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The Making of the Kurdish Frontier: Power, Conflict, and Governance in the Iraqi-Syrian Borderlands

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Abbreviations

ISF   Iraqi Security Forces

KCK   Kurdistan Communities Union

KDP   Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê)

KRG   Kurdistan Regional Goverment (of Iraq)

KRI   Kurdistan Region of Iraq

PKK   Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê)

PMF   Popular Mobilization Forces

PYD   Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat)

SDF   Syrian Democratic Forces

YBS   Sinjar Resistance Units (Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şengalê)

YPG   People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel)

Methodology

This paper is primarily based on qualitative and quantitative data collected in the course of fieldwork undertaken by the authors and their research assistants between November 2019 and December 2020. Because the coronavirus pandemic prevented the authors from undertaking field work starting in January 2020, two research assistants conducted twenty-five structured interviews with samples of individuals. In addition, a team from Impact, which focuses on topics related to civil society and policy-oriented research, has compiled data on border economy between September–December 2020. The authors also conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews via telephone and Skype with local residents and actors from different areas of the border zone. In addition, they led two workshops with local leaders and experts to discuss the Iraqi-Syrian border dynamics and utilized data from primary and secondary sources.

Summary

Even after the collapse of the self-proclaimed Islamic State, the Iraqi-Syrian border continues to be one of the most geopolitically restless areas in the Middle East. In the last few years, a variety of Kurdish entities and groups have increasingly shaped the dynamics across the northern section of this border. In particular, there are two dynamics that deserve attention. First, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Kurdish-dominated Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria have come to effectively control new border crossings in this area as the Syrian government has lost access and the Iraqi government's presence has been contested. This means that the movement of people and goods in this area is largely controlled by two entities that are neither state nor nonstate actors. The reality on the ground reflects hybrid arrangements that have emerged as a result of the weaknesses of both central governments and the increasing autonomy gained by Kurdish parties (which, in the case of the KRG, is stipulated constitutionally).

Second, the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), by virtue of its participation in the war against the Islamic State and by taking advantage of the consequent power vacuum, managed to augment its influence along the border. Its ideological and organizational ties with local groups, such as the People Protection Units (YPG) in Syria and Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS) in Iraq, enabled it to exert security and political influence. On the one hand, this turned segments of the border into an arena for transnational, pan-Kurdish militancy. On the other hand, these groups' presence intensified intra-Kurdish rivalries, especially between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which is the KRG's main ruling party, and the PKK. This rivalry reflects a clash of two visions for the border: the PKK's revolutionary, transnational vision that seeks to eradicate or at least underplay the reality of the border; and the KDP's pragmatic and territorial vision seeking to assert the border's reality as a demarcation of the KRG's authority and future statehood. In addition, the KDP is allied with Turkey, which has been fighting the PKK for several decades and is currently waging a military campaign against the group in northern Iraq and Syria.

To a large extent, the future of this border is predicated on this geopolitical conflict and whether the PKK manages to entrench itself further or becomes isolated and marginalized as the KRG, the Autonomous Administration, and the Iraqi federal government assert their territorial authorities.

Introduction

Even after the collapse of the Islamic State, the Iraqi-Syrian border continues to be one of the most geopolitically restless areas in the Middle East (see Map 1). The disintegration of the central state authority in both countries and its retreat from the periphery has led to a surge of multiple militant groups seeking to fill the vacuum. These groups often identify with an ethnic or sectarian identity shared by populations living across the border. In this process of disarticulation, a remarkable transformation has occurred along the northern section of the Iraqi-Syrian border: for the first time since the formation of the modern state in Iraq and Syria, a variety of Kurdish forces came to dominate portions of the border on both sides. This significant geopolitical shift, which can be characterized as the formation of Kurdish-Kurdish frontiers, could have long-term implications for the region.

MAP 1
Northern Sections of the Iraqi-Syrian Border
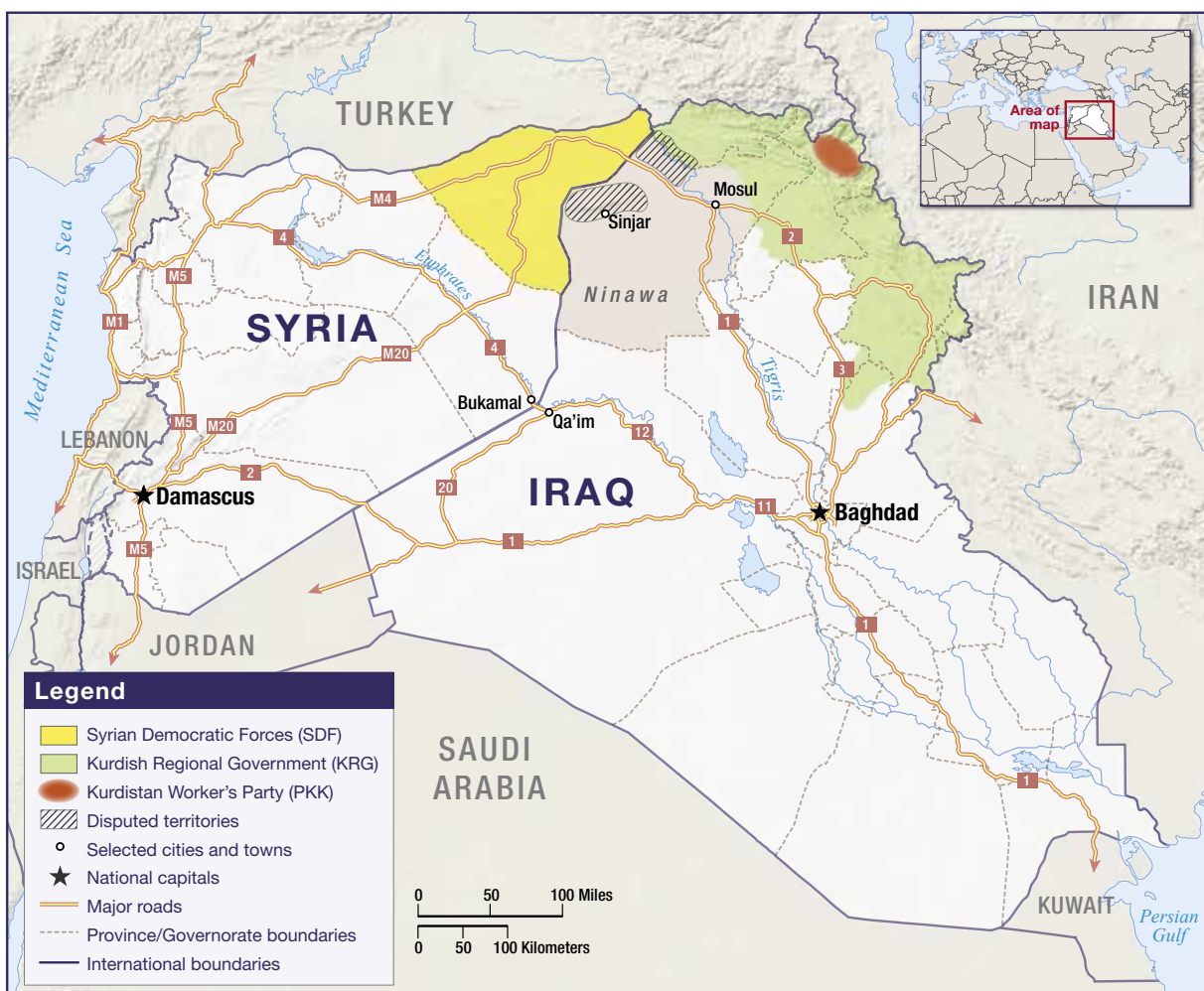
On the Syrian side, this border section is governed today by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (hereafter, the Autonomous Administration), which is led by Kurdish factions. The two primary factions are the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat; PYD) and the Kurdish-dominated armed group known as the People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel; YPG), which also enjoys a leading position in the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). At the same time, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê; PKK), a pan-Kurdish organization that has fought the Turkish government over Kurdish sovereignty and independence since the mid-1980s, has been able to expand its presence on both sides of the border, benefiting from its ideological and organizational links with the YPG and newly formed militias in northern Iraq, particularly the Sinjar District in Ninawa. Through these connections, the PKK has created or revived border-crossing corridors that its affiliate militants regularly use, diluting the border in a way reminiscent of the Islamic State. On the Iraqi side, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê; KDP), the main ruling party in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), has managed to maintain its hold over several parts of this border segment, despite its retreat from Sinjar after the failed independence referendum in 2017.

The new reality has spawned increasing cross-border Kurdish interactions and contributed to the gradual evolution of socioeconomic structures that promote transnational ties. The Autonomous Administration has been working to consolidate its authority and assume statist functions that include governance, security, and service provision. For this reason, it has attached an utmost impor-tance to opening and developing border crossings with the KRI and the rest of Iraq. In the face of a Turkish-led siege from the north and the opposition of the Syrian regime from the south and west, these corridors have provided the only reliable passage for the Autonomous Administration to interact with the external world. Most of its exports and imports, as well as its people's mobility outside Syria, rely on free movement through this border. The Autonomous Administration and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq have sought to formalize the management of the shared border crossings as part of their endeavor to undertake functions previously held by Damascus and Baghdad and to curb smuggling and illicit activities that deprive them of additional resources. However, as the border region continues to be subject to ongoing conflict and institutional fluidity, in which political parties and their affiliate paramilitaries vie for influence and control, gray-market

activities have continued and in some instances are even sponsored by the two main administrative authorities. This situation reflects the characteristics of a process—one that is by no means irreversible—of the transformation from militancy to statism.

Even as the Autonomous Administration and the KRG attempt to cooperate on border issues, regional developments have deepened intra-Kurdish rivalries. The link between the PYD and PKK, an organization that Turkey, the United States, and the European Union all classify as a terrorist organization, presents an obstacle for the Autonomous Administration's attempt to normalize and gain more international recognition. This factional link has intensified the PYD's competition with the KDP with regard to controling and managing or sharing power in northeastern Syria (which Kurdish parties call Rojava or Western Kurdistan) and Sinjar. Over time, the Iraqi-Syrian border has become the main theater for this rivalry, as well as a regular target of Turkish air strikes and military incursions against Kurdish activism.

The dynamics of the intra-Kurdish rivalries indicate that ethnic unity is not enough to achieve consensus over this border's administration. Fragile economic interests may motivate both sides to cooperate in organizing affairs at the border, but major problems with deep historical roots continue to cause tensions. The KDP and pragmatic elements in the Autonomous Administration prefer not to challenge the reality of this border and appear to have accepted the existing state lines as the territorial boundaries of their authorities. They aspire to formalize and, perhaps in a more remote future, employ these borders as a demarcation of their claims of statehood. Their pragmatic approach is driven partly by their heavy reliance on international support and recognition from powers that are liable to reject changes to existing state borders, and partly by their assumed roles as governing entities. By contrast, the PKK and its allied organs have a revolutionary perspective that is interested in surpassing the current border and asserting transborder and transnational solidarities as a mode of expanding their influence and challenging the traditional forces and geopolitical status quo. The outcome of this competition, or its potential protraction in the foreseeable future, will be of great significance for the future of the Iraqi-Syrian border.

The Formation of the Kurdish Frontiers

The conflict in Syria and the surge of the Islamic State in western Iraq have had a lasting impact on the Iraq-Syria border region. Kurdish forces have come to control the two sides of the border as a result of their fighting against the Islamic State (see Map 2). This struggle has brought the Kurds closer to the dream of Kurdish transboundary unity, but it also has become a source of intra-Kurdish rivalries.[1]

In Syria, the regime of Bashar al-Assad began to withdraw from the Kurdish-majority areas in northeastern Syria in the summer of 2012. This withdrawal allowed the PYD—many of whose members are linked to the PKK—to bolster its presence. The PYD has controlled the border zone with Iraq since mid-2012, particularly the Symalka crossing at the northern end. It extended this control southward to Yarubiyah in November 2013. In March 2019, it was able to expand its control over al-Baghouz to the south along the Euphrates River, after fighting the Islamic State with support from the international coalition.

In Iraq, the battle to expunge the Islamic State from this area has involved a variety of forces. The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF); the Hashd al-Shaabi, a collection of local militias commonly known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF); and the Peshmerga, acting for the Baghdad government and the KRG, respectively, provided a state and parastate military presence. Local militias (including Sunni tribal militias, known as the tribal Hashd), and a group of Yazidi factions that had different allegiances and affiliations scattered between the KDP, the PKK, and the PMF also participated in the fighting. Not long after the Islamic State forces were cleared out of western Ninawa in 2017, however, the victors began to compete with each other over land and resources.[2]

In particular, the dispute between the KRG and Baghdad over two border areas that are today part of Ninawa Governorate, Zummar and Sinjar, escalated when the KRG organized an independence referendum in September 2017. In response, the federal government, backed by the Iran-allied PMF, advanced militarily to take over disputed territories and imposed economic sanctions on the KRG. In Western Ninawa, the ISF and the PMF moved to control the subdistricts of Rabia and Zummar, including border crossings in Faysh Khabur and Al-Waleed, with the declared aim of asserting the state's sovereignty over the border. Yet even though the ISF and the PMF managed to stretch Baghdad's authority to most disputed territories, they could not maintain control over Faysh Khabur and Al-Waleed in the face of stronger resistance by the Peshmerga and the United States' mediation between Baghdad and the KRG. At the same time, the KDP lost most of its influence in the areas to the south of Zummar, including Sinjar, whereas another Kurdish group, the PKK, was building its own base of support.

Although this regional transformation has boosted Kurdish nationalist sentiments and the dream of a Kurdish state, it has deepened the rivalry between the KDP and the PKK (and its affiliate factions). This rivalry was generated by competition for territory, resources, and status, but it also reflects a contest between two different worldviews, which have given the border distinctive meanings for either side. The KDP, in an ironic but perhaps understandable turn of thinking, concluded that the survival and sustainability of the KRI and its wide-ranging autonomy in Iraq require it to defend the very border that many Kurdish nationalists have for decades lamented as a hindrance to Kurdish unification and nationhood. For the PKK, however, the border is nothing but a barrier to realizing its goal of establishing a stateless society.

MAP 2
The Deployment of Major Kurdish Groups Near the Border

Initially a Marxist-influenced group, the PKK embraced the ideas of communalism and radical democracy, advocating the formation of democratic confederations between localities run by elected assemblies, with no need for overarching state authority. In 2005, Abdullah Öcalan, a founding member of the PKK and its ideological leader, advocated the formation of municipal councils as a way of facilitating a democratic confederation of Kurdish and other communities across the state borders of Syria, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey.[3] In his recent writings, Öcalan criticized the nation-state as a "colony of capital" and an extension of the patriarchy. He claimed that the Kurds should seek democratic autonomy without a state and unite instead on the basis of decentralized self-government by councils and cooperatives.[4]

In this complex setting, these various groups, from different vantage points, seek to appropriate the border and the border crossings that are an essential military, economic, and political resource.[5] Since the 1980s, the PKK has been in rebellion against the Turkish government, which has led to its designation as an unlawful organization by Turkey and several international actors. This outlaw status has hampered the group's ability to formalize and unmask its presence in Iraq and Syria, forcing it to go underground and try to exert influence through clandestine deployment of its personnel and the shadowy connections with other groups, such as the YPG in Syria and the Sinjar Resistance Units (Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şengalê; YBS) in Iraq. However, these less visible and more informal connections have enabled the PKK to deploy, maneuver, and exert power across the border, and provide it with a shield and plausible deniability when necessary. At the same time, these connections must not be interpreted as if they indicate that these groups are merely camouflages for the PKK. Despite their military and ideological links with the PKK, local Kurdish groups sustain their own interests that are largely shaped by the ways in which they are embedded in local structures.

The Rise of Transborder Kurdish Economy

Before Syria's internal conflict began in 2011, the KRG's relationship with the Kurdish-majority regions of northeastern Syria was a mostly political one, limited to a small number of Syrian Kurds living in the KRI and to a few Syrian Kurdish loyalists who supported one of the KRG's main parties. Today, these connections have grown into an economic relationship as well. The border crossings between the two regions, set up around 2016, have turned this area into an economically active zone. What makes this zone an interesting area to study is that it is not one between two sovereign states, but rather between two Kurdish-led political entities.

The Management of Border Crossings

One feature of this evolving economy is the emergence of new border crossings that help move people and goods between northeastern Syria and the KRI—key sites over which the KDP and the Autonomous Administration seek to gain political leverage. In this 150-kilometer-long border section, which begins at the Iraqi-Syrian-Turkish triangle and extends southward to the Baaj district in Ninawa Governorate on the Iraqi side and to As-Shaddadi on the Syrian side, there are four border crossings and entry points: Rabia-Yarubiyeh, Symalka-Faysh Khabur, Al-Waleed, and al-Faw (see Map 3).

MAP 3
Border Crossings Between Iraq and Syria

Rabia-Yarubiyah. Of the four areas, only Rabia-Yarubiyah is recognized as a formal border crossing by the Iraqi and Syrian governments. However, both governments lost access to it, and since 2013 it has remained closed. On its Syrian side, the YPG was able to take control of it after battles with Islamist militant fighters in October 2013. The Autonomous Administration pushed to reopen the crossing, but it failed to do so because Baghdad did not want to provoke Damascus by giving international legitimacy to the Autonomous Administration. Instead, the Syrian government favored the reopening of the Qaim-Bukamal border crossing in the southern section of the border, which occurred in October 2019.[6] In 2020, the World Health Organization requested an urgent opening of the Rabia-Yarubiyah crossing to facilitate the movement of medical and humanitarian aid to Syria, as part of its response to the coronavirus pandemic. However, the Syrian government and its major ally, Russia, rejected this request as a violation of Syrian sovereignty, and claimed that Western powers intended to use humanitarian aid as a cover for transfering weapons to their allies in Syria, namely the SDF.[7]

Local politics have created particular internal dynamics around Rabia-Yarubiyah. The subdistricts of Rabia and Yarubiyah are inhabited by the Sunni Arab tribe of Shummar, whose members have lived on both sides of the border since the nineteenth century. In Rabia, the KDP enjoyed good relations with local Shummar chieftains. But those chieftains also seek to balance these relations with their link with Mosul, the capital of Ninawa Governorate, and Baghdad, especially since the latter gained the upper hand after the referendum crisis. Rabia has two main tribal Hashd factions: al-Nawadir, led by local leader and Iraqi member of parliament Abdul Raheem al-Shummari, and the Lions of Ninawa, led by Ahmed al-Madlool. Both are affiliated with the PMF. The Fifteenth Infantry Division of the Iraqi army secures this section of the border. It was sent to Rabia in 2017 as part of the military redeployment that followed the Kurdish referendum, and in the process, it has removed several of the PKK fighters that were stationed in the Rabia-Yarubiyah border crossing.[8]

Symalka–Faysh Khabur. The Symalka–Faysh Khabur border crossing is located between the town of Faysh Khabur at the eastern bank of Tigris, in Duhok Governorate, on the Iraqi side, and the town of Symalka in the Malikiyya district on the Syrian side. The crossing is disputed between the KRG and the Baghdad government, and the latter does not formally recognize it. Currently, the KDP manages the Iraqi side and the SDF controls the Syrian side.[9] In the past, the crossing was little more than a point for unlicensed movement of primarily Kurdish politicians and militants, who used river boats at the closest point between the two sides.[10] It evolved to become a border crossing with the construction of a floating bridge on January 26, 2013, following the Hewler-1 agreement between the People's Council of West Kurdistan (a PYD-led umbrella of Syrian Kurdish parties) and the

KDP-backed Kurdish National Council, under the auspices of KDP head and then KRG president Masoud Barzani. The agreement supported the needs of both groups by facilitating commercial exchange and the transport of wounded patients to be treated in the KRI.[11]

The KRG faced difficulties in opening the border crossing—not least because it was an act that violated international laws, as neither Damascus nor Baghdad recognized the crossing. But the KDP appreciated the importance of this crossing, both symbolically as a way to show solidarity with the Syrian Kurds and politically as a tool to pressure the People's Council of West Kurdistan and the Autonomous Administration to cooperate by giving a space for the Kurdish National Council to take a political role. However, the issue of managing the crossing created divisions between the KRG and the Autonomous Administration soon after its opening, as the People's Council of West Kurdistan and the Kurdish National Council disagreed about the implementation of the Hewler-1 agreement and about managing resources at the crossing.

At times, the entry was closed either fully or partially. For instance, on May 19, 2013, KRG authorities decided to close the border crossing to all but humanitarian cases and medical patients after the PYD detained seventy-five members of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party, which is close to the KDP.[12] Tensions rose to the point that the Syrian Kurdish president of the PYD, Saleh Muslim, had to enter Iraq through the Rabia-Yarubiyah crossing so that he could travel by air to Belgium via Baghdad after KRG authorities forbade him from entering their territory.[13] Nevertheless, over time, border traffic resumed. In April 2014, the KRG dug a 17-kilometer-long trench to prevent unauthorized infiltration from the Syrian side as an attempt to control smuggling operations across the border and to activate Symalka–Faysh Khabur as the main point for licensed entry.[14]

In the past three years, given the increasing economic importance of the crossing, it has only been closed once, during clashes between the Peshmerga and the PMF after the referendum crisis. The battle that occurred between the KDP-backed Syrian Rojava Peshmerga and the PMF derailed the plan to surround and reach the Faysh Khabur crossing—the KDP now celebrates this as the day it aborted the "Turkish-Iranian-Iraqi conspiracy."[15] In 2020, the KRG and the Autonomous Administration began to restrict border-crossing movement in response to the coronavirus pandemic.[16] Nevertheless, there has been a progressive trajectory toward the expansion of trade and the movement of people across Symalka–Faysh Khabur. As the crossing became an important source of revenue, the KDP and SDF administrations developed its facilities in order to manage and support the movement of people and goods. Two factors aided this decision: (1) the closure of the

Rabia-Yarubiyah crossing, which made Symalka–Faysh Khabur the most plausible alternative; and (2) the deployment of U.S. troops in both the KRI and northeastern Syria, which boosted the importance of the crossing for the movement of these troops and their equipment.[17]

Al-Waleed. The Al-Waleed crossing is located in the disputed Zummar subdistrict near Duhok Governorate in the KRI, at the western bank of the Tigris River and close to the Iraqi-Syrian-Turkish triangle.[18] It is controled by the KRG on the Iraqi side and the Autonomous Administration on the Syrian side. In 2013, the KRG opened it temporarily after it closed the Symalka–Faysh Khabur crossing following its disagreement with the SDF. Use of the crossing was restricted to those wanting to move from the KRI to Syria but not from Syria to the KRI—an act intended to signal the KDP's opposition to collaboration with the Autonomous Administration unless the latter committed to implementing the Hawler-1 agreement.[19] However, as trade between the KRI and the Autonomous Administration increased, the two sides officially agreed to open the crossing in April 2017 to reduce the burden on the Symalka–Faysh Khabur crossing. U.S. troops also used this crossing when they withdrew from Syria in October 2019.[20]

Al-Faw. Al-Faw is an informal entry located between northern and southern Sinjar on the Iraqi side, corresponding to the area between al-Yarubiyah and al-Hawl subdistrict on the Syrian side.[21] Following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and the rise of the Islamic State in the early 2010s, al-Faw served as an informal corridor for the transfer of food and humanitarian aid to Syria. More specifically, PKK-affiliated elements used it to secure a safe corridor to Syria for tens of thousands of Yazidis who fled the Islamic State's onslaught on Sinjar, allowing the refugees to travel to Duhok through Al-Waleed. Subsequently, the PKK and the YBS boosted their presence near al-Faw, which became another key entry for their militants crossing the border.[22]

According to local sources and Iraqi officials, illegal crossing and smuggling around al-Faw increasingly has been identified with the PKK. It was not until clashes took place between PKK-affiliated elements and Iraqi border guards that the Iraqi authorities began to upgrade their deployment in this area.[23] By the end of 2020, following an agreement signed between the federal government and the KRG, the ISF began to deploy additional security forces in Sinjar and near this border zone with the objective of limiting the PKK movement and its ability to operate on the Iraqi territory.[24]

Trade and Illicit Activities

The growing trade between northeastern Syria and the KRI is emblematic of the emergence of a Kurdish-Kurdish frontier. What is interesting here is that this common economic activity is taking place between two entities that are neither truly state nor truly nonstate actors. This state of affairs

reflects the increasing hybridity and the blurring of lines between the formal and informal spaces in the region as a result of the weakness of the central state apparatuses and the overlap of political entities, paramilitaries, and bureaucracies.

Many Syrians have been crossing through Symalka–Faysh Khabur to the KRI in search of employment, safety, or medical care, all of which became possible thanks to transborder Kurdish solidarity and later to the common cause against the Islamic State. The KRI became a major transient zone for Syrians who wanted to travel to or from Syria but could not risk traveling through airports controled by the Syrian government.[25] This traffic of people has been occurring since 2011, when thousands of Syrians entered the KRI during the first two years of the Syrian uprising. The number of those who arrived at that time reached about 150,000, and the number of refugees rose to about 250,000 throughout 2017.[26]

In spite of the rise in traffic, the administrations on both sides have paid little attention to either the overall movement of residents or possible ways to improve the border crossing experience, except when problems with the crossing become matters of public opinion and appear in the media. For example, for many years, residents had crossed the river on boats, even though there was a floating bridge that could carry vehicle traffic. However, after one boat sank and a passenger drowned, the administration switched the transport mechanism to buses. The incident grew into a public issue, with activists and journalists criticizing the fact that for years, border crossers had been required to use small crafts that held mere dozens of people, while livestock had been transported over the floating bridge in cars—an insulting irony for passengers.[27]

For the local authorities, their priorities are primarily commercial. Symalka–Faysh Khabur is a major crossing for foodstuffs and other essentials. From the Syrian side, the local customs clearance offices, of which there are around ten, work with the traders to facilitate the process and save time. The main strategic goods traded through the area are steel, sugar, cement, and fertilizers. From the KRG side, a KDP-affiliated company controls the crossing and collects taxes for products such as plastics, mobile phones, textiles, and electrical goods.[28]

The second crossing that has seen significant growth in economic activity is Al-Waleed crossing.[29] At this crossing, a joint company called Hefkarten has been set up between the Autonomous Administration and local traders who monopolize the strategic goods in this area. At Al-Waleed, goods can be brought in at larger volumes than is possible in the Symalka crossing, which is restricted by the 35-ton capacity of the floating bridge.[30] The company was founded at the end of 2015 by the economic committee of the Movement for a Democratic Society, a group of individuals who worked with the PKK in the 1990s in Qandil, now part of the Autonomous Administration.[31]

The Al-Waleed crossing was allocated for the import of steel, cement, fertilizers, and sugar, all of which are monopolized by Autonomous Administration loyalists. Sometimes, during the winter season when the Symalka crossing is out of operation, the Al-Waleed crossing becomes an alternative for commercial traffic.[32] The crossing has supported the rise of a number of companies operating within a patronage network on both sides—broadly speaking, one set connected with KDP leaders and the other with PKK-affiliated figures.

A new class of traders at this crossing have revived the markets of the border towns on both sides. In the district of Zakho-Duhok, for instance, large-scale vegetable traders have brought in convoys of vegetables from Syria. A class of about 2,000 additional traders from the Autonomous Administration areas have emerged to benefit from this trade.[33] Opportunities for futher profit abound. For example, more than 600,000 tons of cement enter the Autonomous Administration areas from the KRI per day. On the Syrian side, each ton is sold for $80, compared with the $30 per ton price it would fetch in the KRI. Everyday, 1,000 tons of steel also cross the border, where it is sold for $650 per ton—even though Hefkarten purchases steel for only $450 per ton. Sugar shows a similar situation, being bought in the KRI at $450 per ton and sold across the border at $550 per ton, with about 2,000 tons entering per day.[34]

This growing trade has incentivized the Autonomous Administration and the KRG to impose tariffs on goods imported through the crossings. Anyone who wants to carry out commercial activities in this area needs to pay between 120,000 to 160,000 Syrian pounds for the licensing process, which includes vetting from the security forces. Any trader who wants a customs license must pay a further one-time deposit of 50,000 pounds to the Autonomous Administration.[35] Some businessmen have complained that tariffs have risen so steeply that trade through this crossing is no longer profitable. From their perspective, even though the relatively secure movement via the Symalka–Faysh Khabur crossing has reduced illicit activities across the Iraq-Syria border, the burdensome tariffs might revive these activities.[36]

Illicit trade is not a strange concept at the Iraqi-Syrian border. The lack of natural barriers and the existence of transborder ethnic and tribal ties have long facilitated smuggling activities, especially after the late 1970s when the formal border crossing points were closed. The most common smuggled items are livestock and tobacco, but recently the list has expanded to include oil, narcotics, and weapons.[37] But whereas tribal networks controled this trade in the past, today it is paramilitary groups that are taking the lead. Residents of many border villages between the Rabia-Yarubiyah and Symalka–Faysh Khabur crossings were involved in smuggling before the Autonomous Administration took control, much as in other Syrian border areas. Syrian villages such as Suweidiyeh, Qald-

man, and Kilahi (Qalaat al-Hasan), facing the villages of Sihela and Jozik on the Iraqi side, were known locations of smuggling activity. Historically, this area inclined toward the KDP-Iraq, but since the 1990s it has had more loyalists to the PKK compared to other Syrian regions.[38]

With the start of the Syrian crisis, these smuggling routes developed to become routes for the illicit transport of people as well as goods, particularly between 2011 and 2013, and to a lesser extent in the years that followed. During the Turkish assault on the Ras al-Ayn and Tel Abyad areas in October 2019, tens of thousands of people fled through the smuggling routes into the KRI. Even after the opening of the Al-Waleed crossing in April 2017, smuggling continued in the villages. For example, the increase of customs fees for mobile phones led to the return of smuggling of these phones through the villages adjacent to the border in the Dreik (al-Malikiyeh) area.[39] Traders say that the Autonomous Administration has used its security agencies to attempt to control smugglers and to win them over by various means, with partial success. The Autonomous Administration also used these routes to smuggle certain goods banned by the KRG, such as electrical equipment and other materials needed in northeastern Syria.

In recent years, oil smuggling—specifically, the smuggling of Syrian crude oil to the KRI and refined fuel to northeastern Syria—has become a concern in the region. In February 2012, the Iraqi Integrity Commission charged four Rabia-Yarubiyah crossing officials, including its director, with facilitating the smuggling of 1,500 oil tanks.[40] According to an investigation published by the Iraq Oil Report, a news website on Iraqi energy affairs, the KRI has become "a key market for Syrian crude and provider of refined fuel."[41] Starting in 2014, this trade has evolved and generated tens of millions of dollars per month to the Autonomous Administration, Iraqi border officials, crude buyers, and foreign military officials. Although the Rabia-Yarubiyah crossing has been a key point for this trade, the investigation pointed out that the Symalka–Faysh Khabur crossing also has been employed. A security official questioned about the illegal traffic said that about thirty tanker trucks cross from Syria into the KRI every day. Their drivers often carry special permits, which indicates that KRG officials were involved. The Autonomous Administration sells the crude for as little as $60 per ton, and traders then resell it for $240 to $260 per ton to refiners in the KRI, who then turn around and export part of the processed fuel to northeastern Syria.[42]

In addition, after 2014, both the Al-Waleed and the al-Faw crossings became key entry points for PKK and affiliated groups' fighters seeking to cross the border. One source said that the PKK coordinated with Iraqi security officials, especially those linked to Iranian-allied groups, to facilitate its cross-border operations.[43] Additionally, whenever political tensions occurred with the KRG, the Autonomous Administration activated these smuggling routes, mainly between the Khan Sour area

in Syria and the Sinjar District, where the al-Faw entry is located. This entry served as a smuggling crossing after 2014—more precisely, after the establishment of a a PKK-allied administration in Sinjar.[44]

Borderlands, Intra-Kurdish Rivalries, and Geopolitical Powers

For the first time in the modern history of this region, Kurdish administrations on both sides of the border have enjoyed a degree of autonomy and international recognition that would have been unthinkable less than a decade ago. Some observers regard the growing connections between the KRI and the Rojava area of Syria as a basis for grand geopolitical transformation, if socioeconomic and political integration were permitted to flourish.[45] However, the opportunities for Kurdish unity have been offset by the rise of intra-Kurdish rivalries. The competition between the KDP and the PKK is not new, but it has been deepened—first, by both groups' attempts to shape the fragile political outlook in northeastern Syria, and second, by the PKK's increasing encroachment on the KRI's territory and areas that the KDP traditionally saw as part of its own sphere of influence, such as Sinjar.

Territorial Control and Intra-Kurdish Competitions

The KRG and the Autonomous Administration seek to transform their territorial authority into a sustainable reality, mainly by formalizing it and gaining internal and international recognition. The KRG has come a long way in reaching this objective because of its longer experience as a constitutional entity that assumes statist powers such as security, governance, and revenue generation within its territory. At the same time, the PKK and affiliated groups seek a broad territorial reengineering that trespasses the border in favor of a transnational pan-Kurdish solidarity, one that also defies the traditional authorities on which the KDP relies for its patronage networks and practical governance. In this intra-Kurdish polarization, the SDF and the Autonomous Administration have a more nuanced and complicated relationship. Their positions are driven by two opposing needs. On the one hand, they need to stabilize and normalize their autonomous authority, which requires them to seek international recognition and protection. On the other hand, they need to sustain their militant spirit and the alliance with the PKK in order to face ongoing threats to this painfully garnered autonomy, primarily those coming from Turkey and its allied Syrian factions but also from the Islamic State and from the Syrian regime. Therefore, it seems that the future of this border rests heavily on the choices of the Syrian Kurdish factions, and whether these choices lead them in the direction of greater statism or militantism.

In 2012, Kurdish fighters in Syria took up a slogan during their battles with radical Islamist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra in the town of Ras al-Ain on the border between Turkey and Syria: "We are few where no one can see us, and many where you can find us everywhere."[46] The slogan was meant to convey the widespread but well-concealed presence of the PKK. Indeed, the PKK's interest and presence in Syria's northeastern border regions is nothing new. It dates back to the 1980s, when the group first declared its armed struggle against the Turkish government. Back then, the PKK considered Syrian territory a safe haven. During the 1990s, senior leaders such as Abdullah Öcalan and Jamil Bayek were able to use Kobani, a Kurdish town northeast of Aleppo, as a hub for their activities against Turkey.[47] Their presence only came to an end with the October 1998 Adana Agreement between Damascus and Ankara, which resulted in the expulsion of PKK leaders from the Syrian border regions.[48] However, the leftist militant group was not uprooted completely from its former bases of activity. In 2003, the PKK was involved in the formation of a new Syrian Kurdish political party, the PYD,[49] and in 2005, the two parties became part of the same umbrella organization, the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), which is committed to implementing Öcalan's ideology of "democratic confederalism."[50]

Throughout, the PKK developed a significant presence in the border regions. Although it is true that a body officially named the PKK in the area does not exist, the party managed to make inroads to local society by building connections with other groups and civil society organizations. For example, in 2011, the PKK set up an institution called the Martyrs' Families Organization, which plays a significant role in communications with families of fighters who have died in battles in Turkey or Syria.[51] Through this support and the development of contact networks, the PKK has expanded its popular base—specifically in areas near the border. This gives it a capacity for mobilization, as occurred in 2016 and 2017, when youth groups backed by PKK cadres in Syria organized sit-ins at the Symalka–Faysh Khabur crossing, demonstrating solidarity with their comrades in the Iraqi Kurdistan region and protesting the attacks by the Turkish army on the Qandil Mountains, where many PKK leaders were located. In response, KDP officials closed the border crossing.[52] This capacity for social mobilization drew attention to the PKK's ability to cause disturbances on the border during any political event.

After the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, the KDP sought to influence events by backing the Kurdish National Council, which was part of the United Syrian Council that served as an umbrella for the Syrian opposition. In adopting this position, the KDP came closer to the Turkish position, which in the early period of the conflict backed the United Syrian Council and the efforts to topple the Syrian regime. This stance put the KDP at odds with both Tehran and, to some extent, Baghdad, whose Shia-dominated government was suspicious about the prospect of a new Sunni-dominated regime in

Syria. At the same time, the PKK-allied PYD and its military wing, the YPG, were emerging as the most capable force on the ground, especially after the Islamic State attempted to invade Kurdish-held territories.[53]

To serve as the Kurdish National Council's military wing, the KDP trained and equipped a Syrian Kurdish militia known as Rojava Peshmerga, composed of about 4,000 fighters.[54] After the formation of the Autonomous Administration, the KDP sought to redeploy this militia in Syria to ensure that the PKK and its allies could not monopolize power in the emerging autonomous region.[55] The PYD-led Autonomous Administration, however, was skeptical about the move and did not collaborate with the militia. PKK media claimed that Rojava Peshmerga was supported and trained by Turkey with the objective of hijacking the bitterly earned autonomy of the Syrian Kurds.[56]

In the past two years, this rift between the PKK/PYD and the KDP has deepened as Turkey increased its efforts against the PKK and the SDF. The current Turkish security strategy is to prevent northern Iraq from becoming a stronghold for the PKK and to preclude stronger connections between the Autonomous Administration in northeastern Syria and the KRI, especially if this connection would further empower the PKK-allied elements. To that end, in mid-2020, the Turkish army started a new military campaign in northern Iraq that included heavy bombing of what Turkey characterized as PKK bases in Sinjar and Duhok. According to Iraqi security officials, about 1,500 Turkish soldiers participated in the land offensive, supported by the air force, and their operations were coordinated with the KDP.[57] In another instance of escalation, in August 2020 a Turkish drone strike targeted a meeting between PKK members and Iraqi border guards. The attack killed Agit Karzan, a senior PKK commander in Duhok, and two Iraqi border guard officers.[58] Another offensive took place in January 2021, when Turkish forces were deployed in Duhok and claimed to have killed forty-eight PKK members and found Turkish hostages kidnapped by the group dead.[59] The KDP was facing mounting pressure from Turkey to cooperate against the PKK, which meant risking the outbreak of an open intra-Kurdish war that could harm the party's political position and its appeal to Kurdish constituencies. Collaborating with Turkey against another Kurdish group could have high costs in terms of losing constituencies, as many Kurds are enraged by Turkish attacks and military presence in the KRI. For example, in January 2019, a crowd in Duhok stormed a Turkish military camp in protest against recent attacks.[60]

This confrontation between Turkey and the PKK took place in areas that were part of the KRI or in which the KDP enjoyed great influence, such as Sinjar. It became more difficult for the KDP to balance its economic dependency on Turkey, which was essential for the KRG's survival, with its pan-Kurdish sympathies that mitigated its rivalry with other parties such as the PKK. The KRG

exports most of its oil (about 450,000 barrels per day) and gas through pipelines that pass through Turkey to the Mediterranean. This infrastructure made the KRG more dependent on Turkish cooperation, given Baghdad's objections to the KRG's unilateral exportation of energy. This arrangement was part of a political shift in Ankara's policy toward the KRG, which sought to make the latter a strategic ally, an alternative source of energy, and a buffer against the increasing Iranian influence in Iraq.[61] As their trade partnerships evolved, the Ibrahim al-Khalil border crossing through which most Turkish exports enter Iraq has become a major source of revenue for the KDP. Consequently, for the KRG to survive economically and to sustain its autonomy from Baghdad, it needed to keep its collaboration with Turkey—a fact that gave the latter a great leverage over the KDP.

In their verbal war, the KDP accused the PKK of threatening stability in the KRI.[62] The PKK, in response, continued to accuse the KDP of conspiring with Turkey.[63] In November 2020, KDP leader Masoud Barzani issued an unprecedented statement accusing the PKK of illegally expanding its military presence in the KRI borderlands and forcing its authority over the local population. Barzani insinuated that his party's long-time reluctance to engage in intra-Kurdish fighting should not be interpreted as a weakness.[64] On the ground, meanwhile, military clashes between the two became more regular. In October 2020, the KRG security organ accused the PKK of assassinating one of its officials near a border crossing with Turkey.[65] In mid-December 2020, KDP-affiliated media reported more clashes between the Peshmerga and YPG militants near the Al-Waleeds border crossing.[66] KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani described the incident as a "reckless, unprovoked attack" and a "clear and illegal violation of the territory of Kurdistan Region."[67]

These and other incidents embodied the emerging fault line in transnational Kurdish politics, which threatened to become all the more pronounced in the future. On one side, the KRG's territorial and institutional autonomy derives its legitimacy from the recognition it has received in the Iraqi Constitution and the international acceptance of this reality within its recognized borders; therefore, to maintain this legitimacy, it must defend this border. On the other side, the PKK's anti-state project seeks to dilute the border for the sake of a transnational solidarity. Nowhere has the confrontation been more intense and complex than in the border region of Sinjar in northern Iraq.
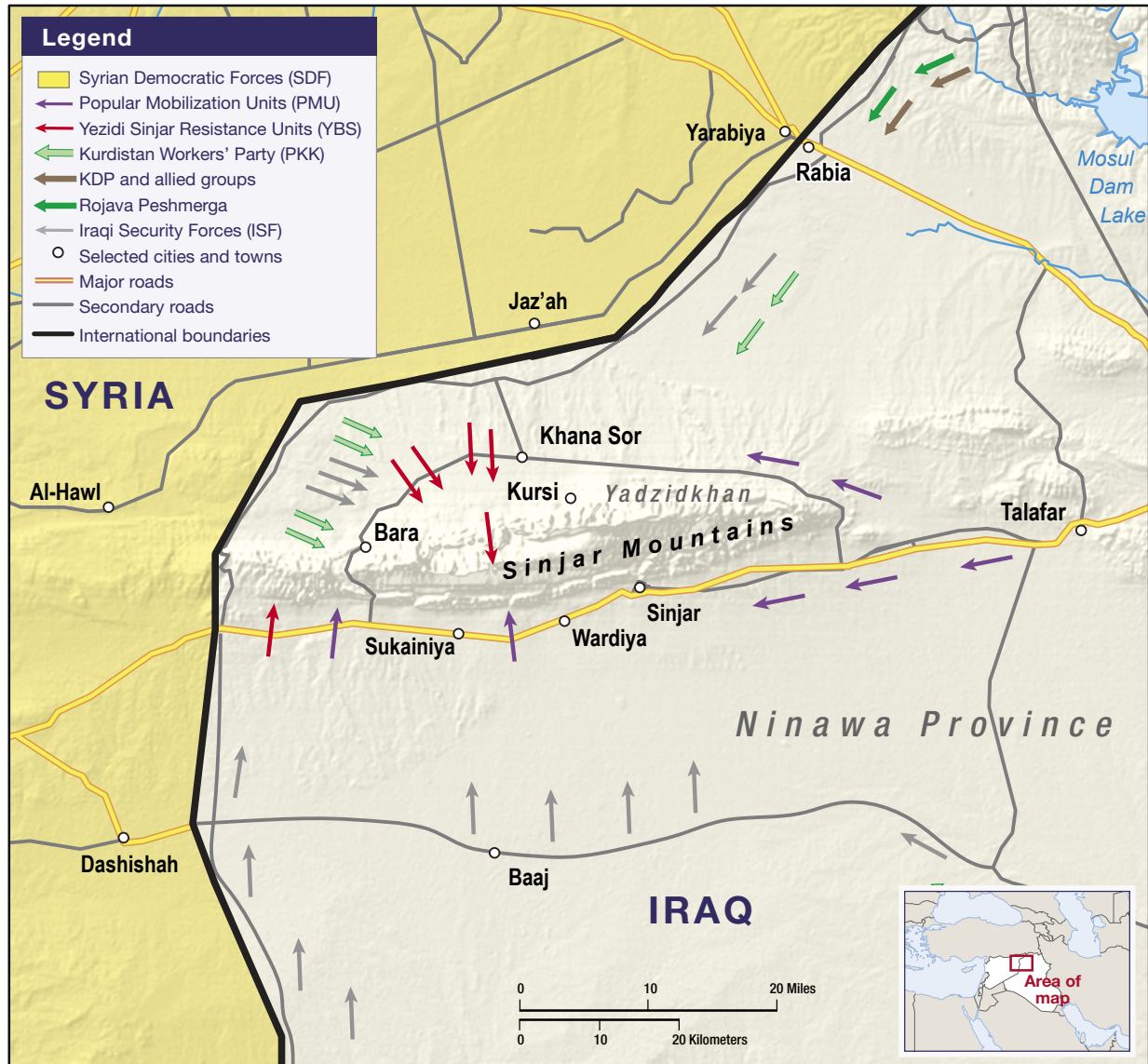
Sinjar as a Main Theater

Most of the residents of Sinjar, about 75 percent of the population, are Kurdish Yazidis.[68] Some Yazidis regard themselves as primarily Kurds, whereas others tend to emphasize the "distinctiveness" of the Yazid community.[69] Appreciating the strategic location of Sinjar, the Baath regime tried to reengineer the demographic makeup of the district through policies of Arabization. These policies

included relocating tens of thousands of indigenous populations from their villages near Jabel Sinjar into easily controlable townships with Arabic names, and administratively dividing the district by joining Qahtaniyya subdistrict in southern Sinjar to the nearby Baaj District, which is inhabited by an Arab majority (see Map 4).[70]

MAP 4
Armed Actors in Sinjar, Iraq

Legend
- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)
- Popular Mobilization Units (PMU)
- Yezidi Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS)
- Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)
- KDP and allied groups
- Rojava Peshmerga
- Iraqi Security Forces (ISF)
- Selected cities and towns
- Major roads
- Secondary roads
- International boundaries

SYRIA

IRAQ

Yarabiya
Rabia
Mosul Dam Lake
Jaz'ah
Al-Hawl
Khana Sor
Kursi
Yadzidkhan
Talafar
Bara
Sinjar Mountains
Sukainiya
Wardiya
Sinjar
Ninawa Province
Dashishah
Baaj

0   10   20 Miles
0   10   20 Kilometers

Area of map

After the collapse of the Baath regime, the KDP and its Peshmerga emerged as the main organized political and paramilitary force that filled the vacuum in Sinjar. Therefore, the post-2017 rise of the PKK and its allied groups, along with the deployment of the PMF in the district, has reshaped the security and political landscape of the region. Several PMF-affiliated factions were deployed in Sinjar, including Yazidi groups such as the Lalish Regiment and Kojo Forces, along with Shia factions such as Kataib al-Imam Ali, al-Abbas Brigade, and Ansar al-Marjiyya. Two PKK-allied groups, the YBS and the Yazidkhan Women Units, also were involved in Sinjar. In addition, the Asayish Yazidkhan, led by former Iraqi MP Haider Shashu, was deployed in the city and allied with the KDP.[71]

Sinjar became a main theater for tensions between the KDP and the PKK, especially when the latter began to build its presence in the border zone after the KDP's failed attempt to annex Sinjar to the KRG in 2017.[72] In March 2017, the KDP-allied Rojava Peshmerga entered the town of Khansour in northern Sinjar and tried to redeploy its forces near the border, a move that the YBS and the PKK interpreted as an attempt to dillute their presence in this area. A fight broke out between these groups and the Rojava Peshmerga, resulting in several casualties.[73] Meanwhile, in Syria, a PYD-affiliated group attacked the Kurdish National Council offices in Darbasiyah and Qamishli in protest over the clashes.[74] This reaction signaled the extent to which political and security dynamics in Sinjar had become linked to what happens in Syria, and vice versa. Many PKK militants think of Sinjar as part of Rojava.[75] According to a Yazidi activist, a PKK local leader told him that he heard Öcalan saying: "My dream is that we hold an inch of land in Sinjar."[76] Kurdish residents of Sinjar speak the Karmanji dialect, the same dialect as the Syrian Kurds, which is distinguished from the local dialect of adjacent areas in the KRI such as Duhok.

When the KDP decided to organize the independence referendum, the district administration led by mayor Mahma Khalil, a KDP member, announced that Sinjar would join the KRG. Reacting to this step, Baghdad and the PMF reimposed their territorial control over Sinjar. The KDP-led administration was dismissed from Sinjar and a new autonomous administration was installed with the support of the YBS, the PKK's local ally.[77] Then, the PMF operational commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis endorsed the selection of Fahad Hamid, a Sinjar native, to be the acting mayor, a move backed by both the YBS and the PKK.[78] A PMF faction controled the KDP headquarters in Sinjar, known as Branch 17.[79] This turn of events was a blow to the KDP, which had held the upper hand in the district from 2003 to 2014.

However, even though the KDP lost territorial control over Sinjar, it continued to have influence by virtue of hosting about 300,000 Yazidis who had been displaced by Islamic State attacks.[80] Even after the Islamic State's defeat, most refugees preferred to stay in their refugee camps inside the KRI rather

than returning to Sinjar, considering that the district's economy had been devastated and its political situation remained unstable with the existence of multiple paramilitaries with competing allegiances.[81] According to some sources, the KDP also may have discouraged the refugees from returning because it wanted to maintain its sway over the Yazidi population in the case of a new election.[82]

In contrast, the PKK found recent evens, beginning with the rise of the Islamic State, to be an opportunity to build its presence in the border area. Before this, the group's presence in Iraq had been largely reduced to the Qandil Mountains near the Iraqi-Turkish border, as well as in Makhmour District, another disputed area between the KRG and Baghdad, and home to a long-standing refugee camp for Kurds who fled the PKK-Ankara conflict.[83] An estimated 5,000 PKK militants were based in Iraq.[84] However, following the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, PKK militants made several attempts to use Sinjar as a main passage to Syria and Mount Sinjar as a new sanctuary.[85] After the KDP's withdrawal, the PKK and its allied paramilitaries worked to entrench themselves in the local fabric and gain ground in the well-fortified area around Sinjar.[86] The PKK erected secure locations and built tunnels both as protection from Turkish attacks and to facilitate the movement and relocation of its militants across the Iraqi-Syrian border. According to Iraqi security officials, the group boosted its fortifications by smuggling light and medium weapons from Syria.[87] Its allied militia, the YBS, controled or was deployed to several security and governmental buildings in the district.[88]

The nature of the YBS's connection to the PKK is controversial. Clearly, many observers and locals talk about both groups interchangeably, seeing them as one and the same. Yet, as is the case with the YPG and the PYD in Syria, the YBS denies any organizational connection with the PKK. About 900 to 1,000 members of the group are employed by the PMF as part of the Al-Nasr al-Mubeen Brigade, led by Said Hassan Said.[89] The group also has an "international wing," composed of foreign volunteers who have fought in Sinjar and also have been involved in the battles against the Islamic State and the Turkish army in Syria.[90] Some local residents reject the notion that the PKK has an organic presence in Sinjar and reduce its connection to the YBS as a symbolic relationship that was elevated by the role the PKK played in helping the local population flee the attacks of the Islamic State. Others object to this assessment, citing the two groups' strong organizational and military links, which include smaller militias such as the Yazidkhan Women Units. The YBS seems to have two branches: those who are registered in the PMF and those who are more strongly connected to the PKK. Salaries received by the group's PMF members are shared with other non-PMF members, with other smaller sums allocated to social services—a reflection of PKK's communalist culture.[91]

According to Iraqi security officials, the PKK concentrated its presence in Mount Sinjar and the subdistrict of Sinuni in northern Sinjar, as these areas are more crucial for the mobility of its members across the Iraqi-Syrian border.[92] An Iraqi MP from the area said that since 2017, the PKK and

the YBS have regularly used four routes from Sinjar to northeastern Syria.[93] The PKK-YBS connection not only has become a main pillar of support (along with the PMF) for Sinjar's Autonomous Administration, but also produced a political wing represented by the Yazid Freedom Party, which seeks to participate in the Iraqi parliamentary election in 2021.[94] To date, one member of the Iraqi parliament from Sulaimaniya Governorate is widely considered to be politically allied with the PKK.[95]

The PKK could not extend and sustain its presence in this borderland without adapting itself to the local environment, to the extent that its character has become more amorphous and its boundaries with other entities have blurred. For some Yazidi youth, the PKK's egalitarian, secular, and feminist ideology appears to be an attractive alternative to the deeply conservative and hierarchical religious culture of traditional Yazdi authorities.[96] At the same time, these accommodations have helped transnational Kurdish militancy (represented by the PKK and the KCK) to embed itself in the region's military, economic, and governance apparatuses, and to benefit from its pragmatic partnership with the PMF. The PKK has thus gained a wider territorial space for maneuver than it has had in the past, and in doing so has strengthened its position within regional power relations, adding a geopolitical layer to the complexity of the competitions in this area.

The PKK's unprecedented presence resulted in Turkey's intensified attacks on Sinjar and adjacent areas. In January 2020, a Turkish airstrike killed YBS commander Zardesht Shingali and three other members of the group.[97] In February 2021, it was reported that Turkish intelligence captured a high-profile PKK figure, Ibrahim Barim, in Sinjar.[98] The Turkish government pressed Baghdad and the KRG to work more forcefully to root out the PKK from Sinjar, and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan even went so far as to threaten a military invasion of the district.[99] In October 2020, the Iraqi federal government and the KRG signed an agreement to deescalate and normalize the situation in Sinjar. The agreement stated that the federal police, the National Intelligence Service, and National Security Organ will be exclusively responsible for security in Sinjar, and that all other military groups must leave the district. The agreement also stipulated that 2,500 individuals from Sinjar, including displaced people who reside in the KRI, should be hired by the security forces to help secure the area.

Through the agreement, the signing parties sought to end the PKK's presence in Sinjar and its environs, stating that "this organization and its offshoots shall not play any role in the area."[100] On administrative matters, they agreed to select a new independent mayor according to the legal and constitutional mechanisms.[101] The agreement was facilitated by the United Nations Mission in Iraq and received the support of the U.S. and Turkish governments as well as several European countries. It aimed to create a shared governance mechanism whereby both Baghdad and Erbil could achieve some of their goals, primarily expelling the PKK from the district.

However, both the PKK and the YBS condemned the agreement. The KCK issued a statement criticizing the exclusion of the Sinjar's Autonomous Administration from the deal, and noting that PKK fighters had already withdrawn from Sinjar and handed over security to locals.[102] Additionally, YBS commander Dalil Shangali, stated that his group would "absolutely not withdraw from Sinjar," as they have "made sacrifices" to protect it and the Islamic State still poses a threat to the district. The YBS accused Turkey and the KRG of spreading misleading information about the links between the YBS and the PKK with the purpose of "occupying Sinjar like Afrin, Sari Kani and Gre Spi"—referring to three predominantly Kurdish areas in northern Syria that Ankara and its local allies controled following separate offensives against the SDF in 2018 and 2019.[103]

Another party that was not pleased with the agreement was the PMF, particularly the Iranian-allied groups such as Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq. A few days after the agreement was finalized, Abdul Aziz al-Muhamadawi (also known as Abu Fadak), a Kataib Hezbollah leader and the current PMF chief of staff, met a delegation from Sinjar. The delegation requested that the PMF-appointed Autonomous Administration be maintained, and sought assurances that the PMF would not abandon Sinjar to the KDP.[104] Asaib Ahl al-Haq leader Qais al-Khazali also criticized the agreement as one motivated by political and electoral interests aimed at removing the PMF from the district.[105] Indeed, in February 2021, the PMF deployed nearly 10,000 additional troops to Sinjar following reports that Turkey was planning to attack the area.[106] These objections are driven mainly by the concern that the agreement will reduce the PMF influence in Sinjar and near the Iraqi-Syrian border, thereby strengthening the position of groups allied with the United States and Turkey. To mitigate these objections, the federal government authorized National Security Adviser Qassim Al-Araji, an associate of the Iranian-allied Badr Organization, to supervise the implementation of the agreement, which established a channel to involve the PMF in the process.

To implement the agreement, the sixth division of the federal police was deployed to Sinjar and the Iraqi-Syrian border. Its main responsibility would be to secure this border section and prevent foreign fighters from crossing the border illegally.[107] The ISF began to negotiate with the YBS to convince the latter to leave the center of Sinjar and redeploy its fighters outside the city. The results of this negotiation have been mixed. The YBS did evacuate most of the buildings it controled inside the city, but some reports noted that YBS members in the PMF have been quietly boosting their presence in the district.[108]

Clearly, the implementation of the agreement faces several obstacles, reflecting the resistance of the main forces that have had more leverage in shaping the security and administrative regime in Sinjar since 2017: the PMF, the PKK, and the YBS. Ignoring these forces could lead to a conflict that the ISF may not be ready to undertake, especially given the PMF's powerful role in the capital and the

support it enjoys from several Shia parties. The Iraqi government and the KRG may have to take more practical and symbolic measures to assert the distinction between the YBS and the PKK, such as by allowing the former some role (perhaps backed by or channeled through the PMF) in the ongoing reconfiguration of the political and security scene in Sinjar.

Conclusion: What Next?

Future developments in Sinjar and northeastern Syria will influence each other and shape the dynamics of the Iraqi-Syrian border. A number of scenarios are possible in this constantly changing region. The first likely scenario will occur if the Iraqi federal government manages to exert more control in its border districts and the KDP is able to restore some of its previous influence; this outcome may weaken the PKK and force local groups to further distance themselves from it. Greater securitization of the border on the Iraqi side may weaken the links that the PKK nurtured between its bases in Iraq and in Syria. This scenario may have a greater chance of success if it is accompanied by the success of the U.S.-led efforts to distance the SDF from the PKK as a condition for continued U.S. political, military, and financial support. Doing so may be hamper the revolutionary trend represented by the PKK, reassert the border as a fait accompli, and limit transnational forces' ability to instrumentalize cross-border connections to serve their interests and revolutionary vision.

The second, opposite scenario will occur if the Iraqi federal government and the KDP fail to reestablish control over this border section, or if the competition between them escalates again. The PKK would be able to take advantage of this opportunity to sustain its influence and underplay the reality of the border. Such a scenario would be more likely if the confrontation with Turkey escalates and turns into a zero-sum game, which would bring the SDF and the PKK closer to each other.

A third and more plausible scenario is a middle way between the two previous scenarios. The PKK will continue to have a presence in the area but it may have to contend with its already achieved goals and perhaps further embed its members in other existing factions while simultaneously maintaining a low profile. This approach may be helped by its increasingly malleable character as it attempts to adapt to new societal environments outside of Turkey. In this process, the PKK may become less relevant as the new administrative entity in northeastern Syria consolidates itself further, partly by emphasizing its local characteristic over transnational associations.

Undoubtedly, this process of reconfiguration will be affected by the roles, rivalries, and settlements of key international and regional actors in Iraq and Syria, primarily Turkey, Iran, the United States, and Russia. The United States is trying to maintain its commitment to the SDF, its main ally in the war against the Islamic State in Syria, as well as its alliance with the KRG, which is a partner in the war

against the Islamic State and a host to U.S. military troops operating across the border. Turkey will continue to push for the reduction of Kurdish-controled geography in Syria while seeking to uproot the PKK. Both the United States and Turkey agree on the need to expel the PKK as a necessary condition to legitimize the Autonomous Administration in northeastern Syria, or at least to stop the hostilities between Turkey (and its Syrian allies) and the SDF. If they used their leverage to that end, their efforts could help define the borders of the Kurdish areas in Syria more clearly and thus assert the reality of the border with Iraq. It is unlikely that Russia and Iran will oppose such an arrangement if it takes place within the framework of U.S. and Turkish acceptance of the Syrian regime as a reality on the ground, and perhaps compromises on other zones such as the southern section of the Iraqi-Syrian border, which both Iran and Russia seek to influence.

Such a broad geopolitical rearticulation will take time to materialize—if, indeed, it materializes at all—and will require the formulation of complex win-win equations for all or most of these parties. If this path proves possible, the trajectory of normalization likely would overrule the PKK's transnational, revolutionary vision in the ongoing process of the Iraqi-Syrian border's reconfiguration.

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Acknowledgments

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