

Competing Interests in Shingal: Yazidis Caught Between Millstones

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Nearly two years since the north side of Shingal was liberated from the Islamic State, most of the Yazidi population is still displaced. Yazidis are trapped between millstones of the competition of exogenous actors, such as the KDP, the PKK-linked forces, and Baghdad, over the control of the strategically important disputed territory of Shingal.

A “Disputed Territory” Curse in Shingal

The current dynamics in Shingal can be best understood by approaching it as a disputed territory between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) under [Article 140](#) of the Iraqi Constitution. Non-Yazidi actors - mainly the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the forces linked to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), and Baghdad - are engaged in competition over the strategically important disputed territory of Shingal. The one-sided pragmatic desire to firmly control the terrain and politics is prioritised over a long-term commitment towards improving the societal, economic and security situation of the Yazidis. The overarching issue is also a long-standing deficit in good governance, rule of law, inclusiveness, or social justice in Shingal.

The Shingal range is a mountainous barrier overseeing the westernmost edge of the disputed territories, as well as sharing a border with Syria. The proven oil and gas reserves in the Shingal district are modest but there are reportedly some 400 unexploited oil wells, mainly in the north. No systematic surveys have been conducted since the 1960s, however the unproven oil and gas reserves [could be substantially large](#). With this possibility on the table, assuming control over the district becomes even more desirable. However, the area has been largely [underdeveloped](#) even [prior](#) to the war on the Islamic State (IS) and following IS’ retreat by November 2015 it remains significantly damaged. According to a [UN-HABITAT report](#), some 6,000 houses are thought to have been burnt or destroyed. So far neither the KRI nor Baghdad have shown a willingness that goes [beyond promises](#) to substantially invest in development and reconstruction of the region, precisely because its status is disputed and thus they are reluctant to commit resources with no guarantee that the

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region will fall under their control in the future. Furthermore, the current financial crisis has makes possible reconstruction efforts difficult.

The majority of the Shingal population, roughly [300 thousand](#), consisting mostly of Yazidis and a minority of Sunni Kurds and Arabs, left facing IS advance in 2014. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), only some [24 thousand have returned](#) so far. This is a relatively low number considering the city of Shingal was [reclaimed](#) following withdrawal of the majority of IS forces in November 2015, and areas [north of the Shingal mountains](#) with more Yazidi collective towns were already recaptured [in late 2014](#).

The KDP and the PUK

Over time, the KDP has become the dominant political force in Shingal, making use of an extensive patronage network which provides crucial public sector employment opportunities in an otherwise impoverished area. Unsurprisingly, most of the Yazidi (political) elite are members of the KDP.

The KDP, in an appeal to Yazidis, incorporated Yazidi units into the Peshmerga structures under the command of Qassim Shesho. However, they are [reportedly](#) underequipped compared to Kurdish Peshmerga. This episode also underscores KDP's resolve to upkeep its monopoly in Shingal. Another initiative, stemming seemingly independently from the Yazidi community itself, has been pursued by Haydar Shesho.

Haydar, Qassim's nephew who at the time had ties to the second major Kurdish party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), established another armed group, the Yazidi Protection Force (HPÊ). Haydar's project was for a while financially [backed](#) by Baghdad, however, in April 2015 Haydar Shesho was briefly [detained](#) by KDP security forces. Upon his release, Haydar denounced his ties to Baghdad and announced that he would not maintain a militia outside the control of the Ministry of Peshmerga. Since then, Haydar's militia has had only limited presence on the ground having failed to transform into a Peshmerga unit, due partly to lack of funds. The PUK has a clear political presence in Shingal, but its military presence is via KDP-led Peshmerga units which are under the command and control structure of the Ministry of Peshmerga.

To add to the complexity, the so-called [Rojava Peshmerga](#), consisting mainly of Syrian Kurds which are in opposition to the PKK's Syrian affiliate the People's Protection Units (YPG), are deployed along the Syrian border north of the Shingal mountains to curb YPG's ability to penetrate the borders.

The PKK

In the summer of 2014, when the Peshmerga forces hastily retreated from Shingal facing IS' advance, another regional actor seized the momentum to fill the emerging power vacuum. The PKK (and YPG) quickly moved in its forces both from Syria and Qandil. By doing so it arguably bolstered its reputation as the saviour of Yazidis and started to train Yazidis and incorporate them into the newly established militia, the Shingal Resistance Units (YBS). The PKK-linked forces have been establishing their presence in Shingal since the early 2000s ([for example](#), in 2005, the Yazidi Democratic movement, TEVDA, was established).

Having a presence in Shingal provides the PKK with a possible land bridge guarded by a mountainous safe haven between their YPG-controlled territory in Syria and PKK bases in the KRI. Also the pro-PKK forces strongly express their resolve to maintain their influence in Shingal. In [January 2015](#), the PKK announced its plan to establish "democratic autonomy" (Canton) in Shingal, hinting that the PKK's vision for Shingal should follow an example of YPG's "cantonal" administration in Syria. Such plans are [strongly rejected](#) by the KRG and the Ninewa Provincial Council, which [voted](#) in June 2016 for the PKK to leave.

There is a concern that political rivals of the KDP such as the PUK or Baghdad might choose to empower pro-PKK forces and use them to curb KDP influence in the area. On the other hand, Turkey, with a military base

in the Bashiqa camp north of Mosul, wants to have a say in the Mosul liberation, but it also has an interest in curbing the pro-PKK forces' influence in the Shingal area.

Baghdad

Baghdad's ability to control developments in Shingal has been limited since 2003. Since 2015, it reportedly [backs YBS](#) and [Sunni Arab militias](#) on the ground to curb KDP's ambitions, adding even more complexity to the situation. On September 27, 2016, the Iraqi parliament [voted](#) to reconfirm the current borders of Ninewa governorate, thus expressing a desire to keep Shingal under Baghdad's control. Moreover, even if [the idea](#) of the partition of Ninewa into several provinces including a Sinjar province comes to life, the core of the discord between the KRG and Baghdad will still be present – i.e. it remains unclear under whose authority will the province of Shingal fall.

Yazidis Caught Between Millstones

There is an underlying feeling of abandonment by both Baghdad and the KRG among the Yazidi population stemming from the fact that these actors did not protect Yazidis from IS atrocities in the summer of 2014. PAX for Peace reports that the [prevailing idea](#) among the Yazidi population seems to be that from now on they have to rule themselves and to ensure security on their own.

The pro-PKK forces managed to bolster their reputation while moving in to help Yazidis. It is, however, questionable to what extent the radical leftist ideology of the PKK finds truly fertile ground among the conservative Yazidi society. The KDP seems to be locked in its post-2003 mindset of relying on selected pro-KDP Yazidi elite to secure its interests. For example, on September 25, 2016, Yazidi [Mir Tahseen Beg](#) stated that he seeks to establish a separate province in Sinjar under the KRG administration. Mahma Khalil, a KDP mayor of Shingal, is also a frequent critic of the PKK presence in Shingal. The KDP also uses measures such as a [reported](#) restriction on [goods imports](#), especially to areas of Shingal where the pro-PKK forces are present, likely fearing that their return could bolster PKK's pool of supporters.

The Way Forward

When Mosul is liberated, the actors may attempt to attain their incompatible goals in Shingal, which could lead to an escalation of conflict. The one-dimensional focus on a firm territorial control continues to be prioritised over a commitment towards the societal and economic development of Shingal. This fails not only to improve the welfare of the population but it also invites exogenous actors such as the PKK to compete over Yazidi support. The trust between Yazidis and both Baghdad and the KRG is severely damaged and it can hardly be restored by adopting a repressive approach. Instead, a more "hearts and minds-oriented" approach should be prioritized. Winning support of Yazidis should after all be a goal of both the KRG and Baghdad in case a referendum regarding Shingal's final status is carried out in the post-IS period. The policies of both actors need to move away from gaining the support of elite Yazidis and towards an approach that targets the grassroots and promotes good governance, social justice, inclusiveness, and rule of law, as only by winning the people's support can the issue be solved in the long-term.

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