the relative strength in their alliances with external actors. While Halbousi is aligned with Iran-backed political parties, Kataib Hezbollah has much stronger and long-standing ties to the core of the Iranian government as well as to the hardline, Iran-aligned wing of the Binaa bloc. In general, Kataib Hezbollah is widely considered one of the least accountable armed actors in Iraq, with a poor track record of responding to state attempts to reign it in.

43 Kamal Ayyash, “Times, They Are A Changing: The Ambitions of One Politician Putting a Whole Province at Risk, Locals Say”, Niqash, September 06, 2018. Available at: <https://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/5986/The-Ambitions-of-One-Politician-Putting-a-Whole-Province-at-Risk-Locals-Say.htm>

44 In-person/phone interviews by IRIS research team with local government officials, al-Qaim, Baghdad Belt, July, 2020.

45 “IOM Iraq Mission: Displacement Tracking Matrix: Return Index Coverage,” International Organization for Migration, January–February, 2020. Available at: <http://iraqdtm.iom.int/archive/ReturnIndex.aspx>.

46 Phone interview by IRIS research team with Fallujah Head of District, August, 2020.

47 Phone interview by IRIS research team with Amiriyat al Somood Head of District, August, 2020.

48 Phone interview by IRIS research team with advisor to the governor of Anbar, August, 2020.

### ***Geopolitical Interests of the PMFs***

Understanding why specific PMF factions, such as Kataib Hezbollah, are motivated to control returns at the peripheries requires an analysis of their economic and political interests, and how IDP return complicates the protection of these assets. In al-Qaim (western Anbar), Iran-aligned groups such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), Kataib Hezbollah, and al-Tafouf have operated to secure Tehran's goal of building a land bridge that connects Iran to its allies in Syria and Lebanon and passes via Iraqi territories including Anbar province. The presence of Kataib Hezbollah and al-Tafouf brigade in Anbar's town of al-Qaim fulfils Iran's goal of transferring weapons and aid to its allies in Syria. Returns of IDPs to al-Qaim have been sensitive because Kataib Hezbollah regards the Sunni Arab population as a threat to its dominance over the crossing. When Kataib Hezbollah has negotiated with Halbousi, AOC, and other government figures over IDP return, it has agreed to concessions only when it has received guarantees that it could continue its presence (and implicitly, its dominance) in al-Qaim.<sup>49</sup>

Tragically for IDPs, Western Anbar is caught in the crosshairs of US-Iran tensions. Iran-aligned groups have been instrumental in applying pressure on US forces stationed in Anbar, in particular those on the Ain al-Assad military/airbase. In case of a regional war that involves Iran on the one hand, and the US and its regional allies on the other hand, Tehran has signaled that it could use the PMF groups in Anbar to attack the US forces stationed both in Anbar province and in Saudi Arabia.<sup>50, 51, 52</sup> Because of Anbar's importance in the US-Iran rivalry, PMFs have been slow to cede any ground and allow IDPs to access areas they deem sensitive to their interests.<sup>53</sup>

### ***Economic Interests of the PMFs***

In both the eastern and western peripheries of Anbar, economic interests are key factors shaping IDP return dynamics. The border regions present plentiful

opportunities for smuggling (especially across the border to Syria from Anbar), taxation or fee collection at checkpoints on strategic routes and highways, and land grabs (particularly of fertile agricultural lands that belong to local Sunni citizens and IDPs from Anbar). Return of IDPs compromises PMF hold on land and economic resources and is another reason to interfere with return.<sup>54</sup>



*Habaniya Tourist City Camp*

### ***Domestic Political Interests of the PMFs***

In the eastern periphery of Anbar, displacement dynamics are intertwined with the imperative on the part of major political parties to protect Baghdad from threats to high-value political assets. In the eastern borderlands with Baghdad/Babil, PMF groups share the Baghdad government's goal of controlling Anbar's territory and population as a prerequisite for protecting the ruling elite and federal state institutions in Baghdad. For this reason, the PMFs have often obstructed returns to the Anbar borderlands with Baghdad and Babil. This includes Juraf al-Sakhir, which is part of Babil, but falls within a shared Anbar-Babil security complex. Juraf al-Sakhir has become what amounts to a no-return zone; attempts by the AOC to enable IDP families to

49 Phone interviews by IRIS research team with local government and security officials, Anbar, September 1-October 5, 2020.

50 Ibid.

51 Ayyash, 2018.

52 Kamal Ayyash, "Red Lines In The Sand: In The Deserts of Anbar, US And Pro-Iran Forces Jostle," Niqash, September 9, 2019. Available at: [www.niqash.org/en/articles/security/5990/](http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/security/5990/)

53 Phone interviews by IRIS research team with local government and security officials, Anbar, September 1-October 5, 2020.

54 Ibid.

return have been met with force by the PMFs.<sup>55</sup>

### ***Tribal Politics***

Tribal actors concentrated in the western portions of the province have also obstructed IDP returns due to a calculation of political and economic interests. Influential tribal groups in the western portions of the province (in areas such as al-Baghdadi, Haditha, Anna, al-Rawah, and al-Qaim)<sup>56</sup> have witnessed a slower rate of reconstruction and socio-economic development in the post-ISIS period than the urban zones have seen. These tribal actors recognize that the provincial government, and powerful figures such as Halbousi, intend to close IDP camps and facilitate IDP return, and have strategically promised to accept the return of IDPs as leverage to gain access to reconstruction funds.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, due to the convergence of coercive leverage and high-value interests for PMFs at the western peripheries, tribal actors in this region are aware that maintaining good relations with Kataib Hezbollah and other Iran-aligned groups offers them greater security compared to a similar alliance with the AOC and provincial administration. Therefore, tribal actors are likely to align with, and defer to, the position of Kataib Hezbollah over the AOC when it comes to questions of IDP return.



*Mohammed al-Halbousi, Speaker of Parliament and former Governor of Anbar*

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Phone interview by IRIS research team with district official in Ramadi, August, 2020.

### **Concentration of Sustainable IDP Return to Provincial Centers (Ramadi, Fallujah)**

IDP returns to Ramadi and Fallujah have taken place at comparatively high rates due to the relative stability and coherence of the political marketplace in these urban centers. Security and political actors suggested in interviews that the Anbar provincial government is the driving force behind these returns, due to the role it plays in coordinating the various administrative and security bodies involved in the return process. A local government official in Ramadi noted, “More than 95% of Ramadi families have returned to their areas, after the great effort made by the local government and the governorate represented by the service and support departments.”<sup>58</sup> Unlike the eastern and western peripheries, where security clearances for IDPs can easily be denied by PMF groups and/or tribal entities, the security institutions in the provincial centers have formed an allegiance under the influence of Speaker Halbousi, his local government proxy in the governor’s office, and key commanders of the AOC.

### ***Leverage of the Provincial Government over Security Forces***

The AOC has been consistently responsive to, and supportive of, the governor’s office and its policy towards camp closure and IDP return. In comparison to other provincial commands, which are weakened by the co-optation of multiple political parties and divergent allegiances, the AOC is relatively coherent in terms of its internal hierarchy and orientation to political power. This is largely a function of Halbousi’s influence over the AOC in his political strongholds of Ramadi and Fallujah. Halbousi used his position as the Governor of Anbar (2017-2018) to strengthen patronage ties with government officials and top officers in the ISF in Anbar (including with the head of AOC). Meanwhile, he managed to co-opt or expel IIP-affiliated officials. Dominance over these patronage relationships has allowed Halbousi and his political proxies (i.e., the

current governor) the necessary leverage to gain the support of the AOC in the comprehensive process of IDP return, going well beyond simply issuing security clearances.<sup>59</sup> A commander within the AOC explained the importance of its role in the process of IDP return: We coordinate with the MOMD,<sup>60</sup> the local government, and the Ministry of Transportation to provide the means necessary for the return of the IDPs. Our main role is to protect the IDPs in the camps and when they move to their places of origin. We also make sure they are accompanied by military escorts to ensure their safe access to their areas of origin and also to protect them and preserve their properties.<sup>61</sup>

For now, there is no sign that other claimants to power in the province (the IIP, al-Hal) have the leverage to exert influence over the AOC and weaken its close relationship with the Halbousi-backed governor.

#### ***Lack of Strategic Interests Valuable to the PMFs***

In addition to the question of leverage, the Halbousi-backed provincial government and the AOC have the ability to determine policies related to IDP returns in the provincial centers of Ramadi and Fallujah because these urban areas lack any political and/or economic assets of high value to the PMFs. As discussed in the previous section, the economic and political assets of Kataib Hezbollah and other Iran-aligned PMFs lie at the peripheries of the province. In fact, it behooves the PMFs to allow IDPs to return to urban provincial centers, since the more IDPs that are permitted to return to urban centers, the less likely they are to return to peripheral areas of the province where PMF interests are strongest.

## **Camp Closures and Forced Returns**

The recent GoI-led push for camp closures has impacted Anbar. One official noted that over 1600 individuals in Habbaniyah Tourist City (HTC) camp were now effectively living in an informal site after the camp abruptly lost its official status.<sup>62</sup> In addition to the national effort, Anbar has witnessed a concerted effort on the part of provincial authorities to close IDP camps and require that IDP populations return home. In some cases, IDP populations have been uprooted from camps and forcibly returned home without any warning. While the Prime Minister certainly sees camp closure and return as a priority, the push to close IDP camps at the provincial level has a specific political dimension. Anbar serves as a launchpad for Halbousi's national political ambitions, since he is able to appeal to Sunni Arab voters in Nineveh and Salah al-Din on the basis of success in Anbar in reconstruction and IDP returns.<sup>63</sup> IDPs in Anbar are important to Halbousi in that they help him project power nationally and expand his electoral base. Fallujah and Ramadi are the center of Halbousi's political ambitions, as they represent the largest population centers in the province. In the lead-up to the 2018 national elections, both then-Governor Halbousi and his allies among the Shia-majority political parties in Baghdad wanted to return IDPs as part of a campaign to expand their electoral base.<sup>64</sup> After the 2018 election, with national political resources as Speaker, and with strong local backing from the al-Hal (Karbouli) Party, Halbousi was able to play the role of mediator in channeling returns, particularly in the eastern areas of the province along the Euphrates River. In October 2019, nearly six months after his break from his former party, Halbousi orchestrated a new round of IDP returns to Anbar under his official patronage, with no reference made to his former party.<sup>65</sup> During these IDP movements, Halbousi's patronage is always prominently displayed on the buses used to transport IDPs.

59 Ayyash, "New Attempts to Change the Balance of Power."

60 Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displacement.

61 Phone interview by IRIS research team with Anbar Operations Command officer, August, 2020.

62 In-person /phone interviews by IRIS research team with local government and security officials, and IDPs from Anbar, December 2020.

63 "Al-Halbousi Plans to Become the Leader of Iraq's Sunni Community to Breakout from Dependency of Shia Parties," Al Arab, August 30, 2019. Available at: <https://alarab.co.uk/الخبوسي-يخطط-لزعامة-سنة-العراق-للخروج-من-تبعية-الأحزاب-الشيعة>.

64 Phone interviews by IRIS research team with local government and security officials, and IDPs from Anbar, September 1-October 5, 2020.

65 In-person /phone interviews by IRIS research team with local government and security officials, and IDPs from Anbar, September 1-October 5, 2020. See also: "Supported by Speaker of Parliament Muhammed Halbousi, and within the efforts for returning IDPs to their homes; 668 IDPs from Amriyat al-Fallujah returned to their areas", parliament.iq, September 28, 2019. Available at: <https://ar.parliament.iq/2019/09/28/-2/برعاية-رئيس-مجلس-النواب-محمد-الخبوسي>.

## POLITICAL MARKETPLACE APPROACHES TO ADDRESSING DISPLACEMENT IN ANBAR

### Promote Consensus Among Anbar's Political Factions Towards Sustainable IDP Solutions

In the provincial centers of Anbar, the current governor of Anbar enjoys the influence necessary to implement his policies of choice regarding camp closure and IDP return in coordination with the security forces. This influence is largely the product of Halbousi's vast patronage network and, by extension, the tacit assent of the Iran-aligned political parties. There is no immediate sign that this power structure might be disrupted. However, at the time of this writing, troubling developments are on the horizon. Halbousi is increasingly quarreling with members of the Iran-backed political blocs in Baghdad. Moreover, the political discourse of the IIP and al-Hal has become heated and rejects the status quo represented by the Baghdad-based political class. The worst-case scenario for Anbar's IDPs would be a deepening of the rift between al-Hal and Halbousi, with both becoming spoilers to each other's IDP initiatives. However, there is still enough overlaps in terms of common political interests and networks between the two political entities to prevent this scenario, and the international community should encourage cooperation between the two sides.

Furthermore, while both Halbousi and al-Hal have historically worked to undermine or sideline the IIP, in today's context, additional marginalization of the IIP threatens to destabilize the context in Anbar to the detriment of IDP return. The IIP is advocating for a new Sunni Arab province to be established at the western extremity of Anbar, and this threatens to polarize political actors in Anbar and create separate and contradictory policies towards IDPs. The international community should work with the IIP to establish alternative modes of settling its grievances with the Ramadi-based government; furthermore, it should recognize that including the IIP in discussions related to camp closure, IDP return, and other

IDP-related policy issues remains important, despite the diminished status of the IIP. Although the IIP is now politically weak, it retains social capital through mosques and among the intelligentsia, and any efforts to promote tolerance towards IDP families with a perceived ISIS affiliation should include the IIP due to its strength of social capital.

### A Framework for Returns to PMF-controlled Areas

The PMFs currently enjoy significant influence in the strategic border regions of Anbar (such as al-Qaim and the Baghdad Belt) which allows them to protect and pursue their interests. This means that in the short term, they are highly unlikely to consider giving up their influence and allowing an operational shift that empowers the ISF or other security actors, particularly when US-Iran tensions are at their highest in years. Nonetheless, the PMFs should be involved—albeit cautiously—in any vetting process that precedes IDP return, so that IDPs who have otherwise received all security clearances are not blocked at entry checkpoints. This involvement must not include disclosing to the PMFs a comprehensive list of IDP names, but shared information must be substantive enough to ensure that returning IDPs do not have to endure last-minute transit or admission rejections.

In the long term, however, the international community will have to work with the PMF Commission, Anbar Governor, Halbousi, and other partners to arrive at a solution regarding the security sector within these areas. These negotiations will have to take into account both the levers of power and the interests that different political and security actors hold. The PMFs are unlikely to allow a more meaningful presence of ISF forces, or to support IDP return operations led by the AOC, if they are concerned that their wide-reaching geopolitical, domestic, and economic interests would be threatened. At the very least, it seems likely that they would have to be granted political/economic assets elsewhere to counterbalance any anticipated concessions in Anbar.



## UNDERSTANDING DIYALA'S POLITICAL MARKETPLACE

### Main Political Actors

#### *Badr Organization*

The Badr Organization is an Iran-aligned coalition that represents the political arm of the Badr brigades.<sup>71</sup> In the post-ISIS era, Badr has dominated the security apparatus across the province in addition to the provincial administration.<sup>72</sup> Badr is led by Hadi Ameri, who simultaneously oversees the Binaa Coalition, which is a cohort of Iran-aligned parties and security actors.

#### *Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH)*

The AAH is part of Binaa and generally aligns with Badr on core domestic and geopolitical issues (particularly in securing Iranian interests); however, in Diyala, its interests revolve around specific localities and economic assets, and in this respect, it competes with Badr for influence.<sup>73</sup>

#### *Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Security Forces*

The PUK, whose stronghold is Sulaymaniyah, has long exerted influence in northern Diyala due to the large Kurdish population in Khanaqin.<sup>74</sup> Its influence is considerably reduced at present due to the withdrawal of Kurdish forces from the disputed territories following the October 2017 referendum.<sup>75</sup>

#### *Khamis al-Khanjar's Mashroo' al-Arabi Party*

The Sunni Arab party has generally aligned itself with Badr and Iranian interests in order to gain access to state resources. In Diyala the party is largely a commercial actor and relies upon connections to Badr for access to markets.<sup>76</sup>

#### *Sadirist Movement*

The Sadirists were much more relevant in the province prior to the rise of ISIS and competed for control over the provincial council. During and after the ISIS period it has shifted resources towards Samarra (Salah al-Din) and have generally acknowledged Badr's dominance over Diyala.<sup>77</sup>

#### *Iraq Islamic Party (IIP)*

The IIP briefly held influence in the provincial administration but has been sidelined by the Iran-aligned political network.<sup>78, 79</sup>

#### *Iraqi Security Forces (ISF)*

The Iraqi Security Forces based in Diyala are generally regarded as under the influence of the Badr Organization.<sup>80</sup> Many of the top ISF leaders in the province are simultaneously Badr members and they regularly participate in coordinated operations with the Badr PMF.<sup>81</sup>

#### *Iranian Regime*

Due to the long border, pilgrimage routes, and security concerns, the Iranian government regards Diyala

71 "The Badr Organization of Reconstruction and Development," Mapping Militant Organizations, Stanford University, Center for International Security and Cooperation, March, 2019. Available at: <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/435#note17>.

72 Michael Knights, "Pursuing Al-Qa'ida into Diyala Province," CTC Sentinel, 1 no. 9, August, 2008. Available at: <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Vol1Iss9-Art2.pdf>.

73 Phone and in-person interviews by IRIS research team with government officials, journalists, and observers from Diyala, September-December, 2020.

74 Zmkan Ali Saleem, Mac Skelton, and Christine M. van den Toorn, "Security and Governance in the Disputed Territories Under a Fractured GOI," London School of Economics and Political Science, Middle East Centre, November 14, 2018. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/11/14/security-and-governance-in-the-disputed-territories-under-a-fractured-goi-the-case-of-northern-diyala/>.

75 Ibid.

76 Phone and in-person interviews by IRIS research team with government officials, journalists, and observers from Diyala, September-December, 2020.

77 Ibid.

78 Jared Young, "Ahead of Iraq Vote, ISW Releases Diyala Province Political Report," Institute for the Study of War, January 30, 2009. Available at: [www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/DiyalaProvincePressRelease.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/DiyalaProvincePressRelease.pdf).

79 Russo, "Diyala."

80 Knights and Mello, "Losing Mosul," p. 4.

81 Phone and in-person interviews by IRIS research team with government officials, journalists, and observers from Diyala. September-December, 2020.

as strategically important and has therefore gone to great pains to secure the position of their proxies (Badr and the AAH).

## Key Dynamics in the Political Marketplace

### *The Maliki-Badr Alliance (2003-2013)*

In the months and years after the 2003 US-led military campaign, the Iran-backed Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq (ISCI, along with its military wing the Badr Brigades) worked methodically to infiltrate the army and police units in Diyala. Control of the ISF in the province aligned with the broader strategic aims of ISCI/Badr in that it allowed them to secure the long border with Iran. But dominance over the province was contested, with a number of armed actors, including Al-Qaeda, competing for hold over the terrain. When Al-Qaeda gained strength and briefly took over the provincial capital, US forces reasserted control alongside the ISF.<sup>82</sup> This move had the indirect effect of securing the interests of ISCI/Badr in addition to their GoI ally then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Maliki and his Badr allies worked together in sidelining Sunni Arab political actors such as the IIP in the province on the pretext of countering the insurgency.<sup>83</sup> When the IIP won the provincial council elections and governorship in 2009, Maliki and ISCI/Badr were able to expel the governor from office by force two years later in 2011.<sup>84</sup> Subsequently in 2013, the IIP took advantage of fissures in the Shia-majority political blocs and made the extraordinary move of

allying with the Sadirists in the elections, a strategy that granted them the largest share of votes.<sup>85, 86</sup> Maliki leveraged the power of the premiership to challenge the victory in court, a challenge that he won.<sup>87</sup> When the Sadirist-IIP governor refused to step down, Maliki once again used the powers of his position to issue an arrest warrant for the governor on dubious allegations of corruption.<sup>88</sup> Thus by the end of 2013, the Maliki-Badr alliance was in control of the provincial administration.

### *Badr Becomes the Hegemonic Power in the Province (2014-2017)*

Between 2006 and 2013, Badr collaborated with Maliki in order to secure control over the province and gain access to the resources and political clout required to undermine other claimants to power. The rise of ISIS removed the benefit and necessity of the alliance. First, Maliki lost the premiership and no longer possessed influence over the ISF. Second, the mobilization of the PMF in the war against ISIS allowed the Badr Brigade to stop operating in the shadows of the ISF and establish itself as a state-backed and -funded entity.<sup>89</sup> The enormous political clout and patronage networks granted to Badr under this arrangement gave it the necessary leverage to extend full control over the province.<sup>90</sup> This consolidation also aligned with the interests of the Iranian government, which favors the dominance of its direct proxy (Badr) over the ISF and an unpredictable Iraqi Prime Minister.<sup>91</sup> Meanwhile, the IIP and other Sunni political actors collapsed into disarray and were methodically co-opted by Badr.<sup>92</sup>

82 Kimberly Kagan, "Iraq Report: The Battle for Diyala," Institute for the Study of War, February 11–April 25, 2007. Available at: [www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/reports/IraqReport04.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/reports/IraqReport04.pdf).

83 Young, "Ahead of Iraq Vote."

84 "After Maliki's Deadline, Diyala's Governor Resigns," Almadia Paper. February 27, 2012. Available at: <https://almadia.com/view.php?cat=64827&fbclid=IwAR2dvuW7gCN-8xwutC91SQtrBk25hnmYclQRPN29wHuyr1xRuPGQjZRs>.

85 "Sadr Criticises Marjaya's Stance on Distributing Government Positions and Supports Giving the Position of Diyala's Governor to the Sunnis," Alsumaria TV, June 16, 2013. Available at: [www.alsumaria.tv/mobile/news/77792/iraq-news](http://www.alsumaria.tv/mobile/news/77792/iraq-news).

86 Jessica Lewis, "Middle East Security Report 18: The Islamic State of Iraq Returns to Diyala," Institute for the Study of War, April 2014. Available at: [www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Lewis-Diyala.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Lewis-Diyala.pdf).

87 "Administrative Court Delays for the Seventh Times National Alliance's Lawsuit Regarding the Legality of the Local Government," Buratha News Agency, September 25, 2013. Available at: <http://ftp.burathanews.com/arabic/news/212208>.

88 "Maliki Decides to Remove Al-Hamiri from Diyala's Governorship Role," Alsumaria TV, January 8, 2014. Available at: [www.alsumaria.tv/news/90147/الملكى-يقرر-سحب-يد-الحميري-من-ادارة-مجا](http://www.alsumaria.tv/news/90147/الملكى-يقرر-سحب-يد-الحميري-من-ادارة-مجا).

89 Sinan Adnan and Jessica Lewis McFate, "The Resurgence of ISIS in Diyala and its Implications for Iranian Proxies," Institute for the Study of War, July 25, 2015. Available at: <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2015/07/the-resurgence-of-isis-in-diyala-and.html>.

90 Knights and Mello, "Losing Mosul"

91 Phone and in-person interviews by IRIS research team with government officials, journalists, and observers from Diyala. September–December, 2020.

92 Ibid.

### ***Disintegration of the Kurdish Enclave Due to Badr Dominance (2017-2020)***

Between 2003 and 2016, there was one exception to the political marketplace dynamics described above. The disputed Khanaqin district in the north of the province includes a large Kurdish population that has long come under the influence of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and particularly the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) which regard the district as part of Kurdish territory. During this period, the local administration in Khanaqin was staffed largely by PUK affiliates, while the security sector was dominated by the Peshmerga.<sup>93</sup> Maliki attempted to push out the Kurdish Peshmerga in 2008, but the KRG, both the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the PUK, succeeded in negotiating the continued presence of the Peshmerga and remained the main actor in the local administration.<sup>94</sup> The rise of ISIS and withdrawal of federal troops allowed the Kurdish forces (mostly aligned with the PUK) to take near full control of Khanaqin district; however, this would be short-lived. Iran brokered a security collaboration between Badr and the PUK Peshmerga during the military operations to retake territory from ISIS, which in turn gave Badr a foothold in the province.<sup>95</sup> Yet during these military operations, the PUK Peshmerga were able to operate across much of Khanaqin and allegedly expelled Sunni Arab populations in what has been characterized as a “reverse Arabization” campaign.<sup>96</sup> After the failed 2017 referendum for Iraqi Kurdish independence, the Peshmerga and other Kurdish security and political actors were pushed out of the district almost entirely. While the KRG still staffs some administrative offices for the purpose of service delivery, and Kurdish security forces (Asayish) are allowed

symbolic presence at checkpoints, power in the district has shifted toward Badr and the Badr-backed governor's office in Baquba.<sup>97</sup> Though Badr is the only PMF-aligned group with broad province-wide influence, Badr has allowed the AAH, its ally in the Binaa Alliance, a foothold in Diyala, ceding it the town of Jalawla.

## **Levers of Power**

### ***Coercive Force***

At present, Badr is the dominant security actor in Diyala; this includes both its members and affiliates, including those at all levels of the ISF (army, police). The unity, political allegiance, and synergy of command structure between a PMF faction (Badr) and the ISF (both the army and police) is unique to Diyala and is not seen anywhere else in Iraq. Badr's hold over the ISF is reinforced by its connection to the Interior Ministry and other important federal security agencies in Baghdad. With powerful Baghdad backers and hegemonic local control, the Badr-aligned security sector is entirely unaccountable. Police forces and Badr PMFs have responded to signs of resistance among provincial council members with violence and detentions.<sup>98,99</sup> Moreover, the same forces have forcibly displaced populations and only permitted return on their terms. There are two very minor exceptions to Badr's hold on the security sector. First, although their influence has diminished significantly, the PUK-aligned internal security forces are permitted a face-saving operational presence at shared checkpoints in Khanaqin.<sup>100</sup> They cannot make arrests and must coordinate all activities with the Badr-aligned security sector. Second, the AAH controls the Sunni Arab and Kurdish town of Jalawla as part of a deal with Badr.<sup>101</sup>

93 Mac Skelton and Zmkan Ali Saleem, "Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries After ISIS: Heterogenous Actors Vying for Influence," LSE/Middle East Centre Report, February 2019. Available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100100/3/DIBsReport.pdf>.

94 Ibid.

95 Phone and in-person interviews by IRIS research team with government officials, journalists, and observers from Diyala. September-December, 2020.

96 "Banished and Dispossessed: Forced Displacement and Deliberate Destruction in Northern Iraq," Amnesty International, 2016 p. 13-18. Available at: [www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE1432292016ENGLISH.PDF](http://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE1432292016ENGLISH.PDF).

97 Saleem, Skelton, and van den Toorn, "Security and Governance,"

98 "Diyala's Provincial Council Holds a Session to Question the Governor Amid 'Great Pressures' on the Council's Members," Almadia Paper, March, 2016. Available at: [www.almadapress.com/ar/news/67677/مجلس-ديالى-يعقد-جلسة-استجواب-الحاف](http://www.almadapress.com/ar/news/67677/مجلس-ديالى-يعقد-جلسة-استجواب-الحاف).

99 "Iraqi Diyala Holds the Security Forces Responsible for Protecting the Lives of the Members of the Provincial Council," Alsumaria TV, April 1, 2016. Available at: [www.alsumaria.tv/news/164434/عراقية-ديالى-يحمل-القوات-الامنية-مسؤولية](http://www.alsumaria.tv/news/164434/عراقية-ديالى-يحمل-القوات-الامنية-مسؤولية).

100 Saleem, Skelton, and van den Toorn, "Security and Governance,"

101 Ibid.



“Badr Leader Hadi Ameri” (center)

### ***Multiple Economic Assets Fueling Patronage***

Badr’s control over the security and political apparatus in Diyala grants it multiple sources of income to fund patronage networks across the province.<sup>102</sup> Control over the provincial administration allows Badr to allocate positions and contracts to loyal party members and members of Kurdish and Sunni Arab factions that form part of the Badr-allied network.<sup>103</sup> These actions demonstrate that, in light of Diyala’s ethnically diverse population, dominance and stability cannot be achieved through coercive force alone. In addition to government contracts and commercial deals, Badr also extracts revenues from border crossings, checkpoints, and businesses across the province. This extra-legal revenue has become even more essential with the

lowering of oil prices and the absence or reduction of state salaries and contracts.<sup>104</sup>

### ***Alliances and Connections to Baghdad Ministries***

The Badr Organization is the most influential party within parliament’s largest bloc, the Binaa Coalition, and has long controlled the Interior Ministry. This combination of parliamentary influence and dominance over federal securities agencies creates an overall lack of accountability, and contracts, resources, and state salaries flow to Diyala with little to no oversight.<sup>105</sup>

102 Phone and in-person interviews by IRIS research team with government officials, journalists, and observers from Diyala. September–December, 2020.

103 Ibid.

104 Ibid.

105 Ibid.

## DISPLACEMENT TRENDS SHAPED BY THE POLITICAL MARKETPLACE

### High Percentages of Blocked Returns and Fears of Violence Among IDPs and Returnees

A November 2018 report by IOM noted that the highest percentage of blocked returns were IDPs originating from Babel (72%) and Diyala (53%).<sup>106</sup> The majority of the Diyala blockages took place in two districts, Muqdadiya and Khanaqin. Most IDPs from these areas reside in Baquba and Khanaqin city. A 2019 study on the IDPs residing in Baquba—over 90% of whom were displaced from within Diyala—reported that 80% of IDP respondents marked “fear” as a “key obstacle” to their return.<sup>107</sup> Clearly, the threat of violence presents a major problem for IDP return, and that fear has not dissipated despite the fact that nearly all of the IDPs originating from these areas were displaced over six years ago in 2014. The following analysis will unpack why this is the case, using the political marketplace analysis.

#### *Collusion among Badr, AAH and ISF*

Badr has long established patronage networks across the ISF in Diyala and its members staff the top command-erships. The ISF has no agency in Diyala, apart from Badr. The ISF's alignment with Badr and the PMF is a driving factor behind IDP perceptions of insecurity and the fear IDPs express regarding return. In January 2015, ISIS was removed from parts of Diyala—in particular, Muqdadiya—thanks to a military collaboration between Badr, the AAH and the ISF. Soon after this campaign was finished, allegations of killings and abductions of the Sunni Arab population and mass destruction of Sunni Arab houses followed.<sup>108</sup> ISF units that participated in

the campaign (namely, the 5th Division of the Army and SWAT) aligned themselves with Badr and the AAH, and contributed to forced displacement in Muqdadiya and surrounding areas.<sup>109</sup> This led to a high levels of displacement from Muqdadiya (as well as districts and villages in the west and north of Muqdadiya) to IDP camps in Khanaqin and Baquba, which exacerbated the perception that the ISF was intimately connected to the PMF. Because of this history, IDPs in Anbar typically perceive the ISF as a reliable force that respects their interests and desires, while IDPs in Diyala do not view the ISF in such favorable light.

Even after the military campaign against ISIS ended, episodes of violence against IDPs continued via a collusive arrangement between the ISF, Badr and the AAH. Following a January 2016 double bombing in a café in Muqdadiya that killed more than 46 people including a local Badr commander, roving bands of Badr and AAH combatants cruised the city, using loudspeakers to call on Sunni families to leave or face execution. Armed groups affiliated with Badr and the AAH also torched Sunni-owned shops and houses and firebombed seven Sunni mosques, despite a curfew and the deployment of Diyala police reinforcements. All of this unfolded in full view of the ISF.<sup>110</sup> As a result of this history, Sunni Arab IDPs in Diyala often lament that they have no ally in the security sector.

#### *Cross-border Ties and Interests*

In recent years, particularly 2013–2016, the Iranian government sought to clear its borders from the ISIS threat via its proxies, Badr and the AAH.<sup>111</sup> Meanwhile, armed groups affiliated with Badr were motivated to secure the flow of weapons necessary for the fight with ISIS (in addition to building leverage within the

106 “Reasons to Remain: Categorizing Protracted Displacement in Iraq,” International Organization for Migration (IOM) et al., November, 2018. Available at: [https://iraq.iom.int/files/publications/Categorizing\\_Protracted\\_Displacement\\_in\\_Iraq\\_2018-11\\_IOM\\_RWG\\_SI.pdf](https://iraq.iom.int/files/publications/Categorizing_Protracted_Displacement_in_Iraq_2018-11_IOM_RWG_SI.pdf).

107 “Protracted Displacement: An In-Depth Analysis of The Main Districts of Displacement,” International Organization for Migration (IOM), April 22, 2019. Available at: <https://iraq.iom.int/publications/protracted-displacement-study-depth-analysis-main-districts-displacement>.

108 Sheren Khalel and Mathew Vickery, “Iraqi Sunnis in Diyala Tell of Fleeing Shiite Militia in Terror,” Middle East Eye, August 10, 2015. Available at: [www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraqi-sunnis-flee-terror-shiite-militia-1623496057](http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraqi-sunnis-flee-terror-shiite-militia-1623496057).

109 “Iraq: Militias Escalate Abuses, Possibly War Crimes: Killings, Kidnappings, Forced Evictions,” Human Rights Watch (HRW), February 15, 2015. Available at: [www.hrw.org/news/2015/02/15/iraq-militias-escalate-abuses-possibly-war-crimes](http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/02/15/iraq-militias-escalate-abuses-possibly-war-crimes).

110 “Iraq: Militia War Crimes in Muqdadiya Highlight Authorities’ Persistent Failures to Hold them to Account,” Amnesty International, February 5, 2016. Available at: [www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE1433962016ENGLISH.pdf](http://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE1433962016ENGLISH.pdf).

111 Phone and in-person interviews by IRIS research team with government officials, journalists, and observers from Diyala. September–December, 2020.

Iraqi security sector) via the Diyala-Iran informal and formal crossings.<sup>112</sup> Badr and the broader network of PMFs saw value in securing pilgrimage routes from Iran westward towards Samarra.<sup>113, 114, 115</sup> With these multiple mutual interests at stake, the potential of an ISIS stronghold in Muqdadia, Jalawla or Saadiya was simply too risky for both the Iranian government and the influential PMF factions in the province. As a result, population expulsions, followed by highly conditional IDP returns, became the norm.

### ***Support from Baghdad-based Political Parties***

The proximity of Diyala to Baghdad heavily shapes the interests of the political blocs present in Diyala. In particular, the perception that Diyala was (and still is) a restive Sunni Arab population with links to ISIS gave Badr and its leader Hadi Ameri a near-undisputed mandate to defend the province and Iraq's capital from external threats.<sup>116</sup>

### ***Election Implications for Badr***

Some analysts speculate that Badr's pursuit of hegemony in Diyala has motivated the group to reduce the presence—even marginally—of the Sunni Arab population in the province, in an effort to improve the fortunes of the Shia Arab constituency. To this end, forced displacement and the refusal to allow IDPs to return helps render the Sunni Arab population politically impotent and difficult to mobilize.<sup>117</sup>

### ***Economic Interests***

Members and commanders of the Badr Brigade have occupied concrete block- and sand- processing factories that originally owned by Sunni citizens (and who were made IDPs during the recent waves of displacement). If these IDPs were allowed to return, they would almost certainly demand their factories and businesses back, and “this would leave Badr Brigade at a great economic disadvantage,”<sup>118</sup> said a Sunni Awakening leader from Dala al-Abbas district in Diyala.

### ***Selective Returns to Hotspot Areas***

Select subgroups of IDPs have been permitted to return to areas under strict Badr or AAH control. Both Badr and the AAH have used the right to return as leverage to co-opt IDPs and to build (or more accurately, coerce) allegiances or loyalties with them following return. In Saadiya, for instance, Badr has allowed some Sunni Arab IDPs to return in exchange for their political loyalty, and the AAH has done the same in Jalawla. For example, in February 2018, 1,268 IDP families received AAH clearance to return to Jalawla; although only 30% of this group (around 407 families) actually returned home several months later,<sup>119</sup> this was a significant development. The following subsections describe the process of co-optation and return in greater detail.

### ***The AAH's Co-optation of Local Tribes***

The historically mixed Kurdish and Sunni Arab town of Jalawla came under the influence of the AAH in 2018 through a deal negotiated with Badr. The AAH needed local support to maintain control however, as the group

112 Ibid.

113 Mohamed Binkasem, “Diyala...Identity-based Killing Aims at Demographic Change,” Al Jazeera, January 13, 2016. Available at: [www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2016/1/13/ديال-قتل-على-الهوية-لتغيير-الديمغرافيا](http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2016/1/13/ديال-قتل-على-الهوية-لتغيير-الديمغرافيا)

114 “What is happening in Iraq's Diyala?” Aljazeera TV, January 12, 2016. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.net/programs/arab-present-situation/2016/1/12/هل-ما-يجري-في-ديال-العراقية-تطهير>

115 Hamza Mustafa, “Diyala...a Struggle of Geography, History, and Identity,” Asharq Al-Awsat January 23, 2016. Available at: <https://aawsat.com/home/article/550271/ديال-صراع-الجغرافية-والتاريخ-والهوية>

116 Phone and in-person interviews by IRIS research team with government officials, journalists, and observers from Diyala, September-December, 2020.

117 Zack Beauchamp, “The US Uses Iraq's Shia Militias to Fight ISIS. They Just got Accused of Ethnic Cleansing,” Vox, February 5, 2015. Available at: [www.vox.com/2016/2/5/10918780/shia-militias-diyala-cleansing](http://www.vox.com/2016/2/5/10918780/shia-militias-diyala-cleansing)

118 Phone interview by IRIS research team with a Sunni Sahwa leader from Muqdadia/Dala al-Abbas district, September, 2020.

119 “Iraq Protection Cluster: Diyala Returnees Profile,” UNHCR Updates, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), February, 2018. Available at: [www.refworld.org/pdfid/5ad735b84.pdf](http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5ad735b84.pdf)

had no historical ties in the area and lacked the level of political support that Badr enjoys. Therefore, the AAH manipulated recent patterns of violence and displacement to coerce part of the Sunni Arab IDP population into allegiance. Between 2016 and 2017, when Kurdish forces were in control of the district, the Peshmerga expelled a number of Sunni Arab residents who were allegedly affiliated with ISIS. After the GoI reclaimed control of northern Diyala in October 2017 wresting control from the Peshmerga, the AAH became a prominent security actor and gained the ability to control the process of IDP return. The AAH agreed to allow IDP families with accused ISIS affiliation to return, and also granted them a salary in exchange for conscription within their ranks. Given their political vulnerability, these Sunni Arab residents had little choice but to pledge allegiance to the AAH in exchange for security, the ability to return, and financial stability.

#### ***Economic Strength of the AAH in Jalawla***

In Jalawla, the AAH controls all major revenue-generating channels and staffed checkpoints on commercially strategic roads, imposing taxes on vehicles passing through.<sup>120</sup> These funds allow the group to extend patronage networks across the province.

#### ***Limitations on Badr and PUK***

##### ***Leverage Over the AAH***

With the rising potential of an ISIS resurgence in northern Diyala,<sup>121</sup> the PUK Asayish has repeatedly exhorted Badr to intervene and stop the AAH's reliance on former ISIS members as recruits, but there is little Badr can do to control its fellow PMF member. AAH leader Khazali, whose party won 15 seats in the most recent parliamentary election, is now a formidable force both militarily and politically.

## **IDP Haven Along the Diyala-KRG Border (Khanaqin City)**

The pervasive insecurity and overall unfavorable conditions for return do not apply to the northernmost Diyala urban center of Khanaqin city. Khanaqin city hosts many of the IDPs displaced from central and southern Diyala. For example, an IOM report notes: "While Khanaqin city is in need of general infrastructure improvements, it is relatively stable, largely in good condition, and provides residents and IDPs with a range of services."<sup>122</sup> The following section discusses this relative stability as a function of a political settlement that balances the military dominance of Badr with the interests of the large Kurdish population—in part, through Iranian mediation. Were this settlement to break down, the implications would likely be severe for returnees in northern Diyala in addition to the significant IDP population currently residing there.

#### ***Political Strength of the Kurdish Population***

After the 2017 referendum for Iraqi Kurdish independence, the PMFs were compelled to tread carefully in their move to assert control over the northernmost areas. Badr and the AAH planned to enter Khanaqin city alongside the Iraqi Army—branding themselves as a unified PMF.<sup>123</sup> However, this plan was thwarted by huge anti-PMF rallies in Khanaqin,<sup>124</sup> which led to the Diyala chief of police (and a Badr affiliate himself) to personally exhort Badr and AAH commanders against entering the city. In this way, he partially aligned himself with the moral populism of Kurdish nationalism.<sup>125</sup> This decision is typical of a broader trend, whereby federal authorities who have the backing of Badr publicly rebuff the military wings of Badr and the AAH, in order to burnish a veneer of legitimacy among the Kurdish population.

120 In-person interviews by IRIS research team with PUK-affiliated subdistrict council member in Jalawla, Diyala, October, 2018.

121 Knights and Mello, "Losing Mosul,"

122 "Labour Market Opportunities and Challenges: Khanaqin District, Diyala Governorate," IOM, April, 2019. Available at: <https://iraq.iom.int/files/Khanaqin%2C%20Diyala.pdf>.

123 In-person interview by IRIS research team with head of AAH's coordination office in Jalawla, Diyala, October, 2018.

124 "One Killed, Three Wounded in Protest in Khanaqin," Rudaw, October 19, 2017. Available at: [www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/19102017](http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/19102017).

125 In-person interview by IRIS research team with chief of police in Khanaqin, Diyala, September, 2018.

***Iranian Influence***

Kurdish intelligence and security forces (Asayish) are permitted to monitor checkpoints alongside Iraqi police, though they have been stripped of the authority to make arrests. The arrangement, which Badr and the PUK struck under Iranian mediation, aimed to appease the large pro-KRG Kurdish population of Khanaqin. Iran has longstanding ties to both the PUK and Badr. While the ideological and military linkages to Badr are much stronger, the regime nonetheless relies upon the PUK for a foothold of influence in the Kurdistan region.

## **POLITICAL MARKETPLACE APPROACHES TO ADDRESSING DISPLACEMENT IN DIYALA**

### **Curbing violations against IDPs/ returnees in hotspot areas of Diyala requires top-level political and diplomatic engagement with the Badr leadership.**

Due to Badr's consolidation of power in Diyala and its strategic interests in the province—both of which are important to its main backer, Iran—it is unrealistic to expect a change in the political or security sector. Instead, the only way to improve conditions for IDPs and returnees is engagement with, and steady pressure on, Badr. Current Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi's recent attempts to establish a measure of control over border crossings with Iran highlighted the difficulty of making serious change in the local security sector: the Badr commander and brigade previously present at the border were replaced by a Badr-backed ISF unit. Given the level of state capture in Diyala and the difficulty of establishing public authority, in the short term, IDPs from Muqdadiya, Jalawla, Saadiya and other hotspot areas should be compelled neither by the government nor by international actors to return home. Those who do return home are at risk of re-displacement given the structural asymmetries in the political marketplace where IDPs lack political leverage in the face of overwhelming coercive force on the part of Badr. In the long term, the federal government, KRG, and international

community must engage Badr leadership to devise a strategic plan for managing protracted displacement and repeated re-displacements from Diyala.

### **Khanaqin's status as a relatively stable IDP haven can only be preserved by establishing shared governance/security settlements between Badr and the PUK.**

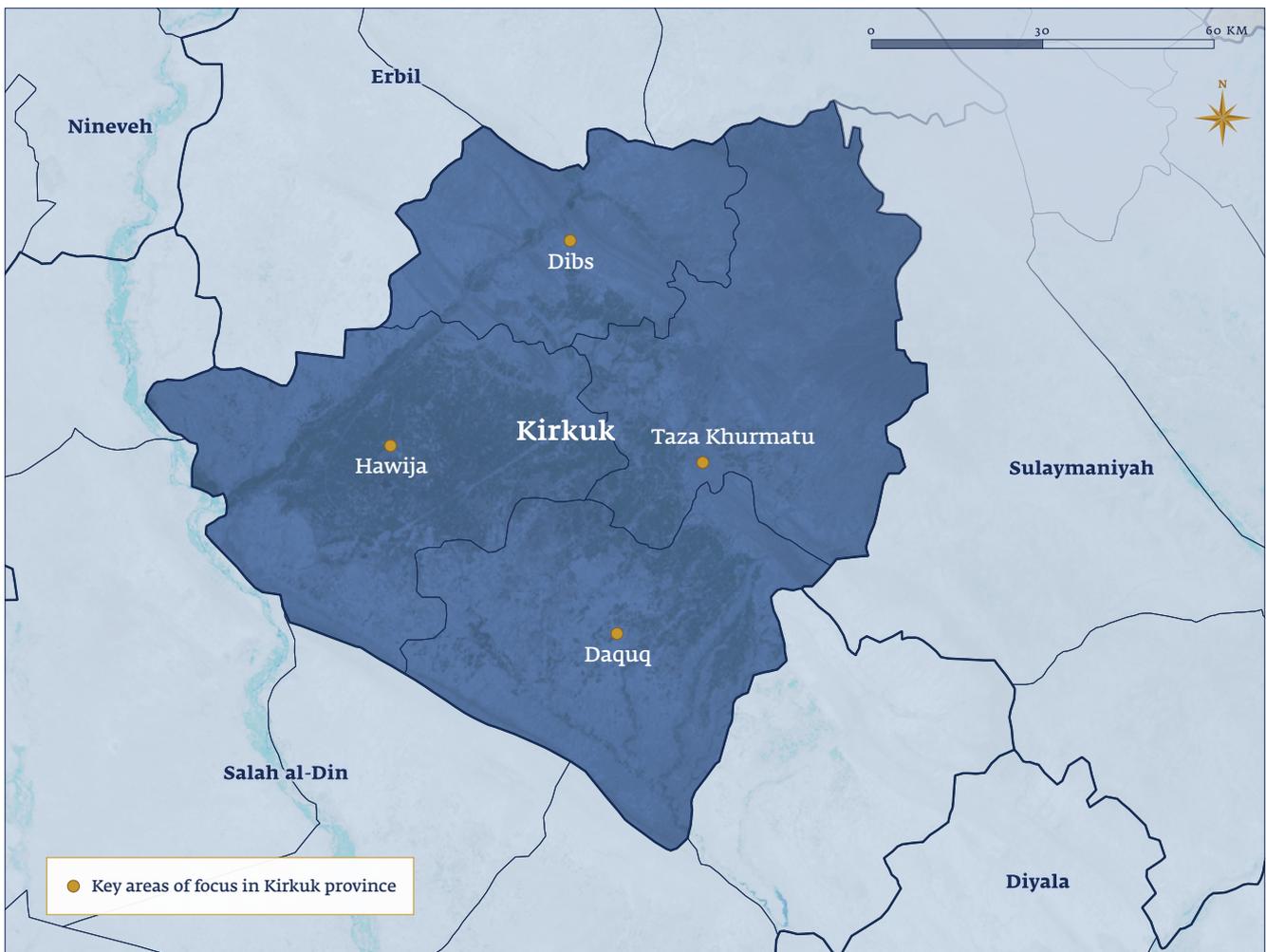
While it is true that Badr remains the most important political force in Khanaqin city, the allowances granted to the KRG government and security actors—however symbolic and limited—are nonetheless substantial stabilizing factors that reduce civilian anxieties about the security apparatus, and they enable the continuance of IDP services and housing. The UK, EU and international organizations should encourage, rather than diminish, the sustainability of the asymmetric political settlement between Badr and the PUK; Iranian diplomats must also be at the table, given the undeniable importance of the Iranian government in mediating PUK-Badr relations. This political settlement between the PUK and Badr over security arrangements need not be held hostage by the more distant prospect of a broader long-term effort towards a KRG-GoI shared governance agreement.

## KIRKUK PROVINCE

Kirkuk is uniquely positioned within the Iraqi political framework as the epicenter of the territorial dispute between Kurdish and Baghdad-based political factions. This makes the issue of internal displacement rife with political, demographic, and ideological complexities; Kirkuk's disputed nature has pushed demographic politics to the center of nearly all major policy decisions, including the return of IDPs.

With the rise of ISIS in 2014 and its capture of territory in the southern parts of Kirkuk province, waves of IDPs entered the capital city of Kirkuk (predominantly Sunni Arabs). Subsequent violence in Anbar and Salah al-Din brought even larger numbers of IDPs into Kirkuk city as IDPs from those provinces also sought safety.<sup>126</sup>

Map 4: Key areas of focus in Kirkuk



126 "Iraq: Security Situation and Internally Displaced People in Kirkuk Province - May/June 2015," LandInfo, The Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre, July 2, 2015, p. 21. Available at: [https://landinfo.no/asset/3243/1/3243\\_1.pdf](https://landinfo.no/asset/3243/1/3243_1.pdf).

Between 2014 and 2016, the mass movement of persons that took place to and within Kirkuk unfolded when the political and security arrangements of Kirkuk province were undergoing a major shift. As the rise of ISIS led to the withdrawal of the ISF and any last vestige of GoI influence, the Peshmerga (mostly PUK affiliated) moved into the capital and expanded across the province.<sup>127</sup> Kurdish security actors in control of the province regarded the influx of Sunni Arabs as a political problem: since the Kurdish establishment has long claimed Kirkuk as Kurdish territory,<sup>128</sup> the Peshmerga anxiously predicted demographic change, uncertainty in future elections, and a revisiting of historical grievances over property distribution. Kurdish forces dubbed this influx the second “Arabization” and harkened back to the Saddam Hussein-era policy of forced demographic change. Acting upon this sentiment at several key moments in 2016, the Kurdish security forces moved to forcibly expel Sunni Arab IDPs—particularly those from Salah al-Din and Anbar—from informal settlements in Kirkuk, thereby generating mass secondary displacement.<sup>129</sup> Then, in October 2017, the political and security configuration of the province shifted dramatically, with the longstanding Kurdish influence being largely supplanted by a new, federal political-security apparatus. The new political order—which shifted power from the Kurdish Peshmerga to the Badr Organization and a Sunni Arab governor—has stalled returns to some areas and forced returns to others. Understanding this complexity requires a full grasp of the political marketplace.

## UNDERSTANDING KIRKUK'S POLITICAL MARKETPLACE

### Main Political Actors

#### *The Badr Organization*

Badr played a major role in the fight against ISIS in Kirkuk and gained prominence in provincial politics by mobilizing the Shia Turkoman community concentrated in the southern part of Kirkuk.<sup>130</sup> Following the October 2017 referendum, Badr is regarded as the most decisive actor in provincial politics in terms of setting overall parameters for the distribution of security actors and allocation of resources.<sup>131</sup> Badr has co-opted the federal police, enjoys connections to the lead ISF commander (Saad Harbiya), and is represented politically by the powerful Mohammed Bayati.<sup>132</sup> However, in the everyday brokering of deals among different political actors, the governor put in place by Badr is arguably just as influential as Badr itself.

#### *Other PMF Groups*

Other PMF groups such as the AAH and Kataib Hezbollah are present and operational in Kirkuk. They are mostly involved in pursuing their own economic interests, including smuggling opportunities.<sup>133</sup>

#### *Governor Rakan Al-Jabouri*

Rakan al-Jabouri, a Sunni Arab from Hawija, rose from political obscurity to become the governor of Kirkuk.<sup>134</sup> Badr negotiated Jabouri's appointment as governor in the hopes that he would protect Badr's interests while also avoiding any further escalation in tension between the two main Kurdish political parties, the KDP and

127 "Iraqi Kurds 'Fully Control Kirkuk' as Army Flees," BBC News, June 12, 2014. Available at: [www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27809051](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27809051).

128 András Derzsi-Horváth, "Iraq after ISIL: Kirkuk," Web Essay, Global Public Policy Institute, August 30, 2017. Available at: [www.gppi.net/2017/08/30/iraq-after-isil-kirkuk](http://www.gppi.net/2017/08/30/iraq-after-isil-kirkuk).

129 "Iraq: 'Where Are We Supposed To Go?' Destruction and Forced Displacement in Kirkuk," Amnesty International, November 7, 2016 (Index number: MDE 14/5094/2016). Available at: [www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde14/5094/2016/en/](http://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde14/5094/2016/en/).

130 "Iraq: Fixing Security in Kirkuk," Middle East Report No. 215, International Crisis Group (ICG), June 15, 2020. Available at: <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/215-iraq-fixing-security-in-kirkuk.pdf>.

131 Phone and in-person interviews by IRIS research team with government and security officials, journalists, and observers from Kirkuk. September–December, 2020.

132 Ibid.

133 Ibid.

134 Michael Knights and Bilal Wahab, "Setting the Stage for Provincial Elections in Kirkuk," Policy Analysis/Policy Watch 2915, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 10, 2018. Available at: [www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/setting-the-stage-for-provincial-elections-in-kirkuk](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/setting-the-stage-for-provincial-elections-in-kirkuk).

the PUK, which were at odds following the October 2017 referendum.<sup>135</sup> He has proven adept at broadening his political network through ties with successive prime ministers,<sup>136</sup> and he has appeased Badr, Sunni Arab tribal affiliates (particularly the Jabouris), and to a certain extent the Kurds through the allocation of jobs and resources.<sup>137</sup>

### ***Kurdish Parties***

The PUK and the KDP no longer have troops positioned in Kirkuk, following the failed Kurdish independence referendum of 2017. This withdrawal weakened the position of the Kurds considerably, particularly in light of ongoing tensions between the two main Kurdish political parties (KDP and PUK).<sup>138</sup> The KDP refused any candidate from the PUK to be governor, which resulted in the selection of Rakan al-Jabouri, a Sunni Arab from Hawija district in southern Kirkuk.<sup>139</sup> However, the PUK still has influence over local affairs in Kirkuk, due to a large popular base among the Kurdish population there, and the fact that Badr/ISF has granted the PUK a role in the security sector through the presence of the PUK Asayish which is responsible for gathering intelligence and security oversight in the Kurdish-majority areas. The KDP, on the other hand, has formally boycotted participation in Kirkuk's political sector on the pretext that the city remains under occupation;<sup>140</sup> however, this boycott has its limits since the Erbil-Kirkuk trade route is too valuable for the KDP to cut ties with the governor in any substantive manner.<sup>141</sup>

### ***The ISF and Sa'ad Harbiya***

Sa'ad Harbiya, head of Brigade 61 in Kirkuk, is based at K1 south of Kirkuk. He wields influence due to his ties to the PMFs, local administration (via Jabouri), and positive relations with the Kurdish parties. Like Jabouri, he gained influence by multiplying alliances across the various factions present in Kirkuk.<sup>142</sup>

### ***Sunni Arab Tribal Groups***

Governor Rakan al-Jabouri is supported by the "Arab Council," a political entity largely formed out of his Jabouri base of support. It is countered by a political organization headed by the powerful Obeidi tribe, which views Jabouri as biased towards his own clan in the allocation of resources.<sup>143</sup>

## **Key Dynamics in the Political Marketplace**

### ***Kurdish Dominance Checked by Political/ Security Limitations (2003-2013)***

In 2003, when the government of Saddam Hussein was removed by the US-led military campaign, the KDP and the PUK (particularly the latter) entered Kirkuk in order to reassert Kurdish control of the province and its resources. Part of their strategy included encouraging Kurds who were originally from Kirkuk but had relocated (usually by force) to Sulaymaniyah and Erbil, to return to Kirkuk and settle permanently in the city.<sup>144</sup> Though many had been IDPs for so long they had lost a sense of Kirkuki identity, the KDP and PUK relied on both ideological and financial incentives to entice them; in

135 Phone and in-person interviews by IRIS research team with government and security officials, journalists, and observers from Kirkuk. September-December, 2020.

136 Ibid.

137 "Tough Competition Between Al Jabouri and Al Ubaid Tribes for Power in Kirkuk," KirkukNow, January 14, 2020. Available at: <https://kirkuknow.com/en/transition/17>.

138 "After Iraqi Kurdistan's Thwarted Independence Bid," Middle East Report No.199, International Crisis Group, March 27, 2019. Available at: <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/199-after-iraqi-kurdistan.pdf>.

139 "KDP, PUK in Row Over Kirkuk Governorship," Rudaw, October 16, 2018. Available at: [www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/161020185](http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/161020185).

140 "Kirkuk is Occupied and Must be Run by its People, says KDP Official," Kurdistan 24, January 18, 2019. Available at: [www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/b9114da9-ab27-4a4f-973a-3b327ff548ef](http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/b9114da9-ab27-4a4f-973a-3b327ff548ef).

141 Phone and in-person interviews by IRIS research team with government and security officials, journalists, and observers from Kirkuk. September-December 2020.

142 Ibid.

143 "Arabs Lost Kirkuk' United Arab Front Tells Rakan al-Jabouri, Kirkuk Governor," KirkukNow, June 3, 2020. Available at: <https://kirkuknow.com/en/news/62398>.

144 During the 1991 uprising, a great number of Kurdish Kirkukis were expelled by the regime. See: Joost Hiltermann, "To Protect or to Project? Iraqi Kurds and Their Future," International Crisis Group (ICG), June 4, 2008. Available at: [www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraqi-protect-or-project-iraqi-kurds-and-their-future](http://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraqi-protect-or-project-iraqi-kurds-and-their-future).

addition to financial benefits, they were promised state employment, lands, and commercial deals by the Kurdish parties in exchange for their resettlement in Kirkuk and support in the local elections.<sup>145</sup> Consequently, the 2005 elections swept the Kurds into power in the province. Yet the Kurdish influence over the province was largely confined to the administrative offices as well as the city center.<sup>146</sup> Beyond the capital, an insurgency was underway, and by 2006 and 2007 Kurdish, Shia Arabs, and Shia Turkoman residents found themselves targets of insurgent attacks. The US military sought to restore stability by installing a shared security and governance arrangement that split governance between Kurdish, Sunni Arabs, and Turkoman,<sup>147</sup> a balancing act that generated fragile stability for a short period; however, the American withdrawal in 2011 led to the unravelling of the settlement. Increasingly, then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki sought to capitalize upon the instability that spread across Iraq by sending ISF troops into Kirkuk as a check on Kurdish power. At one point in 2012, this tactic led to military standoff between KRG forces and the ISF.<sup>148</sup> By the end of 2013, the Kurdish parties retained dominance over the provincial administration but were forced to cede security control to the ISF.

#### ***Kurdish Domination of Political and Security Apparatus, with KDP-PUK Fissures (2014-2017)***

The rise of ISIS in early 2014 led to the withdrawal of the ISF from the city, paving the way for the complete takeover of Kirkuk by Kurdish security forces. This enabled the two main Kurdish parties (the KDP and PUK) to expand their influence also, and they were able to control the entirety of the province's political and administrative

apparatus. Initially, the PUK was the primary party in control (as was historically the case in Kirkuk), but the KDP made shrewd choices that gradually allowed the party to assert its leverage. The KDP overtook Kirkuk's oil fields and connected the pipeline to Erbil, strengthening its wealth and growing its patronage networks.<sup>149</sup> Despite fissures between the KDP and the PUK, the overall picture in Kirkuk was one of joint Kurdish dominance—with one important caveat. In the south of the province (in the district of Hawija) as well as in the Shia Turkoman areas, security incidents spotlighted limits on Kurdish power.<sup>150</sup> Therefore, with tacit Kurdish consent, the Badr Organization asserted security and mobilized the Shia Turkoman population into fighting force.<sup>151</sup>

#### ***The Decline of Kurdish Power and Rise of the PMFs (2017-2020)***

The Kurdish independence referendum of 2017 provoked the federal government to initiate a military response led by the ISF and the PMFs, which forcibly expelled the KDP and PUK security forces from the province. In the aftermath, the control of Kirkuk fell squarely with the ISF and the PMFs, particularly Badr. However, the situation was politically more complex and heterogeneous. The PUK's ties to Iran enabled the party to work out an arrangement with Badr that would allow the continued presence of PUK intelligence in the Kurdish areas as well as continued access to public employment for PUK loyalists.<sup>152</sup> The KDP refused to participate in local government and subsequently blocked any attempt on the part of the local government to appoint a PUK-affiliate as governor. This breakdown in Kurdish relations prompted Badr to shape the negotiations and resulted in the appointment

145 "Iraq and the Kurds: The Brewing Battle Over Kirkuk," Middle East Report No. 56, International Crisis Group, July 18, 2006. Available at: <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/56-iraq-and-the-kurds-the-brewing-battle-over-kirkuk.pdf>.

146 Ibid. p.7.

147 Larry Hanauer, Jeffrey Martini, and Omar Al-Shahery, "Managing Arab-Kurd Tensions in Northern Iraq After the Withdrawal of U.S. Troops," Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2011. Available at: [www.rand.org/pubs/occasional\\_papers/OP339.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP339.html).

148 "Kurdistan Leader Vows to Defend Claims over Disputed City," Reuters, December 10, 2012. Available at: <https://in.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-kurdistan-kirkuk/kurdistan-leader-vows-to-defend-claims-over-disputed-city-idUSBRE8B90ZP20121210>.

149 "Iraq: Fixing Security," ICG, p. 4-6.

150 Derek Henry Flood, "The Hawija Offensive: A Liberation Exposes Faultline," CTC Sentinel, 10 no. 9, October, 2017: p. 24-28. Available at: [https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/CTC-Sentinel\\_Vol10Iss9-21.pdf](https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/CTC-Sentinel_Vol10Iss9-21.pdf).

151 Derzsi-Horváth, "Iraq after ISIL: Kirkuk."

152 Phone and in-person interviews by IRIS research team with government and security officials, journalists, and observers from Kirkuk. September-December 2020.

of a figure who would do the PMFs' bidding while also appeasing the other major political players. Jabouri, a Sunni Arab from Hawija, was the chosen candidate. He proved adept at protecting the interests of the PMFs while also ensuring a measure of cooperation with the Kurdish parties.<sup>153</sup> Ironically, he has been less responsive to the needs of Sunni Arabs from his native Hawija.<sup>154</sup>

## Levers of Power

### *Coercive Force*

While the ISF and federal police are the only forces present in the provincial capital of Kirkuk city, it is widely understood that Badr's close relationship with the head military commander (Saad Harbiya) and the federal police serves as a check on any ISF movements that might run contrary to PMF interests. Meanwhile, Badr also has ground forces in Taza (a town in the south of Kirkuk, towards Salah al-Din), as well as a handful of units stationed at Kirkuk airport. In sum, the PMFs and particularly Badr, are viewed as the most influential actors across the security apparatus in Kirkuk. The sense that the PMFs could take over the capital city in minutes was a common view shared among interviewees. The PUK is no longer a strong military actor but its intelligence/security services (Asayish) are permitted to retain a presence in the areas or neighborhoods populated by Kurds.

### *Patronage and Public Employment*

Although the Kurdish security apparatus in Kirkuk lost substantial power when the ISF and PMFs asserted control over the province, the transformation of administrative power was not as apparent. The two major Kurdish parties had populated the local administration with Kurdish director generals and other high-level posts since 2003, and it is not easy to remove these officials, particularly in a province with a sizeable Kurdish population and longstanding ties between the PUK and Iran. Jabouri has accommodated ongoing Kurdish demands for continued

public appointments and, by extension, access to government employment in the province, while simultaneously ensuring a sizable number of positions for PMF affiliates (particularly Shia Turkoman). Jabouri has further shored up PMF support by enabling PMF commanders to participate in private businesses, parking garages, shops, oil smuggling, and government contracts.

### *Ideology/Moral Populism*

Kirkuk holds an important place in competing Kurdish and federal national rhetoric. For the Kurds, the province is regarded as the lynchpin of any future Kurdish nation due to its rich natural resources and economic vitality. The fact that Kirkuk is disputed between Kurdish and federal Iraq, and holds such strong ideological value in the imagination of the Kurdish people, was key to the KDP's capacity to mobilize widespread Kurdish support for an independence referendum, despite the fact that the Kirkuk population historically leans towards the PUK. The capacity of the Kurdish parties to draw upon this rhetoric is a powerful source of Kurdish cohesion but simultaneously threatens both local social cohesion and relations with Baghdad.

## DISPLACEMENT TRENDS SHAPED BY THE POLITICAL MARKETPLACE

### **Forced Returns to Hawija Backed by the Provincial Government**

As early as January and February 2018, newly appointed Governor Rakan al-Jabouri orchestrated a large-scale and heavily publicized return movement of IDPs from Kirkuk city to Hawija.<sup>155, 156</sup> Under the direction of the prime minister, IDPs were placed into cars and buses and sent back to Hawija regardless of whether or not they consented.<sup>157</sup> Many IDPs who were forced to return during this movement expressed concerns about the destruction of their housing in the place of return, as

153 Ibid.

154 Ibid.

155 "Kirkuk Governor Announces the Return of 1,500 IDPs to Hawija District," Alsumaria TV, January 16, 2018. Available at: [www.alsumaria.tv/news/227048/محافظة-كركوك-يعلن-عودة-1500-نازح-لقضاء-الحويلة](http://www.alsumaria.tv/news/227048/محافظة-كركوك-يعلن-عودة-1500-نازح-لقضاء-الحويلة).

156 "Al-Jabouri Announces the Return of More than 70% of IDPs from Southern Kirkuk," The Baghdad Post, December 9, 2018. Available at: [www.thebaghdadpost.com/ar/Story/136944/الجبوري-يعلن-إعادة-أكثر-من-70-من-النازحين-جنوب-كركوك](http://www.thebaghdadpost.com/ar/Story/136944/الجبوري-يعلن-إعادة-أكثر-من-70-من-النازحين-جنوب-كركوك).

157 "Kirkuk Governor Announces the Return," Alsumaria TV.

well as lack of infrastructure and the presence of armed groups, including not only the PMFs but also ISIS cells.<sup>158</sup> This section examines why and how this coerced IDP movement took place: what were the interests and points of leverage that generated this policy?

### *The Governor's Pursuit of Political Capital Among the Kurdish Factions*

Jabouri's stance towards Hawija's IDPs must first be interpreted as a product of the weak political position he occupied at the start of his term as governor, and his pressing need for allies. He came into power under highly unusual circumstances: normally the governorship would be allocated to the PUK; however, the referendum put the two Kurdish parties at odds, with the KDP refusing any PUK candidate. After Jabouri was appointed governor, he needed allies and local support, especially considering the sheer size and historical

influence of the Kurdish population in Kirkuk city.<sup>159</sup> For most of the Kurdish population in Kirkuk, the issue of IDPs is highly sensitive due to the history of forcible demographic change in the province, and particularly since 2014 when ISIS forced the mass displacement of IDPs to Kirkuk. When Jabouri was appointed governor, many within the Kurdish population feared that he would never act decisively on the issue of IDPs, since he originated from Hawija, the district with the largest number of IDPs in Kirkuk. By enthusiastically and publicly promoting a policy of government-mandated return, he sought to dispel such critics and open up channels of communication and trust with the PUK and KDP leadership. Both the Erbil-Kirkuk trade route (under KDP influence) and the Kirkuki population (under PUK influence) would both be essential to his efforts to strengthen his fragile grip on power.<sup>160</sup>



*PUK co-president Lahur Talabany (left)*

158 Mohammed Abdullah, "Hawija IDPs: We Don't Want to Get Out of the Camps," *Irfaasawtak*, November 22, 2017. Available at: [www.irfaasawtak.com/iraq/2017/11/22/نازجون-الحويجة-لا-نريد-الخروج-الخيمات](http://www.irfaasawtak.com/iraq/2017/11/22/نازجون-الحويجة-لا-نريد-الخروج-الخيمات).

159 Phone and in-person interviews by IRIS research team with government and security officials, journalists, and observers from Kirkuk. September-December, 2020.

160 *Ibid.*

### ***Badr's Interests in Cross-factional Cooperation***

The Badr Organization, which was influential in bringing Jabouri to the governorship, has become the key power broker in Kirkuk since 2017. Badr's power, however, is contested. Kirkuk remains a multiethnic, heterogeneous political order with a number of influential factions, including the PUK, the KDP, and powerful Sunni Arab tribes (Jabouris and Obeidis), not to mention the international actors with energy projects and goals in the province. Because Badr Organization's leadership is pragmatic and seeks a long-term presence in Kirkuk, it has sought to accommodate Kurdish interests, even though the security and administrative power of the Kurdish parties has diminished substantially in recent years. Equally, Badr has tried to accommodate the interests of the Shia Turkoman population in Kirkuk, which is an important component of Badr's support base and fears demographic change and "Arabization" nearly as much as the Kurdish population. As such, the decision to coerce IDPs to return from Kirkuk to Hawija was carried out to appease both the Kurdish and Turkoman populations.

### ***Votes***

The push for mass IDP returns in the months leading up to the 2018 national elections highlights the linkage between displacement-return dynamics and voter mobilization. Jabouri's lack of a sizable political constituency in Kirkuk rendered him a vulnerable candidate. The Sunni Arabs of the province do not vote in a reliable bloc and their loyalty typically splits along tribal lines. The governor calculated that the policy of government-mandated return would allow him and his allies to rebuild the Sunni Arab region of southwest Kirkuk in a manner that would favor loyalists and thereby shore up a fragile

electoral base. Security, governance, and reconstruction in Hawija would henceforth be run through the governor's office, granting Jabouri both short-term and long-term prospects of cultivating patronage networks.

### ***Destruction of Housing, Land, and Property (HLP) as a Key Obstacle to Return***

The destruction of housing, land, and property (HLP) is a key factor inhibiting returns to Kirkuk; between 116 and 136 Sunni Arab villages are estimated to have been destroyed during the conflict with ISIS. The affected area extends from the subdistrict of Sarkan in Dibs district, the subdistrict of al-Multaqa in Taza, and certain villages of Daquq. Jabouri has taken a proactive role on this issue, at least in terms of media and public relations,<sup>161</sup> and he often travels to affected districts and opens water facilities, schools, and electricity projects.<sup>162</sup> He also frequently demands help from the federal government and from the international community to reconstruct the affected areas and destroyed villages,<sup>163</sup> <sup>164</sup> an investment which he argues is essential to address the IDP issue in the province.<sup>165</sup> The governor has twice received the head of the UN mission in Iraq, where he pressed the issue of reconstruction of Hawija. Despite these high-profile efforts to support the return and reintegration of IDPs, the majority of villages and agricultural areas remain deserted, with their inhabitants living either in IDP camps or urban areas. The politics of this stalled reconstruction is discussed below.

### ***Leverage of the Perpetrators***

The widespread damage to HLP in Kirkuk was part of a larger wave of destruction that included Sunni

161 "Al-Jabouri Discusses the Reconstruction of al-Sinaee District of Hawija and Restoring and Rebuilding the Destroyed Houses in the Liberated Areas," Kirkuk Governorate Official Website, November 4, 2020. Available at: [www.kirkuk.gov.iq/news/744](http://www.kirkuk.gov.iq/news/744).

162 "Governor of Kirkuk Opens a Water Project in Daquq South of the Province," YouTube, October 6, 2018. Available at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxuVC7IHb2Q&feature=share](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxuVC7IHb2Q&feature=share).

163 "Kirkuk Governor Speaks to the Residents of Atshana and al-Aziziyah Villages," Kirkuk Governorate Official Website, October 21, 2020. Available at: [www.kirkuk.gov.iq/news/730](http://www.kirkuk.gov.iq/news/730).

164 "Kirkuk Governor Stresses the Importance of Rebuilding the Destroyed Villages," Kirkuk Governorate Official Website, November 11, 2020. Available at: [www.kirkuk.gov.iq/news/750](http://www.kirkuk.gov.iq/news/750).

165 "Kirkuk's Acting [Governor] Asserts that all Components in the Province will Benefit from Services and Projects," Radio Nawa, September 30, 2019. Available at: [www.radionawa.com/all-detail.aspx?jimore=14952](http://www.radionawa.com/all-detail.aspx?jimore=14952).

villages in Diyala, Salah al-Din, and Nineveh (more than 300 villages in total).<sup>166</sup> This infrastructural violence resulted in a formal case (a “dossier”) recognized by the Iraqi government. Despite formal government support, the case never moved forward in any serious manner.<sup>167</sup> The security forces accused of causing the destruction (namely, the Kurdish security forces and Iran-aligned PMFs) are powerful components of the national political hierarchy in Iraq. Advancing the case through the courts or parliament—thereby drawing unwanted attention to the perpetrators—could result in the breakdown of the political consensus in Baghdad.<sup>168</sup> The Iran-aligned PMFs and the Kurdish Peshmerga place the blame on ISIS for the destruction, despite convincing satellite and forensic evidence to the contrary. No court or oversight body has the power to challenge the PUK or Badr's narratives on the basis of evidence alone, however.<sup>169</sup> Jabouri finesses the power dynamics by decrying the damage and destruction, while also regularly and publicly calling for aid support, but he stops short of assigning blame to any particular actor.

### **Security Configuration**

The destroyed areas remain under security configurations that are unfavorable to IDP return. Operationally speaking, the security configurations of these areas have undergone rapid changes. In 2017, after the withdrawal of Kurdish forces, the ISF and Badr came to Dibis and took up positions for five months, after being replaced by the federal police (5th Division). In November 2020, the federal police withdrew from Dibis, and Brigade 33 of the ISF, which was previously stationed in Ain Al-Asad, deployed to the district. Despite the removal of the PMFs, the physical presence of the ISF has not brought about a substantive transformation of the power dynamics and economic incentives at play. Like the PMFs before them, the ISF has continued to extort and tax ordinary people,

severely hampering any prospect of rebuilding civilian-military trust. Badr's relations with the head the ISF military command (Saad Harbiya) and the police are very strong, a fact which raises the question of collusion around resource extraction.<sup>170</sup> As long as financial extraction remains the primary objective of the security forces, it will remain difficult, if not impossible, to convince IDPs to return to destroyed villages.

## **POLITICAL MARKETPLACE APPROACHES TO ADDRESSING DISPLACEMENT IN KIRKUK**

### **Engage the Prime Minister and key leaders of political blocs around reconstruction in Hawija**

The last three prime ministers have given the issue of reconstruction in Hawija a prominent place in public statements. Despite these statements, returned IDPs complain that infrastructure is inadequate, and the local economy is very poor, conditions that put them at risk of re-displacement. A number of factors could incentivize political actors to invest in reconstruction in Hawija. First, none of Kirkuk's major political parties—particularly the PUK but also Badr—wants to see the IDPs who returned from Kirkuk city to Hawija re-displaced to central Kirkuk. (After all, the PUK and Badr vigorously supported the governor's policy of forced IDP return from Kirkuk to Hawija, based on their own interests, tied to demographic politics.) Taking advantage of this political opening, the GoI and international community should offer greater support to Jabouri—who, to date, has maintained positive relations with all Kirkuk political factions—to support infrastructure development in Hawija district. As the PUK and Badr consider Hawijah as a potential site for terrorist cells, any infrastructure

166 Ali al-Husseini, “The Destroyed Arab Villages in Northern Iraq: all Sides are Involved but Accountability is Absent,” Al-Araby al-Jadeed, May 3, 2019. Available at: [www.alaraby.co.uk/القرى-العربية-الدمرة-شمالي-العراق-الجميع-متورط-والحاسبة-غائبة](http://www.alaraby.co.uk/القرى-العربية-الدمرة-شمالي-العراق-الجميع-متورط-والحاسبة-غائبة).

167 Ibid.

168 Ibid.

169 Ibid.

170 Phone and in-person interviews by IRIS research team with government and security officials, journalists, and observers from Kirkuk, September-December, 2020.

investments would need to fall under a larger effort to ensure long-term stability in Hawija. National Sunni Arab political leaders such as Mohammed Halbousi likewise have a positive relationship with Jabouri and could contribute political capital to an effort to rebuild Hawija. The one major caution is that development projects, and their attendant resources, typically attract the attention of political factions seeking new revenue streams, particularly amidst national economic distress. Appropriate safeguards must be put in place to mitigate such a risk.



*Rakan al-Jabouri, Governor of Kirkuk*

### **Create the conditions for sustainable IDP return to Daquq and Dibs via sensitive political engagement on the issue of reconstruction.**

Not only is the scale of destruction immense in these areas requiring enormous resources that the current government of Iraq does not have, but also the issue of blame attribution remains particularly sensitive for these villages. The PUK and Badr will only support reconstruction and facilitate large-scale IDP return if they have firm assurances that such efforts will not generate renewed criticism of the actors accused of HLP destruction. Therefore, in light of the political sensitivities and the major deficit of capital at the GoI's disposal, it will likely be very difficult to convince the PUK and Badr to publicize the need for reconstruction. In the long term, however, there are several opportunities to engage the PUK and Badr on the issue. First, the PUK is already worried about the

risk of protracted displacement in the province, when the (Sunni Arab) IDP population looks to Kirkuk city as a safe haven. Second, Badr leader Hadi Ameri is a pragmatically-minded politician with long-term sights on the federal premiership, and he has operated in Kirkuk cautiously due to the deeply-rooted local tensions as well as the international attention on the oil-rich province. Ameri is often responsive to international pressure and may be compelled in a positive direction with the right set of incentives.

### **Recognize that displacement politics in Kirkuk must be addressed in conversation with the new political order, not the pre-2014 political order.**

Since 2003, the international community has typically framed power relations in Kirkuk in one of two ways: either as a political battle between the KRG and GoI, or as an ethnic issue that could be solved by dividing the province's administration across its major ethnic groups (the Turkoman, Arabs, and Kurds). However, these two ways of framing the power balance in Kirkuk is no longer salient. The new political structure is one in which Badr, the PUK, and the governor are the main loci of power. Local ethnic groups hold power as a function of their association or patronage with one of these actors. This can sometimes mean that the influence of an ethnic group outweighs its population size. For example, the Badr-backed Shia Turkoman community in Kirkuk, which is relatively small in number, holds significant influence in determining the course of local affairs due to its affiliation to Badr. Therefore, any effort to influence or negotiate policy solutions, including those related to displacement, should ensure representation from all actors associated with the new political order, regardless of population size. Specifically, it means that discussions must include Badr leaders, PUK leaders, and Jabouri. It is also important to recognize the KDP as an influential player; even though the KDP is officially boycotting local politics for now, it maintains leverage due to the importance of the Erbil-Kirkuk trade route and longstanding patronage networks in Kirkuk city.

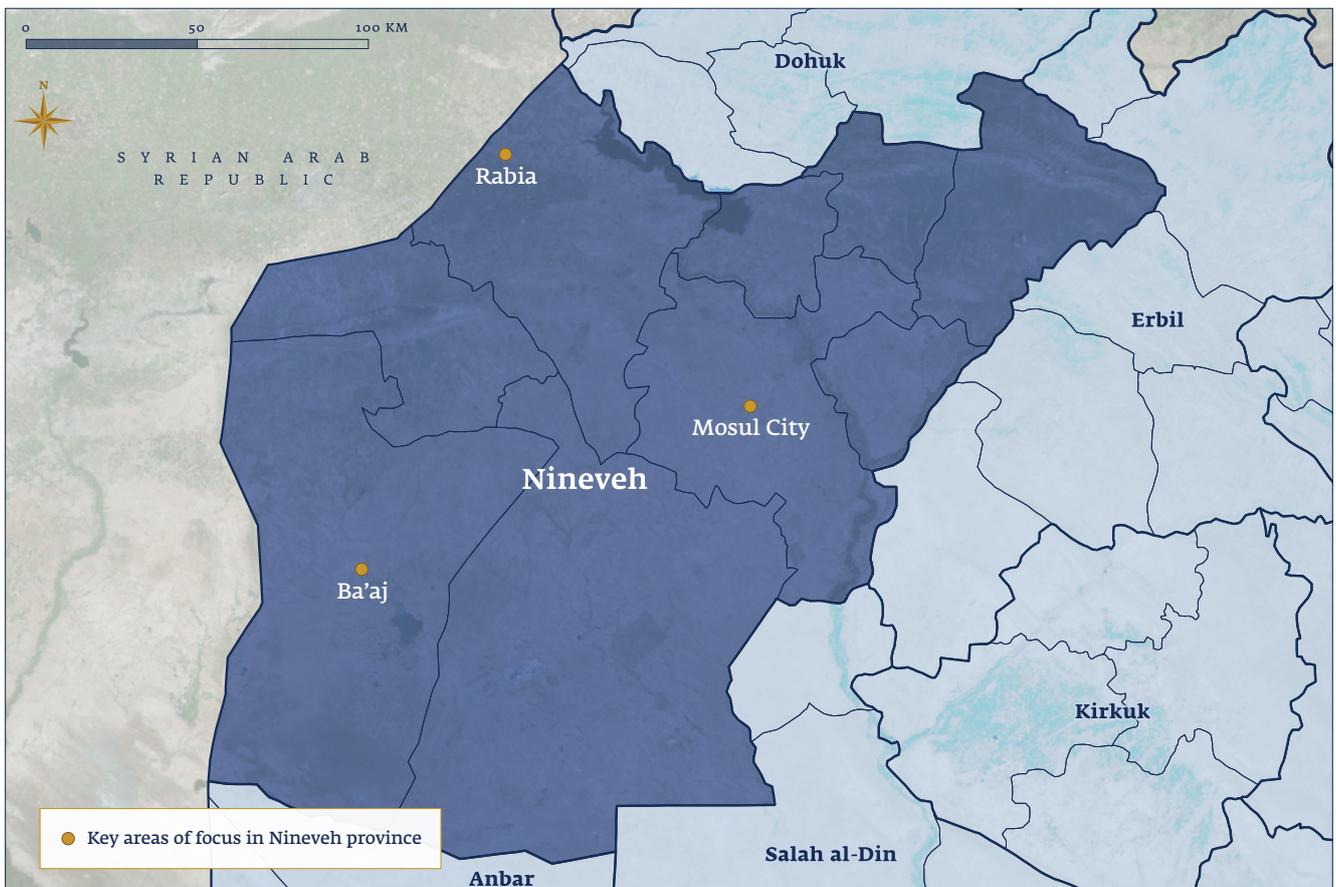
## NINEVEH PROVINCE

Nineveh is Iraq's most diverse province and has a highly fragmented political terrain. It was heavily affected by the violence carried out by ISIS and the responding military campaign. To date, 746,000 IDPs from Nineveh remain displaced, significantly more than any other province.<sup>171</sup> Mass displacement began in 2014 as ISIS fanned out across the province and established territorial control, while also committing terrible atrocities against civilians; additional displacement took place in 2016 and 2017 with the military campaign to regain territory. The vast majority of IDPs fled to Erbil and Dohuk, and today, three years after the end of military operations, protracted displacement remains an enormous challenge.

This chapter contextualizes protracted displacement within a particularly fraught and unstable political

marketplace. For the first decade after 2003, strategic areas under the dominant influence of the KDP were disputed with the federal government. Today, while the KDP remains influential in parts of Nineveh, the war against ISIS ushered into the province a wide range of political and security actors, including many tied to the PMFs, with no single entity capable of establishing dominance. Some of the most complex displacement and return dynamics are situated in areas where either the KDP or a specific PMF group pursue strategic political or economic interests. The influence these security actors—along with their corresponding political parties—hold in different parts of Nineveh puts the governor of Nineveh in a highly constrained position, with very little agency to manage or shape IDP returns.

Map 5: Key areas of focus in Nineveh



171 Salah al-Din has produced the second highest number of existing IDPs with 146,000 (as of December 21, 2020). See: IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix. Available at: <http://iraqdtm.iom.int/MasterList>.

This crisis of authority generates significant problems. The recent acceleration of camp closures across Nineveh is likely to produce a large population of vulnerable people, many of whom may be forced to re-displace. Without a clear government-led program and the political power to back it up, the myriad of PMF- and KDP-backed security forces are likely to prioritize their own interests above those of the IDP population. This chapter focuses on two distinct case studies—Rabia and Ba'aj—in order to understand these dynamics more deeply. These two locations were chosen since they display an important convergence of the political marketplace and displacement, and their examination might offer insight to other contexts.

## UNDERSTANDING NINEVEH'S POLITICAL MARKETPLACE

### Main Political Actors

#### *PMF Groups and Affiliated Parties*

Nearly all of the major PMF groups and affiliated political parties (the AAH, Badr, Saraya Salam, Atta, etc.) have established a range of security, commercial, and political interests in Nineveh during the post-liberation era. No single PMF group or PMF-affiliated political party can claim dominance in the province, leading to a high degree of collusion among these factions in Nineveh.

#### *The Badr Organization*

Badr's influence in Nineveh is relatively limited compared to Diyala and Kirkuk; however, the political party's armed wing has established a totalizing security presence in Ba'aj, with important implications for IDP return.

#### *Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)*

The KDP has wielded enormous influence in the province since 2003 and continues to exert outside influence due to the internal consistency of its political bloc. The KDP was pushed out of much the disputed territories of

Nineveh in 2017; however, the KDP Peshmerga has held firm in certain areas, including the borderland region of Rabia. The KDP's hold on such areas has important implications for IDP return.

#### *National Sunni Arab Political Elites*

The post-liberation era has also ushered in a number of Iran-aligned Sunni Arabs (Halbousi, Khanjar, Abu Mazen) from national blocs that have set up patronage networks and commercial opportunities of their own.

#### *Hadbaa Coalition (no longer active)*

The Hadbaa Coalition is significant because it represents the sole period (2009-2013) in which a wide coalition of local Sunni Arab factions came together to establish a dominant powerbase.

### Key Dynamics in the Political Marketplace

#### *The Era of Kurdish Influence (2003-2009)*

The years immediately after the US-led military campaign are typically referred to as the era of Kurdish influence in Nineveh. The US-led campaign and stabilization of the province relied heavily on Kurdish forces, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) quickly took advantage of the opening to assert administrative control over the provincial governmental bodies.<sup>172</sup> A Sunni Arab governor and other Sunni Arab officials were put in place in order to appease the US-led coalition; however, real power remained in the hands of the KDP and it was able to use its growing financial base (from oil revenues, foreign aid, border crossings, etc.) to co-opt local allies.<sup>173</sup>

#### *The Rise and Fall of Sunni Arab Political Power (2009-2014)*

The defeat of Al-Qaeda in western Mosul provided space for local Sunni Arab elites to politically organize with the backing of Maliki, who sought to diminish the position of the Kurds in the province. A prominent local Sunni Arab, Atheel Nujaifi, formed the Hadbaa Coalition, which

172 Zmkan Ali Saleem and J. Mac Skelton, "Mosul and Basra", p. 8.

173 Ibid. p. 8-10.

effectively organized the local population and tribal groups in the 2009 provincial election.<sup>174</sup> In taking control of the provincial council, Hadbaa formed a government that excluded Kurdish figures from all major positions. However, within several years, the coalition started to crumble, for several reasons. Firstly, the results of their exclusionary tactics towards the Kurds backfired, as the Kurds set up a rival administration in the eastern portion of the province. As a result, Nujaifi was effectively only governor of the western part of the province. Secondly, Governor Nujaifi and then-Prime Minister Maliki turned on each other, both striving to become the most influential figure in the province.<sup>175</sup> The feud with Nujaifi pushed Maliki to impose a strong security presence of the ISF under the commandship of an ally, leading to abuses against the local population and deteriorating civil-military relations.<sup>176</sup> Finally, the competition pushed Nujaifi to such a point of vulnerability that he was forced to embrace an alliance with the Kurds in 2013.<sup>177</sup> While this move allowed Nujaifi continued control of the governorship, the alliance simultaneously angered large segments of his coalition, leading to its fracturing and ultimately, to its dissolution.

### ***A Highly Fragmented Political Field (2014-2020)***

As ISIS moved across Anbar and set sights on Mosul, the province was at its weakest, politically and militarily, due to the fracturing of Hadbaa and the growing civilian-military rift caused by Maliki's harsh security policies. ISIS took advantage of this vulnerability and co-opted large components of the security forces, easily overtaking the province. Unfortunately, the eventual defeat of ISIS three years later did not usher in a new period of stability. The various armed factions and

their affiliated political parties participating in liberation operations soon took over the political economy of the province.<sup>178</sup> Influential national parties and figures (such as the AAH, Badr, Atta, Halbousi, and Khanjar) co-opted local government officials, established dominance over commercial networks, and placed security forces in strategic areas.<sup>179</sup> The governor is no longer under the influence of a single party (such as the KDP) but rather has become a prisoner to the deal between various Baghdad based political entities with interests in the province. The result has been a fragmented political marketplace that produces governmental inefficiency, slow reconstruction, and stalled IDP returns in key areas.

## **Levers of Power**

### ***Coercive Force***

Political power and access to weapons have gone hand-in-hand in Iraq since 2003. The Kurdish political apparatus was able to exert influence in the early days due to the collaboration between the US military and the KDP-aligned Peshmerga in taking over the province. Today, the KDP's security presence is limited to a select group of strategic localities (e.g., Rabia, Sinjar), due to fallout from the October 2017 referendum.<sup>180</sup> Meanwhile, PMF groups have taken up strategic positions across the province and have rejected appeals from the Prime Minister's office to shift their locations.<sup>181</sup> While the security terrain is fragmented across different PMFs and interests, there is a high degree of cooperation and collusion among PMFs in Nineveh. These security actors are engaged in a number of illicit economic activities, chief among them the scrap metal trade, oil smuggling, and the

174 "Iraq's New Battlefield: The Struggle Over Ninawa," Middle East Report No. 9, International Crisis Group (ICG), September, 2009. Available at: <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/90-iraq-s-new-battlefront-the-struggle-over-ninewa.pdf>.

175 Saleem and Skelton, "Mosul and Basra," 2019, p. 11-14.

176 Michael Knights, "How to Secure Mosul: Lessons from 2008-2014," Policy Analysis/Research Notes 38, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 12, 2016. Available at: [www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-to-secure-mosul-lessons-from-2008-2014](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-to-secure-mosul-lessons-from-2008-2014).

177 Ahmed Ali, "Iraq's Provincial Elections and Their National Implications," Background, Institute for the Study of War, April 19, 2013. Available at: [www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IraqsProvincialElections-NationalImplications.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IraqsProvincialElections-NationalImplications.pdf).

178 Saleem and Skelton, "Mosul and Basra," p. 15.

179 Ibid. p. 15-16.

180 Julie Ahn, Maeve Campbell, Peter Knoetgen, "The Politics of Security in Ninewa: Preventing an ISIS Resurgence in Northern Iraq," Harvard Kennedy School/Policy Analysis Exercise, May 7, 2018. Available at: [www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/degree%20programs/MPP/files/Finalized%20PAE\\_Ahn\\_Campbell\\_Knoetgen.pdf](http://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/degree%20programs/MPP/files/Finalized%20PAE_Ahn_Campbell_Knoetgen.pdf).

181 "Iraq: Caught Between Militias and 'Islamic State,'" DW Akademie, August 7, 2019. Available at: [www.dw.com/en/iraq-caught-between-militias-and-islamic-state/a-49912478](http://www.dw.com/en/iraq-caught-between-militias-and-islamic-state/a-49912478).

extraction of rents from local businesses.<sup>182</sup> As for the governor, Najim Abdullah al-Jabouri enjoys some influence over segments of the ISF due to his long military tenure; however, the ISF is far too weak to exert decisive control over any of the province's subregions and cannot challenge PMF interests.<sup>183</sup>

### ***Patronage and Co-optation***

The growing wealth of the PMF-aligned political blocs has enabled them to buy the loyalties of Sunni Arab political figures (including provincial council members, governors, and other high level provincial authorities), many of whom have a long history of relying upon Kurdish patronage in years prior to the rise of ISIS.<sup>184</sup> This is not to say, however, that the KDP lacks the resources or influence to maintain patronage networks. Kurdish officials within Nineveh's provincial administration still look to Erbil for support over and above the PMFs. This is in a large part because the KDP enforces party discipline in a comprehensive manner. It is nearly impossible to gain a position of any significance in commercial and political entities tied to Erbil and Dohuk (the two provinces under KDP control) without the support of party members.<sup>185</sup>

## **DISPLACEMENT TRENDS SHAPED BY POLITICAL MARKETPLACE**

### **Blocked Returns and Re-displacements in Ba'aj**

The military campaign against ISIS resulted in mass displacement from Ba'aj.<sup>186</sup> While some IDPs from Ba'aj relocated to camps in the outskirts of Mosul city, others fled to Syria, while still others headed to southern Nineveh. Between April and August 2017, almost 30,000 residents were displaced from Ba'aj.<sup>187</sup> When the district was retaken by the PMFs (under Badr commandship) in August 2017, virtually all Ba'aj residents fled the district.<sup>188</sup> IDPs started to return to Ba'aj as early as January 2018.<sup>189</sup> However, the western borderland town and its surrounding villages repeatedly witnessed blocked returns, overall poor conditions for returnees, and re-displacements.<sup>190</sup> A recent IOM report attributed such problems to a lack of reconstruction, fears of violence on the part of security forces, and high numbers of revenge killings against those with perceived ISIS affiliations.<sup>191</sup> Despite recent reports of increased returns,<sup>192</sup> interviews conducted for this project suggest that the overall situation facing IDPs originating from Ba'aj remains dire. The following sections apply a political marketplace analysis to this situation, which turns the focus towards the specific interests of security forces and their affiliated political blocs in preventing returns to these areas.

182 In-person and phone interviews by IRIS research team with local government officials, observers, and journalists from Nineveh, June–November, 2020.

183 Ibid.

184 Saleem and Skelton, "Failure of Reconstruction in Mosul," p. 11.

185 Ibid, p. 12.

186 "Rapid Overview of Areas of Return (ROAR): Ba'aj, Sinjar, Telafar and surrounding areas," Rehabilitation, Education and Community Health (REACH), April–May, 2018. P. 2. Available at: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/reach\\_irq\\_situation\\_overview\\_roar\\_ninewa\\_comparative\\_report\\_september\\_2018.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/reach_irq_situation_overview_roar_ninewa_comparative_report_september_2018.pdf).

187 "Iraq: Mosul Humanitarian Response Situation Report No. 41," UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Iraq, July–August 2017. p. 1. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Mosul%20Humanitarian%20Response%20Situation%20Report%20No.%2041%20%2827%20July%20to%208%20Agust%202017%29.pdf>.

188 "Iraq: Local Forces Banish ISIS Suspects' Families: Relatives Punished Though Considered Innocent," Human Rights Watch (HRW), April 26, 2018. Available at: [www.hrw.org/news/2018/04/26/iraq-local-forces-banish-isis-suspects-families](http://www.hrw.org/news/2018/04/26/iraq-local-forces-banish-isis-suspects-families).

189 "Iraq Protection Cluster: Ninewa Returnees Profile," OCHA Relief Web, January 2018, p. 1. Available at: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Returnees%20Profile\\_Ninewa\\_Jan2018.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Returnees%20Profile_Ninewa_Jan2018.pdf).

190 "Rapid Overview of Areas of Return," p. 1–2.

191 "West Mosul: Perceptions on Return and Reintegration Among Stayees, IDPS and Returnees," IOM Iraq, June, 2019. p. 4. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Perceptions%20on%20return%20and%20reintegration%20%28June%202019%29.pdf>.

192 "Displacement and Returns to Sinjar and Al-Ba'aj Districts," IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix, IOM Iraq, September 10–October 1, 2020. p. 1–2. Available at: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2020107514250\\_DTM\\_ET\\_Sinjar\\_Baaj\\_Movements\\_01\\_October\\_2020.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2020107514250_DTM_ET_Sinjar_Baaj_Movements_01_October_2020.pdf).



*Governor of Nineveh Najim al-Jabouri*

### ***Badr Dominance Over the Security Configuration***

While the ISF has official jurisdiction in Ba'aj and surrounding areas, Badr is the dominant security and political force on the ground. Badr's influence is felt not only in its physical security presence but also with its influence over the broader security sector and local administration. In February 2018, responding to demands from Badr leadership, the PMFs, ISF, and local authorities issued a joint decree banning the return of ISIS-affiliated families to Ba'aj. Human Rights Watch (HRW) interpreted the decree, signed by the ISF/PMF and administrative officials, as “collective punishment” against the IDPs from Ba'aj.<sup>193</sup> IDPs were put on notice: any attempt at return would come with great risks. One official noted:

*Badr forces have made it difficult for Sunni Arabs to return via the checkpoints they control in Tel-Afar. IDPs pass via Badr checkpoints to reach Ba'aj. They make return a nightmare for Sunni IDPs. They listen to no one except for their superiors in Baghdad. We present letters/permissions from the local government in Mosul but the PMF mostly choose to ignore these letters.*<sup>194</sup>

### ***Geostrategic Interests: Land Bridge to Iran***

According to the IDPs interviewed for this study, the motivating factor behind Badr's harsh stance came down to strategic interests. In the nearby Debagha camp, an IDP from the town of Ba'aj said he would never go home: “The militias have taken my home, and they are not allowing a single person back,” he said. “This is a strategic area for them. Ba'aj for me is finished.”<sup>195</sup> Indeed, Badr's displacement/return policy to Ba'aj is largely a function of geostrategic interests. As the district is situated a mere 40km away from the Syrian border, the Iran-backed group sees strategic value to ensuring channels for the trafficking of goods and weapons. At present, the primary land bridge passes from Iran through Diyala and Salah al-Din to the Anbar crossing with Syria. But when the US built up a military presence in Anbar, the PMFs and Badr calculated that an alternative way into Syria could be Ba'aj. This case shows how the shifting security and political terrain in one province can affect the political calculations in another province, with significant and often adverse repercussions for IDP returns.

193 “Iraq: Local Forces Banish ISIS Suspects' Families,” HRW.

194 Phone interview by IRIS research team with local government official from Ba'aj, September, 2020.

195 Martin Chulov, “The Militias are not Allowing us Back: Sunnis Languish in Camps, Years after Recapture of Mosul,” The Guardian, October 24, 2020. Available at: [www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/24/the-militias-are-not-allowing-us-back-sunnis-languish-in-camps-years-after-recapture-of-mosul](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/24/the-militias-are-not-allowing-us-back-sunnis-languish-in-camps-years-after-recapture-of-mosul).

### *Provincial Politics*

Ba'aj is currently the only area in Nineveh where Badr enjoys largely uncontested control. Badr's desire to increase its influence over Nineveh requires that it hold both a territorial foothold and a voting base. Control over IDP returns is but one lever within a larger set of efforts to ensure that Ba'aj remains a Badr fiefdom. Moreover, Badr draws votes and popular support from the Shia-majority community in nearby Tel Afar. Historically, these communities have been vulnerable to insurgent groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, each of which used Ba'aj as a launching ground for attacks. Badr's stronghold over the area, and obstruction of IDP returns, fits within its aim of shoring up electoral support among a key constituency—namely, the Shia Arab population in Tel Afar, a constituency that perceives the Sunni Arab residents of Ba'aj as potential ISIS affiliates.

### *Lack of Counterpressure from Sunni Arab Political Elites*

Displaced persons from the villages around Ba'aj are exclusively Sunni Arab, and yet there are no major Sunni Arab political figures or blocs working in a substantive manner on their behalf. In Nineveh, the post-ISIS era has replaced the old cadre of local Sunni Arab politicians (who formed part of the Hadbaa Coalition) with national Sunni Arab political figures (e.g., Mohammed Halbousi, Khamis Khanjar, Abu Mazen) whose interests in the province are very much aligned with those of the PMF factions.

### **Blocked Returns and Re-displacements in Rabia**

The ISIS campaign likewise resulted in mass displacements from Rabia. In December 2014, the KDP Peshmerga reclaimed Rabia from the territorial control of ISIS (with US-led coalition support) and asserted control of the subdistrict. The KDP put its Asayish forces in charge of managing IDP return to Rabia and by early 2017 almost 96% of the IDPs were allowed to return, with only 950 families remaining as IDPs in proximity to Rabia's boundaries. The KDP forces blocked return to four villages—Mahmoudiyya, Qahira, Saudiyya, and Sfaya—with accusations of ISIS affiliation. All of these towns sustained large-scale damages during and after the fight with ISIS. In October 2017, federal forces pushed out the KDP Peshmerga from Rabia center. The KDP, however, refused to withdraw entirely from the subdistrict. Consequently, a number of Sunni Arab villages have fallen behind the current positions of the KDP forces. The KDP has continued to obstruct IDP returns from those villages.<sup>196</sup> In July 2020, Human Rights Watch stated that the KDP was specifically punishing the Sunni Arabs, noting that the KDP did allow Kurdish families to return to neighboring villages.<sup>197, 198</sup>



*KDP Leader Masoud Barzani (center)*

196 In-person and phone interviews by IRIS research team with IDPs and government officials from Rabia, Nineveh. June–December, 2020.

197 "Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Arabs Blocked From Returning," Human Rights Watch, July 19, 2020. Available at: [www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/19/kurdistan-region-iraq-arabs-blocked-returning](https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/19/kurdistan-region-iraq-arabs-blocked-returning).

198 In-person and phone interviews by IRIS research team with IDPs and government officials from Rabia, Nineveh. June–December, 2020.

### ***KDP Dominance Over the Security Configuration***

Sunni Arab IDPs from Rabia were generally forthright in pinpointing the specific security and political actors obstructing their return. One displaced person noted, “The KDP Peshmerga took positions in our villages. They demanded us to leave when they withdrew to our areas. Since then, they have not allowed us to return our houses and farming lands.”<sup>199</sup> Another said: “Our return ultimately depends on the KDP. The federal government needs to negotiate our return with the Kurdish regional government.”<sup>200</sup>

### ***Economic and Political Interests***

The KDP's actions must be understood in relation to broader political-economic dynamics. Even though the subdistrict is not part of the disputed territories claimed by the KRG, the area is an example of the KDP expanding its authority into “non-disputed” areas, since controlling Rabia has significant geostrategic value to the KDP. The subdistrict contains oil reserves and connects the Kurdistan Region (KRI) mainland with Sinjar to the west and with Syria to the east. Controlling Rabia has provided the KDP with a foothold in the west of Sinjar where the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the KDP's main Kurdish adversary, exerts influence.<sup>201</sup>

### ***Local Partners and Leverage***

In order to solidify its leverage locally, the KDP has successfully built ties and patronage relations with certain segments of the local Arab population/Sunni tribes in Rabia. The KDP and the US-led coalition organized the Aljazeera brigade, a Sunni fighting force that provided the Kurdish party with valuable intelligence information. (As the political marketplace overview demonstrates, the KDP's proficiency in building patronage relations across Nineveh dates

back to 2003 and cannot be underestimated.) In a bid to ensure adequate coercive force, the KDP also kept the Syrian Kurdish force (Rojava Peshmerga) in Rabia. While they were blocked entry into Syria by the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat; YPD), the Rojava Peshmerga's presence in Rabia helped the KDP maintain leverage in the area.

### ***The Weakness of Governor Najim Al-Jabouri***

Governor Najim al-Jabouri lacks influence in both Ba'aj and Rabia, due to the strength of the KDP and Badr, respectively, and has played a relatively minor role in issues related to IDPs and displacement. Interviewees suggested this is mostly a problem of inadequate leverage. One practitioner from an international organization noted:

*You can have a nuanced conversation with [Governor Najim] al-Jabouri around human rights principles, the need for people to return, and [to] return safely, regardless of what their relatives have done. But the reality is that when you reach a checkpoint, they would not care if you have a letter from him, or if you are on the phone with him. [T]his has been my experience in Nineveh. He and his team pretend that they can facilitate what you need, but they know—and we know—they cannot [help] and their influence only extends to Mosul city and its surroundings.*<sup>202</sup>

A government official from the area concurred: “The governor promised to return the IDPs and he failed to fulfil his promises. He is incapable of returning the IDPs because the decision is in the hands of the political parties and party leaders. The decision to return the IDPs in Rabia is largely in the hands of the KDP.”<sup>203</sup> One practitioner from an international organization attributed this lack of leverage to the governor's military background and “lack of experience in politics,”<sup>204</sup> but the bigger issue is the nature of the political deal that led to his appointment.

199 Ibid.

200 Ibid.

201 András Derzsi-Horváth, “Iraq after ISIL: Rabi’a,” Web Essay, Global Public Policy Institute, August 4, 2017. Available at: [www.gppi.net/2017/08/04/iraq-after-isil-rabia](http://www.gppi.net/2017/08/04/iraq-after-isil-rabia).

202 Phone interview with member of international organization by the IRIS research team, September 15, 2020.

203 Interview with government official from Nineveh by the IRIS research team, September 5, 2020.

204 Phone interview with member of international organization by the IRIS research team, September 7, 2020.

Jabouri came to power as the result of a bargain among the main political actors in control of Nineveh following the military campaign against ISIS, namely the KDP, various PMF figures, and Iran-aligned Sunni Arab elites. The removal of Jabouri's predecessor Mansour Murid represented the climax of a struggle between PMF Chairman Faleh Fayad (who had effectively put Murid into power) and PMF Deputy Commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Seeking to weaken his PMF rival, Muhandis used his leverage with Sunni Arab elites such as Abu Mazen and Halbousi to co-opt the provincial council votes necessary to facilitate the removal of Murid. After Murid's unceremonious ouster, the PMF, KDP, and Sunni political elites came to an agreement to support Jabouri on the condition that he would not interfere with their core economic and political interests. Indeed, as one local observer noted, Jabouri is a "prisoner of the deal" and thus cannot decisively interfere on IDP affairs in areas under KDP and/or PMF control.<sup>205</sup> In that sense, IDPs also find themselves unwitting prisoners of the same deal.

## POLITICAL MARKETPLACE APPROACHES TO ADDRESSING DISPLACEMENT IN NINEVEH

### Understand limitations on Governor Najim al-Jabouri in facilitating return; work more directly with relevant political actors.

The governor's appointment sparked hope among many in the international community that they would have a favorable figure in the province. Jabouri was known for his impartiality as the lead ISF Commander in the province and for his coordination with international organizations. But as the analysis has shown, Jabouri is politically hobbled. Reducing or eliminating barriers to return requires direct and sustained dialogue with the heads of the PMF factions and the KDP.

### Place diplomatic pressure on the KDP in areas under its territorial control.

The above example of the KDP's obstructionism in Rabia is not an isolated case. In the aftermath of the October 2017 referendum, the KDP expelled and blocked returns in a number of Arab villages under its control, not only along the western borderlands but also in Hamdaniya. These blockages are enforced using the very weapons and equipment provided by US and European governments on an annual basis. Ongoing defense cooperation with the Kurdish forces should come with long-term strategy towards pushing their armed forces towards compliance to basic human rights principles and protections of IDPs. At the same time, this pressure must be applied with the KDP's leverage and interests in these hotspot areas in mind. As stated, Rabia provides the party with a foothold into an economically strategic cross-border area, in addition to offering security interests in nearby Sinjar. The economic crisis currently facing the country generally, and in the Kurdistan region specifically, makes this borderland access all the more valuable. The international community, in negotiating with the KDP over returns, would probably have to grant assurances that the KDP's dire economic needs can be met through other avenues.

### Recognize the political importance of humanitarian presence.

The fluidity of the political marketplace in Nineveh, and the lack of locally mobilized and legitimate political power, has generated a highly unstable situation. Presently, the large footprint of the humanitarian community in Nineveh provides a degree of accountability upon otherwise unaccountable security actors. If the humanitarian community continues to scale down in the province, the possibility of greater political turmoil is likely, with very real implications for the return of insurgents, armed groups, and IDP re-displacements.

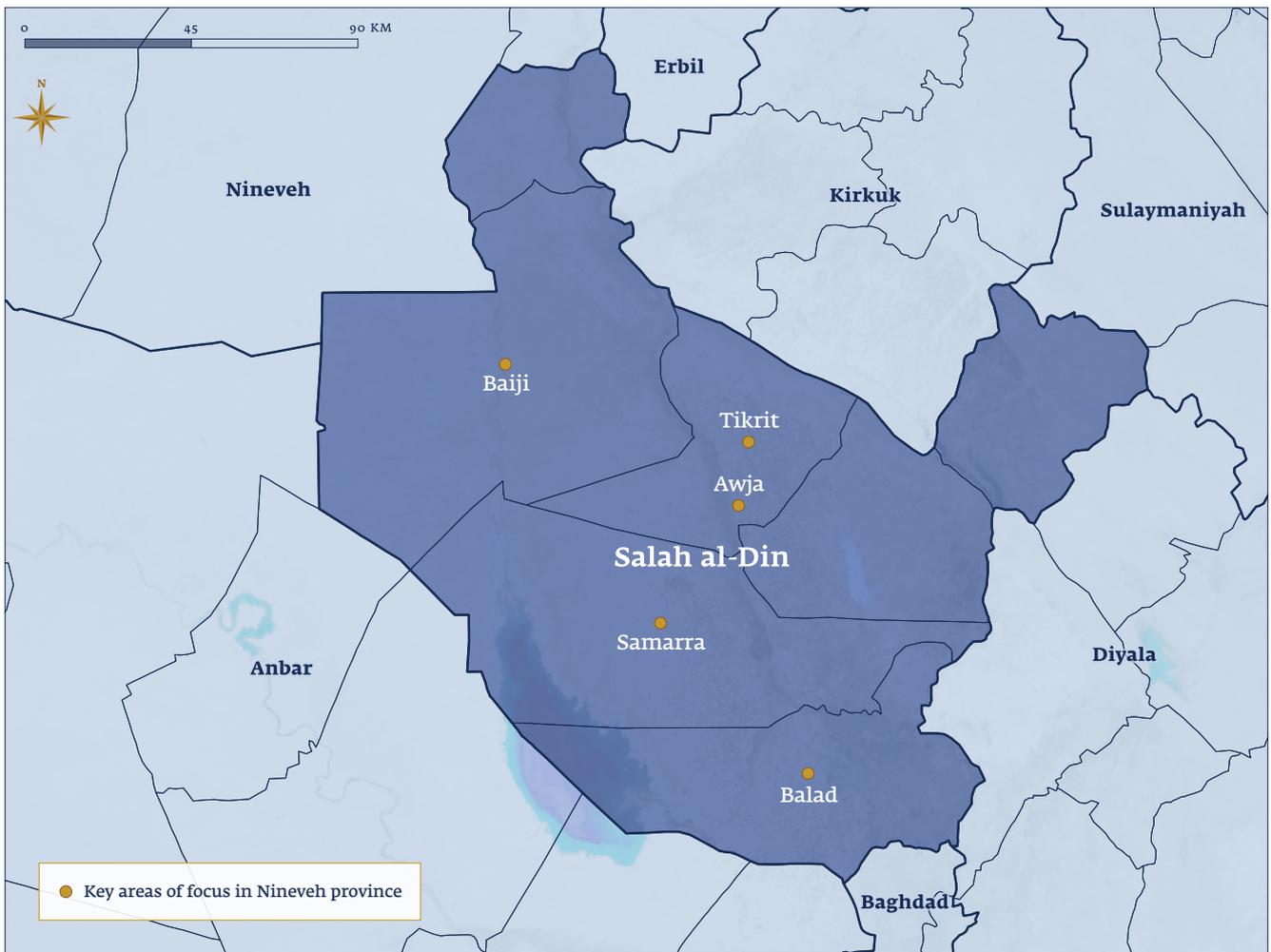
205 Zmkhan Ali Saleem, "Prisoner of the Deal: Nineveh's Governor and Local State Capture," LSE/Middle East Centre Conflict Research Programme Blog, March 12, 2020. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/crp/2020/03/12/prisoner-of-the-deal-ninevehs-governor-and-local-state-capture/>.

## SALAH AL-DIN PROVINCE

Salah al-Din has witnessed some of the most complex and fraught displacement dynamics in the country. Displacements began in early 2014 and accelerated in June of that year when ISIS overtook Tikrit and other parts of the province.<sup>206</sup> While Tikrit witnessed significant returns as early as June 2015,<sup>207</sup> particular zones of the province remain blocked by security forces and/or are otherwise inhospitable to returnees. IOM data on the severity of conditions for returnees indicate an enormous range in the return

experience. In some portions of the province, the severity ratings (measured according to conditions for “livelihoods and basic services” and “safety and cohesion” in areas of return) skew toward medium to low severity. Of the 175,236 returnees to Tikrit district, 96,762 are categorized as living in conditions of “low” severity, 74,784 as “medium,” and just 3,690 as “high.” By contrast, of the 66,630 returnees to Balad, 45,846 are categorized as “high” severity, 12,948 as “medium,” and just 7,836 as “low.”<sup>208</sup>

Map 6: Key areas of focus in Salah al-Din



206 "Displacement Snapshot: Salah Al-Din," IOM-Iraq, September 2014. Available at: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Salah\\_al-Din\\_Governorate\\_Profile\\_-\\_September\\_2014.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Salah_al-Din_Governorate_Profile_-_September_2014.pdf).

207 Omar Al-Jawshy and Tim Arango, "Iraqi Families Return to Fragile Stability in Tikrit After Liberation From ISIS," The New York Times, June 22, 2015. Available at: [www.nytimes.com/2015/06/23/world/middleeast/families-return-to-fragile-stability-in-iraqi-city-liberated-from-isis.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/23/world/middleeast/families-return-to-fragile-stability-in-iraqi-city-liberated-from-isis.html).

208 "IOM Iraq Mission: Displacement Tracking Matrix: Return Index Coverage," International Organization for Migration, January-February 2020. Available at: <http://iraqdtm.iom.int/archive/ReturnIndex.aspx>.

The political marketplace analysis presented in this section will show that the relative stability of the power structures in Tikrit contributed to IDP returns, while PMF control in strategic areas of the province (e.g., Balad, Samarra, etc.) has discouraged returns. Importantly, these PMF spheres of control are increasingly intractable due to the province's complex demographics. Salah al-Din is comprised of a mixture of ethnic groups: Sunni Arab, Shia Arab, Kurdish, and Shia Turkoman. The various groups controlling the province have exploited ethnic fissures in the post-ISIS period, thereby complicating return dynamics. Meanwhile, the provincial government has taken an unpredictable approach to the issue of IDPs and IDP return—sometimes facilitating returns, and other times obstructing it. In 2016, the Salah al-Din provincial council passed a broad decree stating that any ISIS fighter or family member of any ISIS fighter could not return to the province; this order was followed by joint ISF-PMF expulsions of residents from certain areas. As the analysis will show, the provincial government's support of forced expulsions was partly an effort to stave off political challengers.

## UNDERSTANDING SALAH AL-DIN'S POLITICAL MARKETPLACE

### Main Political Actors

#### *Al-Jamaheer Party*

Led by the Iraqi MP and former governor Ahmed Abdullah al-Jabouri (also known as Abu Mazen), Al-Jamaheer is the most influential party in Salah al-Din province. The party has controlled the governor's position since 2012. Geographically, the party dominates the local institutions in Tikrit and the surrounding districts of Alam, Ojah and al-Dor.<sup>209</sup>

209 In-person and phone interviews by IRIS research team with several current and former local government and security officials, local journalists and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1-September 25, 2020.

210 Ibid.

211 Ibid.

212 Ibid.

#### *Parties and Armed Groups affiliated with the PMFs*

Various armed groups under the umbrella of the PMFs are present in Salah al-Din, including the Badr Organization, Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), Kataib Hezbollah, the Risaliyoon, and Saraya Salam. These groups moved into the province during, and in the aftermath of, the fight against ISIS.<sup>210</sup>

#### *Iraq Islamic Party (IIP)*

IIP is one of three Sunni Arab blocs operating in Samarra, though the influence of these entities is significantly curbed by the presence of the PMFs.

#### *Ahmed Krayeem's Al-Taqadom Party*

As the head of Salah al-Din's provincial council between 2014 and 2019, Krayeem played a key role in shaping the local governance and politics in the province, particularly in Samarra.<sup>211</sup>

#### *Muthana Al-Samarayee's Al-Massar Party*

Formed by Iraqi MP and businessman Muthana al-Samarayee, al-Massar competes for control over local government institutions and funds in Samarra with the IIP and Ahmed Krayeem's Taqadom party.<sup>212</sup>

#### *Marjaiya*

The office of the Marjaiya, which is the Najaf-based Shia senior clergy headed by Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, has intervened both in the Tikrit and Yathrib negotiations over IDP returns.

#### *Sunni Endowment*

The Sunni Endowment, the governing body that controls revenues and properties related to Sunni Arab religious sites, has been important in establishing a compensation mechanism in situations where Shia Arab tribes and/or PMF groups have demanded payment

to allow IDP returns. This leveraging of the Endowment is partly due to pressure from Abu Mazen.<sup>213</sup>

### **Tribes**

The tribes, particularly the Shia Arab tribes in areas north of Baghdad (e.g., Balad), have played an important role in obstructing returns and have done so in alliance with political parties affiliated with the PMFs.

## **Key Dynamics in the Political Marketplace**

### ***Extreme Political Instability and a Lack of Coherent Governance Structures (2003-2009)***

The immediate post-invasion period was characterized by extreme instability. This was largely due the fact that the dominant Baghdad-based political parties at the time<sup>214</sup> were keen to sideline Tikrit—the birthplace and symbolic power center of Saddam Hussein—to the greatest extent possible. Boycotts by the Tikritis ensued when they felt politically diminished by the new cohort of party elites. Many local tribes supported the insurgency, Al-Qaeda, and the Naqshabandy. Amidst this disarray of security and politics, the Kurdish political parties and the IIP started to make gains in local elections, but no single actor could consolidate power.

### ***Consolidation of Administrative Power Around a Single Figure (2009-2014)***

Abu Mazen al-Jabouri, a powerful tribal figure with political aspirations, is a unique figure in Salah al-Din. Unlike the majority of Sunni Arab tribes in the province who rejected the post-2003 political order and the Shia-majority political parties in Baghdad, Abu Mazen forged a relationship with key political figures. For example, understanding the importance of national

support and funding, he methodically and effectively forged ties and trust with then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, demonstrating to constituents within his own tribe that he could negotiate with national political actors on their behalf without being co-opted.



*Former Governor and Current MP Abu Mazen al-Jabouri (center in suit)*

Abu Mazen also built local alliances with the dominant political parties. After the 2009 local elections, the IIP and Abu Mazen's coalition formed a local power-sharing government which secured the governor's position for an IIP member. However, the arrangement soon broke down due to intensifying competition between the two sides over government contracts, funds, and positions.<sup>215</sup> The relationship between Abu Mazen and the IIP soon became highly toxic, with one accusing the other of corruption and collusion with extremists.<sup>216</sup> In 2011, Abu Mazen leveraged his growing patronage network of national and local ties to become governor of Salah al-Din (even though his own coalition consisted of only five members out of the 29-member provincial council).<sup>217</sup> Subsequently, he gained access to significant public funds from the local government and amassed significant wealth due, in part, to the historically high

213 Phone interview by IRIS research team with IOM representative, September, 2020.

214 E.g., Da'wa, Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), KDP, PUK, and others.

215 In-person and phone interviews by IRIS research team with former provincial council members, MPs, and party members from Salah al-Din, July 1-September 25, 2020.

216 Ibid.

217 See results of Salah al-Din's 2009 local elections where Abu Mazen's coalition (under Ayad Allawi's Iraqi National List at the time) secured only five seats. Details: "Comparing The January 2009 to January 2005 Provincial Elections," Musings on Iraq (blog), February 1, 2009. Available at: <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2009/02/comparing-january-2009-to-january-2005.html>.

oil prices that existed between 2012 and 2014.<sup>218</sup> Control over the governorship (either directly or through a proxy) has allowed Abu Mazen the means to extend a vast patronage network across the province, granting him the political capital to fend off other claimants to power.<sup>219</sup> Importantly, Abu Mazen has never consolidated control over the security sector or a particular armed group, relying almost exclusively on patronage and administrative authority to co-opt or align the interests of other actors with his own priorities.

### ***Rise of the PMFs' Spheres of Control and the Resilience of Abu Mazen (2014-2020)***

Beyond the capital, a number of different armed PMF groups affiliated with Baghdad-based political parties took advantage of the military campaign to dislodge ISIS to establish control over strategic pockets of territory (e.g., Balad, Samarra, Tuz Khormato, Samarra, etc.).<sup>220</sup> As PMFs moved into these areas, they leveraged resources from the Baghdad-based political parties and PMF military apparatus in order to extend patronage and engage in co-optation of local actors. (This tactic is distinct from the case of Anbar, where the PMFs are instead largely concerned with strategic assets and do not actively seek to mobilize the population.) The effort to establish local roots was aided by the similarity in religious background between the PMFs and the local community, which enabled the Shia-majority PMFs to establish local partnerships with Shia Arab and Shia Turkoman communities. However, ethnic divisions led to a deterioration of local social cohesion and—as the forthcoming sections will address in detail—created obstacles in securing return for IDPs. Abu Mazen remains influential over the Tikrit-based provincial administration, but his continued presence relies upon cooperation with the PMFs and their party

affiliates. The PMFs are present in the center of Tikrit and have made it clear that they will intervene when their interests demand it.

## **Levers of Power**

### ***Coercive Power***

The PMFs in Salah al-Din exert coercion and violence against local populations with seeming impunity. A number of the remaining IDPs are unable to return as their names are listed on databases that record suspected ISIS affiliates, a practice that grants the PMFs plausible deniability when either blocking returns or executing detentions. The province is subdivided by a dizzying array of checkpoints, most of which are staffed by PMF brigades. Checkpoints give PMFs control over returns and allow them to accrue economic benefits through rent seeking.<sup>221</sup> Abu Mazen, in turn, possesses no direct control over armed actors and generally has a poor relationship with the ISF. Abu Mazen has to draw upon his network of alliances to gain access to coercive force when absolutely necessary. For instance, the AAH sent armed fighters to accompany Abu Mazen to the office of the governorship when his claim to the position was contested.

### ***Ideological Appeals***

Abu Mazen commonly appeals to the rhetoric of Sunni identity during elections in order to mobilize the Sunni Arab population in his favor. The same tactic is also used by the Salah al-Din political elite. These same actors attack the PMFs for being anti-Sunni, distancing themselves from the alleged abuses and violence against the population. This rhetoric is effective insofar as it appeals to the collective trauma of Salah al-Din Sunni Arab residents, many of whom perceive the past 17 years as characterized by extreme violence and instability. Abu Mazen is careful about the extent to which he relies upon

218 In-person and phone interviews by IRIS research team with local officials who worked during the same period in the local government in Salah al-Din, July 1-September 25, 2020. Press reported in 2013 that an Iraqi MP from Salah al-Din, Suhad al-Obeidi, had accused Abu Mazen of corruption. Specifically, Obedi alleged that Abu Mazen, in collaboration with provincial council members, used his power as governor to direct large contracts to a local vendor with a reputation for poor quality who was a known acquaintance of Abu Mazen. See: "Al-Iraqqiya: Salah al-Din Governor is Implicated in Many Corruption Cases," Iraq News Network, June 13, 2013. Available at: <http://aliraqnews.com/العراقية-محافظة-صلاح-الدين-متورط-بملفا/>.

219 "Political Coup in Salah al-Din a Week after the Rare Visit by the Iranian Ambassador to Samarra." Almada Paper, February 26, 2019. Available at: <https://almadapaper.net/view.php?cat=216912>.

220 In-person and phone interviews by IRIS research team with current and former local government and security officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1-September 25, 2020.

221 Ibid.

this rhetoric due his leaning upon positive relations with the AAH, Maliki, and other Shia-majority parties.

### *Patronage and Cash-based Co-optation*

Because the province lacks many of the high-value economic assets of other provinces formerly occupied by ISIS (e.g., oil, border crossings, or heavy industry), political and security actors acquire the financial resources they need primarily from the provincial administration itself. Control over the governorship—as gatekeeper to government contracts, reconstruction funds, and salaries tied to the provincial administration<sup>222</sup>—has become the most sought-after prize within the subnational political marketplace. Abu Mazen has proven adept at engaging these resources, using government funds, contracts and employment opportunities to co-opt powerful tribal leaders, officials, and ordinary citizens. His political finances are largely rooted in his control over the governor's position, which has allowed him to redirect provincial funds to line his own pocket, and to fill the coffers of his own party.

PMFs have access to salaries allocated by the state to fighters, much of which is purportedly siphoned off to leaders for personal enrichment and/or for the extension of patronage. In addition, PMFs often have state salary allocations that far exceed the number of officially enrolled fighters. The capacity of the PMF commission to co-opt subsections of the population (mostly co-religionists) has relied upon the provision of fighter salaries and other economic benefits such as farmlands. Through such mechanisms, the PMFs have created spheres of influence over Tuz Khormato, Alam, and Djeil.

## DISPLACEMENT TRENDS SHAPED BY THE POLITICAL MARKETPLACE

### Proliferation of Areas with “Severe” Conditions for Returnees and Blocked Returns

As stated at the outset of the chapter, Salah al-Din has the dubious distinction of having some of the worst ratings for perceived insecurity among returnees in the country according to the IOM, particularly in the areas of Balad, Tuz Khormato, Baiji, Samarra, and Alam. Moreover, IDPs in Salah al-Din point to insecurity and armed actors as a major factor in refusing to return home to the same areas. Despite ridding ISIS from the province in 2017, PMFs are still present and active, pursuing a range of economic and political goals. In some areas of the province, they have placed entire cities and rural zones under their direct control. Areas of territorial influence include Balad district (AAH), Tuz Khormato (AAH, Badr Organization), Samarra (Saraya Salam, Ansar al-Aqeeda, Saraya Ashura), Baiji (Nouri al-Maliki's Risaliyoon), etc. In these areas, displacement/return dynamics are directly controlled by the PMFs, with generally slow rates of return and frequent re-displacement.<sup>223</sup> What explains the high prevalence of blocked returns and severe conditions for returnees? Due to the hyper-fragmentation of territorial control, both general and local interests must be considered.

#### *General PMF Interests*

Four factors have decisively shaped how PMFs in Salah al-Din treat IDPs and returnees:

- Salah al-Din is regarded as a hub for Baathist and radical Sunni Arab insurgent activity. Many within the Shia-majority blocs believe that these actors are determined to topple Iraq's post-2003 political order, including the dominance of Shia actors within the national political framework. Control over territory in Salah al-Din, and the flow of IDP return, must be understood as a part of this security calculation.<sup>224</sup>

222 Ghazwan Hassan Al-Jabouri, “Former Salah al-Din Governor Included in the Sanctions: U.S. Treasury Decision Might Change the Political Map in Salah al-Din,” Niqash, October 2, 2019. Available at: [www.niqash.org/ar/articles/politics/5998/](http://www.niqash.org/ar/articles/politics/5998/).

223 In-person and phone interviews by IRIS research team with current and former local government and security officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1–September 25, 2020.

224 Ibid.

- PMFs are involved in smuggling activities, the collection of illegal fees from trade in goods, and farming of lands taken from families displaced to other communities.
- While the population in Salah al-Din is majority Sunni, the presence of Shia Arab and Shia Turkoman communities provides a natural additional voting base for the Iran-aligned, Shia-majority political parties. Protecting these areas, and preventing the return of Sunni Arab families, is a popular selling point among certain elements of these Shia Arab local communities. In turn, these policies become a factor in elections.
- While Salah al-Din does not share an international border with any country, the province is viewed by PMFs as part of an extended land bridge to Syria through Nineveh province. Control of the population, and dominance over territory, ensures this route remains clear.

#### *Locality-specific Interests*

- **Balad:** In Balad, the AAH has blocked returns of Sunni Arab families on the pretext of ISIS affiliation; however, it has become clear that the AAH's strategic goal is to control farmlands and tribal units across the area with the intent of carving out a subregion in close proximity to Baghdad—much in the same way that Badr enjoys hegemony over Diyala.<sup>225</sup> Balad is strategic due to its position just north of Baghdad. In conjunction with the Shia Arab tribes, the AAH has taken over farmlands, set up checkpoints with rent-seeking activities, and generally played an obstructionist role in negotiations with Sunni tribes over returns. In the case of Yathrib, even after the conclusion of negotiations and the provision of compensation by the Sunni Endowment, the AAH has sought to tax returning families over and above compensatory payments.<sup>226</sup>



*AAH Leader Qais Khazali (left)*

- **Suleiman Beg:** In Suleiman Beg (Tuz), both the AAH and Badr are situated on the airbase. They have justified blocking IDP returns on the pretext of protecting the community against extremists and ISIS affiliates; however, in reality this move is mostly about shoring up the support of the Shia Turkoman community in nearby Amerli.<sup>227</sup>
- **Samarra:** Control over Samarra's entry points (and effectively, all IDP returns) is part of the city's longstanding effort to bolster its image as the protector of Shia shrines and Shiism generally. In Samarra, the Saraya al-Salam (Brigades 313, 314, and 315) control the gates of the city from all directions. ISIS never took over the city, and much of the ongoing displacement has been the result of Saraya al-Salam's harsh treatment of the local population. Saraya al-Salam has imposed the closure of shops next to the Shia shrines, and taken over farmlands; when engaged by the international community on these issues, Saraya al-Salam has denied responsibility.<sup>228</sup> While Saraya al-Salam is the main actor, other PMFs such as Ansar al-Aqeeda and Saraya al-Asura are also present and involved in shrine activities.<sup>229</sup>

225 Ibid.

226 Ibid.

227 Skelton and Saleem, "Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries After ISIS," p.15-20.

228 Phone interview by IRIS research team with UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) official, September, 2020.

229 In-person and phone interviews by IRIS research team with current and former local government and security officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1-September 25, 2020.

- **Awja:** In Awja, Saheed al Sadr al Awwal (a PMF controlled by former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki) dominates the town. Returns are generally blocked. The PMFs have gone so far as to bring families into the area to farm the lands of Sunni Arabs. Meanwhile, they justify blocked returns on the basis of security threats, mines, and anti-terror operations. The dispersal of the Sunni Arab community fits into a long-term objective of transforming Saddam Hussein's birthplace of Awja into an outpost of control by the Baghdad-based Shia-majority political establishment. There was some hope of greater returns facilitated by former PMF Deputy Commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, but his assassination effectively scuttled those efforts.<sup>230</sup>
- **Baiji:** In Baiji, the Risaliyoon, controlled by Maliki, has blocked returns on the basis of security threats and land mines; notably, the town is home to several important economic interests.<sup>231</sup> The Risaliyoon is still engaged in operations against ISIS cells that have spilled over into reprisals against the local community, and particularly returnees, when Risaliyoon members are killed. They have prevented returns to several portions of Baiji including al-Assriyah, al-Badiya, al-Assmida and al-Tasnief. The Baiji oil refinery, Iraq's largest, is a major incentive for the Risaliyoon's continued presence.

### Harsh Provincial Government Policy Against IDPs/Returnees with Perceived Affiliations

Not all areas in Salah al-Din are under the total control of the Shia-majority PMFs. Sunni Arab tribal elites (particularly Abu Mazen) wield significant influence in

Tikrit city center, Dor, and Alam. Yet paradoxically, these very same actors have supported harsh policies against IDPs, returnees, and residents with perceived affiliations, leading to periodic re-displacements. In 2016, the provincial government of Salah al-Din decreed that all families affiliated with ISIS would have their properties and documentation seized, further mandating the non-return and/or expulsion of immediate relatives for ten years to life.<sup>232</sup> Following this decree, one report detailed a troubling incident in Shirqat whereby security forces—a combined effort of ISF, PMF, Sunni Arab PMFs – forcibly expelled residents and destroyed homes with the full backing of the provincial government.<sup>233</sup> While returns to the provincial capital of Tikrit, Dor, and Shirqat have been possible due to the considerable influence of Sunni Arab tribal elites (particularly Abu Mazen), the harshness of these security policies has led to periodic re-displacements and expulsions. The strong stance of the provincial authorities, in conjunction with the security forces, must be understood as a function of Abu Mazen's competition both with the PMFs and with other Sunni Arab elites.

#### *Competition and Collusion with the PMFs*

When Abu Mazen returned to the governorship and 2016, his political vulnerability was at its most acute. Taking a tough stance against IDPs with perceived ISIS affiliation provided just the discursive mechanism he needed to dismiss other claims to power. PMF Deputy Commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis was attempting to undermine Abu Mazen's chances of reclaiming power by accusing him of affiliations with ISIS. But the AAH and Badr intervened on behalf of Abu Mazen and assisted him in controlling the governor's position.<sup>234</sup> Supporting a harsh stance against the residents of his home area signaled to his powerful PMF allies (the AAH and Badr) that he could be trusted as their local partner in the province—which would mean granting them free reign

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> "Salah al-Din Provincial Council decides to displace Daesh families", [almadapress.com](https://www.almadapress.com), August 30, 2016. Available at: <https://www.almadapress.com/view.php?cat=75812>

<sup>233</sup> Human Rights Watch, 'Iraq: Displacement, Detention of Suspected "ISIS Families": Troops Force Residents Out, Demolish Homes', March 5, 2017. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/05/iraq-displacement-detention-suspected-isis-families>

<sup>234</sup> Saleem, 2021, 14-15.

to address security threats.<sup>235</sup> (Just a year earlier, the AAH had summarily destroyed the provincial capital. In speeches leading up to the battle, Qais Khazali employed the words “revenge” and “justice,” not-so-subtle rhetorical references to the ISIS episode and to the deeper history of Tikrit being the home of Saddam Hussein and the symbolic center of his regime.)<sup>236</sup>

Ultimately, the AAH and Badr need Abu Mazen because maintaining a measure of buy-in with a Sunni Arab and predominately tribal population would be very difficult and costly without a powerful local partner who maintains strong tribal, social, and economic ties to the population. On the other hand, Abu Mazen has the right set of patronage relationships locally and nationally to preserve a degree of agency and capacity to pursue his own interests. An equilibrium has been reached between Abu Mazen's considerable influence over the provincial government (due to extensive and longstanding patronage relations) and PMF control over the security sector (due to heavy presence at the provincial capital center). Unlike in Ramadi and Falluja, where the PMFs are not physically present in the city center, Salah al-Din city center is home to PMF political party offices, and armed units are situated within the old presidential palace. But this equilibrium on the political/security front comes with the reality that no Tikriti, even one with the vaguest perceived ISIS affiliation, would consider returning home.

### ***Sunni Arab Claimants to Power***

Abu Mazen's policies towards IDPs and returnees with perceived ISIS affiliation developed in a context in which other Sunni Arab leaders have been positioning themselves to win the support of the powerful PMFs and political apparatus. In Shirgat, just north of Tikrit, the political/security scene is dominated by Brigade 51, led by Yezen al-Jabouri. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis built Brigade 51 with Sunni Arabs, with Yezen al-Jabouri using the opportunity to position himself as a Sunni willing to align himself with PMF leadership. Brigade 51 has facilitated returns in some instances and obstructed them in others, depending mostly on PMF directives.<sup>237</sup> Abu Mazen needed to prove that someone like Yezen al-Jabouri should not be favored over him as the key local ally in Salah al-Din, and thus Abu Mazen's embrace of a harsh decree made strategic sense.

### ***Tribal Politics and Pressures***

The decree against families with perceived ISIS affiliation was a thinly veiled directive against the Albu Nassir and Albu Ajil tribes who allegedly collaborated with ISIS and had a role in the Camp Speicher massacre,<sup>238</sup> which killed members of Abu Mazen's Jabouri tribe. Council members from Abu Mazen's coalition were all Jabouris and were under pressure from their people to take action against collaborators with ISIS.

235 Ibid.

236 Human Rights Watch, 'Ruinous Aftermath: Militia Abuses Following Iraq's Recapture of Tikrit', 2015. [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/iraq0915\\_4up\\_0.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/iraq0915_4up_0.pdf)

237 In-person and phone interviews by IRIS research team with current and former local government and security officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1-September 25, 2020.

238 Zmkan Ali Saleem, 'The King of Salah al-Din: The Power of Sunni Elites in Iraq', Conflict Research Programme/LES Report, January 2021. Available at: [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/108541/1/Ali\\_Saleem\\_the\\_king\\_of\\_salah\\_al\\_din\\_published.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/108541/1/Ali_Saleem_the_king_of_salah_al_din_published.pdf)

## POLITICAL MARKETPLACE APPROACHES TO ADDRESSING DISPLACEMENT IN SALAH AL-DIN

**With Abu Mehdi out of the picture, the GoI and international community must engage the political blocs and leaders who hold sway over the PMFs in the province, namely: Hadi Ameri, Qais Khazali, and Nouri al-Maliki.**

Prior to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis' death, significant political pressure from both the international community and former Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi was enough to push Muhandis, the former Deputy Commander of the PMF, toward a consolidation and restructuring of the PMFs. As part of this restructuring, PMFs were to move outside city centers to town peripheries. Moreover, Muhandis made arrangements for these movements of the PMFs in Salah al-Din as well as other provinces to correspond with IDP returns to sensitive areas of the country, including to Saddam Hussein's birthplace in Awja, Salah al-Din. Muhandis engaged directly with Sunni Arab tribal leaders to coordinate the security screening and return of this population. With the assassination of Muhandis, a power struggle arose among PMF leaders in Salah al-Din, as each PMF group sought to protect its territorial and economic assets from the encroachment by other PMFs no longer reined in by Muhandis. Tragically, IDPs are caught up in this chaotic competition over economic and political dominance. It is important for the international community to understand, however, that PMFs spread across Salah al-Din are not acting so much under the authority of a unified PMF command as they are acting in relation to the political interests of their corresponding political bloc. The PMFs in Awja (where returns have been nearly impossible) are connected to Nouri al-Maliki. The Shia Turkoman PMF group in Tuz Khormatu is connected to Hadi Ameri. The AAH PMF based in Balad is tied to Khazali. Maliki, and Ameri (and, to a lesser extent, Khazali), all political figures with whom the West regularly engages.

<sup>239</sup> Saleem, 2021, p. 17.

<sup>240</sup> Press Release, 'Treasury Sanctions Persons Associated with Serious Human Rights Abuse and Corrupt Actors in Iraq', U.S. Department of The Treasury, July 18, 2019. Available at: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm735>

**While Governor Abu Mazen and his provincial administration do not hold decisive influence over displacement/returns in the areas under PMF control, they hold enough leverage to force concessions on limited issues.**

As stated in the above analysis, Governor Abu Mazen's main areas of control are where the Jabouri tribe has historically held a strong base: Tikrit, Dor, and Alam. This is where Governor Abu Mazen can be relatively decisive in shaping the process of IDP return (with the important exception of Awja). While this is not the case in Balad, Samarra, Awja, Tuz Khormatu, and Baiji—areas under the influence of a different PMF group—the governor holds enough leverage through patronage and official provincial funds to be a key stakeholder in talks. His power was evident in his involvement in the February 2018 Yathrib peace deal which led to significant returns. While the AAH and the tribes under its control were the primary force pushing the direction of those Yathrib talks, Abu Mazen stepped in and played an important role. Abu Mazen realizes any perception of his powerlessness beyond the provincial capital presents is politically hazardous to his long-term ambitions, and he has already placed considerable time and effort in building connections and patronage networks in Balad, Fares, and elsewhere. He has issued government contracts and occasionally embarks on official visits to these areas. With pressure from the international community, Abu Mazen can bring Maliki, Khazali, Ameri and even Abu Fadak to the table to obtain limited concessions on displacements—if only to gain guarantees that violence and rent extraction against returnees will be phased out. The recent massacre in Balad<sup>239</sup> (widely attributed to the AAH) brought nationwide negative attention to the AAH. Abu Mazen can use this blame as leverage. The problem is, of course, that Abu Mazen is quite isolated from the international community due to the recent corruption designation by the US.<sup>240</sup> The international community will have to decide whether to persist with an isolation strategy of Abu Mazen (thereby erasing the option of constructive engagement), or to develop a working partnership with the man known as “the King” of Salah al-Din.

## CONCLUSIONS

This research has examined displacement problems in five provinces through the lens of political marketplace analysis. While the report has heavily cited IOM's material and other international organizations' research to identify major displacement trends, the analysis of those trends has departed from the approach of prior studies. To date, studies on displacement in Iraq have generally mirrored the euphemistic language of IDPs themselves, referring to problems such as safety, security, and HLP destruction only in general terms, without mention of specific actors and political dynamics that create or drive these problems. The absence of political context and content is understandable, and due in large part to the obvious hazards of explicitly naming and criticizing security and political actors who wield the very power necessary to influence humanitarian access and staff safety. Notwithstanding the validity of such concerns, this political marketplace analysis demonstrates that barriers to IDP return cannot be fully understood when separated from shifting political interests and levers of power. Indeed, blocked returns, property destruction, poor services, threadbare infrastructure, and eroded security are mere symptoms of underlying political competition, deal-making, and pursuit of strategic interests by actors who come and go, and are driven by ephemeral interests of their own. Now that Iraq has entered a period of low-intensity conflict, long-term solutions are needed more than emergency responses, and the political dynamics of protracted displacement are ever more critical. To support international organizations in their nuanced understanding of these issues, this report concludes with recommendations relevant to policy and programming in Iraq.

## PROVINCE SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

The Iran-aligned PMFs and their corresponding political blocs do not all hold the same political and economic interests, and many have an interest in developing credibility with the international community. They must be engaged on the issue of IDP return, particularly to hotspot areas. In the aftermath of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis' death, PMF groups in areas formerly occupied by ISIS no longer operate under a unified command structure. Each PMF is tied to a specific political bloc, and it is only via engagement with these bloc leaders that meaningful progress can be made on IDP returns to hotspot areas. From a displacement/return standpoint, some of the most problematic PMFs are tied to national political leaders with whom Western diplomats regularly engage. Nouri al-Maliki, Hadi Ameri, and Qais Khazali all preside over specific PMFs blocking returns to key areas.<sup>241</sup> Sustainable returns to these areas are possible only if the GoI and the international community engage, with sustained pressure, on these figures in PMF leadership. In order to do so effectively, the GoI and international community must understand and navigate the leverage points and interests of each of these groups. All of the PMFs have access to disproportionate coercive force that exceeds that of the Iraqi state, and all have access to significant local patronage networks. But the relative strength of those levers varies depending on the context and the provincial political marketplace.

241 For example, Maliki's PMFs control and obstruct returns to Baiji and Awja in Salah al-Din; Ameri's PMFs control and obstruct returns to Tuz Khormatu in Salah al-Din, Ba'aj in Nineveh, and swaths of Diyala; Khazali's PMFs control and obstruct returns to Balad in Salah al-Din (In-person and phone interviews by IRIS research team with current and former local government and security officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1-September 25, 2020).

## Anbar Province

In Anbar, the PMFs are constrained at the provincial level by the consolidation of power around Governor Mohammed Halbousi and the provincial administration in Ramadi and Fallujah. However, under the current political settlement, PMFs are given more or less free reign at the provincial peripheries—with highly negative consequences for returns. Although Halbousi cannot make decisive demands in these areas, he does possess leverage due to ties with Iran and possession of the Speakership. The GoI and international community can work with Halbousi to gain limited concessions around returns in these areas.

## Diyala Province

In Diyala, the Badr-backed PMFs can act with near total impunity because the entirety of the security apparatus and provincial administration fall under their influence. The only partial check on their power is the presence of a significant Kurdish population in the northern areas of the province whose interests are backed by the PUK, with the help and mediation of Iran. Recognizing that the PUK's hold on this sizable population will endure for the foreseeable future, Badr has sought to appease Kurdish counterparts by allowing partial security cooperation at checkpoints. The internal check on Badr's behavior is that Hadi Ameri, Head of the Badr Organization, and leader of Iraq's second largest political party the Fatah Alliance, is a pragmatic politician with ambitious national political goals. He has shown willingness to work with local Sunni Arab tribes around returns when they guarantee votes; he may work with the GoI and international community if doing so grants him further political legitimacy as national elections approach.

## Kirkuk Province

In Kirkuk, the Badr-backed PMFs cannot act with the same level of impunity as PMFs in other provinces because they are operating in an environment where other significant political actors (the PUK, KDP, Rakan al-Jabouri, and Sunni Arab tribal political factions) with major leverage have interests on the ground. In this context, the international community and the GoI have plenty of room to work in shaping IDP returns in Kirkuk, particularly in Hawija. The only constraint would be the lack of financial capital on the part of both the international community and the GoI.

## Nineveh Province

In Nineveh, the various PMFs (in addition to Kurdish security forces) are operating in a context where the provincial government is extremely weak and where the governor lacks the muscle of a political bloc behind him. The only significant checks on the power of any single PMF are: a) the heavy presence of the international community via humanitarian aid; and b) the competition among the PMFs themselves over provincial resources. The GoI and international community could politically engage with the PMFs and their respective political blocs on IDP issues, so long as the international community maintains a significant presence through aid. For better or worse, the PMFs and Kurds view aid through the prism of political economy and the net economic impact that investment and the presence of foreigners has on the area. The Kurds are particularly keen to see a sustained humanitarian presence, a desire which grants the international community leverage in dealing with KDP counterparts.

## Salah al-Din Province

In Salah al-Din, the PMFs mostly act with impunity in the areas under their control, but they are partially checked by the provincial government (backed by Abu Mazen and his extensive patronage networks). Effective political engagement on IDP issues with various political blocs is extremely difficult due to the lack of humanitarian assistance as well as discomfort on the part of the international community to work with the PMFs and Abu Mazen. Still, one potential opportunity for leverage lies in the fact that many PMFs in Salah al-Din report to national political figures who seek to curry international legitimacy, particularly in the run-up to elections slated for 2021.

## GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

**The international community must pressure local allies, particularly the PUK and the KDP, with influence over displacement and return dynamics.**

The international community provides Kurdish forces with weapons and military vehicles on an annual basis, and yet those same forces are obstructing returns in key areas of the country. The KDP's current position in Nineveh effectively leaves thousands of Arab villagers in limbo. It is well documented that the PUK Peshmerga carried out mass destruction of Arab villages in Kirkuk during the anti-ISIS campaign.<sup>242</sup> The international community has quite reasonably expressed gratitude to the Barzanis and the rest of the Kurdish political establishment for the region's hosting of displaced persons. However, this praise must also be tempered with some accountability in areas outside the KRG where the KDP and PUK Peshmerga have played a particularly destructive role.

**As the international community seeks out local partners who can assist with durable solutions for IDPs, governors serve as important linkages between the GoI and the political/military actors on the ground. However, the influence of governors is highly variable.**

Governors are well positioned to facilitate returns but the extent of their influence depends on the nature of the local political marketplace. The case studies of Kirkuk and Nineveh are telling. In Kirkuk, the governor was brought to power by virtue of a political stalemate between the PUK and the KDP, which Badr exploited to offer up Rakan al-Jabouri as a non-Kurdish compromise candidate. Normally, such multi-party deals predict political weakness, but in Governor Rakan al-Jabouri's case he has successfully positioned himself as the mediator among the parties and proven his capacity to ensure that all sides receive their rightful share of assets. Though al-Jabouri is disliked by many figures across the political spectrum, he is able to play an influential role because all sides have an interest in maintaining a collusive agreement that guarantees access to local resources and state positions. As the lynchpin in allocating provincial resources, Jabouri has considerable influence over returns, particularly to Hawija, and also to Daquq and Dibs. In Nineveh, however, a multi-party deal has left Governor Najim al-Jabouri almost entirely hemmed in. Unlike in Kirkuk, nearly all of the major political actors competing for power in Nineveh are newly arrived national parties whose main goal is to maximize the capture of local institutions and economic wealth. A subset of these factions appointed Najim al-Jabouri, but this brief moment of cooperation soon descended into further competition, with the governor left on the sideline. While the international community is generally fond of the former general, he holds little sway over displacement and return dynamics.

242 "Banished and Dispossessed: Forced Displacement and Deliberate Destruction in Northern Iraq," Amnesty International, 2016 p. 13-18. P. 13-18. Available at: [www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE1432292016ENGLISH.PDF](http://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE1432292016ENGLISH.PDF).

**The concentration of both domestic and geopolitical interests at Iraq's borderlands creates a political marketplace that renders sustainable returns difficult. However, there are possible pathways forward, given Prime Minister Kadhimi's interest in border issues.**

Whether it is Rabia and Ba'aj in Nineveh, al-Qaim in Anbar, or much of Diyala province, Iraq's borderlands have become sites of intense illicit trade, smuggling of weapons, and rent seeking in the post-ISIS era. Iran is heavily invested in ensuring that control over borderlands remains in the hands of its proxies such as Kataib Hezbollah, Badr, and others. The PMFs and Kurdish groups controlling these border areas have been hesitant to allow returns for fear that the local population—and their corresponding tribal affiliations—will create security challenges and disrupt the flow of goods and persons. Limited returns to these areas have been possible in situations in which the PMFs have entered into deals with tribal groups with additional pressure from the provincial government. The areas with dim prospects for returns are those where the already fraught political-economy of the border is compounded by longstanding ethnic and political conflicts. Kadhimi has shown commitment to establish a measure of GoI control over the border crossings. However, these efforts need to expand beyond the current GoI focus on simply replacing the PMFs with ISF border guards. Because border conditions impact the local social and economic context, and shape displacement dynamics, Kadhimi must develop a border strategy that places sustainable returns at the center.

**In light of increasing camp closures, understanding the political marketplace can help predict where IDPs can and cannot return home.**

As the national policy of camp closures continues, policymakers and practitioners should deepen their knowledge of the political marketplace in order to better anticipate where IDP returns are likely to succeed, where IDP returns are likely to be very difficult or even impossible, and where IDP returns may be achievable in the short-term but unsustainable in the years to come. The transactional deal-making that enables returns in one moment often breaks down over time due to the structural asymmetries in the political marketplace, particularly in local contexts where unaccountable political or security actors hold disproportionate access to coercive force, economic power, and patronage. Facing these realities, international organizations can use their knowledge of the political marketplace to identify which actors are likely to be supportive or problematic, the type of obstacles IDPs are likely to face, and the available options to address these issues. A detailed understanding of the political marketplace in each area of Iraq would enable international actors to identify the approaches that mitigate harmful policies or decisions, seek durable solutions, and brighten prospects for IDP protection and return.

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