

Nineveh Plains Security: Needs, Framework, and Mechanisms for Implementation

A Demand for Action

There is an imperative need to create an apparatus for the minoritized communities who comprise most of the population within the Nineveh Plains. It is crucial that we provide them with a measure of their own security outside the basic policing unit (Nineveh Plains Protection Unit). With the advance of ISIL into Mosul, Sinjar, and the Nineveh Plains, and the retreats of the Iraqi military and Kurdish Peshmerga, we have seen the offensive and defensive capabilities of both forces tested to their tactical limits.

It has become clear that to prioritize offensive efforts of both forces, another form of internal, defensive security is necessary. The role of the U.S. is integral to the development of such a security force. In short, U.S. provision of aid for armament or military forces to the Iraqi government must be contingent on the latter's direct investment in the security of its minoritized communities.

Nineveh Plains Police Force: A Natural Framework

In 2006, the Minister of the Interior handed down an order for the creation of a police force in the Nineveh Plains, which was subsequently blocked for political purposes. This force creates a natural framework for the implementation of a unit for Christian Assyrians (including Chaldeans and Syriacs), Yazidis (also known as Yezidis or Ezidis), and other minorities, and can be expanded without the creation of a new infrastructure.

Due to the support of the U.S. and cooperation between Erbil and Baghdad, the latest offensive has yielded limited but positive results. With the creation of a fully trained and armed security force comprised of local minority populations, the defense of the villages and towns retaken from ISIL can be transitioned to local security. This shift will enable the Iraqi central government and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to prioritize their forces for offensive attacks against ISIL positions.

The benefits to such a strategy are threefold. First, it allows both the Iraqi military and Kurdish Peshmerga to maximize the offensive capabilities of their forces. To reiterate, the responsibility of securing and defending local villages and towns would be transferred from offensive forces to the local security forces. Second, a local minority force within this framework would be largely politically neutral. This would help alleviate tensions between Baghdad and the KRG regarding the disputed status of the area.

Finally, a local force comprised of residents of the Nineveh Plains would possess a collective, intimate knowledge of the region. This would allow for more efficient policing, since the local population would view its members with less suspicion than it would the Iraqi military or Peshmerga fighters. By extension, this would facilitate the local population's support of the local

force, thus encouraging them to provide its members with information about potential or ongoing threats.

Legitimate Security

The most important issue regarding a local defense force is that it be part of a legitimate security apparatus. This would discourage the creation of illegitimate security forces—as is predominantly the case with a security vacuum—which result in the local population’s distrust of the current security forces. Furthermore, by creating this force within a legitimate central government structure, the ability to provide supplementary capabilities through close air support or heavy artillery in the area could be expedited in the event of escalated violence or attacks from ISIL or other insurgents.

Local Security: Logistical and Political Consideration

As we discuss the creation of a Christian Assyrian defense unit, it is important to consider the fact that many in the region have already begun the process of both recruiting and integrating individuals into such units to fill the security vacuum. The KRG has enlisted a small number of Christians to form a militia within the Peshmerga. While the numbers of registrants are very low, there is a concern that this approach is intended to drive a wedge between the KRG and Central Government, and even between the PUK and KDP (as both have formed their own militias), as well as undermine the attempt to create an inclusive, unified government.

Many of the recruits are Christian Assyrians that need the income associated with membership in this militia. Additionally, there is a concern that these individuals will be used to advance military and political purposes they do not support.

Shortly after the retreat of the Iraqi military and Peshmerga, the Assyrian Democratic Movement, also known as Zowaa, began enlisting young men to form a defense force as well as petitioning the Central Government to train and equip these recruits to defend their villages and towns. Within the first week, over 2,000 people enlisted, and the consensus is that if a unit is created, it will quickly approach, if not reach, 5,000 recruits. Zowaa leadership also believe they may reach 8,000 recruits as the initial force gains a more substantial operational capacity. This force may be readily absorbed into a local defense force created by the Central Government, alongside other minorities such as the Yazidis.

Conditional Aid: Mechanisms for Implementation

The most obvious way to encourage the Iraqi government to implement a unit comprised of Christian Assyrians and other minorities in the Nineveh Plains is to openly petition for the creation of such a defense force. The obvious mechanism is a carrot and stick approach using conditional aid. Military assistance from the U.S. is often conditional. Requiring the expansion and implementation of such a force as one of the conditions to future military aid to Iraq would align the interests of the Central Government with those of the minorities seeking to protect their lands.

Ultimately, however, the interests of all are naturally aligned as security in Iraq can only be realized with the full participation of all its citizens. If the citizens of the Nineveh Plains, for example, feel a sense of self-determination through their own security, then they will almost certainly be more willing to participate in all other aspects of governance, which would enable the country to function in an inclusive, pluralistic capacity. It would also help proliferate the federal structure of the Central Government, as the force would receive its command from Baghdad.

The tipping point has been reached, and the minorities are approaching their exodus from Iraq—which necessitates a local security apparatus, as most have lost faith in the existing forces they feel have abandoned them. It is with this in mind that we believe it necessary to extend current U.S. policy to encourage the implementation and expansion of a security force that is comprised of Christian Assyrians, Yazidis, and other minoritized people of the Nineveh Plains. We believe a bill, combined with our ongoing negotiations with the White House, would create the greatest opportunity for the success of this policy.