

MINORITY POLITICS BY OTHER MEANS:  
ASSYRIAN MILITIAS IN IRAQ 2014–2017

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## ABSTRACT

When the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria displaced Christian Assyrians from the Nineveh Plain in 2014, several militias were founded in response. These small groups aimed from the beginning to establish a presence on the ground after the defeat of their enemy, with the long-term goal to remain as security providers in their historical heartland. Lacking material resources or political power of their own, most militias tied themselves to a single ally affiliated with the Government of Iraq or the Kurdistan Regional Government — but others obtained support from several actors, or none. Considering the marginality of the political parties and political entrepreneurs behind the militias, those displaying loyalty to a single powerful ally could be expected to prevail against rival groups. Instead, a militia with weak ties to several actors established the strongest presence on the ground, and became the main security provider in the largest Assyrian town. To explain this puzzling outcome, the study provides a detailed account of how the militias formed, built their capacity, and deployed to the Nineveh Plain. The empirical data originates mainly from observations and interviews conducted in Iraq, as well as news and social media. With an inductive and iterative approach, the external relations of the militias emerged as the central explanation to address the research puzzle, but other factors are discussed as well. The study concludes that the most successful militia prevailed over its rivals by engaging multiple external actors with pragmatism and diplomatic skill, while tenaciously building a capable organisation. The findings demonstrate the potential of very small militias to exercise agency and assert themselves in an ongoing civil war.

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# ABBREVIATIONS

## **Assyrian Militias and Affiliated Political Parties**

BB	Babylon Battalions
BM	Babylon Movement
DN	Self-Sacrificers ( <i>Dwekh Nawsha</i> )
APP	Assyrian Patriotic Party
NPF	Nineveh Plain Forces
BNDP	Beth-Nahrain Democratic Party
HBA	Beth-Nahrain Patriotic Union ( <i>Huyodo Beth-Nahrain Athronoyo</i> )
NPGF	Nineveh Plain Guards Force
CSAPC	Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council
NPU	Nineveh Plain Protection Units
ADM	Assyrian Democratic Movement
SHF	Syriac Hawks Forces
SDU	Syriac Democratic Union
SLB	Syriac Lions Battalions

## **Other**

AMO	American Mesopotamian Organization
GoI	Government of Iraq
ICP	Iraqi Communist Party
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IRGC	Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
ISOF	Iraqi Special Operations Forces
IQD	Iraqi Dinar
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PMF	Popular Mobilisation Forces
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
SOLI	Sons of Liberty International
TMF	Tribal Mobilisation Forces
USD	United States Dollar

## NAMES

Population centres with more than one name in common usage is referred to by their Assyrian name (alternative names in brackets): Baghdeda (Qaraqosh, al-Hamdaniya), Tesqopa (Tel Isqof), Tel Keipeh (Tel Keif), and Ain Sifni (Sheikhan). The Kurdish name is used for Shingal (Sinjar). This practice also applies to districts and sub-districts.

Beth-Nahrain translates as the ‘land of the rivers’, and is understood as the wider historical homeland of the Assyrians around the Euphrates and Tigris.

Assyrians can also be referred to as Chaldeans, Syriacs, or Arameans; these names are sometimes used to denote the whole community, or members of specific churches. There is no simple way to avoid confusion, but for simplicity I consistently refer to all community members as Assyrians, since this is the most established term. Single quotation marks are used in discussions of competing identity discourses, e.g. when ‘Syriac’ nationalists refuse the ‘Assyrian’ identity.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. PUZZLE AND RESEARCH QUESTION

In August 2014, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) attacked the Nineveh Plain, a diverse area bordering the city of Mosul, and the historical heartland of the Christian Assyrian community in Iraq. Abandoned by the security forces of the Government of Iraq (GoI) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and lacking the means to defend themselves, Assyrians were forced to flee their homes in haste to avoid death, forced conversion, or subjugation.

In what might seem like a reflexive response to an existential threat, they now formed their own *militias* — non-state armed groups aligned with the government. However, rather than springing from spontaneous community initiatives, these groups were formed by Assyrian political parties and *political entrepreneurs* — ambitious individuals outside the political establishment. The militias soon turned up in the front line, but considering their very modest size it was clearly unrealistic to think they could have any impact on the course of the war. Instead, wartime mobilisation was a means to attain post-war political goals.

Firstly, their participation signalled a willingness to share the costs of defeating ISIS. Assyrian politicians lamented that other Iraqis — and even Assyrians themselves — viewed their community as meek, and unable or unwilling to defend itself. By joining the fight, they wanted to inspire hope and self-confidence among Assyrians, and raise their status in the eyes of others. It was also feasible that symbolic participation could raise the status of the individuals and organisations behind the militias, and translate into future political influence.

Secondly, the militias hoped to engage in *security provision* after ISIS was driven out from the Nineveh Plain. This would entail preventing or responding to attacks by ISIS or other rebel groups operating underground, and assisting the Iraqi Police in upholding law and order, while the military forces of the GoI or the KRG would remain responsible for any external threats (e.g. a foreign invasion). Security provision would of course be essential to enable displaced Assyrians to return, but this was not the only goal. The institutionalisation of a militia as part of the official security forces would remove the need for protection by outsiders, and enable *self-rule* in a new federal province or autonomous region — a key goal for Assyrian political parties. Further, in an area long characterised by its skeletal Iraqi Police presence, weak rule of law, and politicised security forces, the institutionalisation of a militia could be expected to bring affiliated individuals or organisations wider influence in the local community.

Besides having symbolic value, front line deployment could be a means for a militia to establish itself as a security provider. Firstly, participation in combat operations could demonstrate its general competence and commitment. Secondly, considering the fierce competition over territory between various militias and official security forces, the easiest way to establish a foothold in an area would be to simply remain there after participating in the operation to re-capture it. Once the militia was present on the ground, other armed actors could be expected to avoid open confrontations that risked political controversy or wider conflict.

Since the political parties and political entrepreneurs behind the militias had few material resources available, and occupied an extremely marginal position in Iraqi politics, they needed to secure external political and logistical support. The most

obvious solution was to turn to rival *powerful domestic actors* affiliated with the GoI or the KRG, e.g. government branches, or larger political parties and militias.

While co-operating against ISIS, these actors shared strained relations, and one of the main causes of friction concerned the Nineveh Plain and other *disputed territories*, which both governments claimed as theirs. Negotiations over the future political status of the disputed territories had stalled long before 2014, but the war provided an opportunity to unilaterally and without legal authority create new *facts on the ground*, by deploying own security forces to fill the vacuum left by disintegrating rival forces or defeated enemies.

Although a small and powerless minority in the country as a whole, Assyrians probably comprised the largest ethno-religious community in the Nineveh Plain, and dominated most of its population centres. Powerful domestic actors that wished to make inroads into this area could therefore expect to benefit from delegating security provision to an Assyrian militia, which could render legitimacy to their political aspirations, establish a base in the local community, and provide local knowledge.

Considering the participation of much more powerful militias and official security forces in the war, no Assyrian militia could be expected to establish complete *territorial control* as the sole armed actor in an area, or with ultimate authority over other forces operating there. However, a militia could seek to maximise its *territorial presence* as one of several armed actors where territorial control was shared, contested, or delegated. With a foothold on the ground, the militia could then increase its territorial presence by recruiting more members, or expanding into new territory. In the longer term, a strong territorial presence could increase the chances of a militia

becoming institutionalised, since this would require little more than acceptance of existing facts on the ground.

Generally speaking, the Assyrian militias sought to maintain organisational autonomy, and enable local self-rule, whereas the powerful domestic actors wanted dependent allies that could help them control the Nineveh Plain and its inhabitants. This political tension meant the powerful domestic actors needed to weigh the current utility of a militia against the risk of empowering future dissidents. On their side, the militias needed to weigh the need for political and logistical support against the risk of being co-opted to an agenda contrary to their own (unless their own agenda was flexible).

Powerful domestic actors could therefore be expected to form alliances with loyal and acquiescent groups, which either shared their long-term goals in the Nineveh Plain, or were driven by opportunistic self-interest (the latter possibly masquerading as the former). Such groups could be expected to receive substantial political and logistical support, and establish a stronger territorial presence than more autonomous rivals.

This prediction turned out wrong, as the loyal and acquiescent militias established only a weak or moderate territorial presence, whereas a militia that refused to tie itself strongly to any powerful domestic actor managed to become the main security provider in the largest town in the Nineveh Plain.

To find a plausible explanation for the unexpected variation in outcomes, an exclusive focus on the re-capture of the Nineveh Plain and its immediate aftermath would be inadequate, since the constraints and opportunities facing each individual militia during this period largely depended on prior developments. This study

therefore provides a broader account of how the militias formed and gained access to the front line; secured manpower, training, materiel, and funds; and finally deployed to the Nineveh Plain during and after its re-capture. Ultimately, the aim is to answer the following research question: How did the militias establish their territorial presence?

This study makes a unique empirical contribution to the social scientific body of knowledge relating to non-state-armed groups, as it is the first comparative and in-depth investigation of militias based in an ethno-religious minority community. Since the inclusion of an Assyrian militia in the security arrangements of the Nineveh Plain brought opportunities to shape the future of local communities, the topic undoubtedly holds real-world relevance. The study also adds to the theoretical literature on state-militia relations, by accounting for the mechanisms through which the militias were able to exercise agency beyond what could be expected. Whereas the study is mainly designed to produce generalisable knowledge, it also contributes area-specific knowledge about the Assyrians in Iraq, whose contemporary situation remains understudied.

In the following two sub-chapters, I will first situate the research within the relevant literature on militias, then proceed to lay out the theoretical foundation for the research puzzle.

## **1.2. MILITIAS: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1.2.1. Variation and Transformation**

By placing the spotlight on a hitherto unstudied type of actor, which I refer to as *political minority militias*, this study seeks to cover a blank spot on the map of contemporary conflict. However, before providing a precise definition, it is necessary to situate the study within the context of existing research on similar actors.

Militias are non-state armed groups siding with the government against *rebels*, which are non-state armed groups actively opposing the government. Militias may or may not be formally recognised by the government or have operational ties to it (Jentzsch et al. 2015: 756). At least for this research project, there is no need to introduce a third category of neutral non-state armed groups, which seek to avoid involvement in political conflict (Hazen 2010); although the Assyrian militias varied considerably in their level of attachment to the state, none of them took a neutral position towards ISIS.

Militias tend to emerge in conditions of low state capacity, particularly in autocracies (Ahram 2015). They are diverse in character, and can take on many different roles, depending on their goals and the context within which they operate. However, despite increased social scientific attention, this variation remains insufficiently explored (Jentzsch et al. 2015).

Staniland (2015b) suggests that different types of armed actors (e.g. militias) or contexts (e.g. civil war) should not be considered in isolation. Future research should instead broaden the perspective, and take into account the transformations that may occur over time: “Rather than static and intrinsic, the political roles of armed groups are potentially fluid and changeable” (Staniland 2015b: 772). Staniland’s

approach is suitable for this study, since the Assyrian militias transitioned from front line duty to security provision during the war, hoped to become institutionalised in the future, and served multiple political purposes for affiliated individuals or organisations — as well as for their powerful allies.

### **1.2.2. Government and Community Initiatives**

Social scientists often present a dichotomy between militias initiated by the government or the community, and this distinction has even been claimed to be “crucial if we are to understand where, when, and why militias form, mobilize, and fight” (Jentzsch et al. 2015: 758).

Barter (2013) presents two ideal typical cases of militia formation, each characterised by particular relations between the militia, the government, the local community — and the rebels. One type of militia emerges within local communities to address actual security needs; these militias are “driven not by profit, but self-defense against predatory rebel groups in pockets of state failure” (Barter 2013: 75). The other type is formed to serve government interests, and these groups are often themselves predatory, i.e. they engage in human rights abuses against the local population rather than protecting it. With self-interested opportunists in the leadership, and among the rank-and-file, they “serve as low-cost, unaccountable proxies for states wishing to maintain plausible deniability while attacking civilians” (Barter 2013: 75). Carey et al. (2015) argue that plausible deniability is needed if undeniable culpability comes at a political and economic cost. More specifically, “governments that receive most aid from democratic donors and are also furthest away from democracies are most likely to have ties with militias” (Carey et al. 2015:

869). It is therefore unsurprising that a multitude of more or less government-sponsored militias emerged in Iraq — a US-supported authoritarian regime surrounded by other authoritarian or hybrid regimes (Economist Intelligence Unit 2020; ForeignAssistance.gov 2020).

According to Peic (2014), some government-initiated militias mainly serve defensive purposes to shield local civilians and infrastructure from rebel attacks — like their community-initiated counterparts, and unlike more aggressive militias of a ‘death squad’ character. However, organisational origins still matter, since government-initiated militias can drive a wedge between rebels and civilians, and provoke attacks by the former against the latter:

Because civilian collaboration with the state is rightfully seen as a grave threat to rebel aims, insurgent organizations often attempt to discourage further collaboration by orchestrating reprisals against communities which join a [militia] program. The incumbent can then use such ostensibly indiscriminate attacks against non-combatant populations as a propaganda tool with which to tarnish the insurgents’ public image, undermine its claim to legitimacy, and thereby distance the civilian population politically from the rebel organization. (Peic 2014: 167)

Defensive militias initiated from above or below can also differ in their ability to embed locally. In Mozambique, government-initiated militias failed to gain wider popularity, or build morale internally, whereas a community-initiated militia “was more successful because [it] appealed to common cultural practices and provided the opportunity for self-empowerment” (Jentsch 2014: 258). Thus, even for militias set up to perform the same tasks, and in the same environment, it can be hugely consequential *who* forms them.

However, the two dichotomies discussed above — between militias formed by the community or the government, and to protect or abuse civilians — fail to capture the emergence or character of the Assyrian militias in Iraq.

Firstly, none of the Assyrian militias was tasked with carrying out violence against civilians. As part of a wider local power structure allied with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the Nineveh Plain Guards Force (NPGF) helped keep political dissidents in check, but major human rights violations were only conducted by official security forces (see 2.3.2. Carrots and Sticks). Thus, violence was not delegated to NPGF to provide plausible deniability for KDP. Another militia, the Babylon Battalions (BB), engaged in threatening rhetoric against Sunni Arabs, but there is no evidence that this was ordered from above, and it would provide no particular advantage to delegate violence or intimidation against non-Assyrians to an Assyrian militia. Generally speaking, local knowledge ought to make a minority militia ideal for targeting presumed rebel sympathisers within the *own* community, but in this particular conflict the demand for such services was non-existent, since ISIS quite predictably failed to attract any support among Christians.

Secondly, out of seven militias, none was set up by the government, and only NPGF was formed on the initiative of the community in direct response to rebel attacks. NPGF began operating already in the wake of the 2003 US invasion, in response to an insurgency characterised by irregular warfare and terrorist attacks, but the other militias formed only *after* ISIS had captured the Nineveh Plain, when the civilian population had already reached safety. Since the war was characterised by conventional warfare along a relatively stable front line, and both displaced and non-displaced civilians were protected by capable official security forces, there were no immediate security needs for the militias to respond to. Before the re-capture of the Nineveh Plain, the militias engaged in security provision only to a very limited extent, and displayed no ambition to expand such activities. From the beginning, the

militias instead envisioned a *future* role as security providers in the Nineveh Plain. In this intensely contested area, with rival political and armed actors vying for territorial control, the issue was not so much *whether* security would be provided as *who* would be providing it. Thus, the impetus to form militias was mainly *political*.

### **1.2.3. Political Militias**

Not all militias are formed on the initiative of the government or local communities, but some are instead organised by political parties. Unlike other militias — but similarly to many rebel groups — political party militias often have separate yet closely linked political and armed wings, an explicit ideological programme, and a domestic political agenda. Apparently, they emerge primarily in conflicts characterised by *conventional warfare*, or what has been termed *symmetric non-conventional warfare*, rather than *irregular warfare* (Kalyvas 2005). Political party militias have received surprisingly sparse attention from social scientists, but their role in historical and ongoing conflicts has been detailed by journalists and historians.

Before the summer of 2014, non-state armed groups were for the most part prevented from operating in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and the disputed territories, where separate zones stood under control of KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). However, when a major ISIS offensive caused Kurdish defences to crumble, no one prevented individual volunteers, militias, and even co-ethnic foreign rebel groups from scrambling to the front line. Undoubtedly, one motive for these actors was simply to halt the enemy advance, but the desperate and chaotic military situation also provided them with an opportunity to score propaganda victories, or even establish a long-term territorial presence. From the viewpoint of

KDP and PUK, one of the less problematic actors was the Kurdistan Socialist Democratic Party, whose militia deployed to the mainly PUK-controlled Kirkuk Province (Rûdaw 2016). With only one seat in the Kurdistan parliament, this ideologically moderate political party posed no threat to the status quo, and its militia was allowed to remain.

For KDP and PUK, the need for auxiliary forces practically ceased when the front line stabilised, but in neighbouring Syria the incumbent side faced a more structural and long-term problem in the form of a severe manpower shortage. Soon after the civil war broke out in 2011, the government therefore turned to militias:

It unleashed an extremely diverse pallet of non- and quasi-state groups fighting on the regime's behalf, each embedded in their own intricate linkages to various state agents and together reaffirming the heterarchical [*sic*] orders the regime had come to rely on in the past. (Leenders & Giustozzi 2019: 163)

Within this authoritarian but fragmented political system, it should come as no surprise that various governmental actors organised their own auxiliary units, but there were also independent initiatives, including a militia affiliated with the formerly banned Syrian Social Nationalist Party. Despite that its goal to establish a Greater Syria contrasted starkly with the Arab nationalism of the ruling political party, the militia was armed by the government, and tasked with security provision as well as front line combat. Over the following years, the militia grew in size, and established a territorial presence in several population centres, while the political party strengthened its position in the domestic arena. As one of few officially approved alternatives to the ruling political party, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party came second in the 2016 parliamentary election — seemingly because of support from local communities protected by its militia (Samaha 2016).

A more complex situation arose when the Kurdistan Workers' Party — a radical left-wing rebel group fighting the Turkish government — descended from the mountains to join the fight against ISIS in Iraq. The group primarily deployed to areas abandoned by its long-standing rival KDP — an ideologically conservative ally of the Turkish government (Solomon & Dombey 2014). Unsurprisingly, the Kurdistan Workers' Party soon overstayed its welcome, but it was easier said than done for KDP to evict the group, which simply refused to leave. KDP had numerically and technologically vastly superior military forces at its disposal, but resorting to violence would have carried a heavy political cost, because of the strong aversion in Kurdish society to intra-ethnic fighting. In Shingal, KDP encountered further problems, when a Kurdistan Workers' Party-affiliated militia started recruiting local members, tied itself to an Iraqi political party, and began receiving support from the GoI. On one occasion, a KDP incursion resulted in a skirmish that left several militia members dead, which provoked considerable controversy, despite that the conflict was contained locally and quickly de-escalated. For KDP, launching a direct attack would clearly have been extremely ill-advised, but non-violent measures including a blockade on goods proved insufficient, and the militia remained in the area (MacDonald 2017; Morris 2017). This example demonstrates how a political party militia can be formed even by a foreign rebel group, and that the expected political costs can prevent a powerful domestic actor from taking effective measures against undesired allies.

The presence of a problematic but militarily weak ally in a remote location ultimately constituted little more than a nuisance for KDP, which exercised complete territorial control over vast areas, but letting the militia genie out of the bottle can

become far more consequential. Although by definition militias do not use violence to overthrow the government, they sometimes grow powerful enough to undermine its sovereignty. Aliyev (2016) writes about such *state-parallel* militias that

their superiority — either military or structural — over conventional armed forces, their financial and structural independence from the host regime, and their indispensability for the survival of the state elevate these groups to a position parallel to that of the state and place them beyond the state's control. (Aliyev 2016: 499)

An example is the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), a militia umbrella that became indispensable to the GoI early in the war against ISIS, when official security forces were in disarray. However, its constituent militias were for the most part ideologically aligned with Iran, which provided them with material resources. Militarily strong, geographically dispersed, with a number of affiliated political parties, and largely loyal to a meddling neighbouring state, PMF challenged the territorial control of the GoI, constrained its political decision-making, and remained difficult to rein in (Dury-Agri et al. 2017).

Similarly, early in the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) a multitude of militias affiliated with political parties and trade unions rushed to defend the republic. Although united against the right-wing rebels, these ideologically disparate groups competed intensely among themselves, and took advantage of the government's weakness to take control of territory or state institutions. To entrench their influence within the official administration, the pro-Soviet communists integrated their militias into the regular army, but the anarchists refused to follow suit, since they knew this would bring an end to their revolutionary experiment in Catalonia, where they had practically taken over all functions of the state. Although the government and the pro-Soviet communists wanted to re-assert control over the area, they hesitated to divert military resources from the front line, and feared that aggressive action against the

generally popular anarchists would upset the public opinion. The two sides eventually clashed in Barcelona, but the conflict probably escalated spontaneously, and the sporadic fighting was brought to an end within only a few days. Notably, despite their local military superiority, it was the anarchists that proposed a cease-fire — in part to avoid being seen as culpable for the infighting. In practice this meant yielding, and they were soon outmanoeuvred by their rivals. Thus, like the skirmish between KDP and the Kurdistan Workers' Party-affiliated militia in Shingal, the confrontation in Barcelona was not decided on the battlefield. Instead, within the specific context of a wartime alliance against a common enemy, the very presence of rival forces in the same area created constraints for both sides, since it forced them to weigh the desire to expand or retain their own territorial presence against the risk of endangering their reputation. Further, in and around Barcelona — unlike in Shingal — both sides possessed considerable military resources. Thus, in the case of an all-out war within the civil war, they could expect heavy losses, while the original enemy would take advantage (Beever 1982/2001: 123–140, 262–285; Orwell 1938/2000: 106–137, 197–250).

The above examples all concern militias formed by political parties, foreign rebel groups, or trade unions, but militias can also be formed by political entrepreneurs, who initially lack an affiliated political organisation, or whose organisation is underdeveloped and built around their own person. An example comes from the Serb militias that operated during the war in the former Yugoslavia (1991–99):

[I]t seems as if warfare was just an episode in the political life of militias or the political groupings behind them. Violence was just one means among others in the fight for political chances. Therefore, at least partly, the emergence and lives of these groups have to be explained as attempts of single political entrepreneurs to achieve the accumulation of power through the exertion of violence. (Schlichte 2010: 322)

At least in the case of the former Yugoslavia, the political entrepreneurs that formed militias appear to have been driven by individual opportunism rather than ideological conviction, e.g. the infamous war criminal ‘Arkan’ used his militia both to enrich himself and to launch a political career (Schlichte 2010: 320–321). Militias formed by political entrepreneurs can therefore closely resemble government-initiated predatory militias, which have a less marked political character.

I suggest that all groups mentioned above belong to the category of *political militias*, defined as non-state armed groups that align on the side of the government against rebels, but which have as a primary or strongly pronounced aim to effect political change and/or attain political influence. Militias formed by political parties, trade unions, and foreign rebel groups clearly fall within this definition, but the inclusion of groups formed by political entrepreneurs is less obvious, and should be decided on a case-by-case basis, depending on whether their political goals are prioritised.

Instead of viewing strength or weakness vis-à-vis the government as a dichotomous variable, state-parallel militias should be analysed alongside groups with similar characteristics, whose ability to challenge the state varies along a continuum. Notably, one of the key observations about state-parallel militias appears to apply equally well to other political militias:

While state weakness is the first essential condition for the emergence of state-parallel militias, armed conflict is the other factor that accounts for the rise of paramilitaries. State-parallel militias emerge owing to crisis and the government’s inability to deal with the challenge to state authority posed by rebels. Few, if any, state-parallel groups existed in their original form and capacity before the start of a conflict. (Aliyev 2016: 502)

Thus, the outbreak of war provides the *reason* for communities and governments to form militias, but political actors may instead view the crisis as an *opportunity* to participate in a high-risk, high-reward political game. On its side, considering the long-term risks of empowering militias with political ambitions, the government will normally only seek help from them in the absence of other options — typically in a situation where the country is on the verge of being overrun by rebels.

Some of the Assyrian militias were more typical than others, but all fall under the definition of political militias, since they pursued distinctly political goals for themselves and/or their community. With the exception of NPGF, all these groups emerged in the context of a major crisis, where the government faced a serious threat from rebels engaging in conventional warfare. Dwekh Nawsha (‘Self-Sacrificers’; DN), the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU), and the Nineveh Plain Forces (NPF) were from the beginning affiliated with established political parties, whereas NPGF first emerged as a community initiative, and tied itself to a political party later. The three remaining militias were formed by political entrepreneurs, but only the Syriac Lions Battalions (SLB) lacked an affiliated political organisation, whereas BB and the Syriac Hawks Forces (SHF) were tied to political parties built around their respective commander. Most or all militias sought to eventually become fully institutionalised, but this would not necessarily bring them under *de facto* government command, since rival Iraqi political parties often control different units within the official security forces (see 3.2.1. Kurdish Actors; 3.2.2. Shi’a Actors). More generally, whether through violent or non-violent means, the militias and their founders were likely to find new political opportunities in the post-war period.

#### **1.2.4. Electoral Politics**

Whereas war can bring political actors an opportunity to gain prominence, the ensuing peace can enable them to entrench and expand their influence. In Italy, local experiences during the Second World War shaped the subsequent supply and demand of political actors, as voters came to prefer ex-rebel politicians, who also benefitted from their hard-earned organisational skills and experience (Costalli & Ruggeri 2015). Similarly, victimisation in the 1991–95 war in Croatia correlated with post-war support for the political party that eventually led the country to victory — possibly as result of increased legitimacy (Glaurdić & Vuković 2016: 144). In contrast, a cross-national study concludes that political actors transformed their wartime success into post-war electoral gains because they could credibly guarantee security, rather than because they were viewed as legitimate (Daly 2019).

Transforming a rebel group into a political party can be difficult, unless “all requirements of the key structural changes (demilitarization of organizational structures and development of party organization) as well as the key attitudinal changes (democratization of decisionmaking and adaptation of goals and strategies) are fulfilled” (de Zeeuw 2008: 16). However, as the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90) demonstrates, non-state armed groups affiliated with pre-war political parties can expect to make the transition back relatively easily (el Khazen 2003).

Normative concerns aside, a complete shift to peaceful and democratic politics may contradict organisational self-interest, particularly in less developed democracies, or when the transition to peace is incomplete, since violence and threats can be employed successfully to influence elections. Thus, armed political actors strategically choose to either substitute fighting with participation in electoral politics,

or engage in both simultaneously, to transform gains from one arena to the other (Dunning 2011). Notably, militias that are able to influence elections stand a greater chance to remain over time (Acemoglu et al. 2013). In times of both war and peace, they can serve specific individuals or factions related to the government, and engage in violent competition with rivals both within and outside the regime (Raleigh 2016; Raleigh & Kishi 2018). In other cases, there is no clear division between groups supporting or opposing the government, and the latter takes on a largely passive role (Sundberg et al. 2012). Thus, in peacetime the distinction between militias and rebels can blur, or even become irrelevant.

The turbulent era of the German Weimar Republic (1918–33) illustrates how violent and non-violent methods can be employed simultaneously. During this period, political actors across the ideological spectrum half-heartedly adapted to an environment characterised by both parliamentary politics and street fighting. Some aggressively violent right-wing groups lacked clear political goals beyond a strong aversion to democracy, but eventually came to support political parties. Conversely, some left-wing political parties supported the democratic system, and opposed political violence, but eventually organised their own groups to fight in the streets. However, there was one exception to this pattern, namely *Sturmabteilung* ('Storm Detachment'), which after a failed coup changed strategy to participate in both elections and street fighting with equal enthusiasm. This enabled organisational strength and popular support to develop in a mutually reinforcing process, and the affiliated National Socialist German Workers' Party made enormous electoral gains. When the latter took power in 1933, the once-banned *Sturmabteilung* was legally recognised as an auxiliary police force, and proved highly useful to round up

opponents of the new regime. This example demonstrates how a violent or armed group can be utilised for a variety of purposes, and switch role quickly if necessary (Diehl 1977; Evans 2003: 266–288, 310–349).

Among the Assyrian militias, only NPGF existed before the outbreak of war — and it did not systematically engage in electoral or repressive violence. Considering that the allied KDP largely controlled the area, NPGF could probably have acted with impunity, but its embeddedness in a society with strong norms against intra-communal violence may have acted as a brake. The absence of street fighting between rival Assyrian political parties could perhaps also be attributed to said social norms; as well as to the lack of deep ideological cleavages and zealous supporters; and the ability of official security forces to intervene against unsanctioned violence. Nevertheless, NPGF proved valuable for electoral purposes, since its members were threatened to lose their jobs if they failed to vote for the affiliated political party (see 1.2.2. Government and Community Initiatives; 2.3.2. Carrots and Sticks).

The future of the Nineveh Plain looked highly uncertain during the period of study, but the Assyrian militias and their powerful allies most likely anticipated deepened divisions following the defeat of their common enemy, as the rationale for co-operation would largely disappear. Since the militias were practically extensions of political parties, the latter could expect wartime activities to strengthen relations with powerful allies, boost electoral support, and perhaps enable the building or maintenance of patronage networks. If the situation on the ground would turn out substantially different from before the war, another possibility would be to task the militias with electoral violence, in addition to security provision.

The Assyrian militias were a political instrument, which emerged from pre-war Assyrian politics, and could be expected to influence politics in the post-war period. In the domestic political arena, Assyrians depended on relations with powerful allies, who in turn needed them to govern the Nineveh Plain and its inhabitants. Thus, it was ethno-religious identity that defined the political and security role of the Assyrian militias. For them, in the slightly modified words of von Clausewitz (1832/2008: 28), war was merely the continuation of minority politics by other means (in this context, ‘politics’ is a more apt term than ‘policy’; these are alternative translations of the German word *Politik*).

#### **1.2.5. Political Minority Militias**

All but one of the Assyrian militias emerged during a civil war characterised by conventional warfare, which provided them with political opportunities. In this, they were similar to many other political militias. Through propaganda, their affiliated political parties and political entrepreneurs sought to gain status, which could bring political influence through elections or alliances, and change common perceptions of Assyrians. By maximising their territorial presence, they hoped to increase their chances of becoming institutionalised as part of the official security forces, which in turn could enable self-rule in the Nineveh Plain, and bring influence in the local community. Whether they primarily had their own interests at heart, or those of their community, these goals were clearly future-oriented and political in character. At the same time, the ethno-religious minority dimension separated these organisations from other political militias.

My definition of political militias diverges from the characterisation offered by Carey and Mitchell (2017: 138–139), since it is based on the goals of the organisation, rather than the composition of its membership. Although all militias could be considered as political actors, I define as political militias only organisations with a primary or strongly pronounced aim to effect political change and/or attain political influence. This definition excludes in particular many community-initiated militias.

Since most members of the Assyrian militias were politically unaffiliated, Carey and Mitchell (2017: 138) would categorise these organisations as *ethno-religious militias*, while ignoring their profoundly political character. I suggest to instead define *political ethno-religious militias* as a distinct type of actor within the broader category of political militias (organisations that are similarly based in a specific ethno-religious community, but lack a primary or strongly pronounced aim to effect political change and/or attain political influence, can still be categorised simply as ethno-religious militias).

It also matters if the ethno-religious community in question constitutes one of the main demographic segments in society, or a small minority. In Iraq, the vast majority of the population are either Shi'a Arabs, Sunni Arabs, or Sunni Kurds; whereas the small minorities include Christian Assyrians, Ezidis, Kakais, Shi'a Shabaks, and Sunni Shabaks. According to a comparative study of minority politics,

The most basic distinction is between *national peoples* and *minority peoples*. National peoples are regionally concentrated groups that have lost their autonomy to expansionist states but still preserve some of their cultural and linguistic distinctiveness and want to protect or reestablish some degree of politically separate existence. Minority peoples have a defined socioeconomic or political status within a larger society — based on some combination of their ethnicity, immigrant origin, economic roles, and religion — and are concerned about protecting or improving that status. To make the distinction most sharply, national peoples seek separation or autonomy from the states that rule them; minority peoples seek greater access or control. (Gurr 1993: 15)

However, Assyrians in Iraq do not fit neatly into this dichotomy, since they were in large part concentrated to the Nineveh Plain, yet many were scattered elsewhere. For this reason, Assyrian politicians aspired to local self-rule as well as status elevation on the domestic level. The more general and simple distinction between large and small ethno-religious communities is preferable, since it captures the more fundamental issue of relative power.

Like other political or armed actors based in small minority communities, the Assyrian militias had very limited access to political power and material resources — and almost completely lacked the ability to assert themselves on their own through the use or threat of force. Consequently, they had to rely on various kinds of support from powerful domestic actors based in the dominant communities. Since the latter sought to control the Nineveh Plain, they had a certain demand for Assyrian militias. At the same time, the limited supply of militias made them difficult to replace, which brought potential leverage to stake out a certain measure of organisational autonomy.

Since the minority dimension brings particular constraints and opportunities, I suggest that *political minority militias* should be defined as a sub-type of political ethno-religious militias, which are in turn subsumed under the umbrella of political militias. A distinction is thus made between militias with or without a strongly pronounced political character, as well as between militias based in large or small ethno-religious communities (or none in particular). In line with this reasoning, political minority militias are defined as follows:

- a) They are non-state armed groups that align on the side of the government against rebels.
- b) They have as a primary or strongly pronounced aim to effect political change and/or attain political influence.
- c) They are based in an ethno-religious community.
- d) Their community constitutes a small minority within the country.

In logical procession, the first criterion defines militias in general; political militias are defined by adding the second criterion; political ethno-religious militias are defined by also adding the third criterion; and political minority militias are defined by all four criteria. Whereas there are no social scientific studies that deal specifically with political minority militias, this structure provides a framework to place the present study within the context of existing literature on related groups.

### 1.3. EXTERNAL RELATIONS: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One aim of the present study is to describe and analyse the Assyrian militias in Iraq as a collective phenomenon, but the main purpose is to compare and explain the different trajectories of these organisations. Thus, having defined the militias by their similarities in the previous sub-chapter, it is now time to turn to the most important and interesting source of variation, namely their external relations — primarily but not exclusively with powerful domestic actors.

The existing literature relating to the external relations of militias tends to focus on violence (while excluding other forms of interaction), relations with the state (viewed as a unitary actor), and the strength (rather than character) of alliances. Moreover, with quantitative research purposes in mind, the variation tends to be sorted into very broad categories, which provide little guidance for more fine-grained qualitative research. For example, according to Magid and Schon's (2018) typology of state-militia relations, which is constructed to explain variation in militia abuses, the Assyrian militias all fall into the residual category of "Groups that never target the government" (Magid & Schon 2018: 805–807).

However, Staniland's *armed politics* approach, which "lets us systematically study the fluidity and heterogeneity of state-armed group relationships" (Staniland 2017: 459), is unusually well suited to capture the complexity of the real world in a systematic manner. With the aim to include a wide variety of actors and conflicts in a unified theoretical framework, Staniland discusses "three armed orders between a state and an armed group – hostilities, limited cooperation, and alliance – and two forms of termination – collapse and incorporation" (Staniland 2017: 460). Whereas hostilities orders entail at least some violence, limited co-operation orders are

characterised by mutual tolerance, where rivalry is instead expressed through jockeying for position in non-violent ways. Lastly, alliance orders entail direct support and active co-ordination of activities (Staniland 2017: 460–461). Whereas armed actors sometimes engage in violence to reach their goals, they also interact in non-violent ways, but the potential to use force brings a particular dynamic to what would otherwise simply be politics. In short, they engage in armed politics.

Based on the armed politics approach, Staniland (2015b) presents a model to explain and predict variation specifically in state-militia relations. This model is primarily focused on the strategic behaviour of the government, and outlines four distinct ways in which it can respond to militias:

Suppression is a strategy that deploys sustained lethal targeting of a militia and its supporters in hopes of breaking its fighting power to the point that it will be either disintegrate [*sic*] or be forced into making major concessions. [...]

Containment is distinct from suppression in that it uses less state violence and is only triggered by armed group activities that rise above the politically acceptable threshold of unrest established by the state. The intensity of violence and size of force deployments are lower than what would be necessary for full-scale suppression, but containment still involves repression toward armed groups. [...]

Collusion is a strategy of active, sustained cooperation between a state and an organized armed actor, ranging from explicitly holding back police and military action against armed actors to actively providing guns, logistics, and training to them. [...]

Incorporation aims to demobilize a militia by formally integrating it into “normal” politics. [...] Incorporation can lead to full transitions out of violent activity on the part of the group or can involve the armed group continuing to carry guns but now as formally part of the state. (Staniland 2015b: 773–775)

Importantly, getting rid of militias through suppression or incorporation may not always be the goal. The strategic behaviour of the government is not only a matter of its capacity to uphold a monopoly of violence, or its strength vis-à-vis the militias, but also its ideology, defined as “the boundaries of the polity and its relationship to the state that the regime wants to construct and defend” (Staniland 2015b: 776). Within these boundaries, some governments provide room for militias that are seen to be contributing to the desired political order rather than threatening it. From the

ideological viewpoint of the state, militias can therefore be sorted into three categories:

Ally militias are those that mobilize symbols, cleavages, and demands that can be easily accommodated within the political arena desired by a regime. [...] Enemy militias are those that mobilize goals in direct conflict with a ruling regime's ideological template. [...] Finally, militias can occupy a "gray zone" that mixes elements of political conflict and compromise. This is where many militias exist, with their own political agendas that straddle the space between political alignment and opposition. (Staniland 2015b: 777)

The choice of strategic response also depends on the utility of the militia in question. The government will engage all operationally valuable militias with a collusion strategy, but the depth of the co-operation depends on how compatible their respective ideologies are. For militias without operational value, only ideological fit remains in the equation; thus, enemies will be suppressed, grey zone militias contained, and allies incorporated (Staniland 2015b: 779–781).

However, the strategic behaviour of the state is not always consistent, since rival actors within the government may view the utility and ideological fit of a militia differently. While acknowledging that "In these circumstances, the 'government' will need to be disaggregated" (Staniland 2015b: 778), Staniland does not outline how to go about doing this. The most obvious solution is to treat different governmental actors separately, but this ignores the dynamic relations between them. In the often rapidly changing context of civil war, co-operation can turn into conflict, or vice versa, with resulting complications for militias that nurture relations with more than one governmental actor.

In Iraq during the war against ISIS, the 'government' was a multi-polar and geographically divided entity, where the GoI and the KRG controlled separate zones, with a further division between KDP and PUK in the KRG zone. There was also a blurred distinction between state and non-state actors, since parts of the security

apparatus and civilian administration stood under control of political parties (see 3.2.1. Kurdish Actors; 3.2.2. Shi'a Actors). Thus, instead of discussing the contradictions of the 'government', it is better to analyse the role of different government-affiliated powerful domestic actors. However, disaggregating the government is not simple or straightforward, since some powerful domestic actors formed part of others, e.g. several larger militias operated under the PMF umbrella. Moreover, the boundaries between different entities sometimes overlapped, e.g. KDP and PUK exercised power through the KRG, as well as outside it. Thus, the powerful domestic actors themselves can often be disaggregated further. Depending on the topic under discussion, I therefore sometimes refer to powerful domestic actors in general, and at other times to specific actors operating on different levels, e.g. PMF as a whole, or one of its constituent militias. The aim is to strike a balance between the simplicity required for analytical clarity, and the specificity required for accurate description. However, in some cases lack of information makes disaggregation difficult.

The involvement of international actors presents yet another complication. By definition, rebels refuse to accept the legitimacy of the government, hence it is hardly surprising that they engage directly with states, organisations, and influential individuals in the international arena (Coggins 2015). Cases where foreign governments sponsor *rebels in enemy states* are ubiquitous, but there are also examples of direct support to *militias in allied states*, e.g. Iran has extensively sponsored militias in Iraq (Dury-Agri et al. 2017: 29). According to Vinci (2008), states that are fragmented or engulfed in civil war function as *anarchic systems*, i.e. like the international system, and unlike the more structured and hierarchical systems

found in cohesive and stable states. While ignoring state sovereignty, both foreign governments and non-state armed groups “treat fragmented and collapsed states as an open anarchic system, which is intimately connected with the international system” (Vinci 2008: 306). This creates opportunities in particular for enemy or grey zone militias to by-pass the government and deal with international actors directly. Surprisingly, during the war against ISIS in Iraq it was not only powerful domestic actors that took advantage of the anarchic system, but also the small and politically marginal Assyrian militias.

An anarchic system can enable the multiplication of rival state and non-state actors, and thereby create a menu of alliance options to choose from. Staniland does not explore the issue of militia agency in depth, but acknowledges the “political salience of militias” (Staniland 2015b: 772), and that strategic calculations are made on both sides:

The danger for governments is that collusion can hollow out state power and provide a base for militias to become unmanageably powerful; the danger for militias is that collusion may co-opt and defang a movement by embedding it in a system of patronage and control. (Staniland 2015b: 775)

The extent of such worries depends in part on the ideology of potential allies, but militias have much more flexibility to *create* ideological compatibility by “radicalizing or moderating” (Staniland 2015b: 781). To meet demand, I suggest militias can also deliberately misrepresent their ideology, or even make it out of whole cloth; the first option could be expected from true believers, and the second from opportunists. Thus, the ideological fit that informs strategic state behaviour can in turn be the result of strategic militia behaviour.

Considering the complications outlined above, it is unreasonable to expect Staniland’s model to accurately predict powerful domestic actor strategies vis-à-vis

the Assyrian militias. Nevertheless, it offers the best available theoretical starting point for an inductive study, where the role of utility and ideology can be explored alongside other factors. To reduce complexity, I only predict the strategies of KDP and PMF — the most important powerful domestic actors in this context — and allow no more than one alliance for each militia. Based on the actual strategies, I then make further predictions about the territorial presence of the militias following the recapture of the Nineveh Plain.

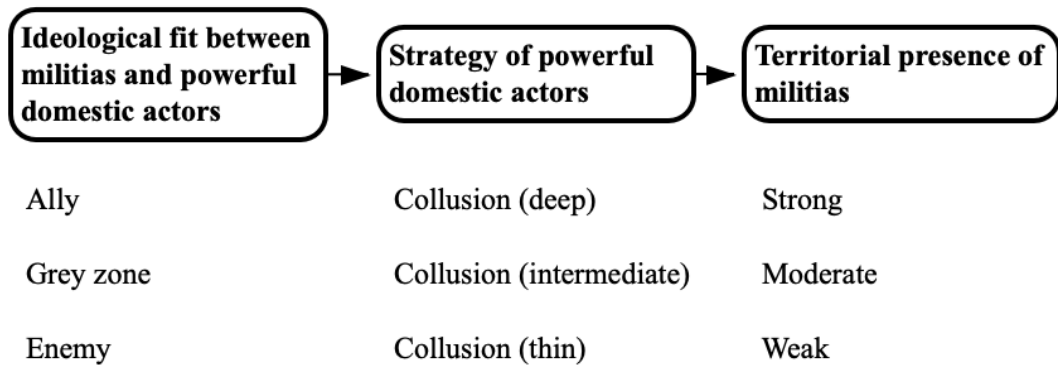
From the viewpoint of KDP and PMF, the Assyrian militias were useful for propaganda purposes (as Christian allies), and to establish a territorial presence on their behalf. Even the smallest and least capable group could be expected to perform these simple functions, at least if it were provided sufficient logistical and political support; hence, all militias could be regarded as potentially operationally useful. The ideological fit varied considerably more, in particular regarding the key issue of the future of the Nineveh Plain. Thus, KDP and PMF are predicted to use a collusion strategy towards all potential allies, but of varying depth.

The level of collusion is defined by the level of political and logistical support. The militias needed political support to deploy and operate on the ground, whereas logistical support was required to build a viable organisation that could perform the required tasks. Deep collusion is defined as the provision of extensive political and logistical support; whereas intermediate collusion entails limited or partial support; and weak collusion little or none.

Considering the political and military strength of KDP and PMF in (different parts of) the Nineveh Plain, they could be expected to exercise a high degree of influence regarding the deployment of their smaller allies. Hence, I predict the level

of collusion (deep, intermediate, thin) will bring a corresponding level of territorial presence (strong, moderate, weak; see Figure 1.1.). A precise definition of territorial presence is provided in the next sub-chapter (see 1.4.2. Outcome Variable). The research puzzle is thus broken down into two separate but connected parts; for each militia, the ideological fit is used to predict the level of collusion, and the actual level of collusion is used to predict the territorial presence (see Table 1.1.)

**Figure 1.1. Predictions of territorial presence based on level of collusion.**



SLB was led by a political entrepreneur with a flexible political agenda, who supported PMF against KDP, but never fully embraced the ideology of his powerful ally. Hence, collusion on the intermediate level is predicted. The actual outcome was deep collusion, yet the militia failed to establish any territorial presence, since it dissolved long before the re-capture of the Nineveh Plain.

BB was led by another political entrepreneur, who unreservedly supported the PMF agenda. The predicted and actual outcome is deep collusion, yet BB established only a moderate territorial presence.

NPU shared with PMF a desire to keep KDP out of the Nineveh Plain, but unlike its powerful ally also wanted to prevent the spread of Iranian influence. The

predicted and actual outcome is intermediate collusion, but NPU nevertheless managed to establish a strong territorial presence.

NPGF wholeheartedly supported KDP, but the latter surprisingly changed from a deep collusion strategy to an intermediate collusion strategy following the invasion of the Nineveh Plain. Since NPGF was made part of the official security forces, it could be argued that KDP used an incorporation strategy, but the change was only superficial, and NPGF remained in practice a militia like any other. Following the re-capture of the Nineveh Plain, NPGF established only a weak territorial presence.

NPF is a more complicated case, since one of its founding political parties was strongly pro-KDP, and the other had a more ambiguous stance. Since the pro-KDP political party dominated the militia, I predict deep collusion, but the actual outcome was intermediate collusion, and NPF established only a weak territorial presence.

DN sought to retain organisational autonomy from all powerful domestic actors, and was neither straightforwardly supportive of KDP, nor vocally opposed to it — but clearly opposed PMF. The predicted and actual outcome is a thin collusion strategy, and a weak territorial presence.

SHF was founded by the same political entrepreneur that had previously led SLB. Following the dissolution of the latter, he pragmatically switched sides and sought co-operation with KDP. The prediction is collusion on the intermediate level, but the actual outcome is containment. Nevertheless, the militia managed to establish at least a weak territorial presence.

**Table 1.1. Powerful domestic actor strategies and Assyrian militia presence in the Nineveh Plain.**

<b>Alliance</b>	<b>Predicted strategy</b>	<b>De facto strategy</b>	<b>Predicted territorial presence</b>	<b>De facto territorial presence</b>
PMF + SLB	Collusion (intermediate)	Collusion (deep)	Strong	None
PMF + BB	Collusion (deep)	Collusion (deep)	Strong	Moderate
PMF + NPU	Collusion (intermediate)	Collusion (intermediate)	Moderate	Strong
KDP + NPGF	Collusion (deep)	Collusion (intermediate)	Moderate	Weak
KDP + NPF	Collusion (deep)	Collusion (intermediate)	Moderate	Weak
KDP + DN	Collusion (thin)	Collusion (thin)	Weak	Weak
KDP + SHF	Collusion (intermediate)	Containment	None	Weak

DN is the only case where the level of collusion and territorial presence are both correctly predicted. NPGF and NPF display the same pattern, with a lower level of collusion and territorial presence than predicted. BB established only a moderate territorial presence, despite the expected deep collusion strategy of PMF, whereas both predictions fail for SLB and SHF. The most interesting case is NPU, which established a strong territorial presence despite the intermediate level collusion strategy of PMF; failure or success against the odds both require an explanation, but a case of the latter is more unexpected.

With only four correct predictions out of 14 possible, there thus is a weak correlation between predicted and actual strategy, as well as between predicted and actual territorial presence. Not only do most predictions fail, but it is difficult to discern any clear patterns. This is the theoretical foundation for the research puzzle,

and justifies an inductive approach to answer the research question: How did the militias establish their territorial presence?

## **1.4. STUDY DESIGN**

### **1.4.1. Case Definition**

This is a study of all seven Assyrian militias operating in Iraq during the war against ISIS. A fundamental issue is whether this should be defined as a single-case study drawn from the population of political minority militias, or a multiple-case study of seven groups operating within the same context. The usage of the term *case* varies in social science, but the underlying logic is arguably more important than the terminology itself (King et al. 1994: 52–53, 117). A case is here defined as a “spatially and temporally delimited phenomenon observed at a single point in time or over some period of time” (Gerring 2006: 211).

A study focused on the similarities between the militias could be justified by the logic of *building block studies*, which “can be component parts of larger contingent generalizations and typological theories” (George & Bennett 2005: 76), in particular for understudied or undertheorised phenomena. Based on this logic, a study of political minority militias could contribute to the construction of more comprehensive theories about the larger category of political militias.

Any generalisation should be made with caution, but the findings are most likely to travel to similar cases, e.g. political minority militias formed by Assyrians in Syria (Drott 2013a), Ezidis in Iraq (Van Den Toorn 2015), and Shabaks in Iraq (Smyth 2015). These groups have received some journalistic attention, but have not yet been studied by social scientists. During the period of my research, they were far less accessible than the Assyrian militias in Iraq, hence my selection of the latter is based on convenience.

As for other militias or official security forces operating at the same time and in the same place, they faced different conditions throughout their trajectories, since they were generally considerably larger, and dominated by one of the main demographic segments in Iraqi society. To address the research puzzle, a comparison with these organisations would therefore have been of limited value.

Although one aim of this study is to explore the role of political minority militias in civil wars generally, the study is mainly designed to enable comparisons between seven specific organisations. Since cases should be defined “at the same level of analysis as the principal inference” (Gerring 2006: 211), I define this as a multiple-case study.

The period of study begins with the fall of Mosul in June 2014, and ends with the re-capture of the city by government forces in July 2017. This period includes the first steps to form proto-militias, the duration of conventional warfare in the Nineveh Plain, and several months of security provision. Considering the time constraints of the research project, it would not have been possible to extend the period of study.

#### **1.4.2. Outcome Variable**

Broadly speaking, I am interested in the success or failure of the militias. However, success can be difficult to define, as the same militia may strive for multiple goals simultaneously. Goals or priorities may also change over time, or vary between the militias. A comprehensive definition that takes all such issues into account would make comparisons impossible, hence a more narrow definition of the outcome variable is necessary. To maintain the analytic focus, this study gives minimal attention to the quest for other goals, but takes into account how they may have

distracted from, interfered with, or even contributed to success on the outcome variable.

Based on the behaviour and statements of the militias, their two main aims were to influence perceptions through propaganda, and to establish a territorial presence (see 3.1. Goal Convergence). Symbolic participation in the war might benefit affiliated political parties or individuals, and this could in principle be measured by comparing election results before and after the war. However, because of widespread manipulation, election results for Assyrian political parties are very difficult to interpret (see 2.3.1. Electoral Politics and Self-Rule). Symbolic participation might also change broader perceptions about Assyrians within the own community, or among the Iraqi political elite and general public. This could in principle be measured through surveys, but the lack of comparable data from before the war presents a validity problem, and it would in any case be nearly impossible to determine the relative contribution of each militia.

The outcome variable is instead defined as the territorial presence of the militias at the end of the period of study. There are several compelling reasons: firstly, it is easily observable; secondly, there is puzzling variation; thirdly, it holds more real-world relevance than perception changes, since it could directly affect local communities. Fourthly, the quest to establish a territorial presence takes on a particular dynamic for political minority militias, whereas a study of their propaganda efforts would be less likely to contribute novel and interesting social scientific findings. The level of collusion with powerful domestic actors will be treated as part of the process, rather than as an outcome variable (see 1.3. External Relations).

A strong territorial presence means the militia ends up as the primary security provider in at least one of the following key towns: Alqosh, Tesqopa, Batnaya, Tel Keipeh, Bashiqa, Bahzani, Bartella, Karamles, or Baghdeda. A moderate territorial presence means the militia is one of the main security providers in at least one key town. Deployments elsewhere in the Nineveh Plain, or of very small contingents to key towns, counts as a weak territorial presence. However, this should not be taken to mean that such deployments are meaningless, since any territorial foothold could potentially be used to expand later.

### **1.4.3. Case Selection**

Following from the research puzzle, the case selection strategy is *heuristic*, i.e. it is focused on *deviant cases*, whose outcome is surprising in the light of existing theories or common-sense assumptions. This selection strategy is suitable to “inductively identify new variables, hypotheses, causal mechanisms, and causal paths” (George & Bennett 2005: 75). The predictions outlined in the previous sub-chapter form the basis for the case selection (see 1.3. External Relations). The most surprising and interesting case is NPU, which established a stronger territorial presence than expected. For this reason, NPU receives more attention than other militias in this study.

Since they follow the same pattern, the inclusion of both NPGF and NPF in the sample might seem unnecessary. If we follow the comparative logic of the *method of agreement*, only one case should be included in the sample for each different outcome, or in this case combination of outcomes (strategy and territorial presence). However, this method is poorly equipped to deal with equifinality, i.e. where different

paths lead to the same outcome (George & Bennett 2005: 153–162). The inclusion of DN might also seem unwarranted, since both predictions proved correct. However, the fact that this case is unique suggests the absence of any direct relation between the outcomes and the theory underlying the predictions. Hence, these outcomes also require an explanation.

A negative case is here defined as a militia that fails to establish any territorial presence. The inclusion of negative cases in a sample should be decided on the basis of the *possibility principle*, i.e. they are only relevant if a positive outcome appears to have been possible (Mahoney & Goertz 2004). Considering its deep collusion with PMF, SLB is clearly a relevant negative case, and is therefore included in the sample. In contrast, the sample does not include short-lived local proto-militias, or a case where a political party considered forming a militia but decided against it. Although these cases do not warrant in-depth study, they will be discussed briefly to help illuminate the conditions of militia formation.

#### **1.4.4. Methodology**

The topic of this study is not typically sociological, but rather lies within the traditional realm of political science. However, the former discipline “embraces a range of different views concerning both what a social science should comprise, and what might be the proper subject-matter of sociology in particular” (Scott & Marshall 2005b: 626). Topic choice aside, the research finds inspiration in the tradition of analytical sociology, with its strong emphasis on studying the specific mechanisms that connect causes and outcomes:

From the perspective of sociological theory, one important reason for insisting on a detailed specification of mechanisms is that it tends to produce more precise and intelligible explanations. [...] Finally, it is the knowledge about the mechanisms as such, that is, knowledge about why the constellation of entities and activities referred to in the explanation can be expected to regularly bring about the type of outcome we seek to explain, that gives us reason to believe that there indeed is a genuine causal relationship between a proposed cause and its effect, and not simply a correlation. (Hedström 2005: 28)

Existing social scientific theories and empirical research give a justification for the research puzzle, and inform predictions that provide a general direction for this study, but fail to explain the outcomes (see 1.3. External Relations: Theoretical Framework). Thus, to minimise theoretical prejudice, the study is inductive and explorative in character. A drawback here is that stepping into the unknown with an open mind makes it difficult to fit the research within any specific social scientific research tradition, or relate it to fundamental theoretical concepts. However, in the absence of prior research, choosing a specific theory to test at the outset would have risked forcing reality into an arbitrary theoretical mould where it does not belong.

Relatedly, without prior research identifying the most likely variables that could bring about the outcomes, a quantitative study with a larger sample of political minority militias would run a high risk of omitting key variables, and it would therefore suffer from poor validity. For this reason, my approach is qualitative and case-based; rather than attempt to demonstrate the average causal effects of a set of variables, I use process-tracing to study a few cases in depth, with the ambition to uncover the specific mechanisms that produced the outcomes (George & Bennett 2005: 25).

According to Beach and Pedersen,

There is a clear bifurcation overall between theory-centric [theory-testing or theory-building] and case-centric [explaining-outcome] process-tracing, reflecting a choice between building/testing (relatively) parsimonious causal mechanisms that can be generalized across a bounded context of cases and focusing on explaining particular outcomes through the pragmatic use of mechanistic explanations to account for the important aspects of the case. (Beach & Pedersen 2013: 11)

Whereas this dichotomy is analytically useful,

The difference between them is more a matter of degree rather than a difference in kind, and explaining-outcome process-tracing case studies often point to specific systematic mechanisms that in principle can be tested in a wider population of cases or that can act as building blocks for future attempts to create generalizable causal mechanisms that can explain outcomes across the population of relevant cases. (Beach & Pedersen 2013: 157)

For this study, I use explaining-outcome process-tracing, which is not amenable to formal testing (Mahoney 2012), but well-suited to provide a comprehensive causal narrative:

While theory-building process-tracing as an inductive method has some elements that overlap with explaining-outcome process-tracing, the key difference between the two is that theory-building process-tracing seeks to build a midrange theory describing a causal mechanism that is generalizable outside of the individual case to a bounded context (e.g., spatially or temporally bounded), whereas explaining-outcome process-tracing focuses on building a minimally sufficient explanation of the outcome in an individual case. Theory-building process-tracing studies do not claim that the detected causal mechanism is sufficient to explain the outcome. (Beach & Pedersen 2013: 16)

In both theory-building and explaining-outcome process-tracing, there are two main ways to build a causal narrative; one is to use variables from existing theories, and the second is to identify and define new ones (Beach & Pedersen 2013: 64; Mahoney 2015: 216–217). These variables are then combined into a model of how specific mechanisms caused the outcome. However, unlike in theory-building process-tracing, where the aim is to create a general model that can be directly applied to other cases, explaining-outcome process-tracing also allows for the inclusion of historical idiosyncrasies that are not suitable for abstract theorisation.

The decision whether — or to what extent — the researcher should simplify real-world mechanisms into abstract models can be viewed as a trade-off between the desire to accurately represent the full complexity of the case at hand, or generate theory with claims to generalisability. However, such choices should not only be determined by the intended use of the findings:

The principle of choosing theories that imply a simple world is a rule that clearly applies in situations where there is a high degree of certainty that the world is indeed simple. [...]

Our point is that we do not advise researchers to seek parsimony as an essential good, since there seems little reason to adopt it unless we already know a lot about a subject. We do not even need parsimony to avoid excessively complicated theories, since it is directly implied by the maxim that the theory should be just as complicated as all our evidence suggest. (King et al. 1994: 20)

Whereas quantitative methods generally require a higher level of theoretical abstraction and simplicity,

Qualitative methodologists tend to believe that the social world is complex, characterized by path dependence, tipping points, interaction effects, strategic interaction, two-directional causality or feedback loops, and equifinality (many different paths to the same outcome) or multifinality (many different outcomes from the same value of an independent variable, depending on context). (Bennett & Elman 2006: 457)

The format of qualitative case studies is generally well-suited to deal with complexity of this sort (George & Bennett 2005: 22); more specifically, the method of process-tracing “may be a unique tool for discovering whether the phenomenon being investigated is characterized by equifinality” (George & Bennett 2005: 215).

With the aim to build a minimally sufficient explanation, I will discuss several factors, but primarily focus on the external relations of the militias. The main reason is simply that it turned out during the research to be the main cause — or one of the main causes — that produced variation on the outcome variable for all militias in the sample. Additionally, the external relations of the militias took on a particular character, which was defined precisely by the ethno-religious identity of the latter. As the most unique aspect of the political minority militia phenomenon, the topic warrants detailed attention. In contrast, the patronage practices described in the study do not appear fundamentally different from what can be found in other militias, or even completely different organisations. Thus, although patronage forms a necessary and important part of the minimally sufficient explanation for NPGF, it receives less attention than external relations.

## 1.5. DATA COLLECTION

### 1.5.1. Field Research

My data collection is based on *field research*, i.e. an eclectic and pragmatic approach that includes various methods — typically observation, interviews, and the gathering of documents — while immersed and bounded within a limited *field*, understood in temporal, geographical, social, or conceptual terms (Burgess 1990: 1–6). Although I have been inspired by ethnographic research, I do not define this study as an *ethnography*, which typically “involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time” (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995: 1). Compared to typical anthropological or sociological studies in this genre, I rely relatively less on observation of human interactions in small-scale settings, and more on interviews. Moreover, I focus primarily on actor behaviour on the mesoscopic level, rather than interpretations of meaning on the microscopic level. This is justified by the research question, which seeks to explain organisational trajectories, rather than the beliefs, desires and character of individuals. Nevertheless, the latter is discussed where necessary, in particular for political entrepreneurs.

Without fieldwork in Iraq, it would not have been possible to conduct this study — at least not without huge sacrifices to its validity. Firstly, the available documents — primarily news and social media — often suffered from poor validity and incompleteness. Although documentary data proved very useful to complement and triangulate observational and interview data, on their own they would have provided a weak empirical basis for the study. Secondly, it would have been difficult to reach most interviewees from afar, and perhaps even more difficult to establish trust

without being physically present. Thirdly, in addition to providing concrete data, first-hand observations enabled me to understand the phenomenon under investigation in its local context — and revise the study accordingly. As Whyte notes about his classic ethnographic study, for which the existing literature provided limited guidance: “I did not develop these ideas by any strictly logical process. They dawned on me out of what I was seeing, hearing, doing — and feeling. They grew out of an effort to organize a confusing welter of experience” (Whyte 1955: 357).

Rather than constitute a discrete data collection stage, fieldwork often has an iterative character, where researchers “review and revise their research design — reformulating their research question, refining concepts, developing new hypotheses, identifying more appropriate cases, developing and enhancing research instruments (e.g., interview protocols and survey questionnaires), and so on” (Kapiszewski et al. 2015: 23). When my own initial ideas collided hard with reality, early in the first fieldwork period, I was forced to engage in just this type of process. Given the obvious time constraints, a full overhaul of the research design would have been impossible in the field, but I was at least able to form provisional new ideas, which enabled me to continue the data collection.

Having explained the methodological rationale of the research, in the following section I will describe how the project developed on a more practical level.

### **1.5.2. Project Trajectory**

In the months before submitting the first research proposal for this project, in the spring of 2015, I followed with great interest updates about newly-formed Assyrian militias operating in Iraq. Having already visited and written about their counter-parts

in Syria (Drott 2013a; Drott 2013b; Drott 2014, Drott 2015), where the conditions were in many ways similar, I formed the idea to conduct a comparative study. If the militia politics in Iraq would turn out to be even half as complex as in Syria, I reasoned, the two cases would surely provide rich material for an in-depth study.

My plan was to first conduct fieldwork in Syria, then return to Oxford and prepare for the trip to Iraq. Unfortunately, only two weeks before my scheduled departure, factors outside my control forced me to cancel the visit to Syria, and the study was re-designed to focus exclusively on Iraq. Since I had already bought airline tickets to Iraq, I proceeded with the planned trip — only without crossing the border into the neighbouring country. Although my preparations were minimal, I reasoned that it would be best to use the opportunity to conduct a pilot study, and return for a longer visit later. In total, I ended up spending seven months in Iraq: two months in June-August 2016, and five months in January-June 2017.

The focus of my research was initially somewhat vague, but the key idea was to explore local governance, and how the militias balanced relations with their own community, rival militias, and larger political actors. However, unlike in Syria, where the militias were present inside Assyrian neighbourhoods and villages, in Iraq they operated almost exclusively in or near the front line, and rarely interacted directly with the civilian population. It took several revisions, and much engagement with the existing literature and my empirical data, before the rationale and focus of the project emerged in its final form.

Between the first and second fieldwork period I explored the literature relating to social movements to make sense of the preliminary findings, and guide further data collection (e.g. Edwards & McCarthy 2004; Tarrow 1998). Although resource

mobilisation theory, political opportunity theory, and the concept of contentious politics were valuable to inspire my thinking in a general sense, I ultimately judged that applying any of them directly would be unhelpful at best — and at worst distort the analysis. The primary reason was that the militias differed from social movements in one fundamental respect: they lacked active or even passive mass support. Together with a multitude of Assyrian political parties and civil society organisations, they arguably formed part of a (national) movement, in a loose sense of the term. However, theirs was not a *social* movement in a stricter sense, i.e. “An organized effort by a significant number of people to change (or resist change in) some major aspect or aspects of society” (Scott & Marshall 2005a: 612).

### **1.5.3. Fieldwork Details**

The fieldwork was mainly conducted in Erbil, Duhok, and the Nineveh Plain, which is located immediately north and east of Mosul (see Figure 1.1.; Figure 2.1.).

Before the first fieldwork trip, I made a brief visit to Stockholm, and the nearby town of Södertälje, which is home to a large Assyrian diaspora community (it is sometimes called ‘little Iraq’, or ‘Mesopotälje’). After a few informal meetings and interviews, I embarked on a direct flight to Erbil, and continued from there to Duhok, where I took up residence near the neighbourhood of Nohadra — a hub for Assyrian political, cultural, and religious life (the name is also used by Assyrians to refer to the city as a whole).

**Figure 1.2. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the disputed territories before June 2014.**



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My priority was to visit the militias in and around Tesqopa. Although the rules and practices to get access within KRG-controlled territory are often obscure, seemingly haphazard, and vary considerably over time, my experience and knowledge indicated that it was usually possible to find a way. Since many journalists had previously visited this area, I did not expect to encounter any severe difficulties — but this assumption proved false.

I first tried to go to Tesqopa as a freelance journalist in May 2015 — a few months before I started my doctorate. When a well-connected interpreter proved unable to arrange a visit, a contact in Sweden put me in touch with an NPF officer, who said he could get us past the checkpoints. Already on the way, we had to turn back when he called to inform me that the KRG security agency Asayish (‘Security’) had found out we were coming, and was not going to let us through. When I returned a year later, I visited the Governor’s office in Duhok, and was directed from there to the Asayish headquarters, where I submitted a formal request. One month later, I finally received a response: the application was turned down, without any explanation. I also tried to get permission through the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs (the defence ministry of the KRG), equally unsuccessfully, before seeking help from NPF and its two affiliated political parties. They initially seemed positive, and offered vague reassurances, but after several delays a senior member of the Beth-Nahrain Democratic Party (BNDP) said they were not willing to support me, since it would be an embarrassment to them if I were to write anything “negative”. He claimed that researchers had previously written negative things, presumably about the KRG and its security forces (possibly, he was referring to researchers from human rights organisations). Finally, with help from a well-connected interpreter (not the same as

the previous year), I was waved through all checkpoints, and entered the town, but was immediately informed that I could only visit as a journalist — not as a researcher. The local commander proceeded to phone the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, and when it turned out we had no permission to be there, we were promptly asked to leave. Having spent a large part of my first fieldwork trip trying and failing to visit the militias in Tesqopa, and realising that my stubbornness had resulted in nothing but waste of time, I finally admitted defeat. I later learned that other researchers encountered similar difficulties getting to this area (Gaston 2017a).

Despite this failure, I was able to collect some valuable data before returning to Europe. In addition to the interviews I conducted in Duhok and Erbil, I went to Alqosh three times, and twice visited the nearby NPU base. I also visited a camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) outside Simele, near Duhok, and another in Ainkawa, the Assyrian neighbourhood of Erbil, where I took up residence for the last two weeks.

I returned to Iraq in January 2017, and again settled in Ainkawa. By this time, the situation on the ground had changed completely, as the Assyrian areas of the Nineveh Plain had been re-captured, and divided into zones controlled respectively by the GoI and the KRG. My plan was to first spend a few weeks conducting interviews in Erbil, in order to prepare my visits to the militias, but once I was ready to travel, a rather mundane factor caused a severe delay. During the unusually drawn-out process to get my residency card, I did not have access to my passport, which meant I was unable to pass through any checkpoints. I therefore remained stuck in the regional capital until April, when I was at last able to visit areas where the militias were active.

In the KRI and the KRG zone of the Nineveh Plain, I made two visits to an IDP camp in Ainkawa, returned twice to Alqosh, and was invited back to the nearby NPU base. DN also brought me to Batnaya, with local permission from Asayish. Access to Tesqopa still required permission from higher up, but this time I refrained from even trying, since I was unwilling to waste valuable time, and the significance of this location had in any case decreased considerably after the front line moved further south. Instead, NPF arranged a trip to Shaqoli village, and with help from an NPGF member I visited Bashiqa, Bahzani, and Mergi village.

In the GoI zone of the Nineveh Plain, I stayed three nights with an NPU squad in Baghdeda, and was also able to visit Karamles and Bartella. In the end, I refrained from visiting locations where only BB was present, e.g. Tel Keipeh, since both the militia commander and an officer responded to my requests with vague evasions. For security reasons, an unannounced and unwanted visit would probably not have been advisable.

Inevitably, I was frustrated by what I was unable to see and learn — and this concerned BB in particular. However, although I made fewer and shorter visits than planned to areas where the militias deployed, I believe that my research did not suffer as much as could be expected — quite simply because there was not all that much to observe. By all accounts, the frontline deployment of the militias was very uneventful, apart from the rare occurrences of actual fighting (when it would not have been advisable to be present anyway). Similarly, after the Nineveh Plain was recaptured from ISIS, most militias were consigned to a passive role, often in completely or nearly deserted locations. The exceptions were BB and NPU, but I was after all able to embed with the latter over four consecutive days.

In addition to visiting militia bases, IDP camps, and various offices, I was invited to Assyrian family homes; attended Syriac Catholic, Chaldean Catholic, and Evangelical church services; explored the monasteries of Rabban Hormizd and Mar Mattai; and spent time with Assyrian friends and acquaintances in cafés, restaurants, and bars. These occasions sometimes brought unexpected opportunities for data collection, but more importantly they gave me a feeling for Assyrian life in northern Iraq.

The very last part of my fieldwork was conducted 28–30 June 2017 at the European Parliament in Brussels, where I was invited as an observer to the conference ‘A Future for Christians in Iraq’. During and after the fieldwork, I also conducted a few interviews via telephone.

#### **1.5.4. Researcher Role**

A clear advantage for me in encounters with Assyrians was that I am European and (although atheist) come from a Christian cultural background. When asked about relations with other ethno-religious communities, in particular Muslim Kurds and Arabs, Assyrians often offered statements along the lines of “we are like brothers”, or “we have no problem with anyone” — and sometimes it ended there. However, eventually (or sometimes immediately), many trusted me to understand or even share their concerns, and described relations that were far from always brotherly. It is unlikely that a researcher from a Muslim cultural background — believer or not — could have gained the same level of trust.

I never concealed my role as a researcher, as *complete participants* and *complete observers* do. My observation can instead be characterised as *participatory*,

but the level of participation was generally low (Burgess 1990: 80–82). It was not expected of me to take part in any specific activities, and it would have been unwise to directly involve myself in the work of rival militias.

Although my research did not involve any deliberate deception or misrepresentation, complete openness is often neither advisable nor possible in field research (Burgess 1990: 197–203). In my case, I was somewhat vague about the angle of the research — for the simple reason that the angle actually *was* somewhat vague, at least initially. However, I was always open about the fact that I conducted research on all Assyrian militias in Iraq, and would be speaking to people from rival groups.

Even when they are open and honest, it is common for field researchers to be confused with other outsiders that occur more frequently in the social setting in question (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995: 80–81). As mentioned above, I might have been barred from visiting Tesqopa because I was believed to be a human rights researcher, rather than an academic researcher. At other times, I was thought to be a journalist — or at least treated as one, e.g. by being asked to inform the world about the situation. Last, but definitely not least, one militia member openly accused me of being a spy, and others probably shared this suspicion. The militia member in question told me he knew I was in fact working for MI5, the British domestic intelligence agency (he probably meant MI6, the foreign intelligence agency). Interestingly, he had no issues with this, and immediately agreed to be interviewed. Bearing in mind that many interviewees were extremely keen to attract attention and support from abroad, the suspicion that I was a journalist or spy may in fact have made them *more* rather than *less* likely to talk to me (although this motivation would

hardly counter the common tendency to make propagandistic claims). Of course, I wanted to avoid any misperceptions about my role, but this was easier said than done. Sluka (1996) suggests that “If you do not want to be defined as a spy, then do not be one or act like one” (Sluka 1996: 283). The first part of this advice was easy enough to follow, but the second was more difficult, since I was asking questions about the capacity, membership figures, and organisation of armed groups in an ongoing conflict. However, such suspicions were unlikely to place me in any danger, since it seemed out of the question for anyone to believe that I was spying for ISIS. Although many held negative views about Western involvement in the Middle East, and some embraced conspiracy theories, no one viewed the West as their enemy.

#### **1.5.5. Interpreters and Translators**

In many cases, I was able to communicate directly in English, German, or Swedish, without using an interpreter. None of the interviewees mastered these languages perfectly, which can be seen in some quoted statements, but they were generally able to express themselves very well. I transcribed and translated interviews conducted in these languages myself. However, since my Kurdish skills are very rudimentary, and I have no knowledge of either Arabic or Neo-Aramaic, I had to rely on interpreters for most interviews, and translators for most recordings as well as many documents. A few documents were also translated from French and Russian.

The use of interpreters is often left out from methodological discussions, despite that this practice entails both advantages and disadvantages, which can be critical to the research process (Borchgrevink 2003: 109–113; Harpviken 2009: 185). In the same way as for a researcher, the identity and inter-personal skills of an

interpreter can be hugely important to establish rapport with interviewees: “just as informants may react to one interpreter by closing up and denying information, another interpreter may serve as a gate-opener for the researcher by serving as warrant of good intentions” (Borchgrevink 2003: 109).

Luckily, all interpreters I worked with proved to have good inter-personal skills, and some were exceptional in this regard. However, the by far most important issue to consider was ethno-religious identity, and I therefore made sure to work primarily with Assyrian interpreters — or sometimes Ezidis, since the two communities generally share good relations. Usually, Assyrians were immediately recognised as such when they presented themselves, whereas Ezidis mentioned their identity during the initial small talk. However, in one revealing incident, the interpreter forgot this detail before we sat down to interview a militia member. At first, the interviewee spoke well of Kurds and the KRG, but once he discovered that the interpreter was Ezidi, he turned around his discourse 180 degrees — now claiming that all Muslims (including Kurds) were like ISIS, and that there was no future for minorities anywhere in Iraq. I should mention here that I actually *did* interview Assyrians together with a Kurdish interpreter on another occasion, since I lacked other options that day; in hindsight, it would have been better to postpone these interviews.

Another potential problem, which needs to be weighed against the advantages of local embeddedness, is that “an interpreter from their own community may not seem to offer much confidentiality to respondents, particularly in small or closely knit communities” (Laws et al. 2013: 257). The problem is two-fold, as it is necessary to ensure both perceived and de facto confidentiality — the latter of course being most important. To prevent leakage of sensitive information, I only used interpreters and

translators that were recommended and vouched for by someone I knew, at least indirectly (sometimes I was given contact details to an interpreter that turned out to be busy, but who instead recommended someone else). I also informed all interpreters and translators that they could not under any circumstances disclose details about the interviews or the interviewees to third parties. However, even without such measures, the risk of information leakage would probably have been relatively low, since the Assyrian militias and political parties were generally subject to no more than lukewarm interest from community members — and none from outsiders.

As a rule, individuals that were themselves affiliated with a political party or militia only interpreted interviews with fellow party or militia members. On one occasion, an NPU member helped me interview a member of a rival militia — but the latter was a friend of the interpreter, and would probably have been less likely to trust a stranger. On another occasion, the same NPU member interpreted an interview with the second NPF commander, when the latter unexpectedly replaced another interviewee — an NPF member that was a friend of the interpreter (this may have been a measure to control information disclosure). However, the commander was aware of the interpreter's affiliation, and I was able to re-interview him at a later date.

Working with interpreters proved invaluable in the research process, and my overall judgement is that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. Not only were they critical to establish trust and build rapport, but on many occasions also helped me find interviewees, offer character judgements, and assess the validity of various claims. More generally, they functioned as guides to the local area and its culture, and shared with me their own experiences, views, and knowledge. Last, but definitely not least, I benefitted from their friendship, kindness, and enthusiasm,

which helped me get through what would otherwise have been a very lonely endeavour.

Reflecting the relative importance of individual characteristics versus language skills in different contexts, I mostly relied on non-professional interpreters for interviews, but professional (or skilled non-professional) translators for recordings and documents. In this way, the translation of the recordings also provided a validity check of the interpretation in the interviews. Importantly, while the translators uncovered some mistakes and misunderstandings, there were no instances where the interpreter seemed to deliberately censor or misrepresent interviewer questions or interviewee statements. Of course, no such validity check was possible for the unrecorded interviews, but most of the key interviews were recorded.

#### **1.5.6. Researching an Active Conflict**

As part of the planning process, I produced a comprehensive risk assessment document, which received approval from the Social Sciences Division of the University of Oxford. Prior to the fieldwork, I had on several occasions visited northern Iraq as a freelance journalist, and could therefore benefit from having a general familiarity with the area, a wide contact network, and experience in risk management. In line with expectations, I was never subjected to any grave danger, and my security procedures proved adequate (in some respects excessive).

During the period in question, and outside of the context of front-line fighting, it was rare for foreign journalists and researchers to be deliberately targeted by state or non-state actors (sadly, the same was not true for our Iraqi colleagues). Instead, the most prevalent and least manageable risk was posed by the notoriously unsafe roads.

Although I tried to at least wear a seat belt (if it had not been disabled, and to the consternation of many drivers), on some occasions there was no other option than to ride on the back of a pick-up truck, or in a car missing a windshield. As for war-related risks, the GoI zone of the Nineveh Plain was the most likely site for abductions, insurgent attacks, or confrontations between rival militias. However, such incidents were very rare, and I stayed informed about local developments through local and international contacts, as well as news and social media. The militia I embedded with, NPU, also provided information as well as protection.

More importantly, I needed to assess and manage the *de facto* and perceived risks to the interviewees. First and foremost, this was of course an ethical issue, but it also had strong implications for data validity.

Conducting research in an ongoing conflict inevitably presents challenges, e.g. “Fear and political pressure serve as severe constraints; questions that would be considered trivial under other circumstances may be highly sensitive; systematic selection and follow-up of informants is difficult” (Harpviken 2009: 186). At the same time, the challenges are not necessarily greater than for research in post-conflict settings, since fear may linger, and political pressure sometimes even intensifies — especially if the war is won by an authoritarian actor. Historical research also introduces new challenges, as interviewees can be difficult to locate, and memories may be distorted by the passage of time or teleological bias (Gayer & Jaffrelot 2009: 13; Jentsch 2014: 53–56; Weinstein 2007: 355–356),

Since the warfare was mainly conventional during the period of study, and virtually no Assyrians supported the rebels, the level of fear and suspicion within the community was much lower than what would be expected in a war characterised by

irregular warfare, where territorial control is less clear-cut, or in communities whose loyalties are divided between incumbents and insurgents. Moreover, although many interview questions concerned politically sensitive matters, they rarely touched upon personal experiences of violence. Thus, at least some ethical and validity concerns were less pronounced than in studies of other conflicts, whether historical or ongoing (Kalyvas 2006: 395–410).

Nevertheless, there was a general reluctance among community members to discuss politics, religion, inter-communal relations, or other sensitive matters. In part, their fear had historical roots, as the Simele massacre of 1933 and other experiences had demonstrated what could happen to an assertive minority. In recent decades, the paranoid and extra-ordinarily brutal regime of the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party (hereinafter referred to as the ‘Ba’ath Party’) had terrorised Iraqi society, before being replaced by Kurdish and Shi’a actors, which were generally intolerant of dissent. During the period of study, nearly all Assyrians lived in areas controlled by KDP, and many relied on KDP-supported Assyrian actors for salaries or humanitarian aid. Considering their historical experiences, current circumstances, and unknown future, it is hardly surprising that many Assyrians were cautious. However, no one reacted with visible anxiety to the questions I posed, some were clearly comfortable discussing sensitive issues, and many seemed genuinely politically apathetic rather than cautious. As Fujii (2010) points out, although evasions and silences pose a problem for data collection, they can also be viewed as meta-data, which reveal how and to what extent fear shape the lives of the interviewees. Notably, the topic of Assyrian militias did *not* appear to be very sensitive — and this is in itself a relevant finding, which demonstrates their lack of power over the own community.

It was often hard for me to judge where interviewees felt safe to speak freely — and even more difficult to arrange meetings in such locations. The most natural meeting spots — e.g. militia bases, or cafés that functioned as hubs for the local community — were also the most problematic, as other people routinely sat down to join or listen in to the conversation. In at least a few cases, they were clearly there to monitor or control the interview, but it was usually not possible to spirit away the interviewee without causing a scene. Moreover, it was not necessarily better to meet in anonymous public places.

After our first meeting in a Western-style café, which was mainly frequented by foreigners, a militia member suggested that Asayish could be listening in to our conversations. On later occasions, we instead met at an Assyrian café of his choosing, where the plenty backgammon players made auditory monitoring through staff or bugging devices all but impossible. Our conversations were now constantly interrupted by others, but it was an environment where he clearly felt safe.

On another occasion, I interviewed a militia officer at a rather quiet café, which was frequented by foreigners and locals alike. During our conversation, which was held in a European language, he mentioned several times the KRG President by name — and his tone of voice and body language probably made clear that his stance was more than a little critical. When he suddenly wanted to leave, I noticed at the next table a heavy-set, middle-aged man staring at us menacingly. As soon as we left the building, the militia officer bid farewell, and walked away in haste. Since he had himself suggested to meet at this location, I was clearly not alone in finding these judgements difficult.

### **1.5.7. Interviewee Sampling**

The interviewees were recruited into three separate samples, which were defined by distinct sampling criteria and procedures. Selection for the general sample (N = 85; see Appendix A), was based on presumed knowledge and experience relating to the militias and the context they operated in (purposive sampling). In some cases, I contacted known individuals directly via e-mail or social media platforms, but most interviewees were found through existing contacts (snowball sampling), or at specific fieldwork sites, e.g. militia bases (convenience sampling).

The bulk of the relevant empirical material comes from interviews with senior members of the militias (commanders and officers), or their affiliated political parties. For the party-militia constellations of DN, NPF, NPGF, and NPU, the sample includes five to 11 senior members, but I was only able to find two for BB and SHF respectively, and one for SLB. Whereas a senior non-governmental organisation (NGO) member provided unique knowledge about SHF, I was unable to find outsiders that were similarly well acquainted with BB or SLB. However, news and social media provided valuable complementary data for BB in particular.

The most important potential interviewee that I pursued without success was the BB commander. During the period of my fieldwork, journalists encountered similar difficulties arranging interviews with other senior PMF members (O'Driscoll & van Zoonen 2017: 10). Although I managed to reach the commander on the telephone, as well as through two intermediaries, it proved impossible to arrange even a telephone interview — yet alone a face-to-face meeting — and I eventually concluded that he was deliberately avoiding me. After an initial, brief conversation, it proved equally impossible to see the first NPF commander, who claimed to be

occupied or out of town every time I called, and failed to turn up to planned meetings. When I judged that additional contact attempts would constitute little more than harassment, I reluctantly accepted that he simply would not yield.

The second sample (N = 52; see Appendix B) is made up of militia members, who had knowledge and experience of how the militias functioned in practice. Recruitment was based on snowball sampling through existing contacts, as well as convenience sampling, e.g. at militia checkpoints. The sample includes five to 21 members each from DN, NPF, NPGF, and NPU — but only one from BB and SLB respectively, and none from SHF. Thus, I encountered recruitment difficulties for the same three militias in both the general sample and the member sample. Although I saw diversity on demographic variables as desirable, the recruitment practice made it all but impossible to employ any such selection criteria. The sample nevertheless turned out to become relatively diverse, with a third (37 %) estimated to be over 29 years old, and many originating from places other than Baghdeda (50 % with missing values excluded, but the actual proportion is most likely lower).

For the third sample (N = 47; see Appendix C), which comprises community members, my only selection criterion was that the interviewees should be Iraqi Assyrians, but I aimed to primarily recruit Nineveh Plain inhabitants. My initial ambition was to ensure variation regarding their home town or village, age, gender, occupation, and church membership. However, I stopped asking about the latter after I noticed that it caused some discomfort among the interviewees. Since the Assyrian settlements in the Nineveh Plain are relatively homogeneous in terms of their religious composition, I judged that it would be enough to ensure geographical variation in the sample. Most interviewees were recruited in a semi-random fashion,

by approaching people in the street or in IDP camps, while trying to ensure diversity on the mentioned variables. Some interviewees were instead recruited through convenience sampling, e.g. while socialising with Assyrian friends.

The sample displays satisfactory variation regarding gender (40 % women) and estimated age (38 % aged 18–29; 21 % aged 30–44; 33 % aged 45–64; 6 % aged 65 or above). Excluding the many missing values on the occupation variable, there is an almost even split between students, graduates, or professionals (42 %); and those holding less qualified jobs, or none (58 %). In line with my intention, most interviewees in the sample come from the Nineveh Plain (79 %), although more variation within this sub-sample would have been desirable, since at least half (50 %) originate from Baghdeda.

Interviews with community members proved less fruitful than expected, since they generally expressed little knowledge of — or even interest in — the Assyrian militias. Although this is an important finding in itself, the absence of rich data made me carry out fewer interviews than I had initially planned.

### **1.5.8. Interviews**

The social and cultural context undoubtedly played an important role in shaping the beliefs and desires of the interviewees, and some issues of interest for this research were subjective in character. However, I was primarily seeking knowledge about existing objective facts, rather than the meaning attached to those facts, i.e. my interviews were part of a process of *knowledge collection*, rather than *knowledge construction* (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009: 48).

For individuals in the general sample, most interviews were semi-structured, planned in advance, audio recorded, and conducted in a secluded setting (usually an office). These interviews usually lasted for at least an hour, and often considerably more, but some were concluded within only a few minutes. When an interviewee provided valuable data, I often tried to meet him or her again on a later occasion, to learn about new developments, and sometimes repeat the same questions as a validity check. This practice was particularly useful when the initial interview was held during the first fieldwork period, and the follow-up interview during the second period.

Most individuals in the general sample can be considered elites, which brought particular challenges, but also opportunities. As noted by Arksey and Knight (1999: 122–125), elite interviewees are often willing to speak openly and at length, but it is important to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the topic to be taken seriously. For this reason, I tried to show off my general knowledge early in the interview, and this practice often sparked the interviewee's interest in holding a conversation with me (although not necessarily about the interview topics). Relatedly, open-ended questions often brought vague and uninteresting answers, but the further I came in the process of data collection, the easier it was to formulate more specific questions, e.g. about a particular event. This approach brought more rich and candid responses — probably in part because the interviewees were not sure how much I knew, and therefore became reluctant to offer up lies or half-truths. In some cases, I could also benefit from the rivalry between different political parties and militias, as interviewees offered information about other organisations — which I later used to formulate specific questions.

On the negative side, elite interviewees “may more or less have prepared ‘talk tracks’ to promote the viewpoints they want to communicate by means of the interview, which requires considerable skill from the interviewer to get beyond” (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009: 147). This proved to be a problem in particular in interviews with politicians, whose default answers were often cautious, evasive, and propagandistic. On my own part, I grew somewhat less cautious over time, and began to ask more potentially provocative questions. Although this sometimes resulted in an angry counter-attack, or at least a palpable souring of the atmosphere, many interviewees did not appear bothered. In hindsight, I should have been less cautious, in particular as I became better at bringing up sensitive issues in a non-provocative manner.

For community and militia members, I mostly relied on unstructured interviews, which are more conversational than semi-structured ones, and occur naturally during fieldwork (Burgess 1990: 101–102). These interviews were usually unplanned, unrecorded, brief, and conducted in non-secluded settings. Unsurprisingly, in such encounters it often proved difficult to get candid responses and elicit rich data. However, a few community and militia members also became my friends, and their guidance to the local culture and society proved invaluable.

In particular for longer fieldwork periods, it is advisable to continually go over the evidence, rather than leave this to a later, separate stage. Preliminary analysis can change the direction or improve the precision of data collection, and a good overview of existing data makes it easier to identify priorities (Kapiszewski et al. 2015: 332–367). During my time in the field, I therefore created and updated data collection plans for each militia; lists of past and future interviewees; and files with questions

for specific interviewees. These documents then guided the recruitment and prioritising of interviewees, as well as the interview schedules. The more I learned, the less I came to rely on generic interview schedules, although I maintained a list of general questions to pose if time allowed (see Appendix D). Maintaining these documents was time-consuming, and in the end it proved impossible to keep track of everything. However, without an elaborate system to guide the data collection, it would have been impossible to complete this research project.

Luckily, unlike some conflict researchers, I did not identify any relevant data that were too sensitive to publish (Wood 2006: 382). However, I refrained from disseminating draft chapters to any of the interviewees — which is sometimes recommended, as a validity check — since this would have given them an information advantage over rival groups (Burgess 1990: 206–207).

### **1.5.9. Ethics**

Prior to the data collection, this research project was reviewed and approved by the Central University Research Ethics Committee of the University of Oxford. To ensure informed consent, the interviews were normally preceded by a brief presentation of myself, the research project, and the conditions of the interview, which I asked the interviewees to agree to, after they had been given an opportunity to pose questions. However, in field research it is impossible to inform every single individual in this manner, e.g. in a brief informal conversation in the street (Burgess 1990: 197–203).

The most important, complex, and consequential ethical issue that I identified was confidentiality, which can be defined as follows:

Confidentiality is about not disclosing the identity of study participants, and not attributing comments to individuals in ways that can permit the individuals or institutions with which they are associated to be recognized, unless they have expressly consented to being identified. (Arksey & Knight 1999: 132)

If the interviewees themselves desire anonymity, or the researcher judges that the negative consequences of disclosing names could be severe, anonymisation would normally be seen as imperative — but there are also important disadvantages of using this practice (Burgess 1990: 203–207):

When all identities are thoroughly masked, it becomes nearly impossible to separate reliable informants from storytellers and rumor-spreaders, much less to determine whether the author has omitted or distorted essential information. Nonetheless, it is standard practice in ethnography to conceal the identities of research participants by using pseudonyms for people and locales, as well as by changing personal characteristics, altering facts, and rearranging or eliding time sequences. (Lubet 2018: 91)

Despite such concerns, I decided to anonymise all militia and community members, and most interviewees in the general sample, by omitting any details that could be used to identify them (it never proved necessary to *change* any details). In many cases, I even anonymised details about interviewees that clearly expressed it would not be a problem for them to be identified by name. One reason for this is that other interviewees would be better protected with consistent anonymisation, e.g. if a militia had only two officers, and one was quoted with his name, an ‘anonymous’ quote from the other would reveal his identity. Another reason was that I sometimes only discussed the issue of confidentiality before the first interview, and did not inquire about this during subsequent and more informal meetings; in hindsight, I should have paid more attention to this problem during the fieldwork. To remain on the safe side, I have therefore tried to anonymise most interviewees.

In most cases, I simply *informed* interviewees that they would remain anonymous. By not giving them the option, I wanted to signal that anonymity was the norm, and thereby reduce any perceived pressure to agree to be identified. This was mainly because I feared that named interviewees would be less likely to offer candid

statements. However, it is sometimes difficult or even impossible to guarantee confidentiality for elite interviewees, at least without significantly altering or blurring the data (Arksey & Knight 1999: 133). If I judged that an interviewee could only be anonymised with great difficulty, I therefore *asked* how they wanted to deal with this issue. Unless there were other ethical concerns (see above), I did not take any measures to anonymise individuals that agreed to be identified. However, for consistency and to make it easier for the reader to follow the text, I refer to all interviewees by their position, e.g. ‘the NPU commander’.

Fieldwork in active conflicts can present severe challenges for data protection, but in this study I did not expect or experience any great difficulties, e.g. to have my house raided, or be searched at checkpoints (Wood 2006: 380). Of course, to remain on the safe side, I still took measures to guard the collected data. The most sensitive information tended to emerge in audio recorded interviews, but I was usually able to transfer data from the recording device to my laptop almost immediately. My handwritten notes rarely contained sensitive information, and were transcribed electronically at the earliest possible moment. Moreover, the illegible handwriting, invented abbreviations, and eclectic mix of languages would have made it all but impossible for outsiders to decipher them (since this could be challenging even for myself, I had an additional incentive to transcribe the notes as quickly as possible). All other documents related to this project were also stored in my laptop, which was secured by encryption and password protection.

### **1.5.10. Documentary Data**

As Lubet (2018: 22–27) notes, ethnographers often make insufficient use of documentary data, although these can be very useful as a complement to interviews and observations, or act as a validity check. In this study, relevant archives were either non-existent or inaccessible, but I made extensive use of available on-line data.

The most important source was social media, in particular Facebook, where the militias posted regular updates. After scrolling back to when the accounts were first set up (an excruciatingly slow exercise), I systematically browsed through everything that had been posted. Texts in Arabic were first machine translated, and subsequently sent to a human translator if they were deemed relevant. Although the vast majority of the posts contained no useful information, I was able to find some unique and valuable data, which were not available elsewhere. I also watched a large number of YouTube videos, and sent some to a translator, who first checked the relevance of the content in unclear cases.

As for published sources, the Assyrian militias featured prominently in the international press; received some attention from Iraqi, Kurdish, and Assyrian news media; and occasionally appeared in NGO reports; but these texts were rarely informative. In contrast, I made good use of the memoirs of an international DN member (Locks 2016), and a diaspora Kurd stationed in the exact same area (Peshmerganor 2018). These accounts are both very candid, and I judge their validity to be high, based on limited cross-checking of facts, as well as my general familiarity with the topic.

### **1.5.11. Data Processing and Thesis Structure**

This research project yielded a large amount of primary and secondary data, which proved challenging to systematise and make sense of — in particular since the structure of the argument was initially unclear. To create an overview and enable comparative analysis, text extracts from interview transcripts and fieldwork notes were first coded and sorted thematically for each militia, using the software NVivo. The broader themes of the research, as defined before and during the main data collection stage (i.e. the fieldwork), then formed the basis for the initial coding categories. During the subsequent coding process, new categories were continually added, and old ones removed or merged, until the coding scheme emerged in its final form (see Appendix E). The resulting compilations of text extracts formed the basis for the first, very rough outline of the thesis, to which I also added the documentary data. The empirical material, along with various notes, was then re-organised continually during the writing process, as my argument took shape.

Triangulation and integration of data from observations, interviews, and documents occurred throughout the research process. In addition to trying to find multiple data points with the same method (data triangulation), or use data collected with one method to validate and complement those collected with another (methodological triangulation), I also employed existing data in an iterative process to guide further collection efforts. This was not only a matter of keeping track of which specific data I was in possession of — or not — but enabled me to contemplate the direction of the research more broadly. As Whyte notes about his own fieldwork, where he occasionally stepped back from the data collection: “I had to balance familiarity with detachment, or else no insights would have come” (Whyte 1955:

357). However, it was only after completing the fieldwork — when I had more time on my hands — that I was able to compare and assess the evidence from various sources more systematically (Arksey & Knight 1999: 21–31; Burgess 1990: 143–165; Whyte 1955: 320–325, 356–358).

While processing the data, I identified three distinct stages in the trajectories of the militias — establishment, mobilisation, and deployment — which were then used to organise the thesis chapters. The logic of this structure is analytic, rather than strictly temporal, since my focus lies on capturing the dynamic of the processes within each stage, as well as between them. At the establishment and deployment stages, the militias are for the most part discussed separately, since the processes are relatively idiosyncratic, and easier to follow in the form of a temporal narrative. In contrast, the mobilisation stage is structured thematically, since the very distinct components are best analysed separately.

## 2. HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Before turning to their armed mobilisation, it is necessary to discuss the recent history of the Assyrians, and the circumstances they found themselves in immediately before and after ISIS invaded the Nineveh Plain. This broader context brings the challenges facing the militias more clearly into view, and enables a deeper understanding of the worldview and goals of those involved.

The first sub-chapter (2.1. Situating the Assyrians) begins with an overview of the demographic development and spatial distribution of the Assyrians in Iraq; this demonstrates the importance of the Nineveh Plain as the last stronghold for the shrinking Assyrian population (2.1.1. Population). The next section deals with controversies around ethnic identity, and the emergence of competing group labels; although such issues remained marginal for most militias, SHF viewed the promotion of a particular label as part of its *raison d'être* (2.1.2. Ethnicity). The role of the churches in society and politics is also discussed, since the Assyrian political parties shared highly uneasy relations with the clergy, who for the most part opposed armed mobilisation (2.1.3. Religion).

The second sub-chapter (2.2. From *Seyfo* to the Caliphate) summarises key events and developments from the late Ottoman period to the fall of Mosul in 2014. The past not only shaped the objective circumstances of the Assyrians, but also their historical narratives, which informed their response to the invasion of the Nineveh Plain.

The third sub-chapter (2.3. A Disputed Community) provides an account of Assyrian politics, and the broader political dynamics in the Nineveh Plain, with focus

on the period between 2003 and 2014. The Assyrian political parties came to depend on support from powerful outsiders, rather than from their own constituents — circumstances that were later reproduced in the process of militia formation (2.3.1. Electoral Politics and Self-Rule). With considerable success, KDP set out to rule the Assyrian population by proxy (2.3.2. Carrots and Sticks), while keeping both security threats and rival security providers in check (2.3.3. Security Arrangements). However, in Bartella a communal conflict developed, which remained unresolved when ISIS took control of the town (2.3.4. The Shabaks).

The fourth and last sub-chapter (2.4. From Occupation to Liberation and Beyond) outlines key events and developments from the fall of Mosul in June 2014 to its re-capture three years later. The invasion of the Nineveh Plain is the most central event, since it directly triggered the formation of Assyrian militias. With recent experiences in mind, their current circumstances changed, and the future uncertain, Assyrians generally responded with despair — but some issued a call to arms.

## **2.1. SITUATING THE ASSYRIANS**

### **2.1.1. Population**

The Assyrian heartland stretches across south-eastern Turkey, north-eastern Syria, north-western Iran, and northern Iraq. However, many Assyrians live scattered throughout the Middle East, as well as outside it (primarily in North America, Europe, and Australia). There are no reliable figures available for these populations — only rough and widely varying estimates provided by religious, governmental, or non-governmental organisations.

In Iraq, one of the few certainties is that emigration has caused a drastic reduction in numbers from the early 1990s until the time of writing. Around 1,000,000 Assyrians supposedly lived in Iraq in 2003, with only half remaining ten years later (Shlomo Organization for Documentation, personal communication, 2017, 15 June; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2015: 96). By 2014, most lived in the Sunni Kurdish-dominated Duhok and Erbil Provinces of the KRI, or in the adjacent Sunni Arab-dominated Nineveh Province — more specifically in the three districts that together make up the Nineveh Plain (not itself a recognised political entity), which is dominated by ethno-religious minority communities. The largest population centres with an Assyrian majority were Ainkawa, a neighbourhood in Erbil, with around 20,000 Assyrian inhabitants; and the town of Baghdeda, which supposedly had a population of 50,000 (Shlomo Organization for Documentation, personal communication, 2017, 15 June).

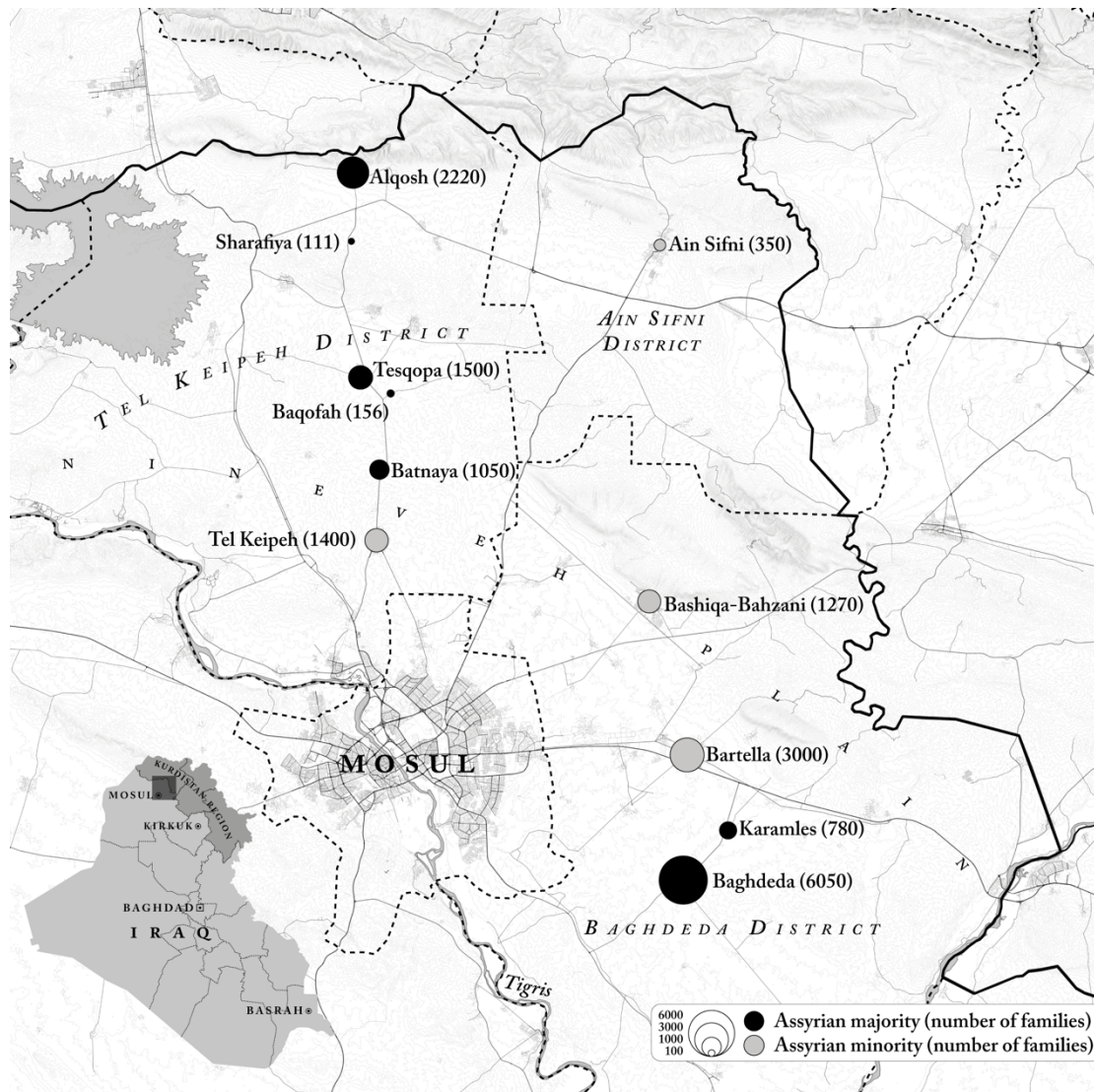
According to official figures from 2009, the total population of the Nineveh Plain was 500,295; out of which 237,330 resided in Tel Keipeh District; 226,367 in Baghdeda District; and only 36,598 in Ain Sifni District (United Nations Human

Settlements Programme in Iraq 2016: 14). All estimates of the ethno-religious breakdown are highly uncertain, but Assyrians probably constituted the largest component before 2014, with a population of around 130–150,000 in the Nineveh Plain and Mosul. They were roughly matched in size by the around 100–140,000 Shabaks, followed by around 60,000 Ezidis and 5–10,000 Kakais, whereas Sunni Arabs and Sunni Kurds comprised the residual (Chaldean Patriarchate of Babylon 2017; International Crisis Group [ICG] 2009: 35; Kurdistan Regional Government Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs, personal communication, 2016, 18 July; Shlomo Organization for Documentation, personal communication, 2017, June 15).

Before ISIS invaded the Nineveh Plain, around half to two-thirds of the Assyrian population lived in Baghdeda District, with the remainder mostly in Tel Keipeh District, and only a small number in Ain Sifni District. Assyrians were mainly concentrated to the larger population centres, whereas other communities dominated the surrounding villages. In Tel Keipeh District, nearly all inhabitants of Alqosh, Batnaya, Baqofa, Sharafiya, and Tesqopa were Assyrian; in Tel Keipeh town, slightly less than half the population was Assyrian, and the other half Sunni Arab. In Baghdeda District, Assyrians comprised the vast majority in Karamles and Baghdeda; Bartella was mainly Shabak, with Assyrians comprising slightly less than half the population; and the twinned towns of Bashiqa and Bahzani were dominated by Ezidis, with minorities of Sunni Arabs, Shabaks, and Assyrians — the latter making up around a quarter of the population. In Ain Sifni District, Ain Sifni town was dominated by Ezidis and Sunni Kurds, with a small minority of Assyrians (Shlomo Organization for Documentation, personal communication, 2017, 15 June; Youkhana

2019: 133, 137, 144–145). For an approximate guide to the spatial distribution of the Assyrian population, see Figure 2.1. It should be noted that these figures were produced in 2006, and include the resident population as well as IDPs that came to settle in the area.

**Figure 2.1. Spatial distribution of Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain, October 2006.**



*Note.* Data from Christian Aid Program Nohadra Iraq (CAPNI), cited in “Fleeing ISIS: Aramaic-speaking Christians in the Nineveh Plains after ISIS” (p. 137), by E. Youkhana, in B. M. Sevdeen, & T. Schmidinger (Eds.), 2019, *Beyond ISIS: History and future of minorities in Iraq*. London: Transnational Press. Copyright 2021 by Eduardo Artika. Printed with permission.

A large number of Assyrians left the country after ISIS invaded Mosul and the Nineveh Plain, and by early 2017 the total population was supposedly down to less than 250,000 (Shlomo Organization for Documentation, personal communication, 2017, 15 June; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2017: 163). Estimates of emigration from the Nineveh Plain specifically range between roughly a third of the population by early 2017, to more than half already by the summer of 2016 (Chaldean Patriarchate of Babylon 2017; Kurdistan Regional Government Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs, personal communication, 2016, 18 July). An unknown but certainly much smaller proportion of the non-Assyrian population emigrated, which meant the Assyrian claim to the Nineveh Plain was eroded by demographic reality at an accelerated pace (World Council of Churches & Norwegian Church Aid 2016: 32).

Following this brief summary of where the Assyrians *reside*, in the next section I will discuss who they *are* — and how they view themselves.

### **2.1.2. Ethnicity**

The development of the Assyrians as an ethno-religious group should be seen in the context of Islamic dominance from the 7th century onwards. Although most people in the Middle East eventually adopted the Islamic religion as well as the Arabic language, some of those that remained Christian also retained the previously dominant Aramaic language, both as a vernacular and for liturgical use (Brock 2010: 13; Loosley 2010: 7). There are today different vernacular dialects of Neo-Aramaic, which are distinct from the liturgical language, but many Assyrians instead have Arabic as their first language — or in some cases Kurdish.

Assyrians generally agree that they make up a distinct ethnic group, but while some proudly assert their unique identity, others play it down, or even identify as Arabs or Kurds (the latter being less common). Throughout Iraqi history, Assyrian distinctiveness has been undermined by both natural assimilation processes and political pressure — particularly during the reign of the Ba’ath Party. Although ethnic nationalism has provided a counter-balancing force, its advances have been hampered by fervent disagreement over which identity label(s) to use, and in what manner. The different labels all imply disparate understandings of the own cultural heritage and its historical continuity, and the identity issue has become highly complex and confusing (Atto 2011: 433–467; Boháč 2010).

Oddly, the three main labels are often used to separate between members of the Assyrian Church of the East and the Ancient Church of the East (‘Assyrians’); the Chaldean Catholic Church (‘Chaldeans’); and the Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholic Churches (‘Syriacs’). This practice suggests there are three distinct ethnic groups (or at least sub-groups), but considering the relatively recent denominational splits (see 2.1.2. Religion), it makes little sense to view ‘Assyrians’ and ‘Chaldeans’ as separate, if adherents of the Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholic Churches at the same time fall under the same label. Some instead claim these to be sectarian labels, which makes even less sense, since it implies doctrinal unity between the Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholic Churches — and separation between the latter and the Chaldean Catholic Church. Adding to the confusion, the same terms are also used with universal claims to denote the nation as a whole.

The ‘Assyrian’ label was the first to catch on among ethnic nationalists, and in Iraq remained more or less ‘the only game in town’ until 2003, when alternative

labels that had long flourished in the diaspora came to gain ground. Notably, the Church of the East only added ‘Assyrian’ to its name in 1976, seemingly without any intention to promote sectarian separatism. The label enjoys considerable support within all denominations, and advocates insist it is both secular and inclusive — although they are sometimes accused of viewing the Assyrian Church of the East as the first among equals (Boháč 2009: 69–70).

Among those embracing the ‘Chaldean’ label, some suggest it represents members of all denominations, while others claim to have a distinct ethnic or religious identity (Hanna-Fatuhi 2012: 43; Teule 2011: 194). At least in Iraq, the term enjoys virtually no support outside the Chaldean Catholic Church, which has led to accusations of sectarian separatism (Assyrian International News Agency [AINA] 2003).

The ‘Syriac’ label was from the beginning closely tied to the Syriac Orthodox Church, and has also gained supporters from the Syriac Catholic Church, but none from other denominations. ‘Syriacs’ are viewed by some as separate from ‘Assyrians’ and ‘Chaldeans’, but others claim the term represents members of all denominations. The term ‘Aramean’ is sometimes used alongside or interchangeably with ‘Syriac’ (Atto 2011: 442–444; Boháč 2010: 70–71).

There have been several attempts to resolve this matter with a compound label, e.g. ‘Chaldo-Assyrian’, which largely failed to catch on (Agence France Presse [AFP] 2003; Hanish 2008: 42–43). During the period of study, the identity conflict remained active in Iraq, but had de-escalated somewhat, as grudging acceptance had spread of the rather awkward compromise ‘Chaldean Syriac Assyrian’ (sometimes altering the order of the three names, or connecting them by commas, hyphens, or

strokes — a contentious matter of its own). However, Assyrians have been divided for considerably longer by religion, which is the topic of the following section.

### **2.1.3. Religion**

Nearly all Christians in Iraq are ethnic Assyrians, but following splits that occurred between 431 and 1968 they are divided into five main denominations (a small number have instead joined Protestant churches).

Until 2014, adherents of the Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholic Churches were mainly found in the Nineveh Plain, and members of the Assyrian and Ancient Churches of the East primarily resided in the KRI. The Chaldean Catholic Church, as the largest Christian denomination in Iraq, had a strong presence in both areas. Within the Nineveh Plain, Tel Keipeh District was strongly dominated by Chaldean Catholics, with a small number belonging instead to the Assyrian or Ancient Churches of the East. Baghdada District was dominated by members of the Syriac Catholic Church, followed in turn by the Syriac Orthodox Church and the Chaldean Catholic Church (Shlomo Organization for Documentation, personal communication, 2017, 15 June).

The Assyrian Church of the East split from mainstream Christianity in 431, and attempts to unify with the Church of Rome only took off a millennium later. Instead of unification, a drawn-out internal conflict eventually resulted in full papal recognition of the splinter Chaldean Catholic Church in 1830 (Rassam 2005: 108–110). In 1994, the Assyrian Church of the East and the Church of Rome finally signed a joint declaration to lay aside their theological disagreements, and soon thereafter it was allowed for members of the Assyrian Church of the East and the Chaldean

Catholic Church to take communion together (Healey 2010: 50). However, the modern era did not signal the end of religious discord. Following a dispute about the religious calendar, the Ancient Church of the East split from the Assyrian Church of the East in 1968, and unification attempts have yet to bear fruit (Loosley 2010: 9). The Chaldean Catholic Church and the Ancient Church of the East currently have their headquarters in Baghdad, whereas the Assyrian Church of the East relocated from Chicago to Erbil in 2015.

The Syriac Orthodox Church split from mainstream Christianity merely twenty years after the Assyrian Church of the East; like the latter, it saw a long period of unification attempts with the Church of Rome, which instead led to the gradual recognition of the splinter Syriac Catholic Church (Rassam 2005: 110–113). However, the Syriac Orthodox Church also eventually reconciled with the Church of Rome (O’Mahony 2010: 136–137). The Syriac Orthodox Church has its headquarters in Damascus, and the Syriac Catholic Church in Beirut.

Since late Ottoman times, the Assyrian Church of the East has been a bastion of ethnic nationalism, and displayed little deference to its rulers. Most notably, when the Ottoman government initiated a genocidal campaign against its Christian subjects in 1915, the Patriarch declared war in response (Healey 2010: 48–49). Although its members have remained prominent in oppositional politics ever since, the church itself has largely come to stay out of politics (Boháč 2010: 70).

In contrast, the other churches displayed deference to successive Iraqi governments. The Ba’ath regime came to favour the Chaldean Catholic Church in particular, but after 2003 the main object of loyalty shifted to the KRG (Petrosian 2006: 126–127). In the new democratic system, the churches (with the partial

exception of the Assyrian Church of the East and the Ancient Church of the East) increasingly reached beyond the spiritual realm to extend their influence in society and politics — often in collaboration with KDP, and at the expense of secular political parties. The churches shared with KDP (and previous rulers) a desire to define Assyrians by their religion rather than their ethnicity, which caused indignation among secular nationalists. “We never had our religious rights taken”, said a senior member of the Assyrian Patriotic Party (APP; G06). “We want to achieve our national rights as Assyrians“.

Although often hidden, the political role of the churches has sometimes been in plain view. Notably, the Assyrian KDP politician Sarkis Aghajan was awarded the title of Knight Commander by the Pope himself (Kurdistan Regional Government UK Representation 2009: 6), and senior clergy inserted themselves in party politics both directly and through affiliated organisations. On one occasion, Archbishops from the Chaldean Catholic, Syriac Catholic, and Syriac Orthodox Churches even supported the extremely controversial proposal to extend the term of the KRG President without holding any new election (Rûdaw 2015). “The churches say they don’t want to be affiliated with politics”, chuckled a senior Assyrian KDP member (G52), who obviously found the claim absurd.

Secular nationalists also claimed the churches enriched themselves, while keeping their flocks in a state of dependency and subservience. “The government and church have turned us into people who seek a tent and bread”, said a senior member of the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM; G37). An NPF officer (G11) agreed: “They have also defiled Christianity, they have, they have sold the Christians, sold, they have made us quite small”. A related accusation was that the clergy engaged in

corrupt practices — in particular after they took on the role to administer IDP camps and manage aid efforts in the summer of 2014. “The distribution committees are almost like gangs”, said a senior member of the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council (CSAPC; G29) with several family members in the Syriac Catholic clergy. Not only were there endemic problems with favouritism and theft, he claimed, but those involved enjoyed protection from others higher up in the church hierarchy. Similar claims were repeated by others — including IDPs from the Nineveh Plain that I met inside church-administered camps.

Even deeply devout and active church members sometimes expressed extreme disillusionment, e.g. a young Chaldean Catholic woman from the KRI (C40) said she had witnessed how the clergy bestowed favours, enforced rules selectively, and used mass as an opportunity to deliver political messages — to the point of mentioning individual politicians by name. Disgusted at the hypocrisy, she eventually came to hate her church, and felt joy upon hearing that the Patriarch had been physically assaulted by his own congregation during a visit to Jordan. “Our fucking Patriarch”, said a Chaldean Catholic NPU member (M31), shaking his head. “He should teach me how to be a good Christian, he should not be involved in politics”. Thus, although church pews remained packed every Sunday (as I observed myself in Ainkawa), the popular legitimacy of the clergy had been eroded — at least outside the strictly spiritual realm. However, this did not prevent continued political interventions.

Following the invasion of the Nineveh Plain, the clergy generally opposed Assyrian armed mobilisation, and as result the already strained relations with secular nationalist politicians worsened. The most prominent and vocal critic of ‘sectarian militias’ was the Chaldean Catholic Patriarch, who argued that only official forces

should fight and provide security (Agenzia Fides 2016; Pentin 2014). Notably, the church-affiliated NPGF never became the object of similar criticism during the decade that it operated in the Nineveh Plain, despite that it lacked an official license to operate — unlike most militias formed later. It appears plausible that rivalry with secular political parties was one reason to oppose militia formation — but there was more at stake here than direct influence over security provision. Whereas NPGF had played a purely defensive role, the new militias aimed to go on the offensive, and challenge traditional norms of behaviour. “The Christian religion is a religion of peace, but not a religion of submission”, said the second DN commander. “It is OK to believe in peace, but that does not mean that we have to submit to whoever wants harm to us”. An NPF officer (G11) agreed, and accused the churches of rendering Assyrians defenceless by promoting passivity: “They only want tranquility, but everywhere there are lions, you are a sheep”.

To understand these divergent views on the role of Assyrians in Iraqi society, politics, and armed conflict, it is necessary to place the religious and secular nationalist currents within a broader historical framework. Accordingly, the next sub-chapter outlines the most relevant events and processes from the 19th century until the fall of Mosul to ISIS.

## 2.2. FROM *SEYFO* TO THE CALIPHATE

The 19th century saw two developments that came to define the modern history of the Assyrians. Firstly, the persecution of Christians intensified, as they were suspected of harbouring sympathies for the enemies of the Ottoman empire. Secondly, a nationalist movement gained ground, particularly among members of the Assyrian Church of the East.

The persecution culminated in 1915, when the Ottoman government — in collaboration with local Kurds — launched a genocidal campaign against Armenians, Assyrians, Greeks, and Ezidis. The event came to be known by Assyrians as (the year of) *Seyfo*, or ‘Sword’, and resulted in population displacement on a vast scale from today’s Turkey into what became Syria and Iraq (Gaunt 2006).

The Assyrian population in Iraq already included members of all four churches, residing in both rural and urban settlements, but among the refugees was a distinctive group from the mountains of Hakkari. Comprised mainly of members of the Assyrian Church of the East, they have been described as “fiercely independent and somewhat warlike” (Healey 2010: 48). After fighting Ottoman forces and local Kurds on their home turf, they had been forced to retreat into Iran, but when allied Russian forces disintegrated in 1917, they were displaced for a second time to Iraq, where they sought British protection (Healey 2010: 48–49).

During the following years, many of the Hakkari refugees served in the Iraq Levies, an auxiliary military force loyal to the British government (Donabed 2015: 61–64). At the same time, Assyrian nationalists engaged in intense lobbying efforts, primarily directed at the British government, to set up an autonomous region (or even an independent state). After failing to secure an autonomy agreement, Assyrian

leaders demanded the Hakkari refugees should at least be resettled together, but they were instead dispersed to counter the rebellious Kurds (Petrosian 2006: 130–133).

The settlement issue remained unresolved when Iraq gained its independence in 1932, and the Hakkari refugees lost their British protection. Still armed, they were considered as an alien threat by the government, and an incitement campaign featuring open calls for mass extermination took off (Donabed 2015: 76–79, 101). Some crossed over into Syria to seek French protection and the right to settle, but without success, and upon returning they were instead attacked by Iraqi soldiers, who next turned their attention to Simele — an Assyrian town full of Hakkari refugees. Joined by local Kurds, the soldiers disarmed and killed the men, before raping, abducting, or killing the women and children. Similar attacks were launched against other Assyrian settlements, in a campaign lasting several weeks (Donabed 2015: 104–124).

The militancy and political assertion of the Hakkari Assyrians have continued to inspire nationalists, but their diplomatic failure and savage victimisation have at the same time served as a warning. Regardless which historical lesson is drawn, there is no forgetting, and the date of the Simele massacre — 7th August 1933 — is still commemorated as Assyrian Martyrs' Day.

The independent Iraqi state became dominated by Sunni Arabs, and defined by Arab nationalist ideology. Assyrians that were already urbanised and arabised could integrate relatively well, unlike the rural population in the north of the country — in particular the remaining Hakkari refugees. The government divided the Assyrian community by co-opting some of its leaders, while fear and denominational fragmentation kept the nationalist movement underground and modest in size

(Donabed 2015: 102, 125–127). However, under the leadership of the Assyrian ‘Comrade Fahad’, the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) became a magnet for disenfranchised communities (Marr 1985: 99). For several decades, ICP remained a potent political force, and popular among Assyrians, although it was steadily weakened by government repression, and the rise of competing religious and ethnic nationalist ideologies.

The launching of a Kurdish rebellion in 1961 heralded decades of misery for Assyrians in Kurdish-dominated areas (the adjacent Nineveh Plain remained firmly under government control, and was spared from violence and destruction). Squeezed between government forces and rebels, and suffering attacks from both, many Assyrians left their ancestral homes to settle further south, primarily in Baghdad. However, despite troubled relations, Assyrians and Kurds also shared cultural and political bonds — and the tribe of rebel leader Mustafa Barzani was generally popular with Assyrians. Although they may not have viewed it through the lens of Kurdish nationalism, many Assyrians willingly joined the rebellion, and some became members of Mustafa Barzani’s KDP, whereas others formed autonomous armed units (Donabed 2015: 142–151). The rebellion ended in 1970, but another was launched already in 1974, and lasted until the following year. Again, some Assyrians participated on the side of the rebels, but many others moved south or were forcibly uprooted and placed in collective towns (Donabed 2015: 175–176). From the first rebellion onwards, the land of the displaced was also expropriated by the government or local Kurds, which prevented Assyrians from returning to their ancestral homes later (Donabed 2015: 157, 176).

Following the outbreak of war between Iraq and Iran in 1980, a third rebellion led by KDP and its splinter PUK was launched — and this time the Assyrian participation was more organised. During the previous decade, after briefly acknowledging both Kurdish and Assyrian cultural rights, the government had reverted to a campaign of forced ‘arabisation’ — and in response the dormant Assyrian nationalist movement had gained strength again. Often with support from the diaspora, several new political parties and organisations were formed, including APP, BNDP, and ADM — and the latter even formed an armed wing to fight the government alongside KDP, PUK, and other opposition groups (Donabed 2015: 193–194; Hanish 2011: 162; Petrosian 2006: 122–123, 134–135). By the time the rebellion was definitively crushed in 1988, it had brought immense human suffering and physical destruction, culminating in the genocidal *Anfal* (‘Spoils’) campaign that targeted both Kurds and Assyrians (Donabed 2015: 199–212). Meanwhile, Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain and further south for the most part remained loyal to the government, and participated as conscripts in the grueling eight-year war against Iran, where they suffered disproportionately many casualties (O’Mahony 2008b: 134–135).

The last Kurdish revolt erupted in the wake of the 1990–91 Gulf War — this time on the initiative of local civilians, rather than the organised opposition. Large areas were initially captured, before government forces returned with a vengeance, causing mass displacement of Kurds and Assyrians alike — but the situation turned around again after the USA and the UK intervened to create the world’s first no-fly zone, which effectively became a no-go zone for the government. Civilians now returned home and — after 30 years of more or less constant fighting — the rebels suddenly found themselves in control of a vast contiguous area.

Already in 1992, a parliamentary election was held in the de facto autonomous zone, and out of five quota seats reserved for Assyrians, the KDP politician Sarkis Aghajan gained one, and ADM gained four — thus consolidating its position as the main force for Assyrian aspirations. Assyrians took up senior posts in the new administration, and there were numerous initiatives to promote Assyrian culture, the Neo-Aramaic language, and the Christian religion. Assyrian civil society and media flourished, and it seemed a new era had finally dawned (Petrosian 2006: 140; Teule 2011: 181–182). At the same time, Assyrians remained vulnerable to various kinds of abuses carried out with impunity by the majority Kurdish population, including frequent land thefts (Donabed 2015: 213–214). Further, the outbreak of civil war between KDP and PUK in 1994 put an end to any positive developments in the autonomous zone. Assyrians remained neutral throughout the conflict, which lasted until 1998, but sometimes fell victims to opportunistic violence (Drott 2012: 20).

The establishment of the autonomous zone entrenched the separation between the minority of Assyrians in Kurdish-dominated areas, and the majority residing further south (primarily in the Nineveh Plain, Mosul, and Baghdad). Fearing the extra-ordinary brutality of the government, most Assyrians outside the no-fly zone remained acquiescent, or actively supported the ruling Ba’ath Party, which provided a degree of protection for those that remained loyal (O’Mahony 2008: 134). However, disillusionment spread in the 1990s, as international sanctions brought the already crumbling economy to its knees, and the government replaced its staunch secularism with an Islamic ‘faith campaign’ to boost popular support (Baram 2011).

In 2003, the USA and its ‘coalition of the willing’ invaded Iraq with promises to bring freedom and democracy, but the repressive dictatorship of the Ba’ath Party was only replaced by the far more unpredictable violence of Shi’a militias, Sunni rebels, and various criminal groups. Assyrians, like other ethno-religious minorities, became easy prey for all of the above — both for ideological and opportunistic reasons (Hanna 2013). A seemingly never-ending wave of kidnappings, assassinations, and bomb attacks culminated in 2010, when gunmen wearing suicide vests stormed the Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad. The gruesome attack, which left 58 people dead, was claimed by an organisation calling itself the Islamic State in Iraq (later re-named the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and eventually the Islamic State; hereinafter referred to as ISIS). Although severely weakened at this point by US and Iraqi counter-insurgency efforts, the organisation clearly gave priority to murdering Christians — to the point where its foot soldiers were prepared to kill themselves in the process (Shadid 2010). The displacement of previous decades was now reversed, as Assyrians returned north to settle in the considerably safer KRI, or in the relatively safe Nineveh Plain. Unable to see a future for themselves there either, many decided to leave the Middle East for good (Abboud 2013; Hanna 2013; Youkhana 2019: 137).

In the years following the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, ISIS co-opted or pushed out rival rebel groups in neighbouring Syria, replaced semi-anarchy with authoritarian governance, and eventually came to reign supreme over a vast area. After gaining control of parts of Iraq as well, in June 2014 the organisation conducted a stunningly successful operation to capture Mosul; before the vastly outnumbered and outgunned attackers even arrived, the demoralised Iraqi Army simply disintegrated, and the country’s second-largest city fell almost without a shot fired

(Al-Salhy & Arango 2014). The remaining Christians were told to accept *dhimmi* status (a form of second-class citizenship), convert, or face death — with the two latter options clearly preferred by ISIS — but nearly all chose instead to flee to the Nineveh Plain or the KRI (Cousins 2014). Before the end of the month, ISIS had declared the establishment of an Islamic caliphate — whose borders were set to expand.

In the next sub-chapter, I will return to the 2003–14 period, and discuss topics of particular relevance for Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain. The first section outlines developments in the Assyrian political arena.

## **2.3. A DISPUTED COMMUNITY**

### **2.3.1. Electoral Politics and Self-Rule**

The introduction of electoral democracy in 2005 brought political opportunities for Assyrians, but also for those that wanted to co-opt them for their own purposes — and this was particularly true in the Nineveh Plain, where “the term ‘disputed minorities’ appears as befitting as ‘disputed territories’ to characterise the conflict” (ICG 2009: 23).

While the dominant ADM pivoted to Baghdad, its fragmented rivals were drawn into the orbit of KDP, but remained unable to garner much electoral support. To mount a more serious challenge to ADM, in 2007 KDP helped found a new party — CSAPC — which quickly entrenched its influence in the Nineveh Plain through allied local elites (Teule 2011; see 2.3.2. Carrots and Sticks). In the 2009 election for the Kurdistan parliament, CSAPC won three out of five designated quota seats, and the remaining two went to ADM, but the distribution was reversed in the election for the Iraqi parliament the following year. Both parties retained two seats in the Kurdistan and Iraqi parliaments after new elections were held in 2013 and 2014 respectively.

However, any attempt to read Iraqi Assyrian attitudes from election results is fraught with difficulty. Firstly, the turn-out was very low at times, some of the votes came from the diaspora, and an unknown number of votes went to non-Assyrian parties. Secondly, KDP directly interfered in the election process by means of fraud, voter suppression, patronage, and intimidation; and Assyrian political parties collaborated with larger allies to manipulate the quota system (AINA 2009a; AINA 2009b; AINA 2009c; Human Rights Watch [HRW] 2009: 47; Porter 2005). The

manipulation of the quota system began in 2009, when for the first time any Iraqi was allowed to vote for the designated minority seats — unlike in 1992 (when Assyrians in the KRI voted in special boxes), or 2005 (when there were no quota seats). Since fewer votes were needed to gain a quota seat than a regular one, larger parties could instruct their own non-Assyrian supporters to vote for an Assyrian ally — in exchange for compliance from the latter’s elected representatives. Allegedly, KDP mobilised votes in this manner for CSAPC; PUK for ADM; and Shi’a Arab parties for ADM as well as the Babylon Movement (BM) — whereas ICP politicians themselves admitted they had won a quota seat for an Assyrian electoral list with the help of non-Assyrian communists.

The over a dozen political parties remained largely ineffective, and were constantly squabbling. Even politicians themselves acknowledged that ordinary people regarded the Assyrian political arena with consternation, indifference, or outright disgust. Typically, politicians claimed to be independent themselves, but that others were mere puppets of a powerful ally; and that despite the tireless efforts of the own political party to foster unity, others regrettably refused, or merely pretended to co-operate. Some also blamed KDP for trying to divide and rule by supporting rival and often marginal political parties — but this seems unlikely, considering the successful effort to empower CSAPC as a counter-weight to ADM. More convincingly, others claimed KDP was collecting as many Assyrian actors as possible on its side, by offering them money and status. Inadvertently, the insatiable demand for new Assyrian allies thus ensured a continual supply of disaffected or opportunistic upstarts.

In principle, nearly all Assyrian political parties united around the goal to enact some form of self-rule in the Nineveh Plain ('self-rule' is here used as a broad term, to include the empowerment of local government without any changes to existing borders, the formation of a new federal province, or the more radical solution to establish an autonomous region), but there was strong disagreement between proponents and opponents of integration into the KRI. The KRG suggested that the Nineveh Plain could become a kind of autonomous region within the autonomous region, if the inhabitants voted for this option in a plebiscite. Most Assyrian political parties embraced a solution along these lines (or at least did not vocally oppose it), yet also supported the ADM-led effort to create a federal province — either because they could not be seen to stand in the way for self-rule, or because they calculated that the new entity could be attached to the KRI later. In early 2014, the GoI finally agreed to form a new province, but the rejoicing among Assyrians was brief. Before the decision could be implemented, ISIS stormed the Nineveh Plain — and the prospective minority haven was instead incorporated into the caliphate (AINA 2004; Hanish 2011; Ishtar TV 2014; Teule 2011: 190–192).

The struggle between proponents and opponents of integration into the KRI was never on equal terms, as the GoI generally displayed very little interest in the Nineveh Plain and its inhabitants — in stark contrast to KDP, as will become apparent in the next section.

### 2.3.2. Carrots and Sticks

To garner support ahead of a planned referendum over the status of the Nineveh Plain, KDP engaged in a major effort to recruit local elite allies, establish unofficial governance structures, and meet the needs of ordinary people — including security, services, and jobs. The project was led by the KDP official Sarkis Aghajan, affectionately known as *Ammo* Sarkis (‘Uncle’ Sarkis; see 2.1.3. Religion; 2.2. From *Seyfo* to the Caliphate). From his own office, Aghajan offered funding for a wide range of projects (including the construction of churches, cemeteries, and private homes), founded or co-opted various civil society organisations (while independent ones were marginalised), and provided salaries or financial aid to thousands of people (including IDPs). The strings were clearly attached to KDP, but the lavish funds were not allocated in any official budget, and there was little oversight — which unsurprisingly resulted in endemic corruption (Benjamin 2011; HRW 2009: 26; ICG 2009: 29–30; Kurdistan Regional Government UK Representation 2009: 8; Shadid & Fainaru 2005; Timmerman 2008).

After CSAPC was founded in 2007 (see 2.3.1. Electoral Politics and Self-Rule), it became a sort of node for Sarkis Aghajan affiliates, but local power was also devolved to the Councils of Notables. According to a senior member of the Beth-Nahrain Patriotic Union (HBA; G14), these unofficial bodies were founded by local initiative after the US invasion, but were soon co-opted by Sarkis Aghajan, who forced out anyone that could not be bought. Local clergy made up the most influential component, but the councils also included other elite members of local communities, including the heads of prominent families, and former government or Ba’ath Party officials. Backed by its mighty ally, these bodies came to wield considerable power,

and were able to side-line or take over official governance structures: ”[The Councils of Notables] often act as proto-states, providing constituency services such as supplemental schooling and medical care and playing a role in the appointment of civil servants and police at both the local and national levels by providing lists of candidates who are then endorsed by Kurdish parties” (ICG 2009: 29).

In addition to offering carrots to local people, KDP also wielded a stick to make them fall in line, using “intimidation, threats, arbitrary arrests, and detentions”, and sometimes even “violence, including torture” (HRW 2009: 9). After the high point of overt repression in 2005, KDP began to rely more on carrots and proxy rule, instead of imposing its will directly as an occupying force — but the shadow of the security service *Asayish* continued to loom, and perceived troublemakers could face arrests, beatings, or harassment. Perhaps even more consequentially, they risked losing their *wasta* (‘connections’) in both official and unofficial local governance structures — as well as their salary, if it was provided by one of the above. Since the private economy remained underdeveloped, dissidence was a luxury few could afford. Quite simply, once you had become part of the local patronage system, it was difficult to get out (AINA 2005a; AINA 2005b; AINA 2005c; AINA 2005d; AINA 2005e; AINA 2006b; HRW 2009; Shadid & Fainaru 2005).

As with job provision, KDP’s security presence served to entrench local influence and create dependency — yet at the same time filled a concrete need; this will be discussed in the following section.

### 2.3.3. Security Arrangements

In the wake of the 2003 US invasion, both the GoI and the KRG (effectively KDP) established a security presence in the Nineveh Plain, which despite its close proximity to rebel strongholds like Mosul and Tel Afar remained relatively safe until 2014. In fact, many displaced Assyrians came to settle there — although there was a simultaneous outflow of people through emigration (Youkhana 2019: 137).

Whereas the GoI was formally in charge, the KRG ultimately called the shots, particularly in the districts of Ain Sifni and Tel Keipeh (Knights & Kalian 2017; Non-Governmental Organization Coordination Committee for Iraq 2010: 8–9). In addition to deploying Asayish and military forces, whose members were not from the area, KDP funded a local Assyrian militia (which later came to be known as the Nineveh Plain Guards Force; hereinafter referred to as NPGF). With low capability, but strength in numbers and local knowledge, NPGF grew to become the main security provider in Assyrian-dominated population centres. In addition to guarding churches and other buildings, NPGF also operated checkpoints, which meant it could exercise power in local communities.

On its side, the GoI controlled another locally recruited force, the Facilities Protection Service, but it had similarly low capability as NPGF, and did not operate outside the government buildings and places of worship it was set to guard (Dury-Agri et al. 2017: 28). Iraqi Army units stationed in the area were equally unable to project power on behalf of the GoI, since they were often de facto loyal to the KRG (Knights & Kalian 2017; Shadid & Fainaru 2005). The GoI also controlled the Iraqi Police, but its presence in the Nineveh Plain was minimal. According to a senior official (G79), 27,000 members were stationed in Nineveh Province before 2014, and

other sources give similar numbers (Ahn et al. 2018: 81; Non-Governmental Organization Coordination Committee for Iraq 2010: 8; Rise Foundation 2017a: 11). However, according to figures from 2010, no more than 327 of them were stationed in Tel Keipeh District, with another 426 serving in Baghdada District. Moreover, Iraqi Police members could be deployed anywhere in the province, and many serving in the Nineveh Plain were Arabs or Kurds that were not local to the area, whereas ethno-religious minorities were extremely underrepresented at least in Tel Keipeh District. Already in 2005, the Ministry of Interior had actually decided to recruit hundreds of new minority members to serve in their home districts, but the KRG managed to delay and obstruct the project — while unsuccessfully pushing to get NPGF members integrated instead (AINA 2006a; AINA 2008; Assyria Council of Europe 2010; Kurdistan Regional Government UK Representation 2009: 14).

Despite that political rhetoric was sometimes running high in Baghdad and Mosul, federal and provincial authorities failed to take effective measures to challenge the KRG in the Nineveh Plain, and were mostly conspicuous in their absence. It should be borne in mind that Kurdish forces established a presence immediately after the fall of the old regime, when other authorities practically did not exist. The demographic composition further hampered the efforts of Shi'a and Sunni Arab actors to embed themselves locally, especially after large segments of the ethno-religious minority population had already been co-opted by KDP. Further, KDP exercised considerable influence in the Nineveh Provincial Council — in particular between 2005 and 2009, after an alliance of Kurdish political parties won the election, as result of a Sunni Arab boycott (Non-Governmental Organization Coordination Committee for Iraq 2010: 6–7). Later, under threat of violence, Kurdish

forces physically blocked the movements of the Governor and Iraqi Police commander — before the relation was patched up again, and KDP influence in the Nineveh Provincial Council partially restored (The International Herald Tribune 2009a). Meanwhile, the GoI prioritised confronting the KRG in the more strategically important Kirkuk Province (ICG 2006).

Regardless of what transpired on the higher political levels, there was little friction between different forces on the ground; the sharing of security camera footage between the Iraqi Police, Asayish, and NPGF is one example of how they cooperated in practice. One reason was probably that everyone accepted the ultimate authority of Asayish, and another that it was necessary to pool resources and information to counter the very real threat from rebels based in the surrounding area. Further, local members of different forces were often familiar with one another, and had no personal stake in political rivalries. An illustrative example is that one of the churches in Bashiqa was guarded by locally recruited Assyrians belonging to the Facilities Protection Service, but a stone's throw away another church was guarded by other locally recruited Assyrians belonging to NPGF. With families and neighbours to protect, and rebels lurking nearby, any conflict between Baghdad or Mosul and Erbil probably seemed irrelevant to them. In contrast, the local inter-communal conflict between Assyrians and Shabaks could hardly be ignored; this is the subject of the following section.

#### **2.3.4. The Shabaks**

As fellow ethno-religious minorities inhabiting the same area, Assyrians, Ezidis, Kakais, and Shabaks share similar historical and contemporary experiences. They were all subject to pressure from the Ba'ath Party to identify as Arabs, then (except the Assyrians) from KDP to identify as Kurds — and from both to submit politically. Like other non-Sunni Muslims, they also suffered devastating violence from ISIS and similar groups in the post-invasion period. Yet, whereas Assyrians generally maintained amicable relations with Kakais and Ezidis (in particular the latter), a conflict developed with their Shabak neighbours.

Compared to its largely successful efforts to co-opt the Assyrian, Ezidi, and Kakai communities, KDP encountered considerably more resistance from the Shabaks, who had other options when it came to seeking external support. Unlike the other ethno-religious minorities, Shabaks are Muslims, and have in later years increasingly come to adhere to the Twelver Shi'a tradition, which is dominant in both Iran and Iraq — and this made them a natural ally of the Iranian government and its Iraqi allies, who were keen to get a foothold in an area dominated by Sunni Muslims and non-Muslims (ICG 2009: 35–36; Leezenberg 2019: 198–199, 201–203; Salloum 2013: 161–163; Salloum 2015d: 27, 37). Mirroring the division between CSAPC and ADM, the pro-KDP camp among the Shabaks favoured autonomy within the KRI, whereas its opponents — led by the Shabak Democratic Gathering — promoted the establishment of a federal province. However, the Shabak Democratic Gathering developed a much closer relation than ADM with powerful Shi'a actors. Co-operation between Assyrians and Shabaks remained limited within both camps (Leezenberg 2019: 203; van Zoonen & Wirya 2017: 11–13).

Shabaks traditionally lived almost exclusively in villages in the Nineveh Plain, but after 2003 many instead came to settle in Bartella, where they turned the majority Assyrian population into a minority. Assyrians claimed this was a deliberate attempt to take over their historical settlements, and that the whole project was organised and funded by the Iranian consulate in Erbil, whose representatives frequently visited the area. Supposedly, houses and land were bought at very high prices, which the mostly poor Shabaks would normally not be able to afford (Gaston 2017a). The display of Islamic flags also caused discomfort among Assyrians, and some accused the newcomers of religious intolerance or incitement. With Bartella serving as a warning example, countering ‘demographic change’ became one of the main tasks of the Councils of Notables: “That is why the [council in Baghdeda] prohibited selling plots of lands to strangers”, said a senior CSAPC member (G29). “We made a black list for those who sell their lands to strangers, so they would have a black history. The black list means a bad reputation. We only had one situation like that”. Assyrian politicians in both camps expressed a desire for peaceful co-existence with the Shabaks — but separately, and not together. “We can deal with them, yes, but not live with them”, said a senior CSAPC member (G28). On their side, Shabaks claimed their only motives were to find jobs, and access public services. It bears remembering that they had no large population centre of their own, and after 2003 it became extremely dangerous for them to remain in nearby Mosul (van Zoonen & Wirya 2017: 10).

Community relations in Bartella remained tense, and on some occasions violence erupted. The most serious incident occurred on Christmas Day 2009 — which coincided almost exactly with the *Ashura* holiday celebrated by Shi’a Muslims. Supposedly, after a rumour spread that Assyrians had taken down or

desecrated Islamic symbols, angry Shabaks started taking down Christmas decorations and destroying shops selling alcohol, before attacking an Assyrian procession that was heading towards a church. Several were left wounded after an exchange of gunfire between local Shabaks and NPGF (AINA 2009d). As this event indicates, NPGF tipped the balance of power in favour of the Assyrians — and not only in direct armed confrontations. Although the militia guarded all town inhabitants against external threats, Shabaks claimed to have difficulties passing through checkpoints, and villages in the surrounding area were left relatively unprotected by all security forces (Kenyon 2008; Knights & Kalian 2017; Taneja 2011: 15; van Zoonen & Wirya 2017: 11). It was only soon before ISIS invaded the area that the GoI finally launched an initiative to set up a Shabak militia, after a previous attempt in 2007 had been thwarted by KDP (The International Herald Tribune 2009b; Knights & Kalian 2017).

However, no local militia could have protected the area from an all-out invasion, which became painfully apparent when official security forces failed to stand their ground. The next sub-chapter continues the historical account where it was left off earlier (see 2.2. From *Seyfo* to the Caliphate), and details the period from the summer of 2014 to the summer of 2017.

## **2.4. FROM OCCUPATION TO LIBERATION AND BEYOND**

When ISIS attacked Mosul in June 2014, the Iraqi Army disintegrated throughout northern Iraq, and parts of the Nineveh Plain were left virtually unprotected until KDP security forces set up a new line of defence. For nearly two months, the front line then remained quiet, before ISIS launched another offensive — and the forces that were supposed to defend the area again retreated without resistance. In the early morning of Assyrian Martyrs' Day — only hours after the panicked flight of the local population, and exactly 81 years after the Simele massacre — ISIS seized almost the entire Nineveh Plain.

In Shingal, which fell only days before, thousands of Ezidis had immediately been rounded up to be forcibly converted, executed, or taken into slavery, but in the Nineveh Plain nearly all non-Sunni Muslims were able to evacuate in time. From Tel Keipeh District, displaced Assyrians went north to the adjacent Duhok Province; and from Baghdeda District, others fled in the direction of Erbil, where most came to settle in the Ainkawa neighbourhood.

Only a small part of the Nineveh Plain remained outside ISIS control, including Alqosh — which was saved only by the premature halt of the rebel offensive, not because KDP security forces stayed to defend it. However, the latter soon launched a counter-offensive, and managed to take back Tesqopa and Baqofa ten days later — before themselves looting the towns (AINA 2014a; Cetti-Roberts 2015; Peshmerganor 2018: 54–55). The front line subsequently froze, and while most residents returned to Alqosh, other population centres remained completely or nearly empty (AINA 2014b).

The displaced were first crowded into churches and unfinished buildings, or slept out in the open, before camps were set up to provide a more permanent solution — while those that could afford instead rented private accommodation, or simply left the country (see 2.1.1. Population; Salloum 2015c: 28). The situation produced profound hopelessness, and many saw the unopposed invasion of the Nineveh Plain and Shingal as the final proof that there was no future for religious minorities in Iraq (Minority Rights Group International 2016: 38).

According to a September 2014 survey of displaced Christians (51 %) and Ezidis (49 %), a majority (56 %) wanted to return to their home areas under international protection, most others (42 %) preferred emigration — and nearly no one believed official security forces or local militias would be able to provide security on their own: “Most of the 14 respondents [0.3 % of the sample] who preferred ‘other/provide another option’ answered they would prefer to return with protection by the members of their own communities (i.e., no international actors involved)” (Nineveh Center for Research & Development 2014). It is worth noting that the survey did not include the option of security provision by local forces — whether on their own, or in collaboration with domestic or international security forces — but the responses still indicate that astonishingly few outside the Assyrian political parties viewed this as a prioritised goal.

In another survey in the spring of 2016, a strong majority (65 %) of displaced Christians expressed a desire to leave the country — a considerably higher proportion than among Muslims (12 %), but fewer than among Ezidis (85 %). This is particularly notable considering that many of those that wanted to leave in 2014 had by this time already done so.

By undermining the demographic basis for a viable Assyrian community, emigration was not only a consequence of hopelessness, but also contributed to creating it — yet I never heard anyone passing judgement on those that left. Staying behind to maintain an Assyrian and Christian presence in the ancestral homeland was perhaps seen as noble, but it was certainly not expected. “Emigration is a personal choice”, said the Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of Erbil in a media interview, “we cannot interfere in that” (Pentin 2017).

After the initial collapse, the official security forces of the GoI and the KRG were joined by a motley assembly of militias and even foreign rebel groups (e.g. the Kurdistan Workers’ Party), while an international coalition led by the USA launched an intense air campaign. The concerted effort eventually halted the advance of ISIS in the KRG-controlled north of the country, where the war settled into a stalemate, as well as in the GoI-controlled south, where official security forces and militias went on the offensive to reclaim lost territory.

With various types of support from the international coalition and Iran, including materiel and training, the capacity of the militias and official security forces gradually improved, and ISIS was slowly but surely forced to retreat from the gates of Baghdad and Erbil towards the gates of Mosul. However, although the GoI and the KRG agreed to co-operate in the final offensive, the issue of which forces should be deployed where became a major point of contention. Before reaching Mosul from the north or east, it was necessary to liberate the Nineveh Plain — but the political process to determine its future status had not moved forward an inch in preceding years, and there were well-founded fears on both sides that whoever liberated a certain area would also remain there.

Eventually, it was agreed that KRG forces would lead the initial push in some areas, but leave most of the Nineveh Plain as well as the city of Mosul to be taken by GoI forces (Gordon & Arango 2016; Salih 2016). When the offensive finally took off in October 2016, ISIS offered relatively weak resistance, and large parts of the Nineveh Plain were liberated within a matter of days, but the ensuing battle for the city itself proved to become just as grueling, destructive, and drawn-out as expected, until the last hold-outs were cleared in July the following year (Arango 2017; Arango & Hassan 2016). After re-gaining control of all Iraqi territory, the GoI declared victory in December — but ISIS remained active underground, and continued its insurgency with ambushes and bombings against both civilian and military targets (Coker & Hassan 2017).

Demands for self-rule in the Nineveh Plain did not fade into the background with the outbreak of war, but rather intensified, as the idea merged with calls to establish a safe haven with international support. Although the details of such suggestions varied, they generally included international guarantees for a self-ruled area, development efforts, and the establishment of local security forces (the politically controversial idea to deploy international forces was discussed more rarely). Practically all Iraqi or diaspora Assyrian organisations supported a solution along these lines, and after lobbying efforts some statements and legislation were passed in the US Congress and the European Parliament — but these documents remained for the most part mere proclamations of solidarity or vague intent (AINA 2015; Gaetan 2016a; Goss 2017; Saadoun 2016).

In a last-ditch effort, the Swedish Member of the European Parliament Lars Adaktusson convened a conference, with the ambition to include all relevant political

and religious actors. “Maybe it’s the last chance for us”, said a senior CSAPC member (G28) two weeks before the opening of the conference, which was held at the European Parliament in Brussels in June 2017. Like many others, he hoped that a display of Assyrian unity would finally prompt action from the USA and the EU. However, at the last minute several key actors including ADM and APP pulled out from the event, which attracted limited media attention, and failed to inspire any political action. Rather than herald a new dawn, the conference confirmed the debilitating political divisions that plagued the Assyrians, and the inability of sympathetic Western politicians to prompt any action on their behalf.

While Assyrian politicians issued statements and lobbied law-makers in Washington D.C. and Brussels, the line between the GoI and KRG zones froze into a de facto border, which Assyrians sometimes referred to as a Berlin wall. It was a solution that satisfied no one, and which the inhabitants of the Nineveh Plain remained powerless to change.

Many Assyrians had held out for the liberation of the Nineveh Plain, only to find their homes severely damaged or destroyed when they returned to visit. However, like other displaced Iraqis, they overwhelmingly cited security as their primary concern — and the lack thereof as the main impediment to moving back (Gaston 2017a; Minority Rights Group International 2016: 32; Rise Foundation 2017a: 3; World Council of Churches & Norwegian Church Aid 2016: 29, 31–32).

Even more than previously, Assyrians distrusted and feared their Sunni Arab neighbours, most of whom had remained in the area, and in some cases actively supported ISIS — as well as the Shabaks, who were now able to assert themselves with a militia of their own. It also remained unknown if the area would be safe from

insurgent attacks in the future, or if the multiple militias and official security forces would turn their guns on each other.

By mid-2017, only a few hundred families had moved back to the GoI-controlled Baghdeda, or the KRG-controlled Tesqopa and Baqofa; while few or none had yet returned to Batnaya and Karamles (which were extensively damaged); Tel Keipeh and Bashiqa-Bahzani (where many Sunni Arabs remained or returned); or Bartella (where many Shabaks returned). With the effective abandonment of key population centres, the future prospects for a viable Assyrian presence in the Nineveh Plain looked grim.

## 2.5. SUMMARY

Over the course of the past century, Assyrians have faced repeated calamities, and many have had their lives uprooted more than once. Between 1960 and 1991, successive Kurdish rebellions and brutal counter-insurgency campaigns caused internal displacement on a vast scale to Baghdad and Mosul — and the process was then reversed after 2003, when the rapidly deteriorating security situation brought Assyrians back north. By 2014, Ainkawa remained the only place in the KRI with a large concentration of Assyrians, whereas in the Nineveh Plain they probably comprised the largest ethno-religious component, and several towns retained an Assyrian majority. In a single night in 2014, Assyrians were then forced to flee their last stronghold in Iraq, and ISIS marched in unopposed to incorporate the area into its caliphate. The event failed to spark a spirit of defiance among Assyrians, who instead experienced an intense and often final loss of hope. 99 years after *Seyfo*, 81 years after the Simele massacre, 26 years after the *Anfal* campaign, and four years after the attack on the Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad, the fall of the Nineveh Plain seemed like final proof that the persecution would never end, that they were defenceless on their own, and that no one else would stand to protect them. Already during the preceding decade, Assyrian emigration from Iraq had increased dramatically, and it now accelerated further.

The seemingly never-ending massacres, displacement, and emigration have strongly shaped the society and politics of the Assyrians — but their modern history entails more than just passive victimhood. Already in the 1960s, Assyrians fought alongside Kurds against the government, and from the 1970s an underground nationalist movement provided direction and organisation for oppositional activities.

As the only Assyrian party with an armed wing, ADM rose to prominence in the 1980s, when it fought the government alongside KDP and others. A genocidal counter-insurgency campaign brought crushing defeat to the rebels in 1988 — but only three years later they took up arms again, and this time were saved by an international intervention to impose a no-fly zone. Following the establishment of the KRI, Iraqi Assyrians for the first time experienced political freedom, recognition, and representation — albeit imperfect. However, those residing outside the no-fly zone largely remained loyal to the government, until they were thrown into the dysfunctional democratic system that was installed following the US invasion. ADM now saw its hegemony threatened by the rapid ascent of the KDP-supported CSAPC, which unlike ADM sought to annex the Nineveh Plain to the KRI. The over a dozen rival Assyrian political parties may have based their politics on principle or pragmatism, but as KDP and its opponents offered funding and votes in exchange for doing their bidding, the discord between them also took on a self-reinforcing quality — while the politicians became less reliant on genuine support from their own constituencies.

Before as well as after the US invasion, the churches tended to define Assyrians by their Christian faith, rather than their ethnicity; and to ask for protection from those in power, rather than assert themselves, or raise their voice. However, when KDP replaced the Ba'ath Party as de facto ruler over most areas where Assyrians lived, the clergy took on an increasingly active political role, which sharpened the conflict between secular and religious leaders — whereas ordinary Assyrians grew increasingly sceptical of both.

To further its goal to annex the Nineveh Plain, KDP launched a major effort to co-opt Assyrian elites, and through them the local population. Amid neglect from the GoI, KDP used repression to stifle dissent, while flooding the area with money, and providing much-needed security, jobs, and services. Whether out of fear or pragmatism, ordinary Assyrians largely accepted this arrangement, which was in many ways beneficial to them, although the price was political disenfranchisement. Importantly, KDP tipped the balance of power between Shabaks and Assyrians in favour of the latter, and the demographic change that turned Assyrians into a minority in Bartella did not spread further — but the conflict between the two communities was never resolved.

After the invasion of the Nineveh Plain, Assyrian politicians at least outwardly retained a forward-looking and hopeful posture, and increased their lobbying efforts in the international arena. Some may have kept going simply out of fear of losing the money, status, and power they had been endowed with during the preceding decade, but others were undoubtedly driven by a genuine desire to save their community — and nationalists in particular retained a fighting spirit that had been formed by decades of struggle against the odds. However, after having spent the past few years squabbling, selling themselves to the highest bidder, and disenfranchising their own constituents, Assyrian politicians were by 2014 unable to inspire and mobilise their own community.

The war did little to impact the political dynamics, as the GoI and the KRG continued their manoeuvring to take control of the Nineveh Plain, the territorial dispute over Bartella endured, the Assyrian political parties failed to come together despite similar goals, and their relations with the churches remained tense. Rather

than bringing everyone together against the common enemy, the war merely presented a new arena for political competition — with alluring opportunities to change facts on the ground unilaterally. In this scramble to shape post-war outcomes, Assyrians for the most part lost out, as attempts to establish a safe haven came to nought, the Nineveh Plain became divided, few IDPs returned home, and several population centres were effectively abandoned. In short, the defeat of ISIS did not translate into victory for the Assyrians.

Having discussed the relevant historical and contemporary context, it is now time to turn to the main subject: the Assyrian militias that operated in Iraq between 2014 and 2017. In the first of three chapters that correspond to distinct stages in their trajectories, I will provide a detailed account of how the militias formed and began to operate.

### 3. ESTABLISHMENT

The first step for the Assyrian militias was getting off the ground as armed actors. To succeed in this endeavour, forging and maintaining relations with powerful domestic actors was essential. Most militias sought an official license to operate and hoped to eventually become institutionalised as part of the official security forces — but as an absolute minimum they needed to be tolerated. In terms of their activities, front line service was initially prioritised, since opportunities to engage in security provision were scarce.

The establishment stage includes the process to form new armed organisations, as well as front line service prior to the re-capture of the Nineveh Plain. It may appear more logical to treat these issues separately, but they were in practice intertwined, since the militias sometimes negotiated access to the front line during the formation process, or took up positions there at a time when their organisations only existed in embryonic form (front line service immediately before or during the re-capture of the Nineveh Plain is discussed later as part of the deployment stage). This chapter sets out to answer the following question: How did the militias establish themselves as armed actors?

The first sub-chapter discusses the goals of those forming or supporting the militias (3.1. Goal Convergence), and the second sub-chapter provides an overview of the most relevant domestic and foreign actors involved in the war (3.2. Domestic and Foreign Actors). Next follows an account of the early trajectories of the militias, and the history of the political parties and political entrepreneurs behind them (3.3. Militia

Establishment), before I finally return to answer the question guiding this chapter (3.4. Conclusion).

### 3.1. GOAL CONVERGENCE

The militias wanted primarily to change perceptions through propaganda, and establish a territorial foothold in the Nineveh Plain that could later be solidified. These wartime goals were to some extent intertwined, and ultimately aimed to assert affiliated organisations and individuals — as well as the Assyrian community — in post-war Iraq.

One key element of the first goal was to challenge notions of passive victimhood, instil a sense of national pride, and inspire Assyrians to believe in the future. “It’s about the participation, not as numbers, as Assyrians”, said the first DN commander. “It’s a national and moral duty to defend this land. We weren’t a force that would make such a huge difference, but we had to be there”. Another key element was to gain the respect of outsiders, and demonstrate the right of Assyrians to equal citizenship and self-rule. Considering that Iraq had recently transitioned to a democratic system, albeit imperfect, such ambitions were probably not unrealistic (Gurr 2000: 176). A senior HBA member (G14) pointed to the importance of

making our relations with Kurds and Arabs and other nations in Iraq more strong in future. Because if we don’t share the war against Daesh [ISIS], in future they will talk with us second class of Iraqi people. Maybe they say ‘you are not able to share us with everything, you don’t give blood for the country and the land’.

As for the second goal, recent experiences had demonstrated the precarious situation of the Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain, and diminished their trust in the ability or willingness of official security forces to protect them. “If you ask me this question before five years”, said the NPU commander regarding the need to form a militia, “I said to you no, no, no, only the army, if anyone here wants to fight, you go to the army, but what happened, I must change my mind”. Armed with local knowledge and dedication, the militias expected to effectively counter rebel or

terrorist attacks, and render the need for non-local Kurdish or Arab forces obsolete. “This is our goal, to become a regular force on the ground and to protect ourselves. We will not allow anybody else to protect us”, said a senior ADM member (NPU NinevehPlainProtectionUnits 2015b). Indeed, the founding statement of the militia proclaimed that

As the NPU grows in strength and size, it will become part of the other official security forces already present in the area, ensuring our peoples’ participation in the protection of their own lands, their own homes and their own lives. (Nineveh Plain Protection Units - NPU 2014b)

NPF voiced a similar ambition when it was formally established (Ittihad Beith Nahrein al-Watani 2015), and a senior BNDP member (G20) claimed later that two main goals had guided the militia from the outset:

First one, it was to participate with Peshmerga forces in the area [...] to liberate all Nineveh Plain [...]. Second, and which is more necessary thing, after the stage of [ISIS], this force will be the nucleus of the force which protects Nineveh Plain.

Despite the modest size of his militias, the SLB/SHF commander also expressed a desire to provide security following the re-capture of the Nineveh Plain (Kunda 2015); more realistically, NPGF aimed to re-establish itself in this role.

In comparison with its rivals, DN stands out for its strong focus on propaganda, but a senior APP member (D075) stated in 2017 that “for sure if we have any kind of autonomous like province or something like this, our Dwekh Nawsha will be part of the security forces in that area”. Possibly, the militia would have tried harder to establish a territorial presence if its membership had not been drastically reduced in 2015–16. BB similarly focused on propaganda initially, but after reaching the Nineveh Plain it displayed a clear ambition to establish a territorial presence; this was enabled by a rapid expansion of the membership. Apparently, the ranking of priorities was to some extent an adaptation to the current capacity and opportunities of the militia in question.

In addition to countering the threat from rebels and terrorists, a standing security force was thought to help the Assyrian community assert itself vis-à-vis powerful domestic actors and non-Assyrian neighbours, and thereby deter repressive or inter-communal violence. Even if an autonomous region were to be established, the ambition was to retain separate communally based security forces for Assyrians, Shabaks, and others. “[If] you have no military, you have nothing, you are nothing at all”, said an NPF officer (G11).

The institutionalisation of a militia as part of the official security forces would ensure its long-term survival, and counter legitimacy problems; among Assyrians, like other Iraqis, the very term ‘militia’ was associated with lawlessness and political division, and the proliferation of rival forces was widely seen as undermining security rather than creating it (Cigar 2015: 2). As demonstrated by the Badr Organisation, and KRG security forces (see 3.2.1. Kurdish Actors; 3.2.2. Shi’a Actors), an affiliated political actor could also be expected to retain de facto control over an institutionalised militia.

General perception changes should be viewed as a public good, but the militia projecting the message (e.g. through news media) would almost certainly benefit directly as well. For affiliated political actors, successful propaganda efforts might bring status, legitimacy, and by extension Assyrian votes. Security should similarly be considered as a public good, which could at the same time bring direct benefits to the militia and affiliated political actors. Firstly, if the militia were to remain loyal and useful, its powerful ally might extend support to the political level, e.g. by mobilising non-Assyrian votes. Secondly, the institutionalisation of a militia would likely bring formal or informal influence in the local community, whether as result of increased

popular legitimacy, or through the use of patronage, threats, or even violence. The striving for shared goals therefore became characterised by the zero-sum logic of political party politics — with support from rival powerful domestic actors acting as a centrifuge. The only militia with two affiliated political parties was NPF, which suffered from debilitating internal conflict, in particular at the deployment stage.

The goals of the militias and their powerful allies broadly mirrored one another, yet differed on critical points. Whereas no powerful domestic actor wanted to amplify the ethnic nationalist discourse of the militias, the latter were still useful for propaganda purposes — not as *Assyrians*, but as *Christians*. The Western-oriented and secularist KDP had a clear interest in boosting its official rhetoric of religious tolerance and inclusion, and the same was to some extent true of Iran-backed actors, whose propaganda highlighted the affinity between Shi'a Islam and Christianity (Al-Tamimi 2014). An Assyrian militia could also be useful as a direct extension of its powerful ally, whether simply to provide security, or to create new facts on the ground by establishing a presence in key areas. At the same time, empowerment and delegation of security responsibilities carried risks, as the militia might grow more assertive, or even switch alliance.

## **3.2. DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN ACTORS**

### **3.2.1. Kurdish Actors**

The KRI was formally established in 1992, and since the end of the Iraqi Kurdish Civil War (1994–98) its territory has been clearly divided into zones controlled by PUK and KDP respectively. In 2003 these zones were expanded into the disputed territories, where the two political parties came to exercise a high degree of influence, but short of full territorial control. Reflecting the generally blurred distinction between formal and informal power, the official security forces remain under political party control, even if they formally sort under the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs or the Ministry of Interior (Taib Menmy 2019). KDP has retained dominance over central KRG institutions, but rival political parties have been able to exercise some influence as partners in coalition governments.

Both before and after August 2014, the vast majority of Assyrians resided within the zone of KDP control (the Duhok and Erbil Provinces of the KRI) or heavy influence (the Nineveh Plain). Thus, unless they were prepared to restrict their activities to other areas, Assyrian actors needed to maintain reasonably good relations with KDP, whereas other Kurdish political parties were far less relevant to them.

### **3.2.2. Shi'a Actors**

Since 2005, Iraq has been ruled by shifting coalitions of political parties — most of them Shi'a-dominated and with varying levels of attachment to Iran. The exercise of power within the GoI evolved to become similarly informal as in the KRG, but less geographically divided and more compartmentalised. Most notoriously, the Ministry of Interior came under control of the closely Iran-affiliated Badr Organisation, which

exercised strong influence over some units within the official security forces — while retaining its own militia on the side (Dury-Agri et al. 2017: 24; Eisenstadt & Knights 2017; O’Driscoll & van Zoonen 2017: 20).

In 2014, a multitude of Shi’a militias — often tied to political parties — joined the new PMF umbrella to fight ISIS. Some of them followed the broadly national orientation of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the new Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, whereas others aligned politically and ideologically with Iran, which channelled support to favoured allies with a proxy character (Dury-Agri et al. 2017: 29). Notably, Iran did not demand full compliance with its own brand of Shi’a Islamism; to reach strategic goals, the country has long supported regional allies with a Sunni Islamist or secular ideology (Ostovar 2016: 11).

The Popular Mobilisation Commission (PMC) was established as the governing body of PMF, with the National Security Adviser serving as Chairman. The latter remained in his post after Haider al-Abadi succeeded Nouri al-Maliki as Prime Minister in August 2014. Notably, all three belonged to the Islamic Dawa Party, but Nouri al-Maliki had a more intimate relationship with Iran, whereas Haider al-Abadi and the PMC Chairman tried to push back its influence and nurture good relations with the USA (Dury-Agri et al. 2017: 33; Watling 2016).

Unlike his nominal boss, the PMC Deputy Chairman practically operated as an arm of the Quds Force, which is responsible for the international operations of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Himself a US-designated terrorist, he held a leading role in the Hizballah Battalions, an Iraqi militia and US-designated terrorist organisation, which is distinct from the similarly Iran-backed Hizballah in Lebanon (Dury-Agri et al. 2017: 8, 33; Eisenstadt & Knights 2017; Levitt & Smyth

2015). Unsurprisingly, it fell to the PMC Chairman to manage relations with the international coalition, while the Deputy Chairman became “the functional head of the PMF”, who “leads the de facto hierarchy of the PMF as he oversees the operational, administrative, and financial dynamics within the force” (Dury-Agri et al. 2017: 33). In this role, he was able to distribute GoI funds to militias aligned with Iran (Mansour 2017).

In April 2015, the Prime Minister (also Commander-in-Chief) was named as the highest authority of PMF, which in December the following year became part of the official security forces (Amnesty International 2017: 14). From the perspective of the GoI, this meant accepting the continued existence and public funding of a powerful military and political structure that was largely loyal to a foreign state, but the arrangement also made it possible to assert some level of domestic control. Since PMF was not re-organised or fully integrated into the official security structure, its institutionalisation should be considered as incomplete, and the future of the umbrella and its constituent militias remained highly uncertain at the end of the period of study.

### **3.2.3. The International Coalition**

The war also brought involvement from a US-led international coalition (formally the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh/ISIS), whose members gave various types of military assistance to actors affiliated with the GoI and the KRG. However, all materiel first needed to transfer through Baghdad, which meant both supplier and receiver depended on good relations with the GoI.

Bob (2005: 23–26, 181–187) describes how rebels use international lobbying mainly to garner attention for their broader political goals, rather than to mobilise

support directly for the armed struggle. Since waging war against the own government tends to be viewed as politically controversial, this appears prudent — but the same constraint does not apply to militias. At the same time, for militias international support is often either unnecessary or difficult to obtain — except in counter-insurgency campaigns with foreign involvement, e.g. the war against ISIS (Schneckener 2017: 812–813). It is therefore not surprising that — although Assyrian lobbying in the West focused mainly on civilian matters (see 2.4. From Occupation to Liberation and Beyond) — considerable efforts were also made to promote specific militias, as well as Assyrian armed mobilisation more generally (Kino 2014; Malas 2015). However, it does appear unprecedented for non-state armed groups this small to lobby foreign governments.

In 2015, the European Parliament passed a resolution in support of “a safe haven for the Chaldeans/Assyrians/Syriacs and others at risk in the Nineveh Plains”, and encouraged co-operation with “newly emerging regional and local forces” (AINA 2015). A similar resolution was passed the following year, but the EU only participated in the international coalition in a non-military role, and was unable to offer any practical support (AINA 2016a).

Already in late 2014, an explanatory statement for the following year’s US defence budget mentioned support for “local forces that are committed to protecting highly vulnerable ethnic and religious minority communities in the Nineveh Plain” (Carl Levin and Howard P. ‘Buck’ McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015 2014: 876–877). Similar formulations appeared in the budgets for 2016 and 2017 (National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016 2015: 774; National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 2016: 1191). No Assyrian

militia was specifically mentioned, which meant any group that had been properly vetted could in principle receive support. Apparently, such decisions were based on communication between the US Embassy in Baghdad, the Consulate General in Erbil, senior military personnel in Iraq, and US-based administration officials. Assyrian politicians had frequent meetings and telephone conversations with Iraq-based US officials, who expressed concern about the rivalry between the militias, and their ties to different powerful domestic actors. The fact that no steps were taken to unify the militias is therefore likely to have limited the extent of US support.

Locked in a cold war, Iran and the international coalition generally stayed out of each other's way, while continuing to back rival armed actors. However, this arrangement was complicated by the creation of the Tribal Mobilisation Forces (TMF), which collected various non-Shi'a (mainly Sunni Arab) militias under a semi-autonomous sub-umbrella within PMF. The main aim was to support local militias that would be able to provide security in re-captured areas. TMF stood under control of the PMC Chairman, and was a joint project between the GoI and the USA, with the latter acting as "the driving force not only behind the funding but also the design and structure of the program" (Gaston 2017b). Compared to militias aligned with Iran, those under the TMF sub-umbrella received very limited logistical support, and was mainly supplied by the international coalition.

### **3.3. MILITIA ESTABLISHMENT**

#### **3.3.1. The Nineveh Plain Guards Force — NPGF**

Like the Councils of Notables, NPGF started as a local initiative, but through Sarkis Aghajan soon came under control of KDP. The militia counts 2004 as its foundation year, and three years later became affiliated with CSAPC (see 1.2.4. Electoral Politics; 2.3.1. Electoral Politics and Self-Rule).

Individuals that were drawn into the orbit of Sarkis Aghajan had often been part of the governance apparatus of the Ba'ath regime — including its security forces and intelligence branches — but were left with few career options following the US invasion. The shift of allegiance to a former enemy undoubtedly relied in large part on individual self-interest, but KDP also provided security, infrastructure, and services for the community as a whole. “What did the central government offer us? If we give up on Kurdistan, who will protect us?” asked an NPGF officer (G27). However, the co-operation remained transactional in nature, and did not reflect any deeper ideological affinity. “Now our benefitting is here, OK, we can work together, and if tomorrow our benefit will be with the Sunna [Sunni Arabs] for example, OK, why not”, said a senior CSAPC member (G28).

The role of NPGF was at first restricted to guarding churches, but “in 2006, the security decline began in earnest and became terrifying”, said the second commander, “so the mission of the force changed from protection of churches to protection of cities in their entirety”. The militia now expanded to cover more or less all larger Assyrian settlements in the Nineveh Plain, with approximately 1200 members serving in Baghdeda; 600 in Bartella; 250 in Karamles; 90 in Bashiqa-Bahzani; 80 in the three villages of Mergi, Alfaf, and Maghara near the Mar Mattai monastery; and 400

in Tel Keipeh District. With only 15 per cent of the members serving elsewhere, the distribution was heavily skewed in favour of Baghdeda District, where the militia originated. Baghdeda town became particularly well-protected, with a three-meter-wide encircling trench, checkpoints at the entry roads, and guards stationed at churches, government buildings, schools — and even a sports centre. One likely reason for the uneven distribution is that Tel Keipeh District had a higher concentration of KDP security forces (Gaston 2017a). Moreover, local opposition to KDP supposedly prevented NPGF from establishing itself in Alqosh — previously a stronghold for opposition against the Ba’ath regime. However, the primary reason appears to have been the varying influence of local elites within Sarkis Aghajan’s governance structure, which had its centre in Baghdeda. This structure was not hierarchical, but rather functioned as a loose confederation of actors, whose informal influence was characterised by *wasta* and patronage practices.

*Wasta* is an important feature of the Iraqi bureaucracy; the term refers to the use of connections to get jobs, official documents, or other favours. A related phenomenon is patronage (or clientelism), i.e. the more organised exchange of favours for political support. Such practices can erode morale and effectiveness within an organisation, as well as trust in the organisation by outsiders, as self-interest replaces any other initial motivations (Warner 1997). If more widespread, the effects can even be seen in society as a whole:

Clientelism [...] both reflects and produces loyalties based on self-interest and material incentives. The frantic competition for new resources breeds nepotism and corruption among the elite — and a corrupted elite is incapable of eliciting sacrifice or even hard work from those further down on the social scale. (Sandbrook (1972: 117)

In Iraq, as in other countries, patronage practices were introduced with electoral democracy (Pierson 2011: 66–67; Shefter 1977). For CSAPC, like political parties

elsewhere, these practices came to influence “the character of the organization the party builds, what it subsequently must do to hold on to its social base, and consequently the bargaining strength within the party of practitioners of patronage politics and of their opponents” (Shefter 1977: 415). Once Sarkis Aghajan had established a patronage system in the Nineveh Plain, it was probably more or less immune to reform attempts, since individual self-interest at all levels depended on maintaining the status quo. The organisational trajectory of NPGF and affiliated actors thus became narrowly confined by path dependence, i.e. “dynamic processes involving positive feedback, which generate multiple possible outcomes depending on the particular sequence in which events unfold” (Pierson 2011: 20).

It is known that some non-state armed groups engage in patronage practices (Acemoglu et al. 2013; Dowdle 2007; Gutiérrez Sanín 2008: 230), e.g. in Colombia, where “paramilitaries deliver votes to politicians with preferences relatively close to theirs, while politicians they helped elect leave them alone and possibly, implicitly or explicitly, support laws and policies that they prefer” (Acemoglu et al. 2013: 7). However, as NPGF depended on KDP for its very existence, it had no leverage to bargain for preferable policies. KDP relied instead on material incentives and disincentives, all the way down to individual militia members, who were threatened to lose their jobs and be evicted if they did not vote for CSAPC (AINA 2009c; HRW 2009: 47).

The informal influence of local clergy over NPGF is notable; the most notorious example is a Syriac Catholic clergyman in Baghdeda, who practically controlled the militia. Anyone criticising him would be threatened by NPGF, said an NGO worker (C13), who had experienced this first-hand in his previous work as a

journalist. According to a senior CSAPC member (G29), the clergyman was “providing protection” for the first NPGF commander, who engaged in a corrupt scheme that was supposed to distribute land to militia members:

[He] used to take lands from people and promise to give it to [NPGF members]. He collected money from [them] and gave them fake ownership documents, and kept most of the lands for himself. [...] [NPGF members] sold everything trying to get the land, but they lost everything because of that man. My cousin was the head of the landownership department and they threatened to kill him if he tells people about the fake documents. [He] and another person went to my cousin’s office and threatened him. [My cousin] moved to Jordan with his family.

Other senior members of CSAPC and NPGF acknowledged that nothing had come of the land-distribution project, but they appeared unwilling to discuss the topic further. The clergyman also functioned as a sort of kingmaker, by instructing NPGF members to vote for a specific CSAPC candidate — thereby connecting those higher up and lower down in his own personal patronage network.

When NPGF was displaced to the KRI in 2014, its security role was reduced to providing unarmed guards for some IDP camps, churches, and schools in Ainkawa. The powerful clergyman passed away, and in early 2016 the NPGF commander was replaced. The new commander had supposedly worked in one of the intelligence branches before 2003, and appeared to enjoy a better reputation than his predecessor.

In previous years, repeated requests had been made to the GoI to formally recognise NPGF, or incorporate its members into the Iraqi Police (see 2.3.3. Security Arrangements). Unsurprisingly, considering the close ties between NPGF and KDP, these efforts had failed. On its side, the KRG could not recognise a security force that operated exclusively outside its own jurisdiction. However, when GoI security forces disintegrated in the summer of 2014, the KRG saw an opportunity to establish full control over the disputed territories. Seemingly as result of this emboldened attitude, the Ministry of Interior recognised NPGF as a sub-unit within the Zerevani

gendarmerie. There appear to have been no trust issues, as the militia retained a high level of organisational autonomy, and continued to function more or less like before, with heavy involvement of both CSAPC and local clergy.

Thus, KDP in some ways intensified its support, yet NPGF was never re-armed, or allowed access to the front line; these matters will be discussed in more detail in later chapters. As for now, it suffices to note that NPGF continued to receive support, but not in its role as a *militia* — only as a patronage apparatus.

### **3.3.2. Short-Lived and Aborted Initiatives**

Assyrian political parties started discussing militia formation after the fall of Mosul, but took no practical steps until the Nineveh Plain too had been captured by ISIS. In Baghdeda and Alqosh, however, local chapters took matters into their own hands earlier, without waiting for directives from above.

Local embeddedness proved to be of critical importance, as members, supporters, friends, and relatives provided a basis for recruitment, and loaned out weapons to supplant the small party armouries. Notably, the political parties in question had all previously set up armed groups for political ends or self-defence. Ahram (2016) claims that government support for militias “is not simply the result of discrete and rational calculation but of habitus and familiarity with certain repertoires and techniques for devolving violence to non-state actors” (Ahram 2016: 208). In this case, the militias were at best only tolerated by KDP, which certainly never devolved violence to them. However, familiarity probably made militia formation seem natural to the political parties themselves, while the general insecurity and uncertainty gave

the impetus to simply do *something*. In this way, militia formation to some extent resembled a *repertoire of contention*:

Particular groups have a particular history — and memory — of contentious forms. Workers know how to strike because generations of workers struck before them; Parisians build barricades because barricades are inscribed in the history of Parisian contention; peasants seize the land carrying the symbols that their fathers and grandfathers used in the past. (Tarrow 1998: 21)

ADM has a long history of armed mobilisation, and has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to shrewdly navigate a complex political landscape (see 2.2. From *Seyfo* to the Caliphate). An official unit was set up following the establishment of the KRG, but it was disbanded when the Iraqi Kurdish Civil War broke out in 1994, and ADM declared neutrality. Despite its official stance — and even active mediation between the belligerents — ADM joined a new government set up by KDP when the latter appeared to be on the verge of winning, but relations between the two political parties worsened over the following years (AFP 1996a; AFP 1996b; Mideast Mirror 1996).

In the running up to the 2003 invasion, ADM participated in high-level talks, and was even officially recognised as part of the Iraqi opposition — supposedly despite resistance from KDP, but with strong backing from diaspora organisations and allied US politicians (AINA 2002a; AINA 2002b; AINA 2002c; AINA 2002d). The official recognition was likely the reason why KDP allowed ADM to participate in the operation to capture the Nineveh Plain. The situation on the ground was often tense, and on one occasion KDP surrounded a building that ADM refused to evacuate, leading to a stand-off with weapons pointed in both directions. “There was a big problem happened in Sharafiya, it was about to lead to killing many people on both sides”, said a senior member of the ADM splinter Sons of the Rivers (G58), “but as I said, the highest level, by making phone calls, they solved the problem”.

During the following decade, ADM made no new attempt at armed mobilisation, but after the fall of Mosul the local chapter in Baghdeda gathered around 15 volunteers. Their attempt to co-ordinate with KDP security forces proved unsuccessful, but no one tried to prevent them from operating, since ADM was an officially registered political party, according to one of the volunteers (M41). It was indeed allowed for political parties to keep armed guards for their own offices and escort details, but they would normally not be patrolling the streets. It is likely that the chaotic situation and looming rebel threat heightened KDP's tolerance for such initiatives — in particular since the group was anyway so small.

The future NPU commander, a retired Brigadier, was unimpressed: “Some of them are too loud, [...] they don't know how they fight, only by ‘oh we will go to fight’, it's not enough, when they start fighting, if you are not trained very well, I think it's difficult to fight”. Instead, he started gathering volunteers through his own social network — without involving any political party — but the initiative was aborted after KDP security forces turned down his offer to co-operate.

Like ADM, HBA has a history of militancy, and its relations with KDP have been even more troubled. Although it was established as an Iraqi political party, HBA emanates from Dawronoye (commonly translated as the ‘Revolutionaries’), a transnational movement formed in Europe by Assyrians from Turkey. Dawronoye first tried to establish itself in the KDP zone in 1995, but was soon expelled. Apparently, it was ADM that asked KDP to take action, and the latter readily agreed, since Dawronoye co-operated closely with its enemy, the Kurdistan Workers' Party. Four years later, in retaliation for the alleged murder of a young Assyrian woman at the hands of a senior KDP member, Dawronoye and the Kurdistan Workers' Party

launched attacks that left no less than 39 KDP combatants dead — an operation that remains unique in modern Assyrian history. Another four years later, Dawronoye joined the PUK offensive into Kirkuk, but pushed its luck by trying to establish a presence also in the Nineveh Plain, where KDP detained several senior members. The movement subsequently dissolved its armed wing, broke with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, and moderated its revolutionary left-wing rhetoric — turning instead to democratic politics and non-violent methods.

The next attempt at armed mobilisation was made in the summer of 2014, when a Dawronoye veteran (G11) gathered a few young men in Baghdeda. However, only a few days later Asayish turned up and confiscated their weapons. “I could not do anything at all”, said the veteran. “When you do something, they come at you ‘ah you are Dawronoye’ [...] They know Dawronoye are dangerous for them”. An alternative explanation is that it was simply easier and less controversial to contain HBA than ADM, since the former was very small, uninfluential, and unregistered.

In Alqosh, local political party chapters held an emergency meeting after the fall of Shingal, and together decided to immediately set up a militia. Most of the 50–80 volunteers came from ICP or ADM, but some were unaffiliated, or belonged to KDP or PUK. There was no attempt from official security forces to prevent the militia from operating — probably for the same reasons that ADM was not actively contained in Baghdeda, and because some KDP members participated.

Alqosh has historically been a bastion of oppositional politics in general, and communism in particular. An elderly communist (C07) that I encountered in the street said the town used to be called the “second Moscow”, and assured me with a smile that “the idea will never die”. During a visit to its local headquarters, it immediately

become clear how ICP had been shaped by decades of struggle and sacrifice. The walls were lined with photographs of 46 ‘martyrs’ — all from Alqosh — and the handful of elderly men that came and went during my visit had apparently all been rebel fighters in the 1980s, before joining the militia in 2014. ICP also organised armed volunteers to protect Alqosh after the downfall of the Ba’ath regime.

As ISIS gathered its forces to invade the area, Alqosh was abandoned by all residents, KDP security forces, and some members of the militia that had formed only three days earlier — while the remaining volunteers spread out to patrol the streets, operate a checkpoint, and observe the plain from the mountainside immediately north of the town. ISIS inexplicably halted its offensive after capturing nearby Tesqopa, but instead suspected thieves turned up, and were driven off by the militia. Preventing theft appears to have been the main reason to remain in Alqosh — although the motive to form a militia in the first place was probably more vague. When official security forces returned, the volunteers disappeared from the streets, but remained on stand-by (Henderson 2014; NPU NinevehPlainProtectionUnits 2015a; Otten 2014).

On the central level, ICP briefly considered forming an Assyrian militia of around 200 members, but in the end decided against it. A senior ICP member (G54) said he met with the Minister of Defence of the GoI in the spring of 2015, but was referred to the Prime Minister, who wanted the militia to come under the PMF umbrella. However, the senior member dismissed PMF as sectarian, and was equally unwilling to seek support from the KRG:

Other parties have relationship, personal relationship or political relationship, like as parties with [...] people here in Kurdistan, so they give them permission to make that group, like NPU, Herasat Baghdada [NPGF], but Iraqi Communist Party refused that way, in dealing with the others in this way, we want formal dealing, we want law, we want something is clear, not to use the groups for passing our policy.

Another senior member (G55) similarly said he preferred the strengthening of official security forces to the proliferation of rival militias, and that ICP did not want to work with foreign powers. In essence, ICP was not prepared to play the game of militia politics. One might suspect this to be a post hoc rationalisation, and that ICP for whatever reason simply *failed* to form a militia. However, considering that much more marginal actors succeeded, it seems unlikely that a political party with parliamentary representation would not have been able to.

### **3.3.3. Dwekh Nawsha — DN**

Only four days after ISIS seized the Nineveh Plain, APP dispatched a handful of armed volunteers to Sharafiya, near the front line. The group took the Neo-Aramaic name Dwekh Nawsha (DN), or the ‘Self-Sacrificers’. The speed with which it mobilised — and the fact that it was from the outset tolerated by KDP — can be explained by the same factors that enabled political parties to form local proto-militias (see 3.3.2. Short-Lived and Aborted Initiatives), i.e. an existing organisational structure, official recognition, and access to local social networks.

The first DN commander was a senior APP member, who was replaced in September 2015 by a less prominent member and former Sergeant (Assyrian Patriotic Party 2015). Neither appears to have excelled in their military leadership.

APP had at least some familiarity with armed mobilisation. In 2003, around 10 volunteers had joined the offensive into the Nineveh Plain — without permission from KDP, which APP had experienced some problems with in previous years. “We had to disguise and dress as journalists, and we hid the weapons inside the cars”, recounted the first DN commander, an APP veteran. Relations with KDP

subsequently grew stronger, and APP gained a seat in the Iraqi parliament in 2005, after joining a Kurdish electoral list. The following year, APP endorsed the annexation of the Nineveh Plain into the KRI, and its leader was appointed as Minister of Tourism in the KRG. However, the political party programme adopted in 2011 neither supported nor opposed the expansion of the KRI, and under new leadership APP subsequently moved in a more independent direction (Assyrian Patriotic Party 2012; HRW 2016; Petrosian 2006: 137).

This development goes some way to explain why DN — in contrast to all other Assyrian militias — refused to seek an official license to operate. “We are partners in this land and not followers of anyone”, said a senior APP member (D025). Another senior member (G07) claimed organisational autonomy was necessary to bring attention to the Assyrian people, and their participation in the war: “If you have been a part from Peshmerga [KRG military forces] that mean your message is useless, you know”. Nevertheless, the small DN contingent in Sharafiya was eventually allowed to set up a new base in Baqofa, which was located right behind the front-line berm. “We had a common enemy, plus we are not strangers. We are the people of the area, and we had connections and know the parties”, said the first DN commander, whereas his successor claimed permission was in fact received directly from the office of the KRG President.

The highest KDP commander in the area was stationed in Tesqopa, but DN co-operated primarily with the commander of a more or less autonomous unit in Baqofa, which numbered only around 150 men (Peshmerganor 2018: 130). According to a Kurdish diaspora volunteer, who served in the unit, “[the Baqofa commander], a former hitman, has served jail time for murder. But for the last few years he has stuck

to fighting ISIS terrorists, becoming one of the most feared, respected and legendary leaders in the Kurdish Peshmerga forces” (Peshmerganor 2018: 11).

From their respective positions outside Batnaya and Baqofa, ISIS and KDP security forces routinely harassed each other with mortars, rockets, heavy machine guns, and auto-cannons. However, DN displayed little interest in manning the berm, or even allowing the considerably more eager foreign volunteers to do so — despite that they were both needed and wanted (Locks 2016: 74–77, 82, 99, 210–211; Peshmerganor 2018: 69–70, 99, 131).

Whereas KDP security forces never went on the offensive, ISIS made occasional and generally unsuccessful attempts. However, in May 2016 a lightning attack overwhelmed the Kurdish defences, and Tesqopa fell into enemy hands, while Baqofa was simply by-passed. According to the second commander, DN helped clearing the surrounding area after the battle. If true, it was a rare occasion, where the militia voluntarily performed some sort of meaningful task.

Judging by its behaviour, the main priority of DN was rather to give the *impression* of participating in the war. The extent of the foreign media coverage was often mentioned with pride, and the quest for attention sometimes turned bizarre — as when a DN-affiliated retired US Lieutenant Colonel boasted that “The Assyrian Army [DN] [...] has proved so effective that it was singled out in the Islamic State’s newsletter as an enemy” (Sangari 2016). A senior APP member (G07) was equally excited: “that was amazing thing, that how much we effect even those terrorists that they tell the world, whole the world, they make attention to all the world, they make a war declaration against a group of Assyrian Christians”.

Whereas DN remained unwilling to tie itself to any powerful domestic actor, it was extremely eager to get support from the USA. According to the senior APP member (G07), the goal was “to directly be allies, not just a group, a fighter group, give them training, give them money, let them go, [...] that was not our goal, our goal was how to be allies”. The senior member claimed to have been invited to the Department of Defense once, and several times to the Department of State. In these meetings, administration officials pointed out that the USA was unable to support an unlicensed militia, and suggested to join PMF. Clinging to unrealistic hope, DN stubbornly refused. “Maybe [...] they will change their policy one day”, said the senior member.

#### **3.3.4. The Nineveh Plain Forces — NPF**

The embryo of NPF was a group of 10 volunteers that turned up in Tesqopa soon after its re-capture. They were neither disarmed, nor forced to leave, but were initially only allowed to remain behind the front line. Uniquely, in the context of Assyrian militia politics, the group was formed by two political parties, whose collaboration relied on a shared desire to seek support from the KRG.

Following the US invasion, HBA had kept a low profile, but despite repeated attempts was never allowed to register as a political party — most likely because it formed part of Dawronoye (see 3.3.2. Short-Lived and Aborted Initiatives). However, Dawronoye did not in principle object to working with KDP — or anyone else, for that matter — according to a senior movement member (G19):

Ah, sure, if I know I can get benefit, or that my people will draw benefit from it, I will sit with the devil too. I can sit with Jesus too [...]. Then how much they benefit from it, they can benefit as much as they want, I do not care, I must first and foremost benefit and do something for my people, for the future.

In stark contrast to Dawronoye, BNDP almost lacked experience of armed mobilisation; the sole exception was an initiative to send a few volunteers into the Nineveh Plain in 2003. Relations with KDP had been somewhat strained before the US invasion, but in 2005 BNDP joined a Kurdish electoral list and gained seats in both the Kurdistan and Iraqi parliaments, and the two political parties subsequently remained very close (AINA 2002d).

Out of political necessity, HBA agreed that BNDP would handle negotiations with the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, and NPF was licensed in January 2015. The militia could now set up a base in Tesqopa, and access the front line — but the logistical support remained very limited.

They want us to remain a small group, small, that is political decision. That is no military decision, political. They want us only for photos, for TV, to remain there, to say ‘the Peshmerga [KRG military forces] is good, we are with the Peshmerga’, said an HBA-affiliated officer (G11). Indeed, the media statements of NPF and BNDP were for the most part completely in line with KDP policies and talking points, e.g. the BNDP leader said Assyrian participation in the war “indicates that Christians support living in harmony and coexistence in the Kurdistan Region” (Ali 2016a).

A BNDP politician was appointed to lead NPF, but he “knew nothing at all” about military matters, said the mentioned officer (G11), and “didn’t think like a military commander”, according to the founder of the Sons of Liberty International (SOLI), an organisation that trained the militia. One of the SOLI instructors (G77) said the haughty manners of the commander inspired both fear and ridicule, and that the members obviously resented him:

I could see the look on their face when he would tell them to do something or when something was stupid or whatever, like you could definitely see that they didn't agree with what he was saying or what he wanted.

Several members confirmed their dislike of the commander, who one claimed had treated them “like slaves”.

None of the Assyrian militias stationed in the Tesqopa area experienced much in the way of combat, except during the major attack launched by ISIS in May 2016. When the mortar rounds started falling, around 12–15 NPF members scrambled towards the collapsing front line, but were forced to retreat to Baqofa, which was soon surrounded. Three NPF members were left behind inside Tesqopa, but were successfully extracted — under fire — by a small group from SOLI. When they arrived to the new defence line north of Tesqopa, they found KDP security forces in complete disarray. “One of the guys [...] eventually [...] he like pointed up at the sky or something, like whatever, like he had had enough, for whatever reason, and he went home”, said the SOLI founder. “The other two NPF guys stayed with us and went like on foot with us trying to advance during this time, trying to fight”. With extensive coalition air support, the tide eventually turned, and the town was recaptured the same evening. By this time, NPF had called up all available off-duty members, and over the following two days the reinforced contingent participated in clearing operations inside the town (Hawramy & Ackerman 2016; Lockie 2016; Mazzetti & Cooper 2016; Peshmerganor 2018: 12, 130).

### **3.3.5. The Syriac Lions Battalions — SLB**

While established political parties were forming militias in the north of the country, a young political entrepreneur instead sought support in Baghdad. Born in Baghdeda in 1986 to parents that supported ADM, he later came to fiercely oppose the latter: “I

was independent and not an organisation. There was no party. In Baghdad, I was active in organising demonstrations. I was an activist, a political activist, a nationalist activist”.

The rapid expansion of ISIS in 2014 brought an unexpected opportunity for the unrenowned activist, who in October reached an agreement to form a sub-unit within the Imam Ali Battalions, a militia closely affiliated with the PMC Deputy Chairman, who “appears to head [its] operations and expansion efforts, and [whose] presence explains the group’s meteoric growth” (Levitt & Smyth 2015).

The sub-unit was dubbed the Spirit of God Jesus Son of Mary Battalions — against the wishes of its commander, who was not even religious. A fierce ‘Syriac’ nationalist, he instead referred to the militia as the Syriac Lions Battalions (SLB). SLB and its host unit did not share any deeper ideological commonalities — but at least for the moment both lacked options. “We joined the Imam Ali Battalions, as they also oppose the Kurds”, said the SLB commander. “My enemy’s enemy is my friend”.

The first SLB recruits were sent to a training camp in late 2014, and soon thereafter joined the Imam Ali Battalions in the front line. In the spring of 2015, they supposedly fought in Saladin Province, first in the Qadisiya neighbourhood of Tikrit, and then around Baiji, but it is difficult to know what role the militia actually played. With his fearless and belligerent personality, the SLB commander probably wanted to participate in active combat, but he lacked military background, and the Imam Ali Battalions had no incentive to risk the lives of its few Christian affiliates.

Relations between the Imam Ali Battalions and its sub-unit were not wholly amicable, according to the SLB commander: “They did not want us to be their

partners, they wanted us to be under their hands, under their command. They used us like they use [the BB commander], they said ‘come here, do that’, like this”. In an apparent attempt to stake out more autonomy, while remaining within the regional network of Iran-affiliates, the SLB commander travelled to Lebanon to meet with the Hizballah representative in the Christian-majority Mount Lebanon Governorate. The host suggested a quid pro quo deal, based on the erroneous assumption that the visitor wielded influence over the many refugees from Baghdeda that had arrived in Lebanon. “They would support me here [in Iraq], religiously, militarily and morally. But it was a condition that the guys over there would join Hizballah”, said the SLB commander. To deliver on the deal, he tried to involve those in possession of the requisite legitimacy, which he himself lacked: “I discussed the matters with our religious men, but they rejected this and I let this matter go”.

In a display of extreme pragmatism, an attempt was also made to get support from within Israel — the arch-enemy of Hizballah — which in 2014 officially recognised the ‘Aramean’ identity (Tepper 2015). The SLB commander welcomed the decision, and contacted an Israeli Assyrian that had been involved in the lobbying effort to ask for support — including weapons. Unsurprisingly, the request was turned down, and instead the reckless commander got into trouble with his host unit:

One time I also suffered an interrogation because of my [Facebook] page, where I had a Syriac flag and an Israeli flag. [...] And so they, the Shi’a, prepared an interrogation for me, which I suffered in Taiji, saying I was an Israeli agent. [...] I was imprisoned for six days during their interrogation. [...] Later I told them it is not just in Iraq that there are Syriacs, there are Syriacs in every state. We are one people. [...] And they were satisfied by this, but there still remained some suspicions among them that I was an Israeli agent.

A more severe challenge emerged when Asayish detained a few SLB members en route to Erbil to visit their families. “Later these six were used as an instrument of pressure on me to negotiate their release”, said the commander. “They wanted me to

join them, not as a partner, but as a subordinate. But I did not accept this. So the guys remained five-six months in prison”. Fearing they might get arrested as well, other members started leaving the militia, which gradually dissolved in the second half of 2015. Shabak PMF members travelling north to visit their families were also detained during this period, which indicates a deliberate policy on the part of KDP to harass rival militias from afar (Salloum 2015c: 78). Supposedly acting out of kin solidarity, an ICP parliamentarian and other influential Assyrians lobbied on behalf of the detainees, whereas the Imam Ali Battalions undertook no effort whatsoever — probably because relations with the sub-unit were at this point strained. The direct leverage of the Imam Ali Battalions vis-à-vis KDP may also have been limited, but the militia had highly influential allies among other Iran-affiliates, who ought to have been able to act on its behalf.

### **3.3.6. The Syriac Hawks Forces — SHF**

When SLB dissolved, its commander moved back north to set up a political party, the Syriac Democratic Union (SDU). Although the first conference was broken up by Asayish, a KDP-affiliated senior NGO member (G68) sensed an opportunity to pull the founder away from his Shi’a allies, and intervened to prevent the new political party from being shut down. Like HBA — which similarly lacked official recognition — SDU was therefore allowed to keep an office in Ainkawa, but without any sign on the front of the building.

SDU never established more than a tiny foothold on the outer margins of Assyrian politics, and its self-appointed leader was widely regarded as a pathetic figure that desperately wanted to become someone — or even as a violent and

deceitful “psycho”. However, Dawronoye saw an opportunity to expand its network of affiliates, and decided to adopt SDU.

Notably, Dawronoye had always played down the name conflict, and opposed denominational divisions, whereas SDU was defined by ‘Syriac’ separatism and overt hostility against ‘Assyrians’ (understood as adherents of the Assyrian and Ancient Churches of the East). “I hate them. I hate Assyrians, all of them,” said the SDU leader, whereupon my interpreter interjected that the community in question included her mother. “I hate them all!”, he yelled back. Dawronoye had also previously recruited allies it shared few ideological commonalities with, but the decision to support SDU is puzzling, since its leader was such an obvious liability and public relations disaster. A possible explanation is that NPF had largely failed in its ambitions, whereas the SDU leader was planning to place himself in charge of a brand-new militia — SHF.

Shared enmity against Kurds had supposedly been the reason for joining PMF the last time around, but the commander now changed his tune, and began courting KDP — with help from the aforementioned senior NGO member (D030). “Right now, actually, the Kurds are, really, better than all”, he said in August 2016. Nothing came of the negotiations, and when the operation to re-capture the Nineveh Plain took off, SHF still existed only in the mind of its commander. KDP had several Assyrian allies already, and probably hesitated to support a politically marginal maverick, but the SHF commander attributed the failure to his own principled stance: “We will only accept partnership, but only being a subordinate? We do not do this type of thing”. Less diplomatically, he added that “The Kurds are nothing but a cancer that eats the human body”.

### **3.3.7. The Babylon Battalions — BB**

Born in Baghdad in 1989, the BB commander was an outsider in the Assyrian political arena, and already before 2014 seems to have nurtured relations almost exclusively with Shi'a actors (Tote Alwade 2013). In the 2014 election, his BM was endorsed by none other than the future SLB and SHF commander — who denied the fact after their relationship broke down (Rian Chaldean 2014).

According to the SLB and SHF commander, his BB counter-part grew up in poverty, never finished primary school, and converted to Shi'a Islam when he married, but continued to present himself as a Christian, since it made him a useful political asset to others. The personal vendetta between the two political entrepreneurs brings obvious credibility issues, but they appear to have been well acquainted, and others repeated the rumour of conversion (Al-Tamimi 2017).

Even if he in fact remained Christian, the BB commander does not appear to have prioritised relations with the own faith community. Notably, BB organised its own celebration of the Shi'a Muslim Ashoura holiday, where the commander was personally scooping up rice and serving to civilians, but there is no evidence of initiatives to celebrate or highlight Christian holidays (Rian Chaldean 2015i).

Among the Assyrian militias, only BB opposed the creation of a self-ruled political entity in the Nineveh Plain, and consistently expressed support for Iranian policies (Iraq Insider 2016). The commander thus rhetorically attacked the KRG, the international coalition, and Saudi Arabia — while eulogising Iran-backed actors across the Middle East, and accentuating the affinity between Shi'a Islam and Christianity (Al-Iraqiya 2015). He also worked tirelessly to promote himself, e.g. one video featured both a song and a poem written in his honour (sinan alkaradi 2015). In

this arena, he competed only with the SLB and SHF commander, who erected a billboard in Baghdad with his own picture, pledging that “I will be the first martyr for our Syriac Aramean people” (Harakat al-Muqawama al-Masihiya 2015).

Whereas the BB commander enjoyed a certain amount of respect from political rivals, the same was not true of his brother, who was delegated responsibility as acting commander on the ground. A former BB officer said “the force was torn apart” by the brother, and that “he always brings bad reputation to Babylon” by engaging in criminal activities. The SLB and SHF commander launched a more personal attack, and claimed the brother was so stupid and ignorant that he “cannot express a single thought”.

Some claim BB formed already in June 2014, and saw combat three months later (Smith 2015), but the SLB and SHF commander as well as an SLB member said it was only attached as a sub-unit to the Imam Ali Battalions after their own militia dissolved, i.e. in the summer of 2015 at the earliest. On the Facebook page of the BB commander, content related to the Imam Ali Battalions first emerges in March 2015 (Rian Chaldean 2015a), and the following month he claimed to have already engaged in combat alongside the host unit in Saladin Province (Qanat al-Ghadir 2015). In May-June, BB members are for the first time seen in photographs from a training camp, and what appears to be the front line south of Baiji in Saladin Province (Rian Chaldean 2015b; Rian Chaldean 2015c; Rian Chaldean 2015d; Rian Chaldean 2015f). The commander also stated in a media interview that his militia participated in operations around Baiji, as well as Tikrit (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC] 2015).

Based on the above, it appears likely that BB existed in name only before it became part of the Imam Ali Battalions in the spring of 2015, then served briefly in Saladin Province, but not precisely during the same time or in the same place as SLB. Like the latter, and for the same reasons, BB probably saw little or no actual combat (see 3.3.5. The Syriac Lions Battalions). Notably, there is no evidence of front-line service between July 2015 and June 2016, and an SLB member claimed BB was in fact expelled from the Imam Ali Battalions in the latter half of 2015, as result of a conflict on the leadership level (Rian Chaldean 2016a).

Although the exact timing and circumstances are unclear, by mid-2016 at the latest BB instead attached itself to the Shabak Brigade, which — like the affiliated Shabak Democratic Gathering — was closely tied to the Badr Organisation (see 2.3.4. The Shabaks; Smyth 2015; Al-Tamimi 2017; van Zoonen & Wirya 2017: 12). In his new host unit, the BB commander apparently played a less subordinate role, and frequently met with senior Iran-affiliated political and military leaders. According to the former officer, the commander closely co-ordinated his activities with the Badr Organisation leader, the PMC Deputy Chairman, and even the mighty IRGC Quds Force commander. Interestingly, photographs from July 2015 show the BB commander standing close to the Badr Organisation leader, who apparently does not even notice his presence, but by October the two are posing side by side, and a year later they are seen leaning over a map — probably to signal the active involvement of BB in ongoing military operations (Rian Chaldean 2015g; Rian Chaldean 2015h; Rian Chaldean 2016b). This may indicate a strengthening of their relationship over time — or at least that BB came to be viewed as valuable for propaganda purposes.

### **3.3.8. The Nineveh Plain Protection Units — NPU**

The history of ADM has in large part been outlined and discussed already (see 2.2. From *Seyfo* to the Caliphate; 2.3.1. Electoral Politics and Self-Rule; 3.3.2. Short-Lived and Aborted Initiatives).

In the years following the US invasion, ADM focused on entrenching its position in Baghdad, and allied itself with the Islamic Dawa Party, one of the main Shi'a actors in Iraq. "At time of Maliki [Nouri al-Maliki, Prime Minister 2006–14, from the Islamic Dawa Party], there was good, very good relations between ADM and Maliki personally, and at that time, there was a minister [the Minister of Environment] from ADM", said a senior member of the splinter Sons of the Rivers (G58). However, ADM had always made sure to nurture relations with rival political actors, and never burned any bridges. According to one senior member (G38), ADM saw no problem in co-operating with the Islamic Dawa Party in Baghdad, KDP in Erbil, PUK in Silemani, and the Sunni Arab al-Hadba Party in Mosul.

Rival politicians tended to view ADM as high-nosed and unco-operative, and its leader as notoriously duplicitous. His authoritarian leadership also brought internal strife, which eventually prompted Sons of the Rivers to break off in 2013.

The following year, when other local militia members de-mobilised in Alqosh, ADM instead increased recruitment, and established a base in the village of Sharafiya, close to the front line (see 3.3.2. Short-Lived and Aborted Initiatives; Henderson 2014; NPU NinevehPlainProtectionUnits 2015a; Otten 2014). A much more ambitious militia project was now initiated, and ADM recruited a retired Brigadier from Baghdad to lead it. "At that time our aim was identical, so I accept to work together", he said, "but I not allow to them to poke their nose in the military, so

also for me, I don't allow myself to speak or poke my nose in the political". Although he liked to present himself as apolitical, the Brigadier had in fact once stood for parliament on the ADM slate. The collaboration between a senior military officer and his former enemies might seem odd, but ADM needed to win votes in Baghdeda, where the Brigadier was well-known and respected. On his side, the latter was apparently pragmatic but not opportunistic, considering that he never became an ADM member, and would have gained far more personally by aligning with KDP.

Despite that ADM opposed KDP, and NPU lacked an official license, in early 2015 permission was granted for the militia to access a training camp belonging to the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs. The ministerial portfolio at this time belonged to the Change Movement — a PUK splinter and uneasy coalition partner of KDP — and the camp was located near Chemchemal, in the zone controlled by PUK. The latter shared good relations with ADM, and apparently sought to bring NPU into its fold. Thus, by exploiting intra-Kurdish rivalries, NPU secured access to a facility where it could conduct a large-scale training programme. However, with the exception of a few volunteers serving in Sharafiya, all recruits subsequently returned home, since there were no funds to pay salaries.

Next, NPU needed permission to access the front line, and in the summer a golden opportunity presented itself in the form of a political crisis. Facing strong opposition from its rivals, KDP was desperately trying to mobilise parliamentary support for extending the mandate of the sitting KRG President, without holding any new election. “[KDP] had enough problems with the parties from Silemani — Gorran [the Change Movement] and PUK — so they want to have new friends”, said a senior ADM member (D040). ADM thus struck a deal to vote with the ruling political party,

in exchange for permission to build a base outside Alqosh, and access the front line. “We support [the KRG President] in some cases, this is politics”, said another senior member (G38).

It took longer to secure an official license, which was necessary to obtain both domestic and international support. Having ruled out a formal affiliation with the KRG, the only option was to come under the PMF umbrella, but NPU wanted to avoid even an indirect alliance with Iran. “If we were with their agenda, we could hire 2000 men”, said a senior ADM member (G38) about the Badr Organisation, whose support NPU refused.

However, an opportunity arose with the establishment of TMF, which offered an official license from the GoI, but with blessing from the USA, and little Iranian involvement (see 3.1.2. Powerful Actors in Iraq). TMF was largely controlled by the PMC Chairman, who shared a close relationship with the ADM leader, and was an old friend of the NPU commander. To be included in the new sub-umbrella, NPU also needed approval from the KRG, which was apparently granted following US pressure (Gaston 2017b). Finally, the militia was told to demonstrate that it was more than a paper product, by finishing construction of the Alqosh base. In February 2016, a delegation finally came to inspect the site, and NPU received green light to call up its members again — this time not as volunteers, but with salaries provided by the GoI.

The official recognition in turn enabled US political and logistical support, which materialised in the next few months. As mentioned, ADM had strong and long-standing ties with diaspora organisations and sympathetic law-makers, and the decision to support NPU was most likely influenced by their concerted lobbying

efforts (21st Century Wilberforce Initiative 2015: 9; American Mesopotamian Organization 2016; Intelligence Online 2015).

An Assyrian Public Affairs Committee called the American Mesopotamian Organization (AMO) was involved from very beginning, and supposedly had meetings at the White House, the Department of State, the Department of Defense, as well as Congressional offices. However, AMO tried to stop similar efforts from SOLI, which trained NPU at the KRG camp. “We had Members of Congress tell us that if you work, if NPU works with [the SOLI founder], we will not support, we will make sure the US government does not support the NPU”, said the AMO Chairman, who opposed SOLI on political grounds (see 6.1. Training; Kosnáč 2017: 15). However, the continued involvement of SOLI manifestly did not deter US support.

In the end, it is difficult to know whose lobbying efforts were most critical, or whether the decision to support NPU emanated mainly from administration officials in the USA, or the diplomatic mission in Iraq; what is clear is that no other Assyrian militia was promoted as aggressively as NPU.

Uniquely among GoI-licensed militias, NPU was now able to access the KDP-controlled front line. A base was set up in Tesqopa, where NPF was already present, but the rival militias steered clear of one another. The NPU commander lauded the co-operation with the Tesqopa commander, whereas the relationship with the Baqofa commander was less amicable — understandably, since he was implicated in the assassination of an ADM parliamentarian in 1993 (Amnesty International 1995: 86, 92–93; Assyrian Policy Institute 2018: 48).

When ISIS attacked Tesqopa in May 2016, some NPU members retreated together with KDP security forces, but 15 stayed behind in a well-placed defensive

position. Armed with only assault rifles, they held up the attackers for around 10 minutes, giving others more time to evacuate. All eventually made it out alive, although three were injured. Reinforcements from Alqosh arrived later to join the counter-offensive, and help clear the town after its re-capture (NPU NinevehPlainProtectionUnits 2016; many details relating to this event, and the Tesqopa battle more generally, are contested and uncertain).

### 3.4. CONCLUSION

To re-iterate, the question guiding this chapter is: How did the militias establish themselves as armed actors? Each process was unique, but based on the position of their founders in 2014, a rough distinction can be made between *establishment militias*, *challenger militias*, and *start-up militias*.

In the first category the only case is NPGF, which became an integral part of the KDP-sponsored governance structure already a decade before the invasion of the Nineveh Plain. According to Staniland (2015a: 697), the closest co-operation between a militia and government-affiliated actor will emerge if the former is electorally useful, ideologically compatible, and dependent. All three conditions held true for NPGF, which delivered votes to CSAPC, supported the annexation of the Nineveh Plain into the KRG, and relied completely on KDP for logistical and political support. Senior members were in turn dependent on the militia, and regular members were dependent on them, which meant acquiescence was built into the system at all levels. KDP could therefore trust its Assyrian ally, despite that the co-operation rested on a thin ideological foundation. However, KDP strategy turned more ambiguous following the invasion of the Nineveh Plain. Whereas the institutionalisation of the militia meant increased support, the decision to keep it away from the front line signals the opposite.

The challengers — DN, NPF, and NPU — were spawned by independent political parties with a developed organisational structure, and existing connections within the domestic and international political arenas. These militias were able to form without initial interference from powerful domestic actors, and enjoyed a

relatively high degree of freedom to choose the character and strength of their alliances.

DN did not directly support KDP, but was nevertheless allowed to take up position in the front line. One likely reason is that the militia held propaganda value, and another that it was not viewed as a political threat — in particular since it shunned any relations with Iran-backed actors. However, as will become apparent in later chapters, DN's insistence to retain complete organisational autonomy was incompatible with any future ambitions beyond propaganda.

As for NPF, the leading role of a political party loyal to KDP could be expected to bring extensive support, but this did not come about — perhaps in part because of an historical grudge against the other political party involved in the militia. More importantly, KDP probably saw no use for NPF other than as a propaganda tool, since NPGF was the preferred future security provider. In any case, NPF got the worst of both worlds, as it could neither assert its autonomy, nor secure sufficient political and logistical support. Moreover, as one of its founding political parties remained loyal to KDP, switching alliance would not have been possible without splitting the militia.

NPU was founded by a political party with some level of influence in Baghdad, Erbil, and Washington, D.C. With an exceptional ability to navigate these complex political environments, it was able to form temporary or partial alliances, and negotiate limited quid pro quo deals, instead of giving up its autonomy. This approach to external relations also came to characterise NPU, which carefully balanced assertion and caution, while keeping its options open. The militia was also patient, and played the game of armed politics in a strategic marathon. It did not reach the

front line until one year and a half after ISIS invaded the Nineveh Plain, but at this point its future existence and autonomy were uniquely well-protected — primarily as result of direct backing from the USA.

The start-ups — BB, SLB, and SHF — were based entirely around their respective commanders, who had no other realistic option than complete dependence on a single powerful ally. The SLB and SHF commander refused to accept this, and sought support from various actors that were not only rivals, but sometimes outright enemies. The ill-advised attempts to stake out more autonomy earned the commander a bad reputation, which further entrenched his marginal position, instead of the opposite. Considering the troublesome character of SLB, it is unsurprising that the Imam Ali Battalions decided to also adopt the loyal and acquiescent BB. However, the precise reason why the latter left its first host unit is unknown, and it is also unclear why the militia seemingly spent a long period out in the cold. Regardless of whether the alliance with the Shabak Brigade was the only option for BB, or the best among several, it was a perfect match. From the viewpoint of the Badr Organisation, collaboration between the two minority affiliates meant a promising opportunity to later establish a foothold in areas inhabited by Shabaks, Assyrians — or both. Lacking any alternative agenda, or desire to assert itself, BB gave unswerving loyalty, and received extensive political and logistical support back.

There was no clear *first-mover* advantage at the establishment stage, as the powerful domestic actors apparently collected as many Assyrian allies as they could. With the possible institutionalisation of a single Assyrian security provider far into the future, and the character of potential allies largely unknown, it made sense for powerful domestic actors to hedge their bets, and maximise the propaganda output

meanwhile. Thus, even within the KDP or PMF sphere, none of the militias was able to fill the *political space* by mobilising quickly, and this turned into an advantage for NPU in particular (Pierson 2011: 71–74). However, NPU probably took up the more narrow political space within TMF, considering the reluctance of the USA to directly support rival militias. It is also likely that SHF — the last mover — failed to attract support from KDP partly because it seemed at the time like a superfluous ally.

To simplify and compare the political practices of the militias, which settled at the establishment stage, it can be useful to think metaphorically in terms of *celibacy*, *monogamy*, and *promiscuity* in relation to powerful domestic actors and foreign governments (see Figure 3.1.). In reverse order, this means to receive political support from several powerful domestic actors or foreign governments; only one such actor; or none. Only successful attempts to build alliances are included, and foreign governments only count as separate actors if their support is the result of direct lobbying efforts on the part of the militia itself.

Although these terms are clearly value-laden, and can even be seen as provocative, no value judgement is implied in their use. Notably, the term with the arguably most negative associations — promiscuity — describes the most successful type of relationship in the context of this research.

**Table 3.1. Assyrian militia origins and political practices.**

<b>Militia</b>	<b>Origin</b>	<b>Political practice</b>
NPGF	Establishment	Monogamy
DN	Challenger	Celibacy
NPF	Challenger	Monogamy
NPU	Challenger	Promiscuity
BB	Start-up	Monogamy
SLB	Start-up	Monogamy
SHF	Start-up	Celibacy

DN can be considered voluntary celibate, although it maintained a low-key flirt with KDP. NPGF, NPF, and BB instead practiced monogamy, which brought a measure of security, but also dependence on a capricious and sometimes unsupportive partner. NPU, on the other hand, was shamelessly promiscuous, yet also tactful, and thus managed to remain uncommitted, without angering any of its temporary or long-term partners. Although skill was undoubtedly a factor, it is uncertain if militias affiliated with less influential political parties would have been able to behave in a similar manner. The unsuccessful mirror image was the SLB commander, whose tactlessness eroded trust within a monogamous relationship. With his new militia — SHF — he again refused to accept the terms of monogamy, and ended up involuntary celibate.

## 4. MOBILISATION

At the mobilisation stage, the militias built their capacity as armed organisations — primarily to fulfil their expected role at the deployment stage. The process began already when these organisations formed, and continued throughout their existence, but the relatively long and uneventful period before the operation to re-capture the Nineveh Plain was generally most important. The mobilisation stage is therefore conceptual by definition, but to a large extent temporally confined. This chapter sets out to answer the following question: How did the militias build their capacity?

Most issues related to recruitment were completely in the hands of the militias themselves, whereas other actors played a marginal role. However, these issues are important for the trajectories of the militias, and are therefore included in the present chapter.

In contrast, the militias depended almost exclusively on outside support for training, materiel, and funds. Unsurprisingly, powerful domestic actors played an important role, but so did foreign governments, and a wide variety of non-state actors, both domestic and foreign. Whereas some militias relied completely on a single powerful ally, others employed a diversified mobilisation strategy, where they sought support from different and sometimes rival actors. Neither strategy guaranteed adequate quantity or quality of training, materiel, or funds — as the present chapter demonstrates.

The first sub-chapter details organisational practices related to recruitment (4.1. Recruitment), and the following sub-chapter discusses how and why the militias accessed military training — or refused to do so (4.2. Training). Next follows an

account of how they obtained equipment and supplies (4.3. Materiel), and the challenges of fundraising (4.4. Funds), before I finally return to answer the question guiding this chapter (4.5. Conclusion).

## **4.1. RECRUITMENT**

### **4.1.1. Membership Size**

All militias spread (often vastly) inflated figures of their own membership size, in a transparent attempt to appear stronger than rival groups. By triangulating data from interviews, observations, news media, and social media, I have produced my own estimates, which are listed in Table 4.1. (Assyrian National Broadcasting 2017a; BBC 2015; Burger 2014; Catholic Herald 2015; Chick 2015; Damon 2015; Dwekh Nawsha 2014a; Dwekh Nawsha 2014b; France 24 2015; France 24 2016; Gaetan 2016b; Gaston et al. 2017: 31–32; Griswold 2015; Henderson 2014; Hussein 2016; Kunda 2015; Locks 2016: 36; Mauro 2016; McLaughlin 2015; Al-Mustaqbal al-Iraqi 2015; Nelson 2015; Neuhof 2015; Nineveh Plain Forces 2015; Nineveh Plain Protection Units - NPU 2014a; Nineveh Plain Protection Units - NPU 2014c; Peshmerganor 2018: 69; Pizzi 2015; Rian Chaldean 2015b; Rian Chaldean 2015c; Rian Chaldean 2015d; Rian Chaldean 2015e; Rian Chaldean 2015f; Rian Chaldean 2016a; Rian Chaldean 2016c; Rian Chaldean 2016d; Rian Chaldean 2016e; Rian Chaldean 2016f; Rian Chaldean 2017d; Neurink 2015; Saadoun 2015; Shlama Foundation 2015b; Shlama Foundation 2015c; Syriac International News Agency 2015; Smith 2015; Al-Tamimi 2017; Taştekin 2016; The voice of the Syriac 2015a; The voice of the Syriac 2015b; The voice of the Syriac 2015c). The figures for NPGF and NPU are likely very close to the truth, whereas other estimates are more uncertain, as result of contradictory or insufficient evidence.

**Table 4.1. Membership size of the Assyrian militias (author estimates based on interviews, observations, news media, and social media). The non-Assyrian membership is preceded by a plus sign.**

Militia	2014	2015	2016	2017
NPGF	2,500	2,500	2,500	2,500
BB	-	20	9 + 71 (Aug) 16 + 141 (Nov) 35 + 150 (Dec)	72 + 500 (Jan) 29 + 500 (Mar)
NPU	20	330 (Feb)	300 (Feb) 270 (Sep) 470 (Oct)	450
NPF	10	60	30	30
DN	24 (Aug)	50 + 5 (spring) 25 + 5 (summer)	25 + 5	15
SLB	-	30	-	-
SHF	-	-	20	7

The membership size varied considerably, e.g. in 2017 NPGF is estimated to have had 357 times as many members as SHF. It is also notable that most militias had only Assyrian members, but DN and BB recruited outsiders as well. Indeed, by the spring of 2017 only around five per cent of the BB membership was Assyrian. Another important observation is that the membership of NPF, DN, and SHF shrank during the period of study — and SLB even dissolved. In contrast, the size of NPGF remained stable, and NPU as well as BB grew considerably.

#### **4.1.2. Incentives and Constraints**

Whereas the topic of recruitment has received a large amount of attention in research on rebels, “we still know surprisingly little about who initiates and joins militias and why“ (Jentzsch et al. 2015: 763). According to Weinstein (2007: 52), a core issue for rebel groups is whether to appeal to immediate self-interest, or offer greater but more uncertain future pay-offs. The latter can entail the achievement of political goals, e.g. a change of government, and related individual rewards, e.g. status and power in the

post-war society. Those that are primarily motivated by immediate self-interest are called *consumers*. There is often a substantial pool of consumers available, but their low level of commitment to any political cause and the need to continuously pay them means the organisation will be built on a shaky ground. If dominated by consumers, an organisation is more likely to engage in predatory behaviour. *Investors*, on the other hand, are highly committed to the cause, but there is a smaller pool of such individuals available, and they may be more difficult to recruit. It may also take considerable time and effort to mould their motivation towards the ideology and goals of the organisation.

Barter (2013: 79) argues that the same mechanisms are at work in militia recruitment, and lead to similar outcomes. Government-initiated militias tend to receive funding from the government, feature consumers, and lack local support. In contrast, community-initiated militias tend to lack external funding, recruit investors, and enjoy local support. This ties in well with a study by Jentzsch (2014: 219–258), which is focused on community-initiated militia formation in Mozambique, and also provides comparisons with a government-initiated militia. The former managed to recruit many members through successful framing efforts, whereas the latter “could not mobilize a sufficient number of community residents, as they did not resonate with the local communities and did not provide an opportunity for self-empowerment” (Jentzsch 2014: 236). It is important to note, however, that these militias normally did not provide any salary (Jentzsch 2014: 235).

One problem with Weinstein’s distinction between consumers and investors is that the categories sometimes blur or overlap. It can therefore be useful to think in terms of necessary and sufficient causes. For consumers, the salary is a necessary and

sufficient cause for serving in a militia, whereas for investors a non-material goal is necessary and sufficient. For others, both are necessary causes, and sufficiency is only attained by their combination; although these individuals require a salary, they would not serve in a predatory militia. I suggest categorising such individuals as consumers, unless they make exceptional efforts towards organisational goals, without additional compensation. Since practically everyone draws a moral red line somewhere, the category of consumers would otherwise be nearly empty.

The Assyrian militias for the most part neither sought nor obtained any practical support from their own community, and found few investors to recruit. Even if a militia were to become the sole security provider in a self-ruled area, its power would not be comparable to that of a rebel group replacing a regime, and regular members or supporters would be unlikely to benefit in any tangible way. Moreover, pessimism about the future was rampant, and few believed in the militias with any zeal. The goal to create a local security force was not a *club good* essential to one's future in the community, but rather a non-essential *public good*, and free-riding was therefore rational from the viewpoint of individual self-interest (Hoeffler 2011: 276). In consequence, the only option for the militias was to recruit consumers — primarily among the many young, unemployed, and displaced (World Council of Churches & Norwegian Church Aid 2016: 23).

As shown in Table 4.2., there was some variation in salary level between the militias, but this did not cause any recruitment or retention problems, since there was a surplus of potential recruits eager to earn any kind of income. A much more important difference was how often salaries were actually paid out. Militias funded through PMF consistently received theirs, but for NPGF and NPF it appears roughly

every fourth salary was missing. For the self-funded militias, the problem was far greater. DN paid out salaries regularly in the beginning, but from the summer of 2015 with intervals of up to four months. SHF provided no salaries initially, but started paying smaller sums at some point in the first few months of 2017. Unsurprisingly, considering the predominance of consumers, both militias bled members.

**Table 4.2. Monthly salaries of Assyrian militia members (data from interviews). 2016 street rate: 1 United States Dollar (USD) = 1,250 Iraqi Dinar (IQD).**

Provider	Militia	Monthly salary	Missing salaries
GoI	SLB	750,000 IQD	Never
GoI	NPU	525,000 IQD	Never
GoI	BB	525,000 IQD	Never
KRG	NPGF	727,000–816,000 IQD	Occasionally
KRG	NPF	510,000 IQD	Occasionally
None	DN	625,000 IQD (maximum)	Frequently
None	SHF	400,000 IQD (maximum)	Frequently

However, there was almost no variation *within* the militias; in this sense they were highly egalitarian. Only NPGF had three different salary levels for members, and yet higher salaries for officers. All other militias paid the same salary to all members and officers (at least officially — the latter may well have received additional payment, e.g. from political party coffers).

For most militias, the membership size was simply a function of how many salaries could be paid by the GoI or the KRG — or with donated funds. NPU successfully lobbied to increase its membership from 300 to 500 in the summer of 2016, whereas similar efforts by NPF failed, and NPGF made no attempt. In contrast, SLB had no limit on recruitment, and in all likelihood neither did BB (until early 2017) — yet both experienced recruitment difficulties.

A major limitation for BB and SLB was that most potential recruits resided in the KRI. Serving in a militia with its headquarters in Baghdad meant paying for expensive travels, being away from family and friends for extended periods of time, and fighting to liberate non-Assyrian areas. It should also be noted that KDP and its Assyrian allies controlled the IDP camps, and were hostile to PMF — as were many community members. The SLB commander managed relatively better to find recruits from the Nineveh Plain, whereas his BB counterpart initially seems to have recruited primarily from the dwindling Assyrian population in Baghdad; this reflects their respective place of birth. However, BB grew rapidly in size after it arrived to the Nineveh Plain, which indicates that lack of local embeddedness or legitimacy did not constitute major problems. It is particularly notable that the communal conflict in Bartella did not prevent Assyrians from joining a sub-unit within a Shabak militia. This appears to confirm the primacy of economic motivations, and indicates that the fundamental cause of the initial recruitment difficulties was geography.

#### **4.1.3. Selection**

Within the large pool of willing recruits, one would expect the Assyrian militias to make an effort to identify those best suited — like in Sierra Leone, where militias successfully utilised referrals from the local community (Forney 2015). However, among the Assyrian militias, referrals were used systematically only in NPGF — and then to build patronage networks, not to screen for quality. Once you had secured a spot, it was yours to keep indefinitely, although you could choose to give it away to someone else (often a family member), or give it up in exchange for retirement pension. The result of this practice — where no quality criteria were employed, and

no one was forced to quit — became apparent during my visits to Bashiqa and Bahzani, where only around half of those present appeared fit for active duty. I estimated several members to be in their sixties, despite the official upper age limit of 35, and others were overweight, or in poor health.

In other militias, the vast majority were at least young, and seemed physically fit. Information was sometimes gathered through social networks, but often potential recruits were simply placed on a waiting list — or hired right away, if the timing was right.

The militias mainly recruited from Baghdeda District, with an overrepresentation of members specifically from Baghdeda town. The main exception was DN, which primarily recruited from Tel Keipeh District and the KRI; many were members or guards of the affiliated political party, or had family ties to it, and were therefore easily available. BB constitutes a partial exception, as it initially recruited in Baghdad, but after arriving to the Nineveh Plain drew members almost exclusively from Baghdeda.

An explanation for NPGF specifically is the geographical concentration of patronage networks associated with Sarkis Aghajan. Another explanation is that the second NPGF commander, the NPU commander, the SLB and SHF commander, as well as many officers hailed from the town. In fact, all but two of the NPU officers that had previously served under the Ba'ath regime were from Baghdeda. Through their social networks, information about the militias reached potential recruits, while screening information flowed in the other direction. Such practices may also have produced loyalty to the leadership, and solidarity between the members. Relatedly, with the explicit intention to raise morale, the NPU commander routinely reminded of

the specific goal to liberate Baghdeda; in a more diverse unit, it would perhaps have been more difficult to rally the members.

Recruiting from the largest Assyrian town was probably also a strategic decision. As the likely capital of a future self-ruled area, Baghdeda was uniquely important, and all militias except DN set their sights on establishing a presence in the town. With this goal in mind, local recruitment made sense, as it could feasibly enable effective security provision, and bring legitimacy to the militia.

#### **4.1.4. Motivation and Morale**

For militia members to perform well — particularly under pressure — it does not suffice to have the right physical and mental characteristics; high morale and the right kind of motivation is also needed. Fennell (2012) suggests that

Morale, therefore, can be defined as the willingness of an individual or group to prepare for and engage in an institutionally encouraged action or activity. This willingness may be engendered by a positive desire to act and/or by the discipline to accept orders to act. (Fennell 2012: 3)

Morale generally lends itself well to observation, e.g. if an individual or unit holds out against a vastly superior opponent, despite having the opportunity to leave the battlefield, this indicates high morale. However, the mostly passive deployment of the Assyrian militias makes it difficult to assess and compare their level of morale.

Motivation, on the other hand — which produces a “positive desire to act” — is generally difficult to study empirically. Interviewee statements can be unreliable, and observations inconclusive, yet “the whole specificity of war as a distinct human activity is lost” (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008: 20) if we fail to understand it. However, Assyrian militia members often reported that they and others were primarily motivated by the salary. Since social desirability bias could be expected to suppress

such statements, there is reason to trust this finding. The primacy of economic motivations is also backed up by observational evidence, as few were prepared to serve without a salary.

Even the second NPGF commander agreed the salary was the primary or sole motivation for the members, but in other militias non-economic motivations — e.g. to liberate or defend Assyrian areas — were more prevalent. “I would do anything for NPU because they gave me a purpose”, said one member (M39). “This force gave us the hope that we will go back to our lands and areas. NPU gave me the hope to stay in Iraq and to fight”. However, even if such motivations were genuine, the members generally demanded to also get paid.

Following the re-capture of the Nineveh Plain, there appears to have been a decrease in non-economic motivations, in particular among new recruits. A similar shift occurred in non-Assyrian militias (Rise Foundation 2017a: 19). Most members of NPGF, BB, and SHF were recruited before ISIS invaded the Nineveh Plain, or after it had been re-captured, but the other militias initially consisted exclusively of early joiners. However, few new members joined DN after the spring of 2015, whereas in NPU and NPF the proportion of early joiners gradually diminished. For those that joined early, the invasion of the Nineveh Plain was fresh in memory, the liberation had yet to occur, and the risks associated with front line service were unknown. As it turned out, not a single Assyrian militia member was killed, captured, or missing in action, and only a few were wounded. Once the Nineveh Plain had been re-captured, the risks were even lower. Moreover, in the very early period, the members often received no payment, but over time more stable salary arrangements developed, which changed expectations further.

The militias exerted little effort to tie the motivation of their members to the own organisation, probably because such attempts were likely to backfire. The vast majority would probably not have been receptive to indoctrination, considering the widespread revulsion against politics and politicians within the Assyrian community. “I don’t like politics, it’s a lie”, said a DN member (M03) — despite his own close family ties to the APP leadership.

The morale was in all likelihood also affected by organisational practices and deployment conditions, e.g. in NPGF, DN, and NPF, the rations were generally insufficient, whereas NPU invested more in food and water logistics. During my visits to Baghdeda and Alqosh, the food was consistently of good taste and nutritional value. In contrast, NPGF members deployed to Bashiqa and Bahzani told me the rations were insufficient, and that not enough drinking water was provided — probably because of neglect, embezzlement, or insufficient funds. At the same time, they were privileged, for one week on duty was followed by three weeks off — rather than one, as in other militias. In fact, the vast majority of NPGF members were never deployed at all, and served only eight hours per week in their temporary place of residence, e.g. guarding the entrance to their own IDP camp. However, this luxury probably lowered morale rather than raising it, as the members came to expect payment in exchange for doing almost nothing. The patronage system is also likely to have had a negative effect — not least since only members lacking *wasta* were deployed.

#### **4.1.5. Outsiders**

Non-state armed groups sometimes recruit from the diaspora, as during the Kosovo War 1998–99 (Sullivan 2004: 245–260), or among foreign nationals without ethnic kinship ties, as during the Spanish Civil War 1936–39 (Beevor 1982: 180).

None of the Assyrian militias made an active effort to recruit outside Iraq, but a few individuals from the diaspora nevertheless joined, and in DN a small contingent of non-Assyrian volunteers formed more or less spontaneously (Linehan 2015; Oakes & Dredge 2015; Magnusson 2014). Foreigners that came to Iraq or Syria to fight ISIS clustered together in a handful of units, where working relations were established early on, which meant DN had a first-mover advantage over rival militias.

One reason to accept foreign members was that they came at no cost, as they did not ask for salaries, bought their own materiel, and sometimes even donated to the militia. Senior DN members also pointed out that the volunteers attracted considerable attention in international news media. Indeed, a local British newspaper even reported about a prospective member that “A Nailsworth man who threatened to give up his job to go to Iraq to fight against the Islamic State (ISIS) has now decided against it” (Stroud News and Journal 2015).

For screening purposes, the volunteers were first invited to stay at the APP headquarters in Duhok, or in a house rented by existing foreign members in the same city, but several unsuitable individuals were nevertheless recruited. According to one foreign member (M10), there were frequent personal disputes, along with theft, sleeping on duty, and other types of undesirable behaviour. Similar examples abound in the memoirs of another volunteer, and a diaspora Kurd serving in the same area

(Locks 2016; Peshmerganor 2018). However, misbehaviour mainly affected other foreigners, as they stayed in a separate house during their deployment.

Most non-Assyrians serving in the Assyrian militias were fellow countrymen. NPU briefly opened up for recruitment outside the own community, but apparently hired no more than two Ezidis, who later left the country (Pizzi 2015). With that exception, only BB welcomed other Iraqis, who eventually came to make up the vast majority. Most likely, one reason was to simply increase the membership, and another to enable a territorial presence outside Assyrian areas, on behalf of the Badr Organisation — and ultimately Iran.

There was much confusion among the interviewees regarding which ethno-religious communities were included in BB or the Shabak Brigade — probably because the distinction between their respective memberships remained fluid even after the former split from its host unit in the spring of 2017. It seems likely that Shi'a Shabaks and Shi'a Arabs made up the membership of the Shabak Brigade, whereas BB consisted of Assyrians, Kakais, Sunni Arabs — and occasionally Shia Shabaks and Shia Arabs on loan from the Shabak Brigade or other Badr Organisation affiliates.

#### **4.1.6. Retention**

Militia members usually quit because they emigrated, or found better-paid jobs. Even the NPU commander, who said one of the aims of his militia was to encourage people to stay, admitted he would himself leave if the general situation did not improve. In some militias, members also quit because they feared arrest, did not get paid, or were dissatisfied with the organisation and its leadership.

Despite that replacements were usually readily available, the departure of existing members could cause problems. Firstly, replacing trained or experienced members with fresh recruits directly affected the capacity of the militia. Secondly, early joiners were more likely to have non-economic motivations and high morale (see 4.1.4. Motivation and Morale). Thirdly, the approval of new members could be delayed in the bureaucracy, or even halted on orders from above.

According to the second NPGF commander, 25–30 per cent of the 2014 membership had departed by February 2017. However, with a standing permission to recruit replacements, and extremely low quality standards, this did not really matter.

In SLB, retention problems proved far more consequential. After the incarceration of six members by Asayish, others quit the militia to avoid the same fate, causing it to dissolve (see 3.3.5. The Syriac Lions Battalions — SLB).

In SHF and DN, a large proportion of the membership quit because of unpaid salaries. DN could still rely on a small number of deeply loyal political party affiliates and family relatives — one member even paid out of his own pocket to commute from Baghdad — but SHF lacked a similar network, and only barely survived as an organisation. DN also saw members of the foreign contingent leaving — either to serve in other units, or return home — often out of frustration with the lack of meaningful front-line activities (see 3.3.3. Dwekh Nawsha — DN).

The authority to approve replacements for NPU was initially in the hands of the PMF Chairman, who shared good relations with the NPU commander, as well as the ADM leader. However, all requests were turned down from around January 2017, when the GoI President assumed direct responsibility, and halted all new recruitment — seemingly in an attempt to rein in PMF.

For BB, the timing of this decision could hardly have been worse, as most Assyrian members quit soon thereafter. A former officer (G02) claimed the mass departure was triggered by his own resignation: “I asked my men not to quit, because they need the salaries to live. When I arrived home, they all quit after me”. The underlying reason was that BB engaged in criminal activities throughout the Nineveh Plain, including Baghdeda — the home town of nearly all Assyrian members. The mass departure caused great damage to BB, which more or less lost its credentials as an Assyrian militia.

Some members left NPF because they were unhappy with the first commander, whereas others that remained loyal instead quit when he was replaced. Adding to this problem, the approval of replacements by the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs was severely delayed, and never covered the gaps left by departing members.

Lastly, it is notable that some spots in NPGF and NPU were taken up by ‘ghost members’. In NPGF, those with enough *wasta* could choose to not work at all, at least until 2014, when they were forced to give away their spots. According to an NPU member (M32) with access to the salary lists, 67 (possibly 63) members never trained or deployed to the Nineveh Plain, and at least some instead worked for ADM.

#### **4.1.7. Officers**

NPGF and NPU were the only militias to systematically recruit among retired officers. The second NPGF commander claimed 50 out of 170 officers had previously served under the Ba’ath regime, and initially all NPU officers shared the same background. Apparently, the number of retired officers in NPU grew from seven at the outset, to 17 by the spring of 2017.

Recruitment to NPGF was conducted within the network of Sarkis Aghajan affiliates, whereas in NPU the credit goes to the commander, whose rank and social standing made him uniquely well-placed to function as a bridge between the retired officers and ADM. Like himself, the latter had refrained from joining NPGF, whether out of principle, or because they had other sources of income. Although they lost their livelihoods when ISIS attacked the Nineveh Plain, their motivation to join NPU appears to have been mainly non-economic, considering that they earned the same salary as the members, and probably could have found more lucrative employment elsewhere.

For candidates without military background, higher education was the only requirement in NPGF. According to one recently commissioned officer (G23), “anyone with a degree” was accepted, and all 28 in his cohort graduated, despite that some “should not be officers”. In contrast, NPU had no higher education criterion, and instead commissioned from the ranks. At least three Sergeants from the Ba’ath era were thus made into First Lieutenants, along with another two that had served in the Iraqi Army after 2003, and yet others were selected for their “courage and experience”, as one retired officer (G32) put it (Nineveh Plain Protection Units - NPU 2016d; Nineveh Plain Protection Units - NPU 2016e). This meant NPU could utilise knowledge within the organisation to select the most suitable candidates. However, some members complained about *wasta* practices when several ADM members were commissioned, alongside the son of one of the Captains.

The different approaches of NPU and NPGF resemble those of the German Wehrmacht and the US Army in the Second World War. The practice of commissioning from the ranks was used widely in Wehrmacht, which valued

experience highly, and attempted to bridge the divide between soldiers and officers. In contrast, the US Army gave more weight to formal education, and emphasised distinctions based on rank. The former model was more successful, and German soldiers generally held their officers in higher esteem (van Creveld 1982: 129–141). Similarly, the rank-and-file in NPU seemed to value their officers considerably more than in NPGF.

Other militias sometimes recruited individuals with military background, but they were generally low in rank. More commonly, officers were recruited from the affiliated political parties. One reason was probably that the other militias lacked the kind of social networks that NPGF and NPU had — and another that there were few willing candidates left for a third mover to recruit. Additionally, loyalty was prioritised over competence — and political appointees could be trusted, since their status position and income often depended on their political party career.

## **4.2. TRAINING**

### **4.2.1. State Actors**

Many members of NPGF, DN, and probably SLB were former conscripts, whereas those serving in other militias were generally younger, and lacked military background. Regardless, the vast majority needed to improve their skills, and with the exception of DN and SHF all militias enrolled their members in training programmes organised by powerful domestic actors or their foreign allies.

NPGF members began receiving training from KRG instructors after the militia was incorporated into Zerevani. The first cohort completed a 45-day basic course in early 2015, and others graduated in the spring of 2015 or early 2016, following two months of instruction. The training held very low quality, and was not designed to meet the demands of contemporary warfare or security provision. In video footage from a graduation ceremony, NPGF members are seen performing advanced drill exercises, which must have taken considerable time to learn (Kurdistan 24 2017). Although impressive, such skills were hardly essential in the war against ISIS. Hand grenades were distributed without instruction on one occasion, and the recruits did not even know they had to pull the pin before throwing, according to one member (M16). Commenting sarcastically on the suitability of his peers, and the lack of adequate training, he said he hoped they would not get armed, since they could only harm themselves. However, the training was probably no worse than for other KRG units, which sometimes received none (MacDiarmid 2015).

Additional instruction was provided by the international coalition — more specifically the Kurdistan Training Coordination Centre, whose contributing nations included Italy, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany, Norway, Finland,

Hungary, Canada, and Slovenia. The modules included marksmanship, fighting in built-up areas, counter-Improvised Explosive Device techniques, combat first aid, checkpoint duty, as well as vehicle and body searches. The militia was now organised into 11 cohorts, which undoubtedly improved efficiency. However, although some received up to three weeks of training, most received only one, and the Kurdistan Training Coordination Centre instructors were often present only part of the day. Thus, although the additional training held very high standard, the average NPGF member received very little of it. The officers learned considerably more, since they were trained separately by Kurdistan Training Coordination Centre instructors already during the basic course.

An additional problem was that individuals with sufficient *wasta* could graduate without even participating. In fact, whole local units skipped the training, e.g. in three villages close to the Mar Mattai monastery. These villages were never occupied by ISIS, and a local commander (G22) said the members were therefore needed continuously. However, since the duties were very limited, it would have been easy to send half the members at a time away for training. According to the local commander, this would have angered them, which demonstrates how networks of influence were built and sustained in NPGF. By ‘protecting’ the members against capacity-building initiatives from above, the local commander ensured their continuing loyalty.

Like the first NPGF cohort, NPF members underwent a course lasting around 40–50 days, but it proved even more inadequate. “They did not do any training, real training”, but were mostly just marching around, said an NPF officer (G11). Remarkably, they never even fired a weapon. “It was all just a sham show training they had had”, said the founder of SOLI, which later trained the militia.

NPF pleaded repeatedly for an additional course, but the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs refused to channel support from the international coalition. A senior KRG official (G50) said the militia received sufficient training from SOLI, but this is hardly a credible excuse, considering that the latter did not get involved until a year after the basic course.

More plausibly, KDP's different approach to the two militias reflected its strategy. Whereas NPGF was most likely viewed as a trusted long-term partner, NPF was somewhat politically suspect, and less obviously useful after the war, when it had served its purpose as a propaganda tool.

Militias under the PMF umbrella more rarely received training from official security forces, although access to camp facilities was often provided. Instead, the instructors often belonged to the own militia, the IRGC Quds Force, or Lebanese Hizballah. The duration varied considerably, with some programmes lasting only one day, and others three months (Cigar 2015: 8–9; 23).

According to its commander, SLB was trained for one month by instructors from Iran and Lebanese Hizballah, whereas a militia member (M52) said he received only one week of training, and that others completed a 15-day course. Although the duration of the training was short, it presumably held reasonably high quality, considering that the instructors came from organisations with extensive experience.

BB members were trained for two weeks in July 2015, and the content and quality were likely similar to what SLB received (France 24 2015). According to one of the instructors, “We focus on man-to-man combat as well as fighting within cities and how to assemble arms as well as taking aim in our training” (BBC 2015).

However, following the re-capture of the Nineveh Plain, the militia only organised training internally, presumably to avoid a temporary manpower shortage.

Although NPU was under the PMF umbrella, it also nurtured political relations with the USA, and did not want to be tainted by association with Iran. Consequently, the militia had a strong incentive to *avoid* PMF training if possible. When the NPU commander was invited to the designated camp, and noticed that the instructors were from Lebanese Hizballah and Iran, he simply declined the offer: “They say if you don’t go we will stop your salaries, [...] but I don’t go, I said I will not”. Despite the bold attitude of this inconsequential militia commander, in the end no sanctions were applied, probably for mainly two reasons. Firstly, cancelling salary payments would require approval from the PMC Chairman, who was an old friend of the NPU commander. Secondly, no other PMF units were stationed in KDP-controlled territory, hence it would have been impossible to take more direct measures, e.g. disarming the militia, or arresting its leadership.

Following successful lobbying (see 3.3.8. The Nineveh Plain Protection Units — NPU), NPU instead secured support from the USA. For about one and a half months in the summer of 2016, the U.S. Army Special Forces provided training in the Alqosh camp, mainly for new recruits. According to the NPU commander, 100–120 members participated, and some received specialised training in counter-Improvised Explosive Device techniques. However, the instructors were present only a few hours at a time, three days per week — and the members rotated home every second week. Thus, although the training held high standard, even those attending the sessions regularly received very little of it. Possibly, senior US military personnel in Iraq did not view the training of NPU as an important task to prioritise, and devised a modest

training programme only to satisfy those higher up in the administration. Even if it did not significantly improve the capacity of the militia, the training carried an important political message: NPU now enjoyed direct US backing.

Soon before the offensive to re-capture the Nineveh Plain, 200 new recruits arrived to NPU, but it was not until the spring and summer of 2017 that they passed through a ten-day course organised by TMF, with instructors from the international coalition (Gaston 2017b). The recruits learned very little, but they were not sent to the training camp for this seemingly obvious purpose. “I will explain why”, said the NPU commander. “Because the Americans say each one he will train, we will give to him weapons, that’s the reason why I will send”. Presumably, relations with the USA would have suffered in a more general sense also if NPU had declined the offer.

#### **4.2.2. Non-State Actors**

Training can also be provided by non-state actors, but until recently such opportunities were limited for militias and rebels alike. Private military companies are often prohibitively expensive, and sympathetic international NGOs usually support the civilian rather than armed wing of a political movement (Avant 2005; Bob 2005; Singer 2007). However, a very recent phenomenon is *combat charities*, which provide logistical support to non-state armed groups without charge (Kosnáč 2017).

By its own account,

Sons of Liberty International (SOLI) is the first security contracting firm to operate on a non-profit business model. SOLI provides free security consulting and training services to vulnerable populations to enable them to defend themselves against terrorist and insurgent groups. (Sons of Liberty International 2017)

SOLI was founded in the USA in 2014, and recruited military veterans to work on a volunteer basis, with all operating costs covered by donations. According to the

founder, SOLI found its first client after a Kurdish former business partner introduced him to an Assyrian activist:

So she put me in touch with the civilian leadership committee of NPU at the time, or what would become NPU, they were ADM officials, who were thinking of creating NPU, they hadn't actually created it yet. I got on the phone with them and [...] told them that I could bring over a trainer for them.

Soon thereafter, in late 2014, he arrived in Iraq together with the first instructor, who began training around 20 NPU members in the abandoned village of Sharafiya. The next course ran over three weeks in early 2015, this time with over 300 recruits, in a camp provided by the KRG (see 3.3.8. The Nineveh Plain Protection Units — NPU).

For most of this period, the SOLI founder was in the USA to raise funds, and senior ADM members suggested that he contact AMO (see 3.3.8. The Nineveh Plain Protection Units — NPU). However, already the first telephone conversation with the AMO Chairman heralded future discord. “Once he found out I had been in Libya, his attitude seemed to change”, said the SOLI founder, who had fought with the rebels in the 2011 uprising. “His friends were the al-Qaeda members”, said the AMO Chairman, who had opposed the uprising. SOLI in turn accused AMO of supporting an Assyrian militia in Syria, which was supposedly “trained by Hezbollah terrorists” (Sons of Liberty International 2015).

Already before SOLI began its training mission, AMO had paid a private military company to perform the same task. With the scene set by political disagreement and organisational rivalry, a delegation from AMO and the private military company visited the camp, and turned the already discontented instructors against the SOLI founder (McLaughlin 2015).

The entire time [a senior ADM member] is telling me everything that's going on and just waiting for me to return, but wanted me to return in a way that's not gonna like cause the trainers to quit, because he was like, you know, we have 300 men there, this is like our only shot at training, like if they quit, NPU will be finished, like we have no other options, said the SOLI founder, who returned only at the very end of the course.

The private military company appears to have accomplished nothing of value — unsurprisingly, considering that its founder had failed to deliver on contracts with previous clients, been banned from future contracts by the United States Air Force, and received a conviction of multi-million-dollar fraud of a couple's retirement savings (Fechter & Atkins 2014; Zadrozny & Siegel 2015). “We severed our relationship, our ties with them”, said the AMO Chairman.

AMO threatened to withdraw all political and financial support unless NPU broke with SOLI, and the mentioned senior ADM member duly complied — at least outwardly. “The entire time [we] were planning like the next stage training phase with NPU, like secretly without AMO knowing, because they just wanted [...] the money from AMO, and they wanted the training and everything from me”, said the SOLI founder.

A few months later, a leadership course was aborted after pressure from AMO, and it was not until the spring of 2017 that SOLI returned for a larger training mission. By this time, AMO had long since ceased its support for NPU. The new mission aimed to give additional training to recruits that had just graduated from the TMF course, but the instructors soon discovered they lacked even the most elementary skills — including how to safely handle weapons — and the initially high ambitions were lowered drastically.

The training offered by SOLI generally held high quality, and focused on relevant skills, e.g. fighting in built-up areas, rather than drill exercises (Linehan

2015; History NOW 2016; Maxim Magazine 2015). However, the quality of the course in early 2015 apparently suffered as result of the low morale of the instructors, which was at least in part caused by the conflict with AMO. More importantly, this conflict prevented SOLI from training the militia on a regular basis, which might have increased its capacity considerably.

After the leadership course was aborted, SOLI offered its services to rival Assyrian militias, and NPF responded positively. Thus, from February to May 2016, SOLI deployed instructors to Tesqopa, right behind the front line, where NPF had set up its base. With considerably fewer members per instructor, the training was superior to what had been offered NPU the previous year. Additionally, a leadership course was organised for the officers.

“Honestly, I think the American training was very good and complete. They trained us to fight in the streets and also searching houses and fight in them. And that is what is important in this war, streets and homes”, said one of the officers (G12). Both NPF commanders also praised the training. Most notably, an instructor (G77) recounted about the aftermath of the Tesqopa battle:

I was told by a Peshmerga [KRG military] guy that they [NPF] actually behaved very professionally, and when they came down to like urban operations, moving down the streets and pulling security, and checking houses and stuff, they actually had them go first, because they seemed to know what they were doing, so it was pretty much giving the training that we were giving them to the test.

After the battle, relations soured, and the first NPF commander eventually blocked SOLI from entering Tesqopa. “He basically pulled the plug on the training because I won’t provide him with these few weapons he wanted, which included like a handgun for himself”, said the SOLI founder. The instructor (G77) laughed in bewilderment:

The fact that somebody who is a leader, who supposedly cares for his men and is there for their benefit, would stop people who are there giving them things for free, training them for free, helping them out for free, just because he wanted more free shit, how does that happen, like it doesn't make any sense.

By their account, the first NPF commander had been acting in an obstructive and erratic manner from the beginning — seemingly out of incompetence and emotionality, as well as political considerations.

To demonstrate its desire for official US support, DN eventually declined training from SOLI. “They are contractors and maybe State Department they give them the, they make the contract to give the local groups, give them training, but without any commitment. We want to be a commitment there”, said a senior APP member (G07). Although highly unlikely, the suggestion that SOLI worked covertly for the US government was not entirely implausible, considering that private military companies have previously been utilised in this manner, e.g. to support the Croatian Army in the 1990s (Avant 2005: 98–112). Alternatively, if the suspicion of covert outsourcing was false, the reasoning went, collaboration with a combat charity could prove controversial, and actually *prevent* future US support. Thus, the decision had nothing to do with a desire for capacity-building, and everything to do with political signalling. In the end, no US support materialised — unsurprisingly, since DN refused to seek a license from the GoI or the KRG, which was a clear criterion.

The examples above contradict the generalisation that “winning NGO support is neither easy nor automatic but instead competitive and uncertain” (Bob 2005: 4). In this case, it was an NGO that courted reluctant clients, rather than the other way around. Why, then, did SOLI keep trying? According to Bob (2005),

By supporting local movements, NGOs do more than help the needy and more than meet their principled or political goals — however worthy these achievements. They also gain important nonmaterial resources. Chief among these is a *raison d'être*, legitimation for the NGO's international activism and proof that it's agenda remains unfulfilled. Often as well, movement clients provide their NGO patrons with symbols for broader campaigns, with prestige among

their own support base, and with information or strategies useful in other struggles. (Bob 2005: 15)

Indeed, SOLI used NPU in particular for such purposes, and its donors must have been sufficiently impressed, considering that the organisation not only managed to survive, but later transplanted itself to the Philippines.

#### **4.2.3. Internal Training**

The simplest way to provide training was to utilise officers or other members as instructors. With the possible exception of SLB, all militias relied on this practice at least to some extent, but the instructors were generally incompetent, and ambitions low.

Both DN commanders argued that training was unnecessary, since all or nearly all members had military background — an exaggerated claim. Peer training was occasionally organised by foreign volunteers, who often had extensive experience from Western armies, but the local members lacked interest in learning even basic skills, e.g. zeroing their personal weapon, according to one of the volunteers (M10). Similar attitudes were widespread in other Assyrian militias, as well as KRG security forces (Locks 2016: 164–165; Peshmerganor 2018: 76).

The only militia that displayed more ambition was NPU, whose officers continually organised training in the rear Alqosh base, as well as the front-line bases in Tesqopa and Khazir, until the Nineveh Plain offensive was launched. Although replacements were prioritised, those that had already been trained participated as well. This meant the members not only retained and developed their soldier skills, but were also kept active, which most likely had a positive effect on morale. However, NPU members recruited right before the Nineveh Plain offensive initially received

only internal training, which was clearly of insufficient quality and/or quantity (see 4.2.1. State Actors; 4.2.2. Non-State Actors). Other militias similarly provided only internal training following the re-capture of the Nineveh Plain — most likely because they prioritised their territorial presence, and were reluctant to reduce the number of members in the field by sending them to a camp.

#### **4.2.4. Security Provision**

Despite their poor training, the Assyrian militias were all able to perform security duties — albeit to varying extent, with NPU ranking far above its rivals. Importantly, most official security forces and militias stationed in the Nineveh Plain had limited capacity as security providers — in part because they too had received little or no training — and in two key respects they were actually disadvantaged in relation to the Assyrian militias. Firstly, unlike the mainly Shi'a Arab or Sunni Kurdish outsiders, Assyrians from the area possessed local knowledge, which enabled them to gather intelligence, and navigate the complex social terrain with its many ethno-religious communities. Secondly, bearing in mind the disintegration and flight of both GoI and KRG security forces in 2014, the morale was likely higher among Assyrian militia members, who were protecting their own home towns.

An example to illustrate the exceptionally low expectations for security provision comes from a SOLI trainer (G75), who praised NPU for actually *checking* the cars in the checkpoints, rather than just waving them through (one member of an unknown unit did not even look up from his phone).

### **4.3. MATERIEL**

#### **4.3.1. Powerful Domestic Actors and Foreign Governments**

The distinction between government-endowed or locally acquired funds and materiel is sometimes discussed in the literature on militias (Barter 2013: 76), but the present case exhibits much more variation and complexity. Firstly, ‘the government’ was far from a monolith; instead, competing powerful domestic actors supported rival militias. Secondly, alternative sources were primarily found outside the country, rather than locally. Equipment supplied by powerful domestic actors sometimes originated from foreign governments, and some militias sought support directly from the latter — a behaviour usually associated with insurgent groups (Cunningham et al. 2013: 527).

The most important materiel for the Assyrian militias fall into the categories of supplies or equipment. Supplies primarily include food and water, and need to be provided on a continual basis — unlike equipment, which primarily includes weapons and vehicles. For simplicity, supplies are mostly discussed in the next sub-chapter.

The most fundamental piece of equipment for the militias was the assault rifle — nearly always some version of the AK-47 — but their armoury often also included medium machine guns, heavy machine guns, and Rocket-Propelled Grenade launchers. Since the militias rarely saw combat, their need to continually re-supply ammunition was limited. Lacking armoured vehicles, pick-up trucks were generally preferred, but the need for mobility was limited before the re-capture of the Nineveh Plain, as private cars or even taxis could be used for transportation to the static front line.

NPF received assault rifles of abysmal standard, and only a single pick-up truck, from the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs. “If you fire 10 shots, after that you cannot fire any more”, said an NPF officer (G11), and offered an unfavourable comparison with weaponry from the Second World War. According to a journalist, “Every group in Iraq makes clear that they are the best fighters with the least support from the international community and the oldest weapons” (Gold 2016), but the NPF officer does not appear to have exaggerated. A SOLI instructor (G77) claimed many of the assault rifles had completely broken down by the spring of 2016. “There wasn’t even an AK for every guy I don’t think, or barely”, said the SOLI founder about the NPF members deployed to the Tesqopa front line. However, it should be noted that KDP security forces in Baqofa experienced similar problems — or even worse:

New soldiers joined us, usually young and without military training or experience. They were handed a rifle and three magazines and sent straight to the front. Uniforms and everything else they had to buy themselves, even ammunition. Some weren’t even issued their own rifle and were reliant on finding a squad weapon they could man if a firefight broke out. (Peshmerganor 2018: 65–66)

Nevertheless, a neighbouring KDP unit gave or loaned NPF at least one medium machine gun and one RPG launcher — supposedly out of satisfaction with the performance of the militia in the battle of Tesqopa — and DN was similarly supplied with an RPG launcher. This demonstrates how even an unlicensed militia could obtain equipment through informal channels, based on local relations. However, no equipment was loaned or gifted to NPU, presumably for political reasons. Similarly, KDP security forces in the Tesqopa area provided food to NPF and DN, but not to NPU.

Before 2014, Sarkis Aghajan supplied NPGF with old and barely functional assault rifles; one officer (F012) said they jammed after firing a single bullet. When

ISIS attacked, these rifles were either left behind, or handed over to the KRG — on orders from above, since it would not be allowed to bring them into the KRI.

After NPGF became part of Zerevani, its materiel provision went from bad to worse. In fact, not a single weapon or vehicle was provided by the Ministry of Interior. “We hear that the KRG has so many weapons, so why are they not supporting [NPGF] with some?”, asked a senior member of the affiliated political party (G28), following failed lobbying attempts. He also turned to the US diplomatic mission, but “The consul said the weapons must be sent from the Iraqi government to the KRG, and then from the KRG to [NPGF]”. The Canadian, French, and German governments were also approached, and an NPGF officer (G27) claimed coalition representatives had promised to arm the militia in January 2016 — but any such decision required KDP approval before being implemented.

It is not entirely clear why KDP never armed NPGF, or agreed to let foreign governments do so. A likely reason is that substantial quantities of weapons would have been required for this relatively large militia, whose eventual future deployment remained uncertain.

After the Nineveh Plain had been re-captured, NPGF continued to be ignored, probably because the militia was mainly intended for deployment in and around Baghdeda town, where KDP influence had always been indirect. This area fell to the GoI in the territorial division agreed before the Nineveh Plain operation, whereas in the northern parts of Tel Keipeh District, as well as Bashiqa-Bahzani, KDP exercised more direct control through its own security forces, and saw no need for a local militia. NPGF was quite simply never needed as an *armed* group during this period, although it remained on the payroll and continued to function as a patronage

apparatus, with future elections or security provision in mind (in particular if the border between the two governments were to be adjusted at some point).

With official channels blocked, Sarkis Aghajan stepped back in, and provided the militia with 40 old assault rifles and two pick-up trucks — hardly an impressive inventory for a force numbering 2,500 members. In fact, it was not even enough to arm the few token squads that were deployed for security provision. During a visit to Bashiqa, I found 10 on-duty members sharing only six assault rifles, although in Bahzani they at least had one each. Nevertheless, this provides another example of how ministerial control could be circumvented.

The GoI spent vast amounts of money on PMF, but there was a great deal of variation in access to equipment between different militias. Firstly, those formed before 2014 already had considerable stockpiles. Secondly, the level of governmental provision depended on the *wasta* of the commander (Cigar 2015: 10–13). Thirdly, there were substantial weapons shipments directly from Iran, which naturally favoured its political allies, including the Badr Organisation (Amnesty International 2017: 27–30; Cigar 2015: 24).

Like SLB, BB probably received all materiel from the Imam Ali Battalions, and then from the Shabak Brigade, before it broke off to form a separate PMF unit. With close ties to the Badr Organisation, and ultimately Iran, it comes as no surprise that the Shabak Brigade and BB were well-provided. “We do have Humvees, but now it is a liberated area, so there is no need for them. [We] even [have] tanks and anti-aircraft weapons, but we do not use them unless there is an emergency”, said a BB officer (G01) in the spring of 2017. A former officer (G02) confirmed the existence of heavy materiel, including tanks: “They even have heavy anti-aircraft weapons, but they

cannot use them, because they do not have experience. If they want to use them, they must go to Iran to train”. However, he also claimed that all heavy materiel had been loaned from the Shabak Brigade, and was returned when BB broke off. It should also be noted that the term ‘tanks’ could refer to main battle tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, or armoured personnel carriers.

Unlike militias affiliated with Iran, NPU and other TMF units only received minimal quantities of simple materiel from PMF, said a senior ADM member (G38):

Why they didn’t give us all this stuff, because we are not part, real part, of the Popular Mobilisation [PMF], like [the BB commander], because all these parts they supported, you know, they have pick-up, they have even I don’t know, Hummers, everything you know, even they have mortars, everything they have, why, because they supported by Iranian groups, they are real [...] Shi’a Popular Mobilisation. We and other groups, like Sunni groups, we didn’t get any support from Popular Mobilisation, because they didn’t support us even in vehicles, so now we don’t have vehicles, we don’t have heavy equipment, let’s say heavy weapons, we don’t have all these issues.

However, NPU had a separate logistical channel directly from the USA, through the GoI, which sometimes organised deliveries via the Iraqi Army. As TMF was mainly set up for security provision, rather than combat, NPU received only small arms and light weapons, and soft-skinned vehicles. The first delivery, in the spring-summer of 2016, included 100 assault rifles and seven medium machine guns. Soon after the liberation of Baghdeda, another 150 assault rifles were delivered, along with 10 medium machine guns, and eight heavy machine guns. Lastly, 185 assault rifles were delivered in the spring-summer of 2017 for recruits graduating from TMF training. There is some uncertainty attached to these figures, as well as the exact timing. The NPU commander claimed some weapons were also delivered directly by the USA, without informing the GoI.

As the Nineveh Plain offensive neared, NPU had still not received a single vehicle through official channels, and only had two pick-up trucks of its own. Eventually, the Iraqi Army commander responsible for the operation agreed to lend

some open trucks — despite that he lacked any logistical responsibility for the militia. The NPU commander most likely played a role here, through his connections in senior Iraqi Army circles.

After Baghdeda had been re-captured, TMF finally sent NPU a pick-up truck and a small water tank truck, and another two pick-up trucks were delivered in May 2017 — but this fell far short of meeting actual needs. However, the NPU commander managed to get further deliveries under the table. “From the central government, without knowing of Hashd [PMF], only the chief of Hashd [PMC Chairman] he know, I get some”, he explained. In other words, the PMC Chairman — an old friend of the NPU commander — side-lined the Deputy Chairman, who was normally responsible for materiel provision.

#### **4.3.2. Non-State Actors and Internal Sources**

In some conflicts, the government deliberately limits access to firepower for militias (Fumerton 2001: 489), and in others weapons are simply scarce (Blocq 2014: 715). In contrast, the black market in Iraq was thriving, well-stocked, easy to access, and subject to practically no law-enforcement efforts during the period of study (Peshmerganor 2018: 55–56). Obtaining supplies was equally unproblematic, as they could easily be brought into the Nineveh Plain from nearby Erbil and Duhok. For both militias and sympathetic non-state actors, materiel procurement was thus limited by funds alone.

DN had no powerful ally to rely on for equipment, but managed to provide for itself reasonably well; since sufficient funds were raised in the early period, subsequent financial difficulties had limited impact. Although DN bought most

weapons, some were obtained from APP, and a few local members brought their own — as did all foreign members. In addition to various small arms and light weapons, DN bought one pick-up truck, but cars belonging to the members were also used (Locks 2016: 51).

In contrast, SHF proved unable to cover even its most basic needs. According to a senior SDU member (D047), the militia had only five weapons (presumably assault rifles) when it first deployed to Baghdeda, which probably meant half of the members on duty were initially unarmed. Additional weapons were provided by BB when the two militias entered a temporary alliance, but these were later reclaimed. SHF initially used the cars of its members, according to a former BB officer (D059), but may have obtained a pick-up truck later.

NPF bought a few assault rifles before it was licensed, but did not make any further purchases later — despite being poorly provided by the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs. Private pick-up trucks and cars were loaned to the militia by the members.

In the early period, NPU bought some weapons, and borrowed others from community members. Even after it started receiving support through TMF, the militia continued to receive additional equipment from elsewhere, e.g. foreign donors bought two RPG launchers with eight warheads, and 10 medium machine guns. Yet more weapons were captured from ISIS, including heavy machine guns and Rocket-Propelled Grenade launchers, said an NPU officer (G33), who also claimed that surplus assault rifles were donated to the underequipped Iraqi Police. Through this gesture of good will, the militia probably sought to improve relations with an actor

that was expected to remain in the area. It was an absurd and unique event, where a militia armed the state — rather than the other way around.

NPU eventually came to possess two water tank trucks and 13 pick-up trucks. One of the water tank trucks was donated by the Syriac Catholic Church, which apparently wanted to improve relations with the militia after it established a strong territorial presence in Baghdeda. Out of 10 pick-up trucks that were not provided officially through TMF, it is unclear how many were bought with donated money, or provided unofficially through the PMC Chairman (see 4.3.1. State Actors).

The militias generally used political party offices as rear headquarters, and requisitioned abandoned buildings in their deployment area. NPU demonstrated a more long-term outlook by building a permanent base outside Alqosh in early 2016, but it had the disadvantage of being located in the KDP zone, and at some distance from Baghdeda, where the construction of a new base consequently took off in the summer of 2017.

Sympathetic Assyrian and non-Assyrian NGOs, churches, and individuals — based abroad or in Iraq — donated non-lethal equipment and food primarily to DN (Assyrian Patriotic Party 2014; Dwekh Nawsha 2016; Dwekh Nawsha 2017; Shlama Foundation 2014c; Shlama Foundation 2015a; Shlama Foundation 2015b; Shlama Foundation 2015c) and NPU (Assyrian National Broadcasting 2017a; Murray 2017; Shlama Foundation 2014a; Shlama Foundation 2014b; Shlama Foundation 2015c), but also to NPF (Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 2016). Notably, the recipients were all challengers, whereas rival groups received few donations or none. One possible reason is that the political parties affiliated with the challengers were known in Iraq and abroad;

familiarity and trust may have played a role, as well as active marketing efforts. Further, none of these militias were affiliated with Iran, a highly controversial actor in the region, nor were they known to enjoy strong support from state actors, which would have made donations unnecessary. Some donors supplied more than one militia, which demonstrates an absence of specific political preferences.

Despite considerable food donations, as well as earmarked funding (4.4.1. State Actors), NPU was the only militia to build a more or less self-sufficient logistical system. Whereas others simply bought all food and water they needed, NPU established a cookhouse in Alqosh, and another in Baghdeda, along with a bakery. The militia also dug a new well in Alqosh, and made use of an existing one in Baghdeda. With its two water tank trucks, NPU then supplied all other forces in the area, which probably helped improve relations.

## **4.4. FUNDS**

### **4.4.1. Powerful Domestic Actors**

The militias often used funds to cover materiel shortages, but the largest and most important expense was salaries, which needed to be paid continually. DN and SHF tried and failed to cover this expense with donations, whereas all other militias found a sustainable long-term arrangement through a powerful domestic actor. In PMF, the salaries were also supposed to cover food expenses; for each member, NPU was usually paid around 650,000 IQD, but anything above 525,000 IQD was cut for this purpose.

Apart from salaries, the militias rarely received funds from powerful domestic actors; exceptions include a GoI subsidy for NPU's Alqosh base, and a donation to SLB from the Imam Ali Battalions. The latter also provided funds to SHF, according to an affiliated senior NGO member (G68), who claimed the 5,000,000 IQD were embezzled. NPGF received nothing but salaries from the Ministry of Interior, and materiel expenses were instead paid by Sarkis Aghajan, which reflects the fragmentation of the KRG and KDP. The Ministry of Interior probably viewed NPGF as little more than an idle militia, but for Sarkis Aghajan it was a patronage project that had been carefully nurtured for over a decade, and could not simply be abandoned.

### **4.4.2. Internal and Local Sources**

With the possible exception of CSAPC and ADM, all political parties affiliated with the militias appear to have had strained budgets. The KRG ceased all funding for political parties in early 2014, because of a budget crisis, and informal payments from

KDP are likely to have ended or been drastically reduced as well. Moreover, the invasion of the Nineveh Plain meant many offices were abandoned in haste. Nevertheless, the limited political party funds available to DN, NPF, NPU, and SHF proved critical at the formation stage. Unlike NPGF, SLB, and BB, they were able to found new organisations on their own, before seeking external support, and could subsequently retain a much higher degree of autonomy.

The militias generally refrained from looting or similar activities, probably in part because norms prevented them from cannibalising their own towns and villages, and since ISIS had in any case stolen or destroyed most things of value. Nearby houses were sometimes raided for fridges or fans to equip front line bases, but not to generate income (Locks 2016: 152).

The only exception was BB, whose acting commander organised looting for private gain (see 5.2.2. BB and SHF). It is probably not a coincidence that BB was already generously provided with salaries and materiel by its powerful ally. Rather, this dependent relation relied on an opportunistic mindset, which at the same time created norms that enabled criminal activities (see 1.2.2. Government and Community Initiatives; 4.1.2. Incentives and Constraints).

Extracting funds from the local community was even more difficult. Firstly, forced taxation would have been impossible, since practically all IDPs lived in areas controlled by KDP, which would have prevented any such attempt. Secondly, the IDPs did not need to pay for protection, and it was only towards the very end of the period of study that some returned to their homes in the Nineveh Plain. Thirdly, the Assyrian militias were largely unable to attract voluntary donations — unlike the Ukrainian militias that emerged in 2014, which received funds from both elites and

the general public (Aliyev 2016: 510). The IDPs had often lost most of their belongings, and saved any excess funds to enable emigration, whereas non-displaced Assyrians were equally pessimistic about the future. The militias were not viewed negatively, but as largely powerless, and few believed in them with any zeal.

#### **4.4.3. Foreign Donors**

With few other options available, the Assyrian militias turned their focus abroad — primarily to the diaspora communities in the USA, Europe, and Australia. Funds were sometimes raised directly by the militias and their affiliated political parties, and at other times by affiliated or sympathetic organisations.

Similar efforts on behalf of armed actors in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s met with great success, and were at least initially ignored or tolerated by Western law-enforcement agencies. One charity registered in the USA, for example, claimed to provide aid for the needy — which in practice meant shipping huge quantities of weapons to the Kosovo Liberation Army (Hockenos 2003: 13; Sullivan 2004: 140, 157). More diligence could perhaps be expected in the post-9/11 era, in particular vis-à-vis Middle Eastern groups, but the Assyrian militias seem to never have attracted any attention — perhaps because they were so small and obscure, Christian rather than Muslim, and fought on the side of an internationally recognised government against a designated terrorist organisation.

Only two militias — BB and NPGF — refrained from any fundraising attempts. Not coincidentally, they were both completely dependent on powerful domestic actors, and practically lacked diaspora support. However, whereas BB was well provided for, NPGF received almost no funds or materiel after it was displaced to the

KRI in 2014. At this point, it would have been impossible for the militia to present itself as an underdog in need of donations.

Considering that they were both start-ups, it is somewhat surprising that SLB and SHF received foreign donations. However, as the only militias to espouse a distinctly ‘Syriac’ identity, they were able to fill a niche in the donor landscape. Moreover, lack of information about the SLB and SHF commander among diaspora donors probably worked in his favour.

The SLB commander unsuccessfully sought support from within Israel, as well as from Lebanese Hizballah (see 3.3.5. The Syriac Lions Battalions — SLB), but claimed to have received funds from individual ‘Syriac’ nationalists, as well as the transnational World Council of Arameans. However, the latter cut all ties before the launching of SHF, possibly because the militia allied itself with a rival movement — Dawronoye.

The contacts with [the SLB and SHF commander] were not very close because we choose to not be very close. Iraq is like a hornet’s nest. For us loyalty is of crucial importance. Many switch sides for money, we don’t work like that, said a senior member of the World Council of Arameans.

SHF received a mere 4,500 USD from Dawronoye — and embezzled it — according to a senior NGO member (G68) that initially supported the militia. The movement also funded NPF, but considering its materiel shortages the sums must have been equally modest. This can perhaps be explained by the scattered attention of Dawronoye, which during the period of study supported three political parties in Iraq, as well as militias in Syria. SHF and NPF may have seemed relatively less likely than other affiliates to accomplish anything of value, and lost out as a consequence — or the budget was simply stretched too thin.

NPU and DN managed better than others to secure foreign donations. Like NPF — also a challenger — they were founded by political parties with organisational and social networks in the diaspora, but campaigned much more actively to raise funds.

The first DN commander claimed to have collected 250,000 USD in the first year, mainly during visits abroad in late 2014 and early 2015: “We held conferences and played videos from our fights in the front lines, and people agreed to help, not just stand there and watch their people die”. However, despite additional fundraising events and an on-line campaign, donations dwindled after less than a year. NPU, which employed the same methods, similarly received most donations in the beginning, according to a senior ADM member (G40).

A possible explanation is that donors expected the militias to eventually secure governmental materiel or funds — precisely because they were militias and not rebel groups. In contrast, rebel groups like the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam relied on diaspora donations over a much longer period of time (Wayland 2004). Alternatively, the absence of new dramatic events after the invasion of the Nineveh Plain meant that donor fatigue set in early. “People got bored”, said a senior APP member (G05). In contrast, the Kosovo Liberation Army experienced a dramatic surge in donations following a massacre of Kosovo Albanians in 1998 (Sullivan 2004: 166). Moreover, the baseline level of engagement was low, as diaspora members were unenthusiastic about their political representatives, apathetic towards the national cause, and pessimistic about the future for Assyrians in the homeland (Assyrian National Broadcasting 2017a; Atto 2011: 469–492; Lundgren 2016: 83).

Funds for DN were also raised on-line by foreign volunteers (Locks 2016: 58; Neuhof 2015), but one of them claimed relations soured when “the locals, who in the beginning had been grateful and desperate for help in any form, were starting to see the money that was coming along with the volunteers, and were beginning to take advantage” (Locks 2016: 170–171). On its side, DN warned that money was collected without permission under the militia’s name (Dwekh Nawsha 2015a), and accused three foreign volunteers of swindle:

they began collecting thousands of dollars in donations,, once they had collected a substantial amount of money they [...] left with the monies collected, leaving with weapons and kit belonging to dwekh Nawsha and other fighters here [typos original] (Dwekh Nawsha 2015b)  
A similar accusation even emerged internally, when the first DN commander

claimed APP had kept 50,000 USD of donated funds for itself. APP denied the allegations, and retorted that “he does not even know the multiplication table” (Assyrian Patriotic Party 2015).

These examples demonstrate the importance of control and trust in such fundraising endeavours, and hint at a principal-agent problem — although it is not immediately obvious who played which role. Katz (2000) argues that donors can be seen as principals, and recipients as agents — or vice versa. He then suggests a third alternative, namely to view intermediaries as agents for both donors and recipients, each of whom act as principals on their end. This conceptualisation captures the dynamic of the present case, where both militias and donors often needed to control or trust intermediaries — including affiliated political parties.

NPU faced similar problems as DN. SOLI initially raised funds for itself and the militia simultaneously, which prompted ADM to threaten legal action: “We do not know how much money [the SOLI founder] has collected thus far in our name or what his agenda is, but it is clear that there is no benefit whatsoever to the NPU or

ADM” (Assyrian Democratic Movement 2015). It was not until late 2015 that the NPU commander received a major payment of 30,000 USD earmarked for the Alqosh base. According to the SOLI founder, this was initially kept secret from ADM:

They would rather not have the base built than accept the money from SOLI, because of all the stuff AMO had been telling them, I guess also because they didn’t want to upset AMO, and risk like any money AMO might give.

In another campaign, which was launched in late 2014, 250,000 USD was supposedly raised for NPU in only a couple months (Nelson 2015). However, the funds remained under control of AMO, which used them to pay for travel, lawyers, and a private military company (see 4.2.2. Non-State Actors). The remaining money was transferred to ADM, said the AMO Chairman:

As we felt, we owed them an explanation, so there is no misunderstanding, because the money was raised for mainly the NPU, right, and so there are other issues [...], there were a lot of expenses, so we had to show them, so we felt we need to show them, we owe them that, so we sent them our tax returns.

In other words, only a small amount reached ADM, which never even transferred it to NPU, suggested the SOLI founder. AMO ceased supporting NPU already in the summer of 2015, supposedly because it was no longer needed, but more likely because of conflicts related to the use of funds, and the involvement of SOLI.

Instead, an initiative to raise funds exclusively for NPU was launched in June 2016 — but it was in fact controlled by ADM, and the donations never reached the militia, according to an NPU member (M32) working in its administration. In any case, the total sum of 55,975 USD that had been raised by February 2017 was underwhelming, compared with the donations collected in the early days (Nineveh Plain Defense Fund 2017a).

The NPU commander also accepted donations directly, without any involvement of intermediaries. To establish trust, he told donors exactly what he

needed, and asked them to make the purchase themselves, or hand over a specific amount. This system may have had the added advantage of creating a sense of direct involvement and agency among the donors; similar sentiments have been associated with sustained support for rebel groups (Wood 2003: 231–241). For the most part, donors funded non-lethal equipment and fixed installations for the Alqosh base, but there were exceptions, e.g. an American clergyman bought two RPG launchers with eight warheads, claiming God had instructed him to help the militia. By his own account, the NPU commander tried to keep such donations secret, so he would not be forced to return weapons already received through official channels.

NPU ultimately proved more successful than its rivals, probably because of the relatively large support base and extensive connections of ADM, and the savviness of the commander. However, the fundraising could have been organised in a far more effective manner, and it appears likely that at least some of the donated money was embezzled.

#### 4.5. CONCLUSION

To re-iterate, the question guiding this chapter is: How did the militias build their capacity? I will first discuss the mobilisation efforts of the militias more broadly, before narrowing the focus to their external relations.

The militias were themselves responsible for recruitment, with little or no external interference. Only SLB and BB struggled to find enough Assyrian members, probably in large part due to geographical distance, but BB circumvented the problem by filling its ranks with non-Assyrians. All militias suffered from retention problems, which were largely unavoidable, since the departing members emigrated or found better jobs, but in NPF and BB many also quit out of dissatisfaction, whereas the mass departure from SLB was externally caused.

The recruitment practices of NPU were somewhat more adequate than those of its rivals — particularly the competence-based selection of officers — but none of the militias excelled in this area. Similarly to newly-founded or small businesses, they neglected issues related to recruitment, and ignored problems that emerged, apparently because they were not deemed important. Since the militias engaged in few activities, and suffered no excessive stress or strain, very little learning occurred during the period of study (Cardon & Stevens 2004; Cassell et al. 2002: 689). NPGF constitutes an exception in that it was neither small, nor newly-founded, yet uniquely dysfunctional. The explanation is that its internal practices primarily served to maintain a patronage system, and consequently no quality criteria whatsoever were employed in the recruitment process.

Most militias were offered training by powerful domestic actors or foreign governments, and some also by the combat charity SOLI. However, most members

were insufficiently trained, since offers were often accepted or refused to build political relations, rather than capacity. As with recruitment, no learning occurred, since the militias rarely faced combat or other severe challenges. However, by pooling the efforts of their own officers with those of SOLI and US military instructors, NPU trained its members to a somewhat higher level than other militias (with the possible exception of NPF). As will become clear in the next chapter, the resulting capacity directly enabled NPU to participate in the Nineveh Plain operation (5.1.4. NPU)

With the exception of those fully embedded in PMF, no militia was provided with sufficient materiel by powerful domestic actors or foreign governments. Some were able to add to their armouries and vehicle fleets with donations — mainly from affiliated political parties, NGOs, and individuals abroad — but it proved impossible to raise enough funds to sustain a fully autonomous militia. Salary provision in particular became a major vulnerability, as donations dwindled over time.

To compare their mobilisation practices, it is useful to distinguish between militias that relied on training, materiel, and funds from the state, other sources, or both. To simplify, state sources here include powerful domestic actors as well as foreign governments, since the latter generally provided support through the former, and with their approval. Highly limited support and failed attempts to secure support are excluded from the comparison.

As seen in Table 4.1., the two celibate militias relied exclusively on non-state support, three of the monogamous militias relied exclusively on state support, whereas one monogamous militia as well as the promiscuous militia relied on both.

Thus, the mobilisation practices of the militias mirrored their political practices, with the exception of NPF.

**Table 4.3. Assyrian militia origins, political practices, and logistical support.**

<b>Militia</b>	<b>Origin</b>	<b>Political practice</b>	<b>Logistical support</b>
NPGF	Establishment	Monogamy	State
DN	Challenger	Celibacy	Non-state
NPF	Challenger	Monogamy	State + non-state
NPU	Challenger	Promiscuity	State + non-state
BB	Start-up	Monogamy	State
SLB	Start-up	Monogamy	State
SHF	Start-up	Celibacy	Non-state

The celibate DN and SHF unsuccessfully tried to make it on their own without any powerful domestic ally. As a recent start-up, SHF largely lacked the ability to raise funds directly, and the allied Dawronoye movement was unable or unwilling to cover even its most basic needs. Apparently, the alliance with Dawronoye also pre-empted support from the World Council of Arameans. As a challenger with a more established diaspora presence, DN failed somewhat less spectacularly, but despite active campaigning the militia proved unable to attract sufficient donations over time.

SLB and BB were both in monogamous relationships, and were well provided for by their powerful allies in PMF. Whereas the BB commander apparently lacked both ability and interest in seeking support elsewhere, the SLB commander wanted to stake out more autonomy, and become less dependent on his host unit. Despite lacking an affiliated political party, the militia attracted at least some donations from ‘Syriac’ nationalists, but the scale appears to have been very limited. An attempt to obtain support from a source within Israel failed, as did another attempt to strike a

deal with Lebanese Hizballah. Ultimately, the commander only succeeded in building a bad reputation for himself, instead of militia capacity.

In contrast to their ultimately Iran-backed rivals, the similarly monogamous NPGF and NPF were kept on life support. Following the invasion of the Nineveh Plain, the long-standing and complete dependency of NPGF on KDP proved to become a critical vulnerability, as the latter practically ceased providing materiel and funds — with the exception of salaries. As part of the political establishment, it would probably have been difficult for NPGF to attract donations from non-state sources, and no such attempts were made.

Despite its monogamous relationship with KDP, NPF was both able and willing to seek support elsewhere. This can in part be explained by the co-operation of two political parties with very different character. Unlike BNDP, the more activist Dawronoye movement that stood behind HBA had the requisite capacity and willingness to raise funds in the diaspora. Like the other challengers, NPF also attracted donations of supplies and non-lethal equipment, and its capacity was further enhanced by training from SOLI.

Compared to its rivals, NPU focused more on building actual capacity, and had a more strategic and long-term approach. A key factor in this context is probably that the commander and his officers were competent in military matters. The diplomatic skill and connections of the commander, as well as ADM, were also hugely important to secure logistical support from a wide variety of state and non-state actors. The simultaneous courting of political opponents sometimes backfired, but in the end the accumulated logistical support from various sources enabled the militia to enhance its capacity, while retaining its relative autonomy. In short, this diversified mobilisation

strategy worked well for NPU, but the success relied in part on diplomatic skill and connections that its rivals lacked.

## 5. DEPLOYMENT

The deployment stage entails militia activities immediately prior to the operation to re-capture the Nineveh Plain, during the operation itself, and in its aftermath.

In compliance with a high-level political agreement, GoI security forces re-captured most of the Nineveh Plain, after KDP security forces took Batnaya and Bashiqa-Bahzani. This meant the Nineveh Plain was no longer disputed, but instead divided between the two governments (see 2.4. From Occupation to Liberation and Beyond).

The deployment stage offered greater opportunities to exercise agency than the establishment stage — particularly within the GoI zone. Powerful domestic actors and foreign governments continued to play an important role, but the militias also came to engage more with one another.

The militias had always avoided co-operating with one another, but up to this point their rivalry had not moved beyond the rhetorical level. However, while KDP successfully kept the peace within the KRG zone, there was usually no one around to prevent conflicts from erupting within the more anarchic GoI zone, and the militias turned their guns on each other on several occasions.

This chapter sets out to answer the following question: How did the militias deploy and operate during and after the re-capture of the Nineveh Plain?

The first sub-chapter provides an account of the participation (and non-participation) of the militias in the re-capture of the Nineveh Plain (5.1. The Nineveh Plain Operation), and the second sub-chapter details their deployment following the end of combat operations (5.2. The Nineveh Plain After ISIS). Next follows an

account of inter-militia relations (5.3. Rivalry and Conflict), before I return to answer the question guiding this chapter (5.4. Conclusion).

## **5.1. THE NINEVEH PLAIN OPERATION**

### **5.1.1. NPGF**

After the fighting was over, NPGF claimed it had never desired front-line service — only to provide security once ISIS had been defeated. However, already in 2015 senior CSAPC and NPGF members — as well as senior KDP officers — expressed expectations for NPGF to participate in the Nineveh Plain operation (Ishtar TV 2015a; Ishtar TV 2015b; Ishtar TV 2015c; Ishtar TV 2015d; Ishtar TV 2015e; National Iraqi News Agency 2015; Al-Tony 2015; Your Middle East 2015). Some also claimed representatives of the international coalition had expressed support early on. Following completion of the training programme, “They promised us that we will liberate and control our lands”, said an NPGF officer (G27).

One member (M16) said the reason why NPGF did not take up position in the front line was that the militia was simply too incompetent to fight, and that their Kurdish allies knew this. Indeed, a senior official at the Ministry of Interior said NPGF was not wanted in the front line, due to lack of experience. A senior KDP member (G53) agreed, and expressed concerns over casualties. The exceptionally poor capacity of NPGF was certainly a limitation (see 4.1.3. Selection; 4.2.1. State Actors), but this was not the sole reason.

In the summer of 2016, a delegation of senior clergy met the Zerevani commander, and asked for NPGF to be excluded from the Nineveh Plain operation, since many members might get wounded or killed. The commander granted their request, and the decision was communicated to the leadership of CSAPC and NPGF — which had not even been informed in advance that a meeting were to take place.

This event demonstrates the ability of religious leaders to by-pass secular political actors, and directly influence KDP policy.

With support from many in their congregations, the Assyrian churches have traditionally offered their rulers acquiescence in return for protection (see 2.1.3. Religion; 2.2. From *Seyfo* to the Caliphate). To retain popular support, CSAPC and its Kurdish allies therefore had no choice but to accept the demand of the delegation, according to an NPGF officer (G23).

It should be noted that CSAPC and NPGF on other occasions tried to assert themselves against the churches. “We must distinguish between religion and politics. If politics interfere with religion, it corrupts it. And if religion interfere with politics, it weakens it”, said a senior CSAPC member (G28), who worked behind the scenes to prevent senior clergy from influencing high-level decisions:

[The US Ambassador] phoned me every time [the Chaldean Catholic Patriarch] said anything [...] so I said ‘no, no, not understand him, yeah, misunderstand his speech [...]’. [The US ambassador] said ‘no, he didn’t say that’, I said ‘OK, pretend that he said that’.

The acceptance of the demand was also in line with a strong discourse around minority protection, which gives legitimacy for Kurdish state-building ambitions. With an international audience in mind, the KRG tends to highlight its efforts to protect and help Christians especially (Smith & Shadarevian 2017: 10, 17).

It thus appears likely that concern over casualties was the main reason for KDP to block NPGF from front line service — both before and during the Nineveh Plain operation. In particular since the members had never signed up for this type of work, even a moderate number of casualties might have damaged relations with the Assyrian community. Additionally, once it became clear that the Nineveh Plain would be divided up in advance, there was simply no need for an allied Assyrian

militia to rush in and lay claim to territory. On the contrary, substantial Assyrian participation might have threatened the Kurdish annexation project.

It was KRG policy from the very outset of the war to keep any territory that was captured from ISIS, or taken over from the GoI pre-emptively, ahead of the rebel advance (Filkins 2014). “What is important for us after [ISIS] is Kurdistan’s borders. We will decide the extent of our borders by what has been liberated with the blood of our Peshmerga”, said the KRG Prime Minister in advance of the operation to recapture the Nineveh Plain and Mosul (Ali 2016b). The shedding of blood thus reinforced the claim to land ownership; outside Alqosh, this was communicated to the local community in the form of a memorial with portraits of the Kurdish ‘martyrs’ that had fallen in the battle of Tesqopa. Counter-factually — and cynically — one or two Assyrian faces might have benefitted the discourse around minority representation, but a plurality of Assyrian ‘martyrs’ would have weakened the Kurdish argument for ownership of the Nineveh Plain.

### **5.1.2. DN**

When the Nineveh Plain operation took off in October 2016, KDP security forces stationed in the Tesqopa area surrounded Batnaya, which was captured unopposed after two days of air strikes and artillery fire. A senior KRG official barred Western volunteers from participating, and local KDP commanders did not allow local DN members to join the offensive either — possibly because they had shirked responsibilities for the past two years, or since DN remained autonomous (Chick 2017; Peshmerganor 2018: 148). DN only entered the town once it had been recaptured, but the risk-averse militia probably had little interest in taking part in actual

combat anyway — especially since this was not necessary to score propaganda victories. A video of DN members raising a cross on a church roof was soon released, and probably gave many viewers the impression that the militia had helped re-capture the town (don tedeti 2017).

After KDP security forces made halt in Batnaya, GoI security forces used the area as a staging point to attack Tel Keipeh. According to its second commander, DN shared good relations with the Iraqi Army, but the latter did not allow the militia to join the operation, because of its affiliation with the KRG. However, the second commander said he declined an offer to enter the town after it had been re-captured:

We did not want to endanger the relationship that we have with the KRG, and all the co-operation. We loved everything to be legal and official. Plus, the Tel Keif [Tel Keipeh] operation took two months to finish up, due to the intense ISIS fighter existence in the area, and the tunnels that they have built.

### **5.1.3. NPF**

Before the Nineveh Plain operation, NPF was divided into two contingents, led respectively by the BNDP-affiliated second commander, and an HBA-affiliated officer (G12). The BNDP contingent participated in the operation to re-capture Batnaya, but was not in the first line during the advance. According to the second commander, NPF members raised a cross on top of a church once the town had been secured, but DN members took it down to record a video where they themselves raised it — before visiting NPGF members arrived to repeat the procedure. Clearly, being seen to liberate a church from the clutches of ISIS was believed to be valuable for propaganda purposes.

The second contingent went to the Khazir area, near Bartella, with the aim of joining the coming offensive led by the Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF).

I spoke with [an ISOF commander] and told him that we will come with him to liberate Bartella, but he told me to calm down and relax, because they will do their best to liberate the area, and that we cannot go with them because they have orders that only they can go to the area,

said the HBA-affiliated officer. Undeterred, the contingent attempted to catch up with the advancing forces, but was stopped by Asayish. However, in the nearby area KDP security forces were about to capture four villages that had previously been inhabited by Shabaks, Kakais, and Sunni Arabs. The KDP commander allowed NPF to join the operation, which was soon concluded — without a shot fired.

Soon after Bartella had been re-captured, the HBA-affiliated officer finally received permission to enter the town, but the NPF contingent only stayed for a few hours, before driving on to the outskirts of Baghdeda. The following day, a request to participate in the ongoing fighting was turned down, recounted another NPF officer (G13): “We spoke to [an Iraqi Army commander], and he said you are one of us, but as you know you belong to Kurdistan’s government”.

Clearly, the HBA contingent was very keen to deploy alongside GoI security forces, despite that this contravened the agreement between the two governments. In contrast, the BNDP contingent made no attempt to join the operation to take back Tel Keipeh. “We did not break the rules, because we did not know about the agreement”, said a senior HBA member (G14) — rather unconvincingly, since he also claimed the BNDP contingent had acted “according to the agreement”. A more likely explanation is that BNDP enjoyed close relations with KDP, and therefore had more to lose, whereas HBA had more of an activist character, and was frustrated over the limited opportunities to prove its relevance.

Although NPF was prevented from participating in any actual fighting, the visit to Bartella proved valuable for propaganda purposes. In a video from the news

broadcaster France 24 (2016), members of the militia are seen raising a cross on a church roof, ringing the bell, and praying. The event was also covered by The Los Angeles Times (Bulos 2016).

#### **5.1.4. BB**

The Iraqi Army-led Nineveh Liberation Operation Command generally tried to prevent the often sectarian PMF-affiliated militias from participating in offensive operations (Dury-Agri et al. 2017: 20). Seemingly by local agreement, BB was nevertheless allowed to join other PMF units in the re-capture of the Mar Behnam monastery (located 14 km south of Baghdeda), the nearby village of al-Khidir, and Ali Rash village (located 7 km west of Baghdeda; Kalin 2016; National Iraqi News Agency 2016). During the operation to take back Tel Keipeh, BB remained in the rear. According to a former officer (G02), the militia was never in the first line, and could hardly be said to have participated fully in any operation:

I have some intelligence from the leadership of Hashd [PMF], they do not allow Christian forces to fight with them, because [the BB commander] does not want to lose Christian blood. [...] They allow Christians to join, but they do not expose them to danger and let them die.

However, BB did not miss the opportunity to gain a symbolic victory, by raising a cross outside the Mar Behnam monastery after its re-capture (Rian Chaldean 2016f).

#### **5.1.4. NPU**

NPU was extremely keen to play an active role in the re-capture of Baghdeda in particular, and the first practical step would be to send a contingent to the staging point in the Khazir area, near Bartella. “[The ADM leader] [...] went to see [the KRG

President], and I think within 24 hours we have a secret telegram saying that the NPU can go to this direction and participate there, so they went there”, said a senior ADM member (G39). Additionally, according to another senior ADM member (G40), the USA put pressure on the KRG. Despite its PMF affiliation, NPU then received permission from the Nineveh Liberation Operation Command to participate in offensive operations. Again, the decision relied on direct negotiations between ADM and KDP, as well as support from the USA. Below the political level, NPU continued to benefit from the commander’s personal relationship with the PMC Chairman, and his connections in senior Iraqi Army circles (see 3.3.8. The Nineveh Plain Protection Units — NPU).

Before the main offensive was launched, the US military planned a minor operation for NPU to conduct on its own. “As soon as the Americans started to train us, they said you must do something so they will know you are a real force, not only in name. So they made like a real exercise to free one village”, the NPU commander explained. However, he was first reluctant, since the designated village of Badanah belonged to the Shabak community: “I said not if it is not a Christian village. My people asked why we should be there”.

The NPU contingent advanced on foot, with air support from the international coalition, and the village was quickly overrun. The militia encountered no resistance, but glasses of hot tea and switched-on air conditioning units were found, according to one of the participating members (M34), who suspected the enemy had escaped through tunnels. The operation had no military objective whatsoever, and the NPU contingent returned to base immediately, leaving ISIS to re-take the village. However, the aim had been accomplished, according to the NPU commander: “After we took

Badanah, they said your force is not good, it is excellent. There were more than 10 Americans in a position to see everything”. Having proven its capacity, NPU was now ready to join the main offensive.

When the operation to re-capture Baghdeda took off, NPU advanced towards the nearby village of Bilawat, but encountered stronger resistance than expected, and retreated back to the staging point. The following morning, four NPU members joined an Iraqi Army reconnaissance party, as they were familiar with the area, and the main force then advanced on foot behind Iraqi Army armoured vehicles. The intense fighting lasted three days, during which NPU both gained and lost territory, before victory could finally be declared. This was the only occasion where an Assyrian militia played a meaningful role in a major battle — although the by far largest role was played by the Iraqi Army. A few NPU members also took part in the re-capture of Karamles and Bartella, but not in the first line.

Like its rivals, NPU also took the opportunity to engage in propaganda, by raising crosses on church roofs in Baghdeda and Karamles (Gonzalez 2017; Nineveh Plain Protection Units - NPU 2016a; Nineveh Plain Protection Units - NPU 2016b; Nineveh Plain Protection Units - NPU 2016c).

Only a few NPU members remained in the Tesqopa area, and they were not allowed to join the operation to re-capture Batnaya — probably because KDP wanted to deny the militia any kind of symbolic victory. NPU and ADM did not exert themselves to have the decision overturned; with almost the entire force concentrated to the Khazir area (and later Baghdeda), participation in the Batnaya operation would probably have required more diplomatic effort than it was worth.

NPU was more keen to participate in the re-capture of Tel Keipeh, and assembled a large contingent for this purpose. However, KDP security forces prevented passage through their checkpoints, falsely claiming NPU lacked permission to participate in the Iraqi Army-led operation, according to a senior ADM member (G40). The actual reason, he said, was to prevent NPU from establishing a territorial presence in Tel Keipeh. As with the Batnaya operation, NPU and ADM yielded, and probably for the same reason.

## 5.2. THE NINEVEH PLAIN AFTER ISIS

### 5.2.1. NPGF, DN, and NPF

After the re-capture of Baghdeda, an unarmed delegation arrived to discuss the deployment of NPGF, which had supposedly been promised earlier:

We [...] went to the area one day after the liberation [...], but we faced false things, and we were removed from the operation, although [the Iraqi Ground Forces commander] was present and we met him, and he told us [...], ‘you are the people of the area and you will protect it, our job is done here’,

said an NPGF officer (G27), who knew the Iraqi Ground Forces commander from when they served together under the previous regime. However, if any such promise was made, it was most likely long before the agreement between the two governments, which no military commander could overrule.

The churches also lobbied on behalf of NPGF, said to a senior CSAPC member (G28) in June 2017:

[The Archbishop of Mosul] is now with a delegation in the USA [...]. I think they will talk with the State Department and Congressmen. Before three patriarchs also went there, [the Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, and the Patriarch of the Syriac Catholic Church]. [...] Because the main thing is to return confidence. Because people have long experience with Herasat [NPGF]. People will not return back without Herasat.

The mentioned agreement probably doomed any attempt to enter the GoI zone, but the militia was at least allowed to deploy within the KRG zone. Some members already served in three villages near the Mar Mattai monastery, and others now deployed to Batnaya, Tesqopa, and Bashiqa-Bahzani. Access to materiel remained a severe limitation, but the militia was at least able to establish a token presence on the ground (see 4.3.1. Powerful Domestic Actors and Foreign Governments).

Meanwhile, DN and the BNDP contingent of NPF re-located from Baqofa and Tesqopa respectively to Batnaya, which remained completely deserted throughout the period of study. “There was a new policy in Tel Isqof [Tesqopa] that no force and

soldiers are allowed to stay in the village, so we had to move to Batnaya”, said the second NPF commander. “People have returned to Tel Isqof, and people of Batnaya have not returned yet. [...] We have orders that if people return to Batnaya, we will have to leave”.

The HBA contingent of NPF instead established a base in Shaqoli — one of the villages it had helped re-capture, right by the road between Erbil and Bartella. The members used their local knowledge to assist at the checkpoint between the GoI zone and the KRG zone, e.g. by identifying Assyrians and facilitating their passage. This is a rare example of an Assyrian militia performing a meaningful task within the KRG zone; for the most part, they did little more than literally maintain a presence in various locations.

One likely reason for the reluctance to delegate security responsibilities is that the Nineveh Plain did not revert to its previous disputed state. If there had been a scramble for territory, rather than an agreement to draw a line between two separate zones, the militias would have been useful to lay claim to Assyrian population centres — in particular Baghdeda, Bartella, and Karamles. Compared to in the GoI zone, Assyrian areas in the KRG zone were more geographically isolated from both road traffic and Sunni Arab communities, which meant the threat level was lower. KDP had relied mainly on its own security forces in this area already before 2014, and they had proven well capable of the task (see 2.3.3. Security Arrangements). KDP probably expected to retain control over the KRG zone in the longer term, whether simply by default (i.e. GoI acceptance of the status quo), through unilateral annexation, or following a referendum. In the latter case, there were multiple ways to ensure the desired result, other than to empower a local militia (2.3.1. Electoral

Politics and Self-Rule; 2.3.2. Carrots and Sticks). Quite simply, KDP viewed direct control as preferable, wherever it was a viable option.

### **5.2.2. BB and SHF**

With its main base in Bartella, the Shabak Brigade established a strong presence in the Nineveh Plain following its re-capture, and BB developed into a military and political actor to be taken seriously, rather than a mere propaganda tool. In the spring of 2017, the former sub-unit even saw its status elevated to formal autonomy within PMF — although it continued to work closely with the Shabak Brigade.

According to a former BB officer (G02), the commander co-ordinated his activities directly with some of the most powerful men operating on Iraqi soil: the Badr Organisation leader, the PMC Deputy Chairman, and the IRGC Quds Force commander. Judging by photographs showing tight embraces and hand-holding on five separate occasions, the commander and his brother developed a close relationship with the PMC Deputy Chairman in particular (Rian Chaldean 2017a; Rian Chaldean 2017b; Rian Chaldean 2017c; Rian Chaldean 2017e; Rian Chaldean 2017f).

However, the autonomy of BB remained circumscribed, as I witnessed during a visit to the militia's base in Baghdeda. In the middle of my interview with an Assyrian officer (G01), a man others referred to simply as “the leader” (A059) entered the room — without presenting himself — and joined the conversation:

Before this, I was a fighter with the Iranian Hizballah [presumably the Hizballah Battalions; see 3.2.2. Shi'a Actors]. Then when I saw the reputation of this man [the BB commander], I joined him although I am Muslim and he is Christian.

Before leaving the room, “the leader” instructed the interviewee to not tell me too much.

After ISIS had been driven out, the Iraqi Army gradually reduced its presence inside population centres, but the Iraqi Police was unable to fill the void. In the whole Nineveh Province, only around a quarter of Iraqi Police members returned to duty, according to a senior official (G79); other sources claimed the proportion was around half (Ahn et al. 2018: 81; Rise Foundation 2017a: 11). The presence of other GoI security forces — including ISOF, the National Security Service, and the Federal Police — was also limited. Instead, security responsibilities were often assumed by various PMF-affiliated militias, which were not fully under GoI control. For all forces operating in the area, the somewhat anarchic situation brought opportunities to deploy unilaterally without permission — and even directly challenge rival units on the ground.

BB deployed alongside the Shabak Brigade and other PMF units to the Mar Behnam monastery, al-Khidir village, the Nimrud archaeological site (8km south-west from al-Khidir), Ali Rash village, Imam Gharbi town, Tel Keipeh, Baghdeda, Bartella — and even Mosul (Gaston et al. 2017: 31; Rise Foundation 2017a: 17; Rise Foundation 2017b).

Tel Keipeh and Baghdeda were prioritised for the deployment of Assyrian members — most likely for strategic reasons. With no other Assyrian or Sunni Arab militia present, BB was the only ‘local’ actor that could present claims on Tel Keipeh, a district capital. Baghdeda instead became almost completely controlled by NPU, but the town was too important for BB to give up.

During my visit in April 2017, the checkpoints around Baghdeda, Karamles, and Bartella were operated jointly by NPU, the Shabak Brigade, BB, the Iraqi Police, and the Iraqi Army. However, BB deployed no more than a single token member in

three different checkpoints. This practice suggests that BB established a token presence to create a territorial foothold for the Badr Organisation, which in turn acted as a deterrent to anyone seeking to expel the militia.

In Tel Keipeh, the militia was more active, and took on some responsibility for actual security provision. However, since few or none of its Assyrian members were from the town, and no Assyrian civilians had returned, BB lacked the necessary local knowledge or embeddedness. In contrast, the Sunni Arab population had largely remained or returned to the town; whereas some opposed ISIS, others still sympathised with their former rulers. “The situation in Tel Keif [Tel Keipeh] was not stable, so [the BB commander] asked the Sunni leaders to join”, explained a former BB officer (G02). A recruitment drive among Sunni Arabs was successful, probably in part since joining a militia gave some protection in this relatively lawless environment, where BB itself was one of the predatory actors.

Uniquely among the Assyrian militias, BB engaged in criminal activities for private economic gain. These activities were initiated and supervised by the acting commander, according to the former officer, who led the BB contingent in Baghdeda until the spring of 2017:

He used to steal cars, iron, copper, electricity generators. [...] [He] used to give his officers phone credits, food, and money, and they would do as he asks. They stole 80 per cent of the Qaraqosh [Baghdeda] electrical cables. For example, they have 400 kilos of copper that they extracted from the wires, they would sell them, 5,000 Iraqi dinar per kilo, and they would give [the brother] half and share the other half between them. He also used to give them money to buy drinks at night.

The (initially very few) Assyrian returnees were not targeted, probably because NPU or Assyrian BB members would otherwise have reacted, but Sunni Arabs had no one to protect them. In Tel Keipeh, said the former officer, “They have checkpoints, and they stop the cars, and take a share of whatever the people have with

them”, and “They are arresting people under the charge of terrorism and release them for money”. Sunni Arabs were also subject to revenge attacks, threats, and sectarian rhetoric (Gaston 2017a; HRW 2017; Al-Tamimi 2017). In a media interview, a BB officer admitted that “for every Christian house they [ISIS] blew up, we blow up a house next to it” (Kalin 2016).

According to the former officer, it was the original members that first turned to criminal and abusive behaviour. “Christians from Baghdad were not disciplined, they drink and take pills, and they were aggressive and shoot a lot. So I told them that I only want people from Qaraqosh [Baghdeda] to be in it and protect it”. Supposedly, he managed to get most of the original members discharged, with the remainder stationed away from Baghdeda. However, later many non-Assyrian members entered the town instead: “Now no one is stopping them, and they are stealing and doing whatever they want”, said the former officer in April 2017.

A possible explanation why the members from Baghdad turned predatory is that early difficulties in recruiting Assyrians enabled criminals to join (see 4.1.2. Incentives and Constraints). More generally, recruitment from different ethno-religious communities may have weakened internal cohesion, and the absence of ties to the local community may have undermined social norms (Carey & Mitchell 2017: 135–137; Humphreys & Weinstein 2006: 444). The starkly different response of local Assyrian members provides further evidence for this interpretation. The mentioned officer quit when he proved unable to stop the criminal activities, and nearly all members from Baghdeda followed suit — despite their primarily economic motivations (see 4.1.3. Selection; 4.1.6. Retention). This behaviour reminds of

previous research demonstrating that rebel splinter groups often have a separate regional identity (Christia 2012: 227–228).

Soon after the re-capture of Baghdeda, the newly-founded and unaffiliated SHF also turned up to establish a base — aided by the same senior NGO member (D030) that had previously helped the commander, and apparently still held out hope for an alliance with KDP. However, he severed all relations when SHF suddenly started co-operating with BB, and tried to get back under the PMF umbrella. The unexpected alliance only lasted a few weeks — unsurprisingly, considering that the two commanders shared a history of rivalry and conflict. “We were making a partnership with Babylon and the Syriac Hawks”, said the SHF commander. “Then, it became [the BB commander’s] intention to absorb our fighters completely. Because he does not have fighters. He only has Shi’a, no Christians”. The attempt can be considered successful, as around one quarter to one third of the SHF members left to join the rival militia (see 4.1.6. Retention).

Apparently, the SHF commander also attempted to re-forge an alliance with his former host unit, but nothing came of this (see 4.4.1. Powerful Domestic Actors). Having exhausted all available options, SHF remained unaffiliated. “Independence, it is a problem, but subordination is a greater problem”, said the commander, whose seemingly desperate search for allies indicates sour grapes. The tiny militia retained a presence in Baghdeda, but was left out from local security arrangements, e.g. standing in checkpoints.

### 5.2.3. NPU

Uniquely among Iraqi armed actors, and as result of previous political negotiations, NPU maintained a presence in both the GoI and KRG zones after ISIS had been driven out. In Sharafiya, Tesqopa, and outside Alqosh, the militia simply remained — and it also established a new outpost in Batnaya. According to a senior ADM member (G40), NPU was actually denied permission to deploy there, yet KDP did not react. In practical terms, it was probably easy for NPU to sneak in, since there was no checkpoint on the road between Sharafiya and Batnaya — except at the entrance to Tesqopa — and if the small contingent had been expelled later, it might have caused an unwelcome political stir. In any case, it probably mattered little to KDP if yet another Assyrian militia roamed the largely destroyed and completely abandoned town. In the partially inhabited Tesqopa, on the other hand, NPU was not allowed to operate outside its base.

In the spring of 2017, out of an estimated 450 members (see Table 4.1.), only around one quarter served in the KRG zone. As NPU was not allowed to engage in security provision there, it is not obvious why all bases were retained. The militia may simply have wanted to assert itself against KDP, or hoped to negotiate a security role for itself in the future; another possibility is that local members would have been too upset by an order to abandon their home towns for deployment elsewhere, e.g. in Baghdeda.

Before the offensive was launched, the Nineveh Liberation Operation Command gave NPU permission to deploy to Assyrian population centres within the GoI zone, and the militia later co-ordinated on the ground with various official security forces and militias — in particular the Iraqi Army.

Around three quarters of the NPU members served in the GoI zone, but only a handful of them were stationed in or around Karamles and Bartella. By April 2017, both bases inside Karamles had been abandoned, and only a checkpoint at the entrance remained. There was simply no need for a stronger NPU presence, as no IDPs had come back to settle, and the small town attracted no interest from rival militias.

Soon after Bartella was re-captured, the Shabak Brigade had turned up and demanded full control of all checkpoints, but this was refused, said an NPU officer (G34). The Shabak Brigade then set up parallel checkpoints, but the Iraqi Ground Forces commander intervened and ordered that all checkpoints should be shared. Over the following months, the Shabak Brigade gradually strengthened its presence, while NPU ceded control, and retained no more than a foothold. When I visited in April 2017, NPU had only one base inside Bartella, and another right outside, with some members serving in a checkpoint at the entrance to the town, alongside the Shabak Brigade and the Iraqi Police.

The primary reason why NPU did not challenge the Shabak Brigade was probably that the latter had a too powerful ally in the Badr Organisation, which meant any military or political confrontation could become costly. Moreover, the very few NPU members from Bartella were probably unable to pressure the militia's leadership, which clearly preferred to maintain a strong presence in Baghdeda. Lastly, the absence of returnees — in part probably caused by communal conflict, and fear of the Shabak Brigade — meant there was barely a local Assyrian community to protect.

The vast majority of the members were concentrated to Baghdeda, where NPU became the main security provider. The Shabak Brigade and BB entered the town

following its re-capture, but the former eventually agreed to leave — probably since the latter was allowed to remain. With a transecting major road, the threat level was higher than in any other Assyrian town, and two squads were constantly on stand-by to respond to incidents. The other squads were stationed at 13 different checkpoints and bases; the latter often gave a good view over the surrounding ground, and were equipped with medium or heavy machine guns.

Compared to its Assyrian rivals in Baghdeda and elsewhere, NPU played a more active role as a security provider, e.g. arresting suspected ISIS members, and guarding church services. During the first few weeks, ISIS also infiltrated through tunnels to stage small-scale attacks, which the militia responded to.

As the security situation improved, IDPs started returning to Baghdeda, which made NPU the only Assyrian militia with primary security responsibility for a local community. In April, there were only a handful of permanent residents, but three months later 350 displaced families had moved back (EFE Newswire 2017). At the end of the period of study, very few had returned to other Assyrian towns or villages in the GoI zone (see 2.4. From Occupation to Liberation and Beyond).

NPU intended to deploy to Tel Keipeh as well, but eventually abstained, due to the heavy presence of Iran-affiliated militias, said the NPU commander. As with Bartella, other factors that probably contributed were uncertainty over whether Assyrian IDPs were ever going to return in substantial numbers, an unwillingness to stretch the force out too thin, the low number of local NPU members, and the risk of communal conflict. Additionally, since ISIS retained some support among local Sunni Arabs, the threat level was likely to remain high for the foreseeable future.

## 5.3. RIVALRY AND CONFLICT

### 5.3.1. Fragmentation

With the exception of BB, the Assyrian militias and political parties shared similar goals, and their senior members often spoke passionately about the need to unify the militias, or at the very least co-operate (see 3.1. Goal Convergence; 3.3.7. The Babylon Battalions). At the same time, they tended to blame others for obstructing such initiatives — and this only fuelled the antagonism further.

I visited NPU, I visited Dwekh Nawsha, but until now the others they hadn't come to visit NPF, and once, the last time it was maybe two months ago, I visited Dwekh Nawsha, I took Dwekh Nawsha with me [...] and we visited NPU, so I could to put all three forces together [...]. Just after a week, [the ADM leader] went there and he told the commander of NPU, please, you have no right to visit NPF and Dwekh Nawsha, said a senior BNDP member (G20). The NPU commander had in fact recently visited NPF, as the latter announced on its own Facebook page (Nineveh Plain Forces 2016a). The senior BNDP member also said he visited the Department of State, and met with five-six Members of Congress, soon before the re-capture of the Nineveh Plain. However, his stated desire to make international support conditional on unification was not necessarily selfless:

I told them if you want you could act a positive role even to re-unite our forces [...]. [If you] support one of these forces and not the other, this force will not be ready to re-unite with the others [...]. The good thing even the Europeans they are talking about that, maybe even this thing will more urge the others who don't want to re-unite these forces in order to be able to be sure that if they not re-unite they will lose.

At this time, the USA was working closely with NPU, whereas the much smaller NPF was starved of resources by KDP. Thus, unification followed by international support was perhaps the only realistic way for NPF to get off life support, and survive as an organisation. Alternatively, making support conditional would at least damage NPU, if the militias would fail to come together.

Later that autumn, the affiliated political parties of NPGF, NPF, NPU, and DN declared that “In the event of the creation of a Nineveh Plain Province, we commit ourselves to forming one single self-defense force, which will cooperate with the legitimate government of our country” (Bethnahrain Patriotic Union et al. 2016). In a separate statement, they agreed to increase co-operation as a move towards eventual unification, but no practical steps were taken (AINA 2016b).

The same political parties were invited to the Brussels conference in June 2017 (see 2.4. From Occupation to Liberation and Beyond). ADM demanded that SDU should be excluded, since Dawronoye was already represented by HBA, which eventually agreed. BM was never even invited, since its rivals — as well as the convenor of the conference, who opposed Iran — viewed it as an illegitimate representative of Iraqi Assyrians. The final declaration re-iterated support for militia unification, but only the affiliated political parties of NPGF and NPF signed, since their rivals decided at the last minute to boycott the event (Beth Nahrain Democratic Party et al. 2017). The high ambitions of the conference proved futile, and the final declaration was soon forgotten.

Considering that pragmatic alliances between far stranger bedfellows abound throughout human history, the explanation for the failed unification attempts is likely structural in character. Bakke et al. (2012) provide a framework to analyse fragmentation within a movement engaged in a civil war. They argue that the likelihood of internal conflict depends on the number of rival groups, their relative power within the movement, and the degree to which they are linked in an institutional framework.

It makes sense to view the Assyrian militias and their affiliated political parties as part of a movement, which “represents an underlying group in whose name and interest it — and its constituent organizations — claims to act” (Bakke et al. 2012: 267). In their case, the movement could be characterised as “extremely fragmented” (Bakke et al. 2012: 277), as power was dispersed between many groups, which lacked an effective institutional structure to co-operate within (Bakke et al. 2012: 273, 277). In such cases, “the probability of violent infighting is very high” (Bakke et al. 2012: 277).

However, this framework is designed for movements fighting the state, and may be less applicable for those on the incumbent side — in particular if they are politically and militarily weak, and therefore vulnerable to state suppression. For the Assyrian militias, full unification across the GoI and KRG zones would most likely require some sort of international guarantee. In the absence thereof, it would not be in the interest of powerful domestic actors to allow even limited co-operation between their own Assyrian allies and those of their rivals. At the same time, the powerful domestic actors tried to avoid confrontations between themselves during the period of study, which meant the militias were more or less locked in place between unification and violent infighting.

Inter-militia violence was also constrained by social networks and norms. Unlike many rebel groups, the Assyrian militias were unable to isolate and socialise their members, as the latter normally had every second week off. Most IDPs from Baghdeda lived in Ainkawa, which meant the members were surrounded by family and friends, some of whom belonged to rival groups, or official security forces, e.g. the Iraqi Army, Iraqi Police, or Federal Police. An NPU member (M34) said he even

knew a family where one brother served in NPU, another in NPGF, and a third in BB. Although there were occasional disagreements, these were typically expressed in a timid manner, e.g. another NPU member (M32) said the second NPGF commander, as well as an NPF officer, sometimes responded to his Facebook posts with an angry emoticon.

### **5.3.2. Intra-Militia Conflict: NPF**

NPF was the only militia with two founding political parties, and their co-operation was strained almost from the very beginning. One reason was the general unpopularity of the first commander (see 3.3.4. The Nineveh Plain Forces — NPF; 4.1.6. Retention), but his replacement in early 2017 by a (similarly BNDP-affiliated) militia officer could not heal the rift. The two political parties still disagreed on a more fundamental political level, as BNDP stood extremely close to KDP, whereas HBA had no powerful ally, and wanted to steer the militia in a more independent direction.

“We told them that we want to take over NPF by ourselves for a while”, said a senior BNDP member (G20), but the de facto authority of his political party remained limited to the Batnaya contingent, while HBA assumed full control of the Shaqli contingent. In short, the coup attempt backfired.

Apparently, the split was enabled by both internal structural factors and external change. According to Asal et al. (2012), ethno-political minority organisations in the Middle East are much more likely to split if they are factionalised and de-centralised:

In the competition for organizational power, when a subunit or a faction within an organization is more successful in obtaining resources and thus strengthens its share of institutional power, its acquisition of power can create tension with other competing units or factions. (Asal et al. 2012: 103)

Since HBA appointed half of the officers, and at least some members were bound to them by personal or political loyalties, the militia can be regarded as factionalised, whereas the division into two contingents meant the militia was also decentralised from the Nineveh Plain operation onwards.

However, whereas Asal et al. (2012) fail to find significant support for the impact of external factors on organisational splits, Tamm (2016) argues the opposite in his study of rebel groups. More specifically, he claims the effect of external support depends on which faction receives it; internal cohesion will be strengthened if the current leadership receives support, whereas internal conflict results from support to an internal challenger (or both factions simultaneously). Thus, “the shift from an imbalance to a *more balanced* distribution of power increases the likelihood of a split. The rival becomes strong enough to actively challenge the leader but remains too weak to replace him” (Tamm 2016: 601). There is no obvious reason to expect these mechanisms to be any different for militias, but in this case nothing suggests that external actors were involved.

The initial arrangement had been for HBA to channel funds to the militia, while BNDP managed relations with KDP (see 3.3.4. The Nineveh Plain Forces — NPF; 4.4.3. Foreign Donors). By the spring of 2017, however, the two political parties no longer needed one another, as the start-up costs had long since been covered, and both militia contingents had established working relations with KDP security forces on the ground. Thus, the shift in the internal distribution of power resulted from a more general change in the external environment, i.e. the chaos of the Nineveh Plain operation enabled HBA to form a separate contingent, deploy to Shaqoli, and set up a new base — without any prior political agreement.

### 5.3.3. Inter-Militia Conflict: BB and SHF

The first confrontation between rival militias occurred in the evening of Valentine's Day 2017; I have tried to re-construct what occurred below, but many details are uncertain.

The conflict started when an SHF member was shot in the leg by BB members outside his base in Baghdeda — possibly because he had insulted them — whereupon the drunken commander returned fire. Additional BB members arrived to find out what was happening, but were caught up in the exchange of fire themselves; all BB members then withdrew to their own base. With the explicit aim to take revenge, and avoid being viewed as weak, the SHF commander then single-handedly attacked the BB base:

I threw a grenade in the garden, just to scare them, it was not my intention to kill, I just wanted to scare them. I threw a grenade and fired [...] on their station, and I took down their flag with Hashd [PMF] and Hussein [Hussein ibn Ali, a revered figure in Shi'a Islam] and the other flags they had.

After returning to his own base, he spoke to the BB commander on the telephone, and agreed to a cease-fire — but this did not prevent the rival militia from turning up a couple hours later to detain him. “I had a grenade with me in bed. And my weapon, I hug it when I sleep. They came in when I was sleeping, and they took away my weapons”, said the SHF commander. “He looked for his rifle and grenades, but he did not find them”, said the BB officer in charge on the scene (G02). “Then [I] shot three bullets in the ground, so he will not get any closer to me”.

The SHF commander was then questioned by a PMF delegation dispatched from Baghdad to conduct an investigation. He was released from detention two weeks later, after intervention from an ICP parliamentarian that had previously helped free

six SLB members, and who shared good relations with all actors involved (see 3.3.5. The Syriac Lions Battalions — SLB).

Both sides appear to have been confused about what was going on — and claimed to have acted in self-defence, while trying to calm the situation. Most likely, the conflict simply escalated from an inter-personal dispute, and can be characterised as a *brawl*, as described by Tilly (2003: 84–85, 157). The most relevant background factors that enabled the conflict to escalate were the absence of *monitoring* and *containment*, i.e. control over the physical site by a dominant actor. After their short-lived alliance foundered, there had also been increased *polarisation* between the two militia commanders. Lastly, the event was characterised by escalation through *competitive display* and a *signalling spiral*, i.e. uncertainty about the future behaviour of the other actor, and a desire to communicate one's own capacity and determination.

Although several were wounded on both sides — including the SHF commander — it appears no one had the intention to kill. The violence was spontaneous and limited, as neither side aimed to conclusively defeat the opponent. Notably, the SHF members did not even participate in the attack on the BB base, and were apparently neither viewed as culpable, nor as a potential threat, as they were only detained very briefly. It is likely that the mutual restraint was a consequence of social networks and norms; at the time there were still relatively many Assyrians in BB (see Table 4.1.; 5.3.1. Fragmentation). On the leadership level, fear of political or legal consequences probably played a role as well.

#### **5.3.4. Inter-Militia Conflict: BB and NPU**

As with the incident involving SHF and BB, some details concerning the confrontations between the latter and NPU are uncertain; my account is a reconstruction based on own interviews as well as news and social media (Assyrian National Broadcasting 2017b; Gaston 2017a; Nineveh Plain Defense Fund 2017b; Nineveh Plain Protection Units - NPU 2017; Skelton & Bahnam 2019).

One night in the spring of 2017, NPU stopped and searched a car with drunken BB members, and the experience left at least one of them upset enough to return later and open fire. Instead of responding in kind, NPU called on assistance from ISOF, with which it shared good relations, and a unit soon arrived to arrest most BB members in the area. After BB agreed to discharge the main culprit, the other members were released.

NPU now asked the Iraqi Army to return to Baghdada temporarily to keep the peace. Following the re-capture of the town, both the Iraqi Army and the Iraqi Police had remained in significant numbers for around two months; all members of the former and most members of the latter were then re-deployed. The request was granted, and when I visited the area in April, either the Iraqi Army or the Iraqi Police was present in most checkpoints.

Notably, the NPU commander had personal friends in the Iraqi Army leadership, and relations on the lower level appear to have been cordial as well. An Iraqi Army officer (G80) described NPU as organised, disciplined, well-trained, and professional, whereas the Shabak Brigade and BB was said to lack both training and discipline. Diplomatically — but unconvincingly — he nevertheless claimed the latter enjoyed a good reputation.

While some BB members were dismantling infrastructure and raiding private homes for sellable goods, one of the militia's own officers (G02) was in fact reporting about their activities to a senior NPU member. On several occasions, NPU caught the thieves, but had to let them walk. The reason was that PMF leaders forbade any action against BB, to avoid problems between allies before the battle of Mosul had been concluded, said a senior ADM member:

We could not do anything because we had an agreement with military leaders. But guess what? Finally, we captured them stealing when all operations of liberating Mosul ended. We said enough is enough, as we found in their vehicles a lot of things, such as artefacts, ancient books, manuscripts and stuff like that [...] from the [Mar Behnam] monastery and from houses. We captured six persons, who we handed over to the police station in Baghdeda because we are not authorised to investigate or create prisons. (Assyrian National Broadcasting 2017b)

Two days later, a convoy of 10–15 vehicles turned up at an NPU checkpoint. Inside were members of BB and other PMF units, who had come to free their comrades — mistakenly believing the latter were still being held by NPU. Some remained at the checkpoint to detain the squad that had been manning it, while others drove to the main NPU base in Baghdeda. Finding no trace of their comrades, they instead locked up the NPU officer and three to four members that were present in the building, and drove off again with a stolen vehicle and some weapons. However, NPU quickly surrounded the convoy, and opened fire. With all exit roads blocked, and well-armed NPU members stationed on the rooftops, the raiding party wisely backed down, and the situation settled into a stand-off.

The Syriac Catholic Archbishop of Mosul now intervened on behalf of NPU, and placed a telephone call to the Iraqi Prime Minister. Notably, the Archbishop openly supported the KRG President — to the point where he called for extending his mandate without holding a new election — and had previously opposed NPU (see 2.1.3. Religion).

[The clergy] did not want this force to succeed, because they had Herasat [NPGF] [...]. First they refused NPU, but gradually this changed. Right now, [the Archbishop] and us are working together, it is not like before [...]. Because we are the only force here, so he must deal with us,

said an NPU officer (D054). “Before one year it’s like that”, said the NPU commander in April 2017, pointing his index fingers at one another. “Before two months it’s like that”, he continued, and moved them to a 90-degree angle. “And now it’s like that”, he concluded, with his fingers at a 45-degree angle, illustrating the political alignment between the Archbishop and NPU.

On orders directly from the Iraqi Prime Minister, BB was now instructed to immediately and permanently leave the entire Baghdeda District. Despite the high-level connections of the BB commander, the decision was backed by PMC, which had apparently had enough of the militia’s reckless and criminal behaviour. NPU was now finally rid of its rival — and could even expand its territorial presence to the Mar Behnam monastery.

The drunken assault in the spring fits Tilly’s (2003) description of a brawl — like the earlier incident with SHF (5.3.3. Inter-Militia Conflict: BB and SHF). In contrast, the criminal activities and raiding of an NPU base would better be characterised as *opportunism*, i.e.

low coordination, high-salience violence that occurs when, as a consequence of shielding from routine surveillance and repression, individuals or clusters of individuals use immediately damaging means to pursue ends that would be unavailable or forbidden to them under other circumstances. (Tilly 2003: 139)

By the time of these incidents, BB had very few Assyrians left within its ranks, and some of them were not even from the area (see Table 4.1.; 4.1.2. Incentives and Constraints); supposedly, the convoy that descended on Baghdeda included only a single Assyrian member. This probably meant that social norms against intra-communal violence did not act as a deterrent. Instead, the relative restraint exercised

by both BB and NPU most likely resulted from well-founded fear of legal or political consequences.

## 5.4. CONCLUSION

To re-iterate, the question guiding this chapter is: How did the militias deploy and operate during and after the re-capture of the Nineveh Plain?

At the deployment stage — like at the establishment and mobilisation stages — the militias often depended heavily on backing from powerful domestic actors and foreign governments. Additionally, the churches — which had previously played a limited role — now intervened to support or oppose the deployment of specific groups.

At the establishment stage, the militias had very limited opportunities to act independently, as they were either stuck in the relatively static KDP-controlled front line, or embedded in PMF host units. In contrast, at the deployment stage they operated relatively unsupervised, and sometimes without sanction from above. The various militias that were present within the GoI zone routinely interacted with one another — sometimes violently, or at least threateningly — and sometimes called on local or high-level allies to assert themselves against rivals.

Unlike before, there was quite literally a first-mover advantage for the militias at the deployment stage — at least within the somewhat anarchic GoI zone, as demonstrated by the cases of Baghdeda and Tel Keipeh in particular. However, Bartella constitutes a counter-example, as NPU deemed it too costly to oppose the determined effort of the Shabak Brigade to take over the town.

The opportunities for unsanctioned deployments and activities were far more limited within the KRG zone, where KDP exercised uncontested territorial control. As the case of Batnaya demonstrates, there was no clear first-mover advantage — but deployments within the KRG zone proved to become relatively pointless anyway.

The militias were allowed to remain present, but only as long as they remained irrelevant. Since KDP displayed very little interest in delegating security responsibilities, the prospects of future institutionalisation were slim. The militias probably suspected that their territorial presence — and even their very existence as organisations — would soon come to an end, and practically gave up their ambitions.

Having outlined the general conditions within the two zones, I will now briefly sum up the deployment and activities of each militia, before systematically comparing their external relations.

SHF lacked powerful allies, but took advantage of the chaotic situation before the Nineveh Plain was fully re-captured, and deployed without higher sanction to Baghdeda. The militia soon forged an alliance with BB, but the latter was intent on swallowing rather than co-operating with its new partner. Tensions remained after they parted ways, and eventually shots were fired in anger. Perhaps because of his political connections, or the ongoing fighting in nearby Mosul, the SHF commander received no more than a slap on the wrist, and the militia returned to Baghdeda.

DN was prevented from participating in the re-capture of Batnaya, but was allowed to enter and remain there later. The sanctioned deployment was no indication of goodwill or trust on the part of KDP, however, but rather that it wanted the militia out of the way. Unlike SHF, DN was highly risk-averse — both on the military and political level — and therefore turned down the opportunity to deploy to Tel Keipeh. Rather than jeopardise its relation to KDP, or place itself in harm's way, DN agreed to sit out the rest of the war in Batnaya.

BB initially operated alongside its PMF allies — who in turn negotiated access with GoI security forces, or deployed without sanction. Once established on the

ground, BB used its limited agency to engage in predatory criminal behaviour, and get into conflict with rival militias — but finally pushed its luck in July 2017. When the Iraqi Prime Minister stepped forward, BB's powerful allies stepped back, and the militia was expelled from Baghdeda. However, the order stopped at the borders of Baghdeda District, which meant BB was allowed to remain in Tel Keipeh.

NPGF was barred from participation in the Nineveh Plain operation by KDP, which feared a negative impact on its own relations with the churches as well as the wider Assyrian community. Combat casualties could have undermined the informal governance apparatus of KDP in the Nineveh Plain, by signalling a breach of the implicit agreement between patron and client; NPGF was not set up to fight a war, but to offer salaries in return for political loyalty. Moreover, after ISIS had been driven out, there was no practical need for the militia within the KRG zone, since KDP was able to exercise direct control, and — despite lobbying by the churches — there was probably never any chance for deployment within the GoI zone.

One NPF contingent was allowed to join the operation to re-capture Batnaya, and subsequently remained there. The contingent then evacuated its base in Tesqopa, and refrained from any attempt to cross over into the GoI zone. In short, it conformed to the wishes of KDP, and agreed to remain irrelevant. The other contingent displayed less loyalty, but more assertiveness, and managed to enter the GoI zone at least temporarily. Despite this unsanctioned adventure, the contingent was subsequently allowed to return and set up a base — probably because the local KDP commander appreciated its eagerness to assist in the operation to re-capture the area. The dual personality of NPF can be explained simply by the fact that the contingents were led by two very different political parties, which did not share a common strategy.

After proving its capacity in Badanah, NPU was allowed to actively participate in the operation to re-capture Baghdeda, and remain there with a large contingent. The militia also deployed elsewhere within the GoI zone, albeit in smaller scale — and expanded its presence within the KRG zone without sanction. The only major setback was the planned deployment to Tel Keipeh, which was first obstructed by KDP, then cancelled because BB and other PMF units had already established a strong presence. With continued support from both governments — as well as the USA — NPU maintained a relatively secure position on the political level. On the ground, the militia conducted itself professionally and with restraint, and nurtured its relations with GoI security forces, who could then be called upon to provide protection against the Shabak Brigade and BB. In the end, it was apparently the territorial presence of NPU that prompted a Syriac Catholic Archbishop to contact the Iraqi Prime Minister on the militia's behalf. After the latter ordered BB to be expelled, the position of NPU as the main security provider in the largest Assyrian settlement in the Nineveh Plain was no longer contested.

As seen above, a key difference between the militias is whether their deployments and activities were unsanctioned, or supported by one or more powerful domestic actors or foreign governments. For comparative purposes, it is necessary to define what counts as a unitary actor in this specific context.

KDP counts as a unitary actor, since there is no indication of internal conflicts related to the Assyrian militias between actors on different levels (e.g. local commanders, Sarkis Aghajan, the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, or the Ministry of Interior). NPGF, DN, and NPF are therefore considered to have relied on support from a single powerful domestic actor.

PMF is more difficult to untangle, but can broadly be divided into an Iran-aligned faction with the PMC Deputy Chairman at the top, and a more nationally oriented faction headed by the PMC Chairman. Although BB nurtured relations with several individuals and militias within the former faction, it is therefore considered to have relied on support from a single powerful domestic actor.

For BB, it is also unclear to what extent its crimes, abuses against civilians, and conflicts with rival militias were sanctioned by (at least some) allies within PMF, but these activities were clearly unsanctioned at least to some extent.

As seen in Table 5.1., all three monogamous militias were backed by a single actor. One of the celibate militias similarly relied on support from a single actor, whereas the other remained without external allies — at least most of the time. This difference can be explained simply by the respective conditions within the KRG and GoI zones; in the former, deployment without KDP approval was impossible, whereas militias were able to simply turn up and remain in the latter. The only promiscuous militia was also the only one to rely on support from multiple actors. So far, the behaviour of the militias at the deployment stage mirrors their behaviour at the establishment and mobilisation stages (although DN is defined as celibate, it relied on informal support from KDP also at the establishment stage).

However, the prevalence of unsanctioned deployments and activities is more surprising, at least for the three militias that also relied on support from one or more external actors (the celibate militia operating within the GoI zone simply lacked other options). Such behaviour would seem to carry significant risk, as it could erode the trust of external actors, in particular vis-à-vis monogamous militias. However, the unsanctioned deployment of NPF makes sense from the viewpoint of HBA, which

had little to lose at this point. In contrast, the unsanctioned deployment of NPU appears unwise, since the militia needed to maintain good relations with KDP — and a territorial presence in Batnaya was worth very little. In what appears like an odd contradiction, BB was extremely loyal and acquiescent politically, but also engaged in reckless and unsanctioned behaviour. This can ultimately be explained by the opportunistic character of the organisation, which accommodated the opposing interests of the politically ambitious commander and his rent-seeking brother, the acting commander. Ill-advised or not, the unsanctioned deployments and activities of the militias within both zones demonstrate their agency.

**Table 5.1. Assyrian militia origins, political practices, logistical support, and deployment support.**

<b>Militia</b>	<b>Origin</b>	<b>Political practice</b>	<b>Logistical support</b>	<b>Deployment support</b>
NPGF	Establishment	Monogamy	State	Single actor
DN	Challenger	Celibacy	Non-state	Single actor
NPF	Challenger	Monogamy	State + non-state	Single actor + unsanctioned
NPU	Challenger	Promiscuity	State + non-state	Multiple actors + unsanctioned
BB	Start-up	Monogamy	State	Single actor + unsanctioned
SLB	Start-up	Monogamy	State	-
SHF	Start-up	Celibacy	Non-state	Unsanctioned

## 6. CONCLUSION

To re-capitulate, in the competition between seven small Assyrian militias that aimed to establish themselves as security providers in the Nineveh Plain, a relatively autonomous militia prevailed over those offering loyalty and acquiescence to a single powerful domestic actor. From this puzzling observation follows the research question guiding the present study: How did the militias establish their territorial presence?

The outcome is defined as variation in *territorial presence*, rather than *territorial control*, since the militias always operated alongside other armed actors, or with delegated responsibility. To provide a comprehensive account of the process that brought about this variation, the period of study reaches from the fall of Mosul to ISIS in June 2014, which prompted the formation of the first proto-militias, to the re-capture of the city in July 2017, when the contest over the largest Assyrian town in the Nineveh Plain was brought to an end. To structure and guide the analysis, the process is divided into three separate stages in the trajectories of the militias, namely establishment, mobilisation, and deployment. As the most important and interesting variable, the external relations of the militias stand at the centre of the analysis, but various idiosyncratic factors that are relevant to explain the outcome are also discussed.

This chapter begins with an account of the strategies that the powerful domestic actors employed vis-à-vis the militias, and brings together findings from the three stages into an integrated narrative for each militia (6.1. Militia Trajectories). The following sub-chapter systematically compares the external relations of the militias,

to discern patterns of relevant similarities and differences (6.2. Comparative Analysis). Finally, the study is situated within a wider discussion on non-state armed groups (6.3. Contributions and Implications).

## **6.1. MILITIA TRAJECTORIES**

### **6.1.1. Powerful Domestic Actor Strategies**

The Assyrian militias formed and operated in an environment characterised by civil war, state fragmentation, and foreign involvement. This meant the political parties and political entrepreneurs behind the militias were to some extent able to choose the type of alliance they wanted to form — and with whom. The earlier these choices were made, the higher was the uncertainty about what role the militias could come to play in the future. This depended in large part on the willingness of their powerful allies to offer sufficient political and logistical support, but an even more fundamental issue was the future political status of the Nineveh Plain, and who would come to de facto rule it.

One possibility was that all or most of the Nineveh Plain would end up under sole control of either the KRG or the GoI, but it was also feasible that the area would revert to shared control. As it turned out, the Nineveh Plain instead became roughly equally divided between the two governments, each of whom exercised full control within its own zone (with the caveat that powerful PMF militias within the GoI zone answered to Iran rather than to the own government). This political compromise was detrimental to local Assyrians, who became separated from neighbouring towns and villages by what some called a Berlin wall. However, from the viewpoint of this study, the division into two separate zones enables comparisons between rival militias and powerful domestic actors throughout the period of study — including at the deployment stage.

On the GoI side, the two militias that were fully embedded in PMF received substantial, consistent, and almost unconditional support. This is particularly notable

in the case of SLB, which could hardly be considered as loyal and acquiescent. Even after a failed attempt to secure support from KDP, its commander was briefly welcomed back into the PMF fold with his new militia — SHF. In contrast, BB was politically reliable, but its behaviour on the ground was highly problematic — yet the militia was never actively sanctioned by PMF or other constituent militias, e.g. the Badr Organisation. Even NPU, which overtly opposed Iranian influence, was at least half-heartedly supported. Thus, the demand for Assyrian militias was clearly high within PMF, whereas the supply of loyal and acquiescent allies was limited.

In contrast, KDP gave only minimal political and logistical support even to NPGF — its most trusted ally. Intriguingly, DN (which refused to seek a license to operate) and NPU (which was licensed by the GoI) were allowed to deploy in the KDP-controlled front line on the same conditions as NPF. The most likely explanation is that KDP expected to gain complete control of the Nineveh Plain following the defeat of ISIS. In this scenario, it would have sufficed to deploy NPGF, whereas NPF would have been superfluous — in particular since one of its founding political parties was not politically reliable. It therefore made sense to limit the capacity of NPF, while keeping NPGF on stand-by. Conversely, NPGF was not needed for front line propaganda, since NPF and to some extent DN fulfilled that role. As for NPU, its presence was reluctantly accepted, simply because KDP needed political support from ADM. By denying undesirable militias a security role following the defeat of ISIS, KDP probably calculated that the former would eventually give up and demobilise voluntarily.

Although KDP's active support for a militia licensed by the other government was unique, it is notable that all powerful domestic actors interacted cautiously with

militias affiliated with their rivals. One likely reason is that they wanted to avoid a civil war within the civil war, and another that repressive measures might have played badly in international media, provoked negative reactions from foreign governments, and jeopardised relations with the Assyrian community. The prolonged detention of SLB members by KDP is the most notable exception. However, although the militia dissolved as result, the detainees were eventually released unharmed, which prevented strong reactions. Moreover, from the viewpoint of the Imam Ali Battalions, the problematic small ally was probably not worth an active political intervention.

The militias themselves also displayed a fairly high level of conflict aversion. Although there were violent incidents, they were relatively quickly de-escalated and resolved. More importantly, despite a high level of friction between BB, SHF, and NPU, these incidents were few and far between. However, the aversion to conflict also made it more difficult to establish and maintain order, as even small groups could act more or less with impunity, and remain unmolested wherever they deployed.

### **6.1.2. NPGF**

NPGF was community-initiated, but agreed early on to come under KDP control, in exchange for logistical and political support. Over the decade before ISIS invaded the Nineveh Plain, the character of the militia changed, as it developed into a patronage apparatus with deep involvement of local secular and religious elites. Although NPGF retained a security role until August 2014, its ultimate *raison d'être* became to provide votes for CSAPC and KDP.

After NPGF was displaced to the KRI, it was officially recognised as a sub-unit within the Zerevani gendarmerie, but this meant little in practice, and the militia

failed to develop its capacity beyond the absolute minimum. Over the preceding decade, a system of obligations and expectations up and down the organisation had developed, and dysfunctional organisational practices had frozen into fixed structures. Since no one had anything to gain by upending the status quo, the organisation would have been extremely difficult to reform — had anyone seriously tried.

The members were recruited regardless of age or health status, and in comparison with other Assyrian militias had lower morale, as well as a lower prevalence of non-economic motivations. The training they received from KDP and the international coalition lacked severely in quality and quantity respectively — and those with sufficient *wasta* could skip it altogether — but no training programme could probably have transformed NPGF into a capable military force, even by Iraqi standards.

KDP refused to place NPGF in harm's way, fearing that casualties would jeopardise relations with the Assyrian community and the churches. NPGF was thus supplied with nothing except salaries, probably to retain the militia for a possible future security role, and for electoral purposes.

NPGF sought support from the international coalition — primarily the USA — to receive materiel, serve in the front line, participate in the Nineveh Plain operation, and deploy within the GoI zone. However, without KDP approval the three former requests were unattainable, whereas the GoI-KRG agreement doomed the fourth one. As KDP saw no use for NPGF, its deployment within the KRG zone was not supported logistically, but merely allowed. The dependency created by a decade of generous logistical support turned into a vulnerability, as the strong KDP affiliation and official status of the militia more or less foreclosed alternative solutions to obtain

funds and materiel. Since NPGF was tied to KDP through a patronage system, and lacked other alliance options, it had no room to negotiate — yet its loyalty was practically guaranteed.

Ultimately, NPGF established only a weak territorial presence — despite that it was far larger than any other Assyrian militia, enjoyed official recognition, and was completely loyal to a powerful domestic ally. The failure was in large part due to the organisational character of NPGF — itself caused by the decade-long demand for its services as a *patronage apparatus* — and lacking demand for its services as a *militia* following the invasion of the Nineveh Plain.

### **6.1.3. DN**

DN was able to form on a moment's notice, since APP was established and officially recognised; had an existing organisational structure; and access to at least some materiel, funds, and volunteers.

Fundraising abroad enabled the militia to obtain additional materiel, and provide salaries for an expanded membership. DN also received non-lethal equipment and food from donors in Iraq and abroad. However, when the flow of funds slowed, full salaries could no longer be provided on a regular basis, and most members eventually quit, leaving only a core with personal or political loyalties to APP. DN also recruited foreign members, who did not rely on the militia for funds or materiel, but they were prevented from actively participating in the war, and many quit out of dissatisfaction with their designated role as propaganda props.

DN refused to seek an official license to operate, and relied instead on established but informal relations with KDP. APP did not present a threat to the ruling

political party, as it did not seek support from any other powerful domestic actor, and this uncommitted loyalty proved sufficient to receive permission to deploy to the front line. DN was probably viewed as a useful propaganda tool — or KDP hoped to eventually win APP over as a political ally. However, this arrangement foreclosed US support, which DN was extremely keen to obtain.

KDP barred DN from participating in the operation to re-capture Batnaya, but the militia was nevertheless allowed to deploy there later; in fact, it was given no other option within the KRG zone. The informal dealings with KDP made the political status of DN ambiguous, but the planned deployment to Tel Keipeh was cancelled, since the militia was not prepared to jeopardise its relationship with the ruling political party, or expose its members to physical risks.

In general, DN gave higher priority to propaganda than its rivals, and lower priority to establishing a territorial presence, which more or less doomed it to irrelevance after the Nineveh Plain had been re-captured. At the end of the period of study, the few remaining DN members simply remained present in an abandoned town, without meaningful security duties, or any prospect of institutionalisation.

Ultimately, DN established only a weak territorial presence, since it could not sustain more than a token force without logistical support from a powerful domestic actor, and because it prioritised propaganda.

#### **6.1.4. NPF**

HBA had an organisational structure, a militant heritage, some volunteers, and access to funds from abroad — but also shared troubled relations with KDP. The unregistered political party failed in its attempt to form a militia before ISIS invaded

the Nineveh Plain, but the subsequent deployment of a few volunteers to the Tesqopa area went somewhat better, in that they were at least not evicted or disarmed. By this time, HBA had teamed up with BNDP, the only other political party that wanted to seek support from KDP. Importantly, BNDP was a close ally of the latter, and soon negotiated a license and permission to deploy to the front line.

However, the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs only provided salaries for very few members — who were barely even armed or trained — and refused to channel additional support from the international coalition. NPF received some donations of non-lethal equipment and food, as well as funds channelled through Dawronoye, while SOLI provided much-needed training, but salary provision remained an insurmountable obstacle. The hiring and firing of the incompetent first commander also led to retention problems, and the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs never allowed NPF to re-gain its full strength — which was very modest to begin with.

Considering the political loyalty of BNDP, it appears puzzling that KDP provided so meagre logistical support. The involvement of HBA may have been a contributing factor, but the main reason was probably that KDP saw NPF as superfluous, other than for propaganda purposes, since NPGF was the designated Assyrian security provider following the defeat of ISIS. Without competition from NPGF, it is feasible that NPF would have received considerably more support.

During the Nineveh Plain operation, the BNDP contingent behaved as could be expected by a loyal KDP ally, and participated in the re-capture of Batnaya, where it subsequently remained — doomed to irrelevance, alongside its rivals. In contrast, the HBA contingent utilised the chaotic situation to go on an unsanctioned tour through the GoI zone, before it was finally evicted. Probably because of its relations with the

local KDP commander, the contingent was allowed to set up a new base in a non-Assyrian village, and take on at least some security duties.

The two political parties no longer needed one another at this point, and their dysfunctional marriage ended in separation — but not full divorce, since the militia remained on paper as one organisation under the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs.

Ultimately, NPF established only a weak territorial presence, despite that it remained largely loyal to KDP — probably since the latter saw little use for the militia, other than for propaganda purposes.

#### **6.1.5. SLB**

SLB emerged more or less out of nowhere, on the initiative of an unknown but fearless, ambitious, and highly pragmatic political entrepreneur. Lacking any political organisation of his own, he sought support in Baghdad, where the demand of Assyrian allies outstripped supply — unlike in Erbil, where KDP had tied several established Assyrian political parties to itself already. Unlike the latter, the SLB commander had no qualms about aligning with Iran, and agreed to form a sub-unit within the Imam Ali Battalions.

As an integral part of its host unit, SLB received all necessary logistical and political support without having to exert any effort, but the commander was dissatisfied with the dependency this created. Although he claimed to share an enmity of KDP with his host unit, the SLB commander in fact lacked stable ideological convictions — apart from a virulently sectarian ‘Syriac’ nationalism. He therefore tried to get additional support elsewhere, even from within Israel — an arch enemy of

his Iran-backed ally. The latter — quite understandably — lost trust in him, and adopted the more dependable BB as a second Assyrian sub-unit.

It was difficult for SLB to recruit Assyrians that were willing to travel south from the KRI, where they resided with their family and friends — and this eventually turned out to become an Achilles Heel for the militia. After KDP detained several members, others quit as well, since they were not prepared to suffer the same fate, or go into domestic exile. The SLB commander was pressured by KDP to switch sides, but refused, whereas his host unit made no effort to resolve the situation; from its perspective, the unreliable sub-unit was probably not worth the trouble.

SLB dissolved before even reaching the Nineveh Plain, as result of KDP repression. The unwillingness of the Imam Ali Battalions to intervene was probably caused by the reckless behaviour of the SLB commander, who refused to accept that his monogamous relationship relied on loyalty and acquiescence.

#### **6.1.6. SHF**

Unlike SLB, SHF had an affiliated political party, but it was only established a few months before the militia, and appears to have been of limited value for the latter, as it lacked influence within the Assyrian, domestic, and international political arenas.

SHF was the last militia to form and deploy, which meant potential allies probably doubted its ability to establish a relevant territorial presence — and the demand for a pure propaganda tool was limited following the end of combat operations. The commander had at this point also established a reputation as a reckless and untrustworthy opportunist, but nevertheless managed to form an alliance with BB, and may have had the opportunity to do so with KDP and the Imam Ali

Battalions as well. Refusing to acknowledge his own marginal political position, the commander botched or turned down every opportunity, since he was not prepared to accept the loss of autonomy an alliance would inevitably entail.

However, SHF agreed to join the network of organisations affiliated with Dawronoye, which was equally desperate to make itself relevant. The pragmatic alliance brought at least some funds, but not enough to cover the most basic needs of the militia — and embezzlement may have further worsened the financial situation. The launching of SHF thus turned into a shambles, with too few weapons and no salaries provided to the members, most of whom quit.

It is remarkable that the tiny militia was able to deploy to Baghdeda at all — and remain there — in particular following the conflict with the far more powerful BB, which the SHF commander recklessly escalated. The pressure on BB and NPU to avoid conflicts during the ongoing battle of Mosul likely prevented SHF from being evicted, but it was excluded from local security arrangements.

Ultimately, SHF established only a weak territorial presence, because it could not or would not accept the terms of a monogamous relationship, and was not able to secure sufficient funding without logistical support from a powerful ally.

#### **6.1.7. BB**

The BB commander lacked practically any connection to the Nineveh Plain, its Assyrian community, or the Assyrian political arena. However, already before the war he was at least to some extent established within the arena of Shi'a politics, which other Assyrian political parties — with the partial exception of ADM — tended to stay away from.

The alliance with the Imam Ali Battalions, which may have been enabled by the troublesome character of its first Assyrian sub-unit, ended for unclear reasons. However, the BB commander nurtured relations throughout the network of Iran-affiliated Shi'a actors, and eventually found a new host unit. He developed close personal relationships to key individuals, and eventually his loyalty was rewarded with the granting of autonomous status to BB — at least on paper.

BB lacked the ability to mobilise political or logistical support elsewhere, but was well provided for anyway by its powerful allies. However, the militia encountered the same obstacle that proved disastrous for SLB, namely to find Assyrian recruits that were willing to travel to Baghdad. Part of the solution was to fill the ranks with members of other ethno-religious communities — something that also enabled deployment in non-Assyrian areas. The membership multiplied after BB arrived to the Nineveh Plain, but most of the new Assyrian recruits abandoned the militia, seemingly because the militia's criminal activities contradicted social norms. A recruitment stop meant they could not be replaced, and BB practically ceased being an Assyrian militia.

With support from powerful PMF allies, BB deployed to the Nineveh Plain during and after its re-capture. When the militia reached Baghdeda, NPU had already established itself as the main security provider there, with support from the Nineveh Liberation Operation Command. BB instead became the only Assyrian militia in Tel Keipeh, since the deployment of NPU was first blocked by KDP, and subsequently cancelled — precisely because BB and its PMF allies had by then established a dominant position. However, unlike NPU in Baghdeda and Karamles, BB never assumed main security responsibility for Tel Keipeh.

The BB commander may have been driven by genuine political or religious beliefs, but it is also possible that he was driven purely by individual self-interest — as seems to have been the case with his brother, who turned the militia into a criminal enterprise. Allied PMF units operating in the same area apparently sanctioned the criminal activities, or at least turned a blind eye, while NPU restrained itself. BB thus learned it could get away with anything, but this turned out to be the wrong lesson. NPU reacted strongly as soon as the political circumstances changed — and none of BB’s influential allies leapt to its defence when the Iraqi Prime Minister issued an eviction order.

Ultimately, BB established only a moderate territorial presence, since its reckless, criminal, and abusive behaviour caused its powerful allies to turn away when the militia was met with repressive measures from the highest level.

### **6.1.8. NPU**

Like DN and NPF, NPU was founded by an established political party, and was therefore able to form at least an embryonic force on short notice. In contrast to its rivals, NPU subsequently manoeuvred between different powerful domestic actors, rather than tying itself strongly to a single ally, or remaining completely autonomous. This practice was enabled by the pragmatism and political skills of ADM and the NPU commander, and their connections within the official security forces, as well as in the domestic and international political arenas.

After negotiating a quid pro quo deal with KDP, NPU secured US backing to be included in TMF, which enabled GoI support. Instead of coming under Iranian influence, the militia now answered directly to the PMC Chairman — who the NPU commander counted among his old friends. The initial US political and logistical support was probably the result of lobbying efforts by diaspora allies in Washington, D.C., as well as direct contacts with civilian and military US officials in Iraq. The demonstrated capacity of NPU, e.g. during the operation to re-capture Badanah, then enabled continued US backing.

The logistical support that reached NPU through official channels was not sufficient, but the militia successfully mobilised support from several other sources. Some equipment was provided through the PMC Chairman, or loaned from the Iraqi Army. Since NPU was clearly in need, it was seen as eligible for free training by the newly-founded SOLI, although these efforts were disrupted by the conflict with AMO. Despite mismanagement, the militia also received substantial donations of materiel and funds, probably in large part due to the efforts of diaspora allies. The successful capacity-building of NPU also relied on internal practices, e.g. the

recruitment of officers based on skill rather than political loyalty or education level, the building of bases, and the establishment of sustainable logistical systems.

With official sanction from the Nineveh Liberation Operation Command, NPU participated in offensive operations, and established itself as the main security provider in Baghdeda, with sole control of Karamles, and at least a nominal presence in Bartella. In the latter town, NPU refrained from trying to challenge the Shabak Brigade or BB, but eventually both were ousted from Baghdeda, the by far most prioritised location. Simply getting there first with a relatively large force was probably critical, and during the subsequent months NPU — which did not engage in criminal or abusive behaviour — was assisted by GoI security forces to keep BB in check. Eventually, support from a Syriac Catholic Archbishop and the Iraqi Prime Minister resulted in the eviction of BB, which left NPU as the undisputed main security provider in the largest Assyrian town in the Nineveh Plain. Obstruction from KDP meant NPU arrived too late to Tel Keipeh town to assert itself against BB and its allies, but this may in fact have come as a blessing, as it enabled the militia to concentrate on Baghdeda.

Ultimately, NPU established a strong territorial presence, despite that it refrained from forming an exclusive relationship with a single powerful ally. Unlike its rivals, NPU was willing and able to play the game of militia politics, by engaging pragmatically and skilfully with various external actors to obtain both political and logistical support. Moreover, adequate organisational practices resulted in relatively high capacity, which enabled NPU to be included in the Nineveh Plain operation, and subsequently assume security responsibilities.

## 6.2. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

As demonstrated above, the trajectories of the seven militias display a great deal of variation. For each militia, different idiosyncratic factors played a role in the process that produced the outcome. However, by placing external relations at the centre of the analysis, patterns of commonalities and differences emerge more clearly.

The external relations of the militias were to large extent defined by their choice of political practice, which generally occurred during or soon after their formation. This choice depended on the options that were available to the founding political parties and political entrepreneurs — as well as on their organisational or personal objectives.

Whereas the establishment militia had no other option than monogamy, the start-ups could instead choose celibacy — and all three options were open to the challengers. Although the trajectories varied also between militias with the same political practice, the choice of celibacy, monogamy, or promiscuity largely defined the constraints and opportunities facing them at the three stages of establishment, mobilisation, and deployment (see Table 6.1.)

The celibate militias either refused or were unable to form alliances with powerful domestic actors and foreign governments. Judging by the fate of DN and SHF, this political practice was probably doomed to fail. The Achilles Heel of these militias was logistical support — funding in particular. This problem was in large part caused by the unfortunate combination of two factors, namely that few donors were prepared to offer sustained support, whereas few members were prepared to work without a salary. Without salaries from a powerful domestic actor, only a token force

could be sustained, which made it impossible to establish more than a weak territorial presence.

**Table 6.1. Assyrian militia origins, political practices, logistical support, deployment support, and territorial presence.**

<b>Militia</b>	<b>Origin</b>	<b>Political practice</b>	<b>Logistical support</b>	<b>Deployment support</b>	<b>Territorial presence</b>
NPGF	Establishment	Monogamy	State	Single actor	Weak
DN	Challenger	Celibacy	Non-state	Single actor	Weak
NPF	Challenger	Monogamy	State + non-state	Single actor + unsanctioned	Weak
NPU	Challenger	Promiscuity	State + non-state	Multiple actors + unsanctioned	Strong
BB	Start-up	Monogamy	State	Single actor + unsanctioned	Moderate
SLB	Start-up	Monogamy	State	-	-
SHF	Start-up	Celibacy	Non-state	Unsanctioned	Weak

It is actually quite remarkable that the celibate militias were able to deploy and operate at all, considering that other militias — and their powerful allies — had a clear incentive to evict them. However, DN fulfilled a propaganda role for KDP, and APP was more friend than foe of the ruling political party, whereas SHF utilised the chaos within the GoI zone, as well as the conflict aversion of other armed actors deployed there.

The four monogamous militias demonstrate that reliance on a single powerful domestic actor was not sufficient to establish a strong territorial presence — even for groups that were loyal and acquiescent. In fact, the trajectories of the monogamous militias demonstrate that they did not fail *despite* their political practice, but *because* of it — albeit indirectly, as their monogamous relationships helped bring about dysfunctional organisations, which even the powerful domestic actors themselves

eventually became reluctant to support. This proved disastrous, since monogamy largely precluded the option of seeking political and logistical support elsewhere.

Moreover, forming an exclusive relationship with a single powerful domestic actor was a gamble, since the extent of its political and logistical support would initially be unknown to the militia — and probably to the powerful domestic actor as well, since its demand for Assyrian allies in part depended on the highly uncertain future political status of the Nineveh Plain.

In the end, NPGF and NPF got the short end of the stick, since their services as security providers were not needed. As an integrated part of the KDP establishment, NPGF had put all eggs in one basket, and lacked alternative sources of logistical support. In contrast, the challenger NPF received training from a combat charity, and raised some funds in the diaspora, but this had little to no impact on the outcome. For celibate and resource-starved monogamous militias alike, it proved impossible to raise funds for more than a token force. NPGF and NPF were also unable to obtain political support outside of their monogamous relationship.

Counter-factually, it is possible to imagine that KDP would have armed NPGF early in the war, and allowed it to serve in the front line. In this scenario, the militia would probably have been deployed in much larger scale within the KRG zone following the re-capture of the Nineveh Plain. However, this was at least in part prevented by the uniquely poor capacity of the militia, which emanated from its role as a patronage apparatus — and this was ultimately caused by the character of the decade-long relationship with KDP.

In contrast, SLB and BB received practically unlimited political and logistical support — at least initially. As start-ups, they largely lacked political connections, yet

alone own logistics, and had no other option than to form monogamous relationships, whereas their host units lacked alternative Assyrian allies. The character of these relationships eventually became detrimental to SLB and BB, since the high value of the militias increased tolerance of misbehaviour on the part of their powerful allies, which in turn led to further misbehaviour, until the point where they overstepped the mark. BB was consistently loyal and acquiescent on the political level, but came to operate on the ground as a belligerent criminal enterprise, whereas the SLB commander turned out to be reckless and politically unreliable. In the end, the eviction of BB from Baghdada District, and probably the dissolution of SLB, resulted from the unwillingness of their powerful allies to intervene on their behalf.

The most interesting case is NPU, which was the only militia to establish a strong territorial presence, at the same time as it retained a high level of organisational autonomy. Counter-intuitively, NPU succeeded *because* of its political practice, rather than *despite* it — and in this sense the promiscuous militia mirrored its monogamous rivals. Key to the success of NPU was to engage with a wide range of external actors in a pragmatic, shrewd, and tactful manner. Driven by the goal to establish a strong territorial presence — particularly in Baghdada — the militia became characterised by a determined, strategic, and long-term outlook. Depending on the situation, NPU formed alliances, cut deals, or simply nurtured cordial relations with actors that sometimes opposed one another. Eventually, the militia was thereby able to pool logistical support from many separate sources, and build a secure position on the ground as well as politically.

With the exception of BB, all other militias could be considered pseudo-promiscuous, in that they made at least some attempt to obtain political and/or

logistical support from several external actors. However, even the other challengers were probably unable to adopt promiscuity as a consistent political practice, since their affiliated political parties lacked the requisite diplomatic skill, connections, and influence. In short, a militia like NPU could not have emerged without an affiliated political party like ADM, which understood how to bring minority politics into a new arena — civil war.

### **6.3. CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

This study started out with the puzzling observation that a militia with weak ties to several external actors established a stronger territorial presence than rivals that were loyal to a single powerful ally. The existing literature on militias turned out to offer very limited guidance, since previous studies focused primarily on government- or community-initiated groups organised for defensive purposes, or to carry out violence against civilians. In contrast, the Assyrian militias were set up with political aims in mind — and in this sense they resembled social movements. However, since the militias lacked mass support, their character was fundamentally different from social movements, and the literature relating to the latter was generally unhelpful.

To situate the Assyrian militias within the literature on non-state armed groups, I therefore developed the concept of political militias. Noting that the minority dimension brings particular constraints and opportunities, I defined political minority militias as a sub-type of political ethno-religious militias, which are included in the larger category of political militias. This conceptualisation provides a logical framework for future research on related groups.

Since the contemporary situation of the Assyrians in Iraq is understudied, my thesis also contributes valuable area-specific knowledge, which can be useful to specialists on Assyrians, Iraq, or the Middle East more generally — within as well as outside academia.

More importantly, as the first comparative and in-depth study of political minority militias, the thesis makes a substantial empirical contribution to social science. Since the ethno-religious identity and general character of local security providers can shape the circumstances of local communities — and because the

armed mobilisation of ethno-religious minorities can have implications for post-war minority politics — this study is not merely of academic interest, but can be relevant to a wide range of professionals working in conflict or post-conflict areas.

Existing social scientific studies focus on larger militias (or militia umbrellas, without disaggregating the constituent groups), whereas small groups barely feature at all in the literature. One likely reason is that small militias are considered unimportant, and another that they fly under the radar of academics and journalists alike, e.g. without a prolonged period of field research, I would probably never have heard of the miniscule SHF — or I might have dismissed it as irrelevant. In fact, this loose-cannon militia was able to destabilise the security situation in Baghdeda, by taking advantage of the conflict aversion of other actors. Indeed, its mere *presence* in the town was consequential, as it undermined the efforts of NPU to monopolise security provision.

Moreover, I judge that all Assyrian militias *could* have multiplied in size, given sufficient logistical and political support. If the research objective is to explain success, the exclusion of small or unsuccessful groups (i.e. selecting cases on the dependent variable) presents a validity threat. This is best illustrated by SLB and BB, which started off with equally few members, and support from the same powerful domestic actor. However, whereas the former dissolved, the latter rose to prominence, grew significantly in size, and established at least a moderate territorial presence. To learn what BB did right, we need to ask what SLB did wrong; this justifies the study of small or unsuccessful militias even when they actually *are* inconsequential.

It was vital for the validity of this study to conduct fieldwork in Iraq, and I was generally able to identify, meet, and successfully interview relevant individuals.

However, it proved much more difficult than expected to access sites with a militia presence, which meant I had fewer opportunities than expected to make relevant observations. Although the militias generally remained idle, it is difficult to know what potential observations were never made.

Another limitation of the study is the low number of interviewees from BB, SLB, and SHF. It also proved difficult to find knowledgeable individuals that were unrelated to the militias. The primary reason was simply that few outsiders engaged with the militias, or knew much about them. Additionally, outsiders from KDP in particular were often extremely cautious, and offered little more than vague generalities, evasions, and propaganda. Unfortunately, this meant I had to rely heavily on interviews with senior members of the militias and their affiliated political parties.

With inspiration from Staniland (2015b), I made an attempt to predict the variation in territorial presence by the variation in powerful domestic actor strategies. The latter were in turn predicted by the ideological fit between the militias and their powerful allies. The failure of these predictions provided the justification for conducting the study with an inductive and explorative approach.

My findings demonstrate that the predictions failed in large part because the militias were able to exercise a high degree of agency, despite that they were both small and politically marginal. This was in turn possible because the ethno-religious identity of the militias created demand among rival powerful domestic actors, who could not afford to be very selective or demanding, considering the limited supply. The degree of agency that could be attained for a particular militia depended in large part on its political practice — but the choice between celibacy, monogamy, or promiscuity was constrained by the characteristics of the affiliated political party or

political entrepreneur. Only one militia chose promiscuity, and the main contribution of my study is to demonstrate how this political practice enabled an organisational trajectory that ultimately brought success over both celibate and monogamous rivals.

Unlike Staniland (2015b), I focus on the strategy of the militias vis-à-vis ‘the government’, rather than the other way around. Moreover, ‘the government’ is not treated as a unitary entity, but instead disaggregated into (more or less government-affiliated) powerful domestic actors. The findings demonstrate how rivalry between such actors drives the demand for political minority militias — even those that are very small. Highlighting the importance of state fragmentation for militia politics is an important contribution of this study; whereas Staniland notes that rival government-affiliated actors need to be analysed separately, he makes no attempt to deal with the resulting complexity, or incorporate it into his framework.

While noting the contribution of several factors, the main explanation for the variation in outcomes is the external relations of the militias — in particular vis-à-vis powerful domestic actors, but also foreign governments, and various other external actors. The outcomes could never have been explained without a detailed account of the processes involved; this demonstrates the importance of studying external relations as they develop over time, rather than treating them as static and given.

Staniland (2015b) fails to explain the trajectories of the Assyrian militias, but a thorough revision of his framework is not yet possible — in part because the primary focus of my study lies on the militias themselves, whereas Staniland is focused on the state. Further, the study is designed to produce a minimally sufficient explanation for the success or failure of seven specific groups, i.e. the case is narrowly bounded in space and time. Hence, the findings and conclusions cannot on their own provide the

basis for ambitious theory-building. For the future, the ultimate aim should be to build a comprehensive theory that focuses on interactions over time between powerful domestic actors, foreign governments, and militias. The greatest challenge — empirically and in terms of theoretical complexity — will be to explain the behaviour of different types of actors simultaneously, rather than focus on only one side of the equation.

As a first step, research on similar cases could confirm the existence of similar patterns, identify idiosyncrasies, and enable the building of a more elaborate theory — which could then be tested on new cases, including ones that are more dissimilar. We should therefore begin with research on other political minority militias, and the two most promising cases are the Assyrian militias in Syria (Drott 2013a) and the Ezidi militias in Iraq (Van Den Toorn 2015).

The Assyrian militias that emerged during the Syrian Civil War (2011–) were pulled between the central government and the Kurdish-dominated administration set up by the Democratic Union Party. The North-East of the country, where these groups mainly operated, also saw the deployment of US and Russian forces. Like their counter-parts in the Nineveh Plain, the Assyrian militias in Syria received support from the diaspora, as well as from sympathetic Western politicians. However, compared to in Iraq, Assyrians in Syria are more scattered geographically, which makes regional autonomy impractical.

The militias that emerged in Shingal, the historical heartland of the Ezidis, display even stronger similarities with the Assyrian militias operating in the nearby Nineveh Plain. During the war against ISIS, the area became heavily contested — primarily between KDP, Iran-backed militias under the PMF umbrella, and a foreign

rebel group: the Kurdistan Workers' Party. However, one notable difference was that Ezidis — who suffered unspeakable atrocities after Shingal fell to ISIS in 2014 — were generally more willing than Assyrians to serve without a salary. One of the key obstacles to militia mobilisation in the Nineveh Plain was therefore less relevant in Shingal.

In both Shingal and North-East Syria, territory was sometimes shared, and at other times fully under the control of a single actor, but everyone generally exercised restraint — like in the Nineveh Plain. Considering the largely similar context they operated in, it is reasonable to expect similar patterns of behaviour for the Assyrian militias in Syria, the Ezidi militias in Iraq, and the Assyrian militias in Iraq; indeed, all seem to have included celibate, monogamous, as well as promiscuous groups.

Another suggestion for future research is to find out whether similar patterns can be found among groups with a less distinctly political character, but which are similarly rooted in an ethno-religious minority community, e.g. Druze militias in Syria (al-Tamimi 2013). Conversely, it may be possible to identify political militias that lack ties to ethno-religious minority communities, but are in high demand among powerful domestic actors and foreign governments for different reasons.

The findings from this study are most likely to travel to similar contexts, i.e. where a fragmented state is engulfed in a civil war characterised by conventional or symmetric non-conventional warfare. However, given the presence of strong domestic rivalry, it is possible that similar dynamics can be found among non-state armed groups engaged in other types of conflicts — or even electoral politics.

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## APPENDIX A. INTERVIEWEES: GENERAL

All interviewees are Assyrian unless otherwise stated.

### **BB**

- G01 BB officer
- G02 BB officer (former)

### **DN**

- G03 DN commander (first)
- G04 DN commander (second)
- G05 APP senior member
- G06 APP senior member
- G07 APP senior member
- G08 APP junior member

### **NPF**

- G09 NPF commander (first, BNDP-affiliated)
- G10 NPF commander (second, BNDP-affiliated)
- G11 NPF officer (HBA-affiliated)
- G12 NPF officer (HBA-affiliated)
- G13 NPF officer (HBA-affiliated)
- G14 HBA senior member
- G15 HBA senior member
- G16 HBA junior member
- G17 HBA junior member
- G18 HBA junior member
- G19 Dawronoye senior member
- G20 BNDP senior member

### **NPGF**

- G21 NPGF commander (second)
- G22 NPGF officer
- G23 NPGF officer
- G24 NPGF officer
- G25 NPGF officer
- G26 NPGF officer
- G27 NPGF officer
- G28 CSAPC senior member
- G29 CSAPC senior member

**NPU**

G30 NPU commander  
G31 NPU officer  
G32 NPU officer  
G33 NPU officer  
G34 NPU officer  
G35 NPU officer  
G36 ADM senior member  
G37 ADM senior member  
G38 ADM senior member  
G39 ADM senior member  
G40 ADM senior member

**SLB/SHF**

G41 SLB/SHF commander  
G42 SDU senior member  
G43 SDU junior member  
G44 SDU junior member  
G45 SDU junior member  
G46 SDU junior member

**KRG/KDP**

G47 Ainkawa Sub-District senior official (former)  
G48 Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs senior official  
G49 Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs senior official/KDP senior member (Kurdish)  
G50 Ministry of Interior senior official/KDP senior member (Kurdish)  
G51 KDP senior member  
G52 KDP senior member  
G53 KDP senior member (Kurdish)

**Other**

G54 ICP senior member  
G55 ICP senior member  
G56 ICP senior member  
G57 ICP junior member  
G58 Sons of the Rivers senior member  
G59 Syriac Assembly Movement senior member  
G60 Christians Democratic Independent Movement senior member  
G61 Chaldean National Congress senior member  
G62 Chaldean Democratic Party senior member  
G63 Chaldean Centre for Culture and Arts (Duhok) senior member  
G64 Assyrian Cultural Centre (Duhok) senior member  
G65 World Council of Arameans senior member  
G66 American Mesopotamian Organization chairman

G67 Hammurabi Human Rights Organization senior member  
G68 Iraqi Assyrian NGO senior member  
G69 Iraqi NGO senior member  
G70 Iraqi NGO senior member (Ezidi)  
G71 International NGO employee (Kurdish)  
G72 Photojournalist (French)  
G73 Chief of Staff to Member of the European Parliament Lars Adaktusson (Swedish)  
G74 SOLI founder (American)  
G75 SOLI trainer (American)  
G76 SOLI trainer (American)  
G77 SOLI trainer (American)  
G78 SOLI trainer (American)  
G79 Iraqi Police (Nineveh Province) senior official  
G80 Iraqi Army officer (Arab?)  
G81 KRG security forces soldier/officer (Assyrian?)  
G82 Chaldean Catholic clergyman  
G83 Chaldean Catholic clergyman  
G84 Syriac Catholic clergyman  
G85 Syriac Orthodox clergyman

## APPENDIX B. INTERVIEWEES: MILITIA MEMBERS

Age is estimated by the researcher in most cases.

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Militia</b>	<b>Home</b>	<b>Age</b>
M01	BB	Baghdeda	18–29
M02	DN	Baghdad	30–44
M03	DN	Baghdad/Duhok	18–29
M04	DN	Duhok	18–29
M05	DN	Duhok	18–29
M06	DN	Duhok	30–44
M07	DN	Duhok	30–44
M08	DN	Kirkuk/Duhok	30–44
M09	DN	N/A	18–29
M10	DN	International	18–29
M11	NPF	Baghdeda	18–29
M12	NPF	Baghdeda	18–29
M13	NPF	Baghdeda	18–29
M14	NPF	Baghdeda	18–29
M15	NPF	N/A	18–29
M16	NPGF	Baghdeda	18–29
M17	NPGF	Baghdeda	45–64
M18	NPGF	Bahzani	18–29
M19	NPGF	Bahzani	45–64
M20	NPGF	Bahzani	45–64
M21	NPGF	Bahzani	45–64
M22	NPGF	Bashiqa-Bahzani	30–44
M23	NPGF	Karamles	45–64
M24	NPGF	Mergi?	65+
M25	NPGF	N/A	18–29
M26	NPGF	N/A	18–29
M27	NPGF	N/A	30–44
M28	NPGF	N/A	30–44
M29	NPGF	N/A	45–64
M30	NPGF	N/A	45–64
M31	NPU	Alqosh	18–29
M32	NPU	Baghdeda	18–29
M33	NPU	Baghdeda	18–29
M34	NPU	Baghdeda	18–29
M35	NPU	Baghdeda	18–29
M36	NPU	Baghdeda	18–29

M37	NPU	Baghdeda	18–29
M38	NPU	Baghdeda	18–29
M39	NPU	Baghdeda	18–29
M40	NPU	Baghdeda	45–64
M41	NPU	Karamles	45–64
M42	NPU	N/A	18–29
M43	NPU	N/A	18–29
M44	NPU	N/A	18–29
M45	NPU	N/A	18–29
M46	NPU	N/A	18–29
M47	NPU	N/A	18–29
M48	NPU	N/A	18–29
M49	NPU	N/A	18–29
M50	NPU	N/A	45–64
M51	NPU	N/A	45–64
M52	SLB	Baghdeda	18–29

## APPENDIX C.

### INTERVIEWEES: COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Age is estimated by the researcher in most cases.

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Home</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
C01	Ainkawa	18–29	Female	Higher education student
C02	Alqosh	18–29	Male	Fruit/vegetable vendor
C03	Alqosh	18–29	Male	Unemployed
C04	Alqosh	18–29	Male	Unemployed
C05	Alqosh	18–29	Male	Barber
C06	Alqosh	30–44	Male	Barber
C07	Alqosh	65+	Male	N/A
C08	Baghdad	18–29	Female	N/A
C09	Baghdada	18–29	Male	School teacher
C10	Baghdada	18–29	Male	Shopkeeper
C11	Baghdada	18–29	Male	Shopkeeper or shop employee
C12	Baghdada	18–29	Male	International NGO employee
C13	Baghdada	18–29	Male	International NGO employee
C14	Baghdada	18–29	Male	Electrician
C15	Baghdada?	18–29	Male	N/A
C16	Baghdada	30–44	Female	Engineer
C17	Baghdada	30–44	Female	N/A
C18	Baghdada	30–44	Female	N/A
C19	Baghdada	30–44	Female	N/A
C20	Baghdada	30–44	Male	Iraqi Army soldier
C21	Baghdada	45–64	Male	Iraqi Army soldier
C22	Baghdada	45–64	Male	Engineer
C23	Baghdada	45–64	Male	N/A
C24	Baghdada	45–64	Male	N/A
C25	Baghdada	45–64	Male	N/A
C26	Baghdada	45–64	Male	N/A
C27	Baghdada	45–64	Female	N/A
C28	Baghdada	65+	Female	N/A
C29	Baghdada?	65+	Male	N/A
C30	Baqofa	30–44	Female	Homekeeper
C31	Bartella	30–44	Male	Shopkeeper or shop employee
C32	Batnaya	45–64	Male	N/A
C33	Batnaya	45–64	Female	N/A
C34	Duhok Province	45–64	Male	Security guard
C35	Karamles	45–64	Female	N/A
C36	Koy Sanjaq	18–29	Female	Higher education graduate

C37	Mosul	45–64	Female	Homekeeper
C38	Mosul	45–64	Female	N/A
C39	Shaqlawā	18–29	Female	Engineer
C40	Shaqlawā/Ainkawa	18–29	Female	International NGO employee
C41	Shaqlawā/Ainkawa	18–29	Male	Higher education student
C42	Shaqlawā/Ainkawa	45–64	Male	School teacher
C43	Tel Keipeh	30–44	Male	Barber
C44	Tesqopa	18–29	Female	N/A
C45	Tesqopa	45–64	Male	N/A
C46	Tesqopa	45–64	Female	N/A
C47	Tesqopa/Karamles	30–44	Female	Homekeeper

## APPENDIX D.

### SAMPLE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

This is a template for interviews with senior members of the militias and their affiliated political parties. The template was continually revised during the fieldwork, and specific questions were added before each interview. The document has been lightly edited for clarity.

#### POLITICAL PARTY

What is the history of your political party?  
What kind of political representation do you have?  
How did the events in 2014 affect your thinking?  
What are your goals?  
What should be the future of the Nineveh Plain?  
Why did you start an armed group?  
What should be the future of the armed groups?  
What discussions/preparations preceded the formation of the armed group?  
How did the armed group get permission to operate?

#### ARMED GROUP

What were the first steps to form the armed group?  
How did you build up and develop the armed group?  
What kind of agreements exist with Baghdad/Erbil?  
Where has the armed group been active?  
What activities has the armed group engaged in? (warfare, policing, security)  
How do you co-ordinate with other forces in the field? Orders?  
How did the armed group get permission to operate in these areas?  
How and why did the armed group merge/dissolve/institutionalise?

#### HUMAN RESOURCES

Who are the members? Political party? Particular area?  
Who are the officers? Political party? Particular area?  
How did you select them?  
Did they already have military training? What kind of training did you provide?  
Do you also have lessons about history, nationalism, or ethics?  
How many members do you have? Change over time? All active? Rotation?  
Do you have any diaspora or international volunteers?  
What is the organisational structure of the armed group?

#### MATERIAL RESOURCES

What weapons, helmets, vests, cars? Where did you get them?  
How do you organise supplies like food, water, ammunition?  
What kind of bases? Did you build or take over houses?  
How much money do you need and what do you spend it on?  
What proportion from different sources? Party, donations, KRG/Iraq?  
How are donations collected? Local or international?

What do you get from KRG/Iraq?  
What is the monthly salary? Paid the whole time?

### COMPETITION

Why have others started their own armed groups?  
What kind of relations do you have with other armed groups?  
Which armed groups have been more successful and why?  
How do the armed groups compete with one another?  
How do the churches support you?  
How do you see the identity issue?

### ADDITIONAL HISTORY

Details about the armed group of ADM after 1991?  
Details about the armed group of ADM in 2003?  
Details about the armed group of HBA in 2003?  
Did ADM get HBA leaders arrested in 2003?  
Did others organise armed groups in 2003?  
Initiatives to establish Assyrian security forces 2003–2014?  
Which security forces operated 2003–2014? What did people think of them?  
Relation between the Councils of Notables, CSAPC, and NPGF?  
Were NPGF and Assyrian civilians disarmed in 2014?  
What happened with NPGF in 2014?

### ADDITIONAL POLITICS

What do people think about the political parties?  
Why do people support different political parties?  
How would you describe the different political parties and their character?  
Which parties are supported by Erbil/Baghdad? How and why?  
Who manipulated quota seats? How and when?  
Who supports your political party?  
Relations with other political parties?  
Relations with Kurdish/Iraqi political parties?  
Relations with international allies?  
Affiliated diaspora organisations?

### ADDITIONAL OTHER

What is the role of the churches in society?  
What is the role of the churches in politics?  
Dividing lines in the community? Urban/rural, KRI/Baghdad/Nineveh, church/ethnicity?  
How will the armed groups affect relations with others in the Nineveh Plain?  
How do you reach out to inform local people about your armed group?  
What kind of symbolic activities have the armed group engaged in?  
Which symbols are used and what do they mean?

## APPENDIX E.

### CODING SCHEME

This is the final version of the coding scheme used to organise the empirical material in NVivo. It has been lightly edited for clarity.

#### A. TRAJECTORY (historical development of the militia)

- Emergence (start-up phase of the militia)
- Growth (consolidation of the militia and activities before October 2016)
- Offensive (activities October 2016 to January 2017)
- Post-IS (activities after January 2017)
- BB-SHF incident (clash between BB and SHF in the spring of 2017)
- BB-NPU incident (clash between BB and NPU in the spring of 2017)
- Tel Isqof battle (battle in May 2016)
- Future militias (desired or expected role of the militias in the future)

#### B. MATERIAL (material resources)

- Financial (issues relating to financial capital and how it is acquired)
- Physical (issues relating to physical capital and how it is acquired)

#### C. HUMAN (human resources)

- Key personnel (character and recruitment of key personnel)
- Officers (character, recruitment and training of officers)
- Recruitment (recruitment practices of junior members)
- Numbers (militia membership)
- Training (character and extent of training of junior members)
- Management (disciplinary issues, motivation, organisation, internal disputes)
- Salaries (militia salaries)
- Special (preparations for a special unit in NPU/NPF)

#### D. MORAL (moral resources = discourses on legitimacy + marketing efforts + ethnic/religious politics)

- Historical heritage (history and land claims as a source of legitimacy)
- Political status (presenting the militia as independent of political parties)
- Official status (presenting the militia as an official force)
- Professionalism (presenting the militia as skilled and capable)
- Steadfastness (courage in the face of the enemy  
+ perseverance in the face of obstacles)
- Symbols (logo and flags used)
- Relevance (playing an important role on the ground)
- Pacifism (traditional subservience and pacifism of Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs)
- Media (media coverage)
- Militias (views on Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac militias and militias generally)
- Why militia (rationale for why the militia was established)
- Ethnic politics (identity politics of Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs)

- Arameanism (Syriac-Aramean identity politics)
- Assyrianism (Assyrian identity politics)
- Chaldeanism (Chaldean identity politics)
- General (general identity politics)
- Religious politics (religious politics of Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs)
  - Assyrian & Ancient (Assyrian Church of the East + Ancient Church of the East)
  - Chaldean Catholic (Chaldean Catholic Church)
  - Syriac Catholic (Syriac Catholic Church)
  - Syriac Orthodox (Syriac Orthodox Church)
  - General (general religious politics)

E. MILITARY (military co-operation)

- Coalition (co-operation with coalition and US forces)
- Frontline access (deployment in different areas and how it was granted)
- Militias co-operation (co-operation between militias generally + efforts to merge militias)
- Militias competition (competition + co-operation + views relating to specific militias)
  - Views on BB
  - Views on DN
  - Views on NPF
  - Views on NPGF
  - Views on NPU
  - Views on SHF
- Peshmerga (co-operation between militias and Peshmerga/Asayish)
- ICP militia (issues relating to the ICP militia)
- Iraqi army (co-operation between militias and the Iraqi Army)
- PMF (co-operation between militias and PMF)
- Police 2003–2014 (issues related to Iraqi Police before ISIS attack)
- Police 2014–2017 (issues related to Iraqi Police after the liberation)
- Shabak general (issues relating to Shabaks and the Shabak Brigade)
- Shabak-BB (co-operation between the Shabak Brigade and BB)
- Shabak-NPU (co-operation between the Shabak Brigade and NPU)

F. POLITICAL (political resources + relations + processes)

- Autonomy (Nineveh Plain autonomy)
- Brussels (Brussels conference)
- Diaspora (diaspora arena)
- International (international arena)
- Iraq (relations with Baghdad and Iraqi parties)
- Iraq & KRI (relations with Baghdad and Erbil)
- KRI (relations with Erbil and Kurdish parties)
- Parties (facts and views relating to specific parties)
  - ADM
  - APP
  - Babylon List

BNDP  
ICP  
HBA  
PC  
SDU

Parties 1968–2003 (the Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac political scene before the US invasion)  
Parties 2003–2017 (the Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac political scene after the US invasion)  
Parties co-operation (co-operation between parties)  
Quota seats (manipulation of quota seats)  
AMO (issues related to AMO)  
SOLI (issues related to SOLI)  
AMO & SOLI (relations between AMO and SOLI)

G. OTHER (various issues)

Demography (number and location of the Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac population)  
Displacement (IDPs and refugees)  
ISIS crimes (ISIS crimes committed since 2014)  
Muslims (sentiments about Muslims)  
News (where people get news from)  
Language (issues related to different languages/dialects)  
Lies (obvious or suspected lies by interviewees)  
Situation 1968–2003 (Ba'ath period)  
Situation 2003–2014 (post-invasion period)  
Situation 2014–2016 (ISIS attack + aftermath until the Nineveh offensive)  
Situation 2016–2017 (immediate post-ISIS period)  
Situation 2017–2020 (future)  
Validity (issues relating to the validity of the research)  
Alqosh (current issues relating to Alqosh)  
Tel Isqof (current issues relating to Tel Isqof)

H. COMMUNITY (views of community members — some categories are duplicated or overlap)

Community autonomy (views on autonomy)  
Community displacement (staying in KRI, leaving Iraq, or going back)  
Community fighting (which forces should fight ISIS)  
Community future (what is needed to move back)  
Community security (who should be responsible for security)