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Fighters of the Hashed al-Shaabi paramilitary forces carry the coffins of fellow fighters, who were killed in an ambush on a desolated road south of Mosul, during a funeral in their hometown in the northern Iraqi town of Tuz Khurmatu near the city of Kirkuk, on March 7, 2019 [File: AFP/Marwan Ibrahim]

On April 15, a drone laden with explosives targeted military facilities hosting US troops in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), but

resulted in no casualties. On the same day, rocket fire on a Turkish military base in Mosul's Bashiqa region killed one Turkish soldier.

The attacks, attributed to pro-Iran factions based in Iraq, have been widely seen in the context of the US-Iran and Turkey-Iran rivalries in the region. However, such analysis ignores an important development linked to these incidents: the attempt of Iranian-backed paramilitaries in northern Iraq to consolidate their power in territories disputed between the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

The presence and growing strength of these groups have profound implications not only for the future of Baghdad-Erbil relations, but also for inter- and intra-communal relations in these ethnically-diverse regions. Since their arrival, Iran-backed paramilitaries have transformed the nature of the dispute over these territories from a conflict between two governments, to a very complex situation characterised by deep militarisation of ethno-religious and sectarian identities in Nineveh and Kirkuk governorates.

Militarisation of ethno-religious and sectarian groups

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 gave an opportunity to Iran to massively expand its influence on the internal affairs of its neighbour. Apart from developing a network of supporters within civilian power structures, Iran also trained and armed a number of paramilitaries, including the Badr Organisation, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Hezbollah, and Saraya al-Khorasani.

With the expansion of ISIS into Iraqi territory in 2014 and the fatwa to initiate a popular mobilisation issued by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the highest religious authority among Iraqi Shia, these armed groups became part of the so-called Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation Forces, PMFs). They spearheaded the fight against ISIS and enjoyed quite a bit of popularity.

The PMFs arrived in the disputed areas of the north in October 2017, after they, along with regular Iraqi forces, attacked the Kurdish Peshmerga in the aftermath of the independence referendum conducted by the KRG. Although

architect of the independence referendum conducted by the KRG. Although allegedly acting under orders from Baghdad in the beginning, Iran-backed PMFs have since pursued their own political and military goals.

The pro-Iranian armed groups have sought to establish themselves more permanently in Nineveh and Kirkuk thus extending the military reach Tehran has over Iraqi territory. By recruiting fighters from local communities and creating new factions, the PMFs have militarised and politicised ethno-religious and sectarian identities.

In Nineveh's district of Hamdaniah, Telkaif and Bashiqa, they established the 30th Brigade, dominated by members of the Shabak community, an ethnic and religious minority, which follows the Twelver Shia-ism. They also set up the 53rd Brigade for Shia Turkmens in Telafar, which includes a Yazidi Lalish unit for Yazidis in Sinjar. They also created the 50th Brigade for Assyrians in Hamdaniah district.

In Sinjar in the western Nineveh province, pro-Iranian PMF factions have also supported the Sinjar Resistance Units, formed during the fight against ISIS and initially equipped and trained by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). They formally joined the PMF's al-Nasr al-Mubeen Brigade in 2018.

In the provinces of Kirkuk, there has been a similar proliferation of local armed groups. In Taza district, the Iran-backed paramilitaries set up the 16th Brigade by arming and training local Shia Turkmens. They have also recruited Shia Turkmens for the 52nd Brigade. The pro-Iran PMFs have also tried to create a faction for the Kaka'i community, a religious Kurdish-speaking minority based in Daquq and Kirkuk, but have not been fully successful yet.

Other political and military forces, including the KRG, armed groups associated with Sistani and Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and some local Sunni politicians, have also tried to establish and support their own factions in the disputed territories.

Apart from gaining influence over local communities through military presence and recruitment, pro-Iranian PMFs have deployed shadow administrations, building security, social, political and economic structures that rival and undermine formal ones. They have engaged in not only the control of the movement of people and goods but also in “taxing” local businesses. They have also gotten involved in religious affairs, controlling Sunni religious sites and endowments and supporting newly created Shia endowments.

These activities by the pro-Iranian groups have exacerbated intra- and inter-communal tensions. For example, in Kirkuk city, Sunni Turkmens outnumber Shia Turkmens, but backing from the PMFs has emboldened Shia Turkmens, who have become more politically assertive. This may lead to new intra-Turkman fractures as the Shia consolidate power in the centre of Kirkuk. A similar dynamic is playing out in the district of Telafar among Turkmens.

Among the Yazidis, intra-communal divisions are also growing deeper. Areas that fall under the influence of pro-Iranian PMFs and the PKK have challenged the traditional power structures of the community. This was reflected in the tensions over the election of a new Yazidi leader after the passing of Tahsin Said Beg in 2019.

In July that year, following months of debate that reflected deep internal divisions within the community, Yazidis in Sheikhan, backed by the Kurdistan Democratic Party, appointed his son, Hazim Tahsin Beg, as the new prince. In response, PKK and PMF-affiliated Yazidis in Sinjar threatened something akin to secession, vowing to appoint a leader of their own choosing.

Undermining government power

The dispute between Baghdad and KRG over territories goes back to the constitution-drafting process initiated after the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime as a result of the 2003 US invasion. The constitution outlined the borders of the semi-autonomous KRI but left the status of the province of

contacts of the semi-autonomous KRG, but left the status of the province of Kirkuk and many districts of Nineveh, Salahaddin and Diyala, where Kurdish communities live, unresolved. Referendums to decide on the fate of these disputed territories were never carried out.

Throughout the years, this dispute has been complicated by a number of factors, including disagreements over budget and persistent insecurity. The presence of Iran-backed PMFs, however, has put more strain on Baghdad-Erbil relations and directly undermined efforts to make progress on this key issue.

When Adel Abdul Mahdi headed the Iraqi government in 2018, there was a renewed push to resolve disputes with the KRG. The central government negotiated with Erbil the creation of joint coordination centres in many areas in Kirkuk and Nineveh provinces. But Iran-backed PMFs actively sought to undermine these efforts.

In October 2019, the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior and the KRG Ministry of Peshmerga reached a final agreement to create five joint coordination centres in Kirkuk, Mosul, Makhmour, Khanaqin and Kask. Days later, the Ministry of the Interior, under the influence of PMFs, reneged on the agreement. Under the current government of Mustafa al-Kadhimi, only two such centres in Baghdad and Erbil have been created.

Iran-backed paramilitary groups also tried to sabotage the Sinjar Agreement, signed in October 2020 between Erbil and Baghdad with the support of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq. The deal was meant to jumpstart the stabilisation process for Sinjar by addressing two key issues: the existence of multiple armed actors and two rival administrations for the district. But seven months on, no progress has been made on the ground to implement the agreement.

Some have attributed the failure of the agreement to the lack of engagement and inclusion of all sectors of Sinjar and Yazidi society. The truth, however, is that the major barrier is the Iranian-backed militias' rejection of the essence

of the agreement – the establishment of government monopoly over the use of force – and refusal to withdraw.

It is not in the interest of pro-Iran groups for the KRG and the central Iraqi government to re-establish control over Sinjar because they stand to lose not only politically, but also economically. PMFs present in Sinjar directly profit from cross-border smuggling by imposing a taxation system on imports from Syria including animals, agricultural products, etc.

The recent attacks against US and Turkish forces are likely a result of the Iran-backed groups' intransigence in the face of growing pressure for them to withdraw from the north and west of the country. There is also growing anxiety among them that their popularity is shrinking – something that became apparent during the popular anti-government protests in 2019-2020 in Baghdad and Shia-majority cities of the south.

The Iran-backed PMFs are, therefore, desperately looking for “new enemies” in the face of US-allied KRG and Turkey in order to continue justifying their presence in the disputed regions and sustain the current security and power structure.

By undermining efforts to conclude and implement agreements between Erbil and Baghdad on the disputed areas, the Iran-backed armed groups are precluding the re-establishment of strong civilian power centres that could pave the way for stabilisation and reconstruction of these areas. This corresponds with Iran's overall strategy for Iraq – to keep it in a constant state of uncertainty, with weak state institutions and control.

As long as the Iraqi government is unable to rein in these powerful non-state actors, it will not be able to steer the country towards stability and socio-economic development. Their continuous presence in disputed areas is causing tensions that in the near future could result in renewed conflict.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.



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