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Power Dynamics in Post-2003 Diyala[1]

Abstract

After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, Iraq witnessed the emergence of several Areas of Limited Statehood, including the province of Diyala. Deeply affected by the re-configuration of Iraq's socio-political, economic, and security balances, Diyala became an arena of local, intra-state, and international competition, where the distinction between state and non-state actors increasingly blurred. Despite its strategic relevance—encompassing disputed territories between Baghdad and Erbil and bordering Iran—the province remains largely overlooked in both media and scholarly analyses. To elucidate Diyala's role within the Iraqi system, this article examines its complex human and geographical landscape and the impact of Operation Iraqi Freedom on its structures. It then analyzes local governance through four key actors—the Badr Organization, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, ʿAsaʾib Ahl al-Haqq, and the Islamic State—whose strategies, though often framed in sectarian terms, are driven by far more complex and pragmatic considerations.

Keywords

Iraq, Kurdistan, Diyala, Areas of Limited Statehood, Islamic State

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Introduction

Areas of Limited Statehood (ALS) have long been an integral feature of the Middle Eastern political landscape. Yet, over the past two decades, the region has witnessed the emergence and consolidation of an increasing number of ALS—territories or functional spaces where state authority is challenged, marred or even fully replaced by a wide array of actors (Börzel and Risse 2010; Börzel and Risse 2021; Krasner and Risse 2014; Polese and Santini 2018; Risse, Börzel, and Draude 2018; Risse and Stollenwerk 2018).

While it is undeniable that these processes have unfolded amid growing destabilization across the Middle Eastern landscape, limited statehood does not necessarily imply civil war or the absence of governance. This is particularly evident when considering that even ostensibly sovereign entities often function through hybrid governance arrangements and that the ideal-type Weberian state is far from the norm. On the contrary, limited statehood often results in a redistribution of authority and in complex configurations of governance among state, sub-state, non-state, and hybrid actors, shaped by central, local, and transnational logics (Bacik 2008; Börzel and Risse 2010; Cambanis et al. 2019; Fawcett 2017; Risse and Stollenwerk 2018).[2]

Taking all these factors into consideration, the Iraqi province of Diyala offers a highly interesting case study. Traditionally perceived as a peripheral theatre, the area acquired growing geopolitical importance with the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime (2003): located between Baghdad and the Iraq-Iran border, Diyala's extremely diversified population exposed it to the heightening sectarianization processes that came to affect the Iraqi socio-political fabric along both religious and ethnic lines (Haddad 2011; Ismael and Ismael 2015; Osman 2015). As such the province has been the seat of ongoing episodes of instability and registered levels of violence that remain significant even today. Furthermore, its districts of Khanaqin, Kifri and Baladruz extend over territories disputed by both the Iraqi central government (GOI) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), leading to a stalemate that is still far from being resolved twenty-one years after the adoption of the Iraqi constitution (2005) (Bartu 2010; Meier 2020). Finally, the governorate has represented a critical juncture of the so-called Iranian land bridge to the Levant, dramatically increasing its importance both for Baghdad and for Tehran.[3] Through it pass some of the most significant corridors Tehran has leveraged to extend its influence from the Iranian heartland to the Eastern Mediterranean.[4] As such, it represents a crucial logistical node for the so-called "Axis of Resistance", which, despite

the severe setbacks it has suffered in recent years, remains far from dismantled.

By focusing on Diyala as an ALS, the article intends to highlight the complex interplay of state, sub-state and non-state actors operating in the province and how the agendas of such players are shaped by interests and webs of relations much more flexible and articulated than generally assumed. How do such actors relate to the governance hybridization processes that are dramatically redefining the power dynamics within the Iraqi State? To what extent does ethno-religious solidarity influence their modus operandi and their relations with the "other"? Furthermore, what role do external and non-state actors play in Diyala?

In order to address these questions, the research adopts a qualitative methodology, drawing upon academic and policy literature on ALS and governance hybridization processes in post-2003 Iraq. These sources are complemented by a series of reflections stemming from multiple meetings the author had with Iraqi officials, researchers, and civil society actors during several Track-2 diplomacy initiatives and fieldwork missions.

To provide a clearer understanding of Diyala's equilibriums, its particular status as an ALS, and its evolving role within the Iraqi and regional context, the article is structured into three sections. The first section delineates the diverse human and geographical landscape of Diyala to illuminate how the interaction of demographic, environmental, and strategic factors has shaped—and continues to shape—the governorate's shifting socio-political and geopolitical dynamics. The second section examines how the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime impacted the Iraqi state, and how this contributed to the transformation of Diyala into an ALS. The third part focuses on an analysis of what can be identified as the most significant actors in Diyala: the Badr Organization, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, ʿAsaʾib Ahl al-Haqq, and the Islamic State organization (IS). Their complex interplay—and the relations they forged with the central government and foreign actors—produced a distinctive configuration of governance shaped by central, local, and transnational logics that sets Diyala apart from other Areas of Limited Statehood. By examining the objectives, postures, and modus operandi of these actors, this section highlights how their relations, although influenced by ethno-sectarian considerations, are profoundly shaped by strategies aimed at maximizing their positions—strategies that involve exploiting identity politics when advantageous and circumventing it when expedient.

Diyala's Varied Geographical Setting

Wedged between Baghdad and the Iraqi-Iranian border, Diyala can be seen as a typical liminal space, dividing and at the same time connecting the Mesopotamian plains and the Iranian plateau, as well as central Iraq with the country's northern edges. As such, the governorate is home to several urban areas that, despite their importance, tend either to be attracted by the complex dynamics of the Iraq-Iran border or to fall under the influence of Baghdad. Baqubah (the capital of the governorate) is a clear example of the latter, while Khanaqin and Mandali fortunes have traditionally been connected to their positions along the frontier.

Due to its position, Diyala has always been an important communication hub within and beyond the Iraqi territories. The province connects Baghdad to the northern governorates of Salah al-Din and to the Kurdistan Region in Iraq (KRI) and it has always been an integral part of the border areas lying between Persian inlands and central Mesopotamia. As such the province hosts one of the major and most ancient routes traditionally used by Iranian pilgrims to reach the *'atabat*.[5] Highway 5 links Baqubah to the al-Munthiriya border crossing located a few kilometers east of Khanaqin along the Iraq-Iran frontier. A secondary road linking the province to Iran passes from Baqubah to Mandali through Balad Ruz.

Albeit not navigable, especially in its upper reaches, the Diyala river is the undisputed epicenter of life in the province. After originating along the Iranian side of the Zagros mountains, the river enters Iraqi territory through the governorate of Sulaymaniyah before reaching the north-eastern portion of the province of Diyala and finally flowing into the Tigris a few kilometers south-east of Baghdad.

Diyala's terrain hosts both desolate and semi-desertic areas (like the Jallam Desert and the Hamrin Mountain in the north) and rural territories rich in palm groves, orchards and irrigated lands fed by the affluents of the Diyala and by a complex web of canals.

The complexity of Diyala's terrain and its liminal nature are well reflected at the ethno-religious level: the province is home to a population estimated at over 1.7 million inhabitants[6] whose equilibriums were significantly altered especially at the time of Saddam Hussein's presidency, when the Baathist regime launched ethnic cleansing campaigns aimed at consolidating the presence of Arab Sunni communities in the area and at diluting the weight of other identities (McDowall 2004). The difficult years that followed the fall of the *ra'is*

witnessed the consolidation of opposing processes, resulting in the forced displacement of thousands of families.[7] Especially during the height of the civil war (2006–8) and after 2014, when IS launched a major offensive, thousands of Arab Sunni families living in Diyala were driven out of their homes and prevented from returning for their alleged support for jihadist organizations or for unspecified security reasons.[8]

Such processes have had a profound impact on Diyala's diverse social fabric, redefining its ethno-religious balances and redrawing the distribution of its communities.

In the absence of a census detailing ethno-sectarian affiliations (the 2024 census incorporated data pertaining to religious affiliation; however, it did not differentiate between sects, and it excluded ethnicity), current analyses indicate that the majority of the local population belongs to the Arab community, with significant minority groups comprising Kurds and Turkmen (Knights and Mello 2016).[9] The province has never been divided into enclaves along ethno-religious lines, but it is clear that the deep destabilization that followed the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime has led to increasing polarization. Arab Sunnis are predominantly concentrated in the central-western parts of the province, particularly in the districts of Baqubah and Muqdadiyah, while Arab Shi'as tend to inhabit the district of Khalis and the south. Kurds are mainly found in the districts of Khanaqin, Kifri and Balad Ruz (Lawrence 2009; McDowall 2004; Natali 2005). The Turkmen are mainly concentrated in the districts of Khanaqin and Baladruz (Strakes 2009).[10] However, as we shall see, as significant as ethno-sectarian affiliation may be, it does not necessarily translate into the logics of cooperation and competition usually associated with it at the national level.

Diyala: an Area of Limited Statehood Disputed by Several Actors

Before 2003 Diyala's importance within the Iraqi power system was quite limited: apart from hosting the headquarters of the Iranian opposition group Mujahedeen e-Khalq (MEK) in Camp Ashraf, the province was firmly under the control of the Baathist regime. This changed dramatically in 2003, when Operation Iraqi Freedom brought the Saddam Hussein era to an end, shattering the very foundations on which the Iraqi system had rested for decades.

Despite their successes on the battlefield, Washington and its allies

proved unable to lay the foundations for rapid and sustainable stabilization. Within a few weeks, the entire institutional architecture of the Iraqi state had crumbled—due both to internal weaknesses and to a series of controversial decisions made by the Coalition Provisional Authority (Allawi 2007; Dawisha 2009; Marr and al-Marashi 2017; Sky 2015). These factors profoundly destabilized a system that, for decades, had been dominated by a ruthless regime leaving no room for the emergence of opposition movements or the consolidation of local actors not aligned with it. Multiple players then rushed to fill the resulting political, economic, and security vacuums, facilitating the emergence and consolidation of several ALS.

Crucial in this sense were both the ineffectiveness of the Coalition Provisional Authority and of post-2004 Iraqi governments as well as the role played by a wide array of actors that, directly or indirectly, came to challenge Baghdad's authority. In the absence of effective border control measures, foreign agents were able to penetrate Iraqi territory, thereby sowing the seeds for long-term external meddling in the country's affairs. Baghdad's inability to contain the escalating levels of violence and criminal activity resulted in the emergence and consolidation of a wide array of paramilitary forces. Whether born out of necessity to defend their local communities or driven by more prosaic interests, these actors tended to coalesce around alleged primordial ties that further contributed to the polarization of the society along ethno-religious lines. Yet, despite its significance, this phenomenon did not result in the complete fragmentation of Iraq along identity-based logics: opposition to ethno-religious polarization remained unabated at the popular level and to a lesser extent even within the socio-political spectrum, despite the consolidation of *muhasasa ta'ifiyya* (Haddad 2011; Ismael and Ismael 2015; Osman 2015).[11] A dynamic well reflected not only by the definition of alliances frequently transcending the boundaries of identity-based politics, but also by the open competition that pits factions within a given ethno-sectarian bloc against each other, both at the national and subnational level.[12]

Ethno-religious dynamics aside, the centrality of non-state and sub-state actors in the "new Iraq" emerging from the ashes of the Baathist regime is undisputed. While some of them completely rejected the new political order and tried to resist it with all the means at their disposal (Hashim 2009; Marr and al-Marashi 2017), others decided to adopt a more nuanced approach, leading to processes of governance hybridization that deeply impacted the country's socio-political equilibriums. Numerous paramilitary groups, tribal militias,

criminal networks and even warlords did not refrain from collaborating with state institutions or even from infiltrating them to maximize economic profits, increase their operational capabilities and vie for political influence.

These hybrid actors, as aptly defined by Thanassis Cambanis et al. (2019, ix–x), "depend on state sponsorship and benefit from the tools and prerogatives of state power but at the same time enjoy the flexibility that comes with not being the state. Hybrid actors seek to harness and control some but not all spheres of the state's authority. They engage in war, diplomacy, politics, and propaganda. They build and maintain constituencies, providing not just security but also services and ideological guidance. Though almost all hybrid actors have some relationship with an external patron, they are more than mere proxies, and have some latitude to make their own policies and decisions".

It is in this framework that, as Phebe Marr and Ibrahim al-Marashi (2017, 263) point out, post-2003 Iraq witnessed the consolidation of "shadow governments that often operated beneath the radar of the skeletal structures later established by the coalition". Diyala was no exception. The province caught the attention of a broad array of groups: Shi'a paramilitary forces, directly or indirectly linked to Tehran, nested in to benefit from its proximity to both Baghdad and the Iraq-Iran border , while the same reasons led several criminal cartels (old and new) to elect it as their main seat of operations. However, it is important to acknowledge that non-state actors were not the sole players involved. Amidst the chaos that ensued from the fall of the regime, more institutionalized actors came to play a significant role in Diyala too. In the north-eastern parts of the province, *peshmerga*[13] units mainly aligned to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) moved into a string of territories claimed as part of the Kurdish heartland but whose control was (and still is) disputed between Erbil's Kurdistan Regional Government and Baghdad's Federal Government (Bartu 2010; Meier 2020).[14] A factor that added another layer of complexity to an extremely polarized theatre and that resulted in a series of standoffs that, albeit less known than the ones revolving around the key-city of Kirkuk, attested to the depth of the fractures pervading the province and to the multiplicity of interests surrounding it.

Deprived of state protection, Arab Sunnis also witnessed the emergence of local militias, although these were far more fragmented and disorganized than those of their Shiʿa and Kurdish counterparts. Finally, some of the most inhospitable areas of Diyala have traditionally served as havens for jihadist group.

In the midst of such a complex scenario, four key actors came to play a pivot-

al role in Diyala province, often operating both within and beyond institutional boundaries and mechanisms: the Badr Organization, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, ʿAsaʾib Ahl al-Haqq and the organization of the IS.

The Badr Organization

Despite the abundance of actors vying for power in Diyala and their importance, no one could compete with the influence exerted by the Badr Organization both within the security realm and beyond. Such an outcome would have been unimaginable before 2003. Badr's origins are intertwined with the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). Widely considered one of the most important Iraqi Shiʿa opposition groups operating from abroad, SCIRI was founded in 1982 in Iran (Jabar 2003). The group took part in the Iraq-Iran war against Saddam Hussein's regime through its armed wing, the Badr Brigades, operating in close collaboration with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and especially with the Quds Force.[15] Mainly composed of Iraqi Shi'a exiled opponents and war prisoners, Badr forces fought along Iranian soldiers and were not disbanded when the conflict ended (1988). The group played a significant role in the *intifada* that erupted in Southern Iraq in 1991, but it proved unable to lead the rebels and to resist the brutal onslaught launched by Baghdad (Jabar 2003; Marr and al-Marashi 2017).

It was only in the wake of the fall of the Baathist regime that Badr came back to the fore, ostensibly operating under SCIRI's leadership. The Brigades benefitted dramatically from the successes SCIRI obtained at the ballot boxes, securing important financial resources and inserting several of their cadres into high level positions within state institutions, especially in the security sector. Under the tenure of Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaʿfari (2006) and later on during Nuri al-Maliki's two mandates (2006–10 and 2010–14), Badr took over key positions especially within the Ministry of Interior.[16] The key-role Badr played during the civil war of 2006–8 further cemented its positions within the Iraqi power system. Despite the widespread accusation of employing brutal tactics and of exploiting state institutions to further its own interests, at the end of the first decade of the new century Badr was a powerhouse everybody in Iraq had to reckon with. A result well reflected in the undisputed influence the group came to exert over much of Diyala—the birthplace of its leader, Hadi al-ʿAmiri, and the former stronghold of the MEK.

This increased status impacted significantly on the group's relations with SCIRI/ISCI[17]. The death of the party's leader, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim (2009), the

limited results it scored at the provincial (2009) and national (2010) elections and its gradual distancing from Iranian tutelage laid the foundation for a separation that became official in 2012. Two years later Badr entered the political arena, competing in the 2014 elections and winning 22 out of 328 seats.

Nevertheless, it was in the aftermath of the fall of Mosul in 2014 and the rise of the organization known as the "Islamic State" that Badr definitively rose to prominence. The movement was among the first to answer Grand Ayatollah ʿAli al-Sistani's call for halting the IS offensive.[18] Operating within the newly established Hayʾat al-Hashd al-Shaʿbi (Popular Mobilization Forces, PMF), the organization contributed significantly to the slow but steady reconquest of the territories under the control of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's movement. This proved particularly true in Diyala where the group spearheaded the counteroffensive aimed at liberating the areas of the province that had fallen under IS control.

By doing so Badr acquired levels of visibility, legitimacy and support that would have been unimaginable only a few years before. Building on its image of protector of the country and on the important resources it could obtain in the wake of the military campaign, the group led the al-Fatah Alliance in the 2018 and 2021 elections as well as the Nabni Alliance in the 2023 provincial elections.[19] The weakness of the central government, the influence Badr exerted at the national and at the local levels and the virtual impunity it could muster due to the emergency prompted by the IS threat all contributed to transforming the group into the dominant force within the province. While this position became more and more evident at the political and at the security levels, it had far-reaching implications also at the economic: "the militia party's control of the local government means that government funded projects are largely allocated to companies and persons aligned with Badr, including PMF/Badr commanders. Badr is involved in both formal and illicit cross-border trading with Iran and the KRG via checkpoints on the main roads. Influence over international border crossings located in Diyala guarantees Badr a cut of most cross-border trade and smuggling."[20]

Nevertheless, despite its centrality, Badr's hold over the province is not absolute. In recent years, there have been notable shifts in local power dynamics, as evidenced by the changing fortunes of various actors who have sought to challenge Badr's prominence.

Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

Especially in the province's northern-eastern edges, a crucial role has been played by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, keen to expand its authority from its stronghold in Sulaimaniyah to territories traditionally inhabited by Kurdish communities in Diyala. Building on the weakness of the central government in Baghdad, the group's strong ties with Tehran[21] and the relative stability the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has witnessed with respect to the rest of the country, the party succeeded in consolidating its position, particularly in Khanaqin and the surrounding territories. Such efforts were ostensibly part of a broader intra-Kurdish agenda aimed at protecting the interests of the KRI and of local Kurdish communities vis-à-vis the Federal Government in Baghdad and its local supporters (Tinti 2021). Pending a definitive solution to the issue of the disputed areas, PUK acted as a bulwark against Baghdad's attempts to extend its authority over them, not refraining from mobilizing against the Iraqi Security Forces whenever this status risked being modified (Bartu 2010).[22]

An example of such an occurrence was witnessed in Khanaqin in August 2008, following the arrival of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in the vicinity of the city and in the subdistricts of Jalawla, Saadiya and Qara Tepe.[23] The ISF deployment was ostensibly intended to pursue jihadist cells and other insurgents operating in the Lake Hamrin area. However, the fact that this deployment occurred a few weeks after Prime Minister al-Maliki had publicly pressured KRI forces to withdraw from disputed areas and that it was not communicated to the authorities in charge of Khanaqin contributed to exacerbating an already tense situation. The standoff risked bringing Iraq to the brink of civil war again but was overcome through appeals to moderation from both parties, as well as thanks to the intervention of US officers who mediated between them.[24]

Yet the rationale behind PUK's posture in Diyala was not confined within the boundaries of the Baghdad-Erbil dispute but was also based on the need to strengthen the party's position vis-à-vis the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Despite a façade of unity that served the need to maximise their political clout in Baghdad, the two main KRI parties remained deeply divided. While emphasizing their nationalist (Kurdish) credentials to their local constituencies, they continued to run two different administrations in their respective fiefdoms of Sulaimaniyah (PUK) and Erbil-Dohuk (KDP). The duopoly that de facto dominated political life in the KRI began to crack with the progressive weakening of the PUK, which—especially after the 2009 regional elections and the deteriorating health of its leader, Jalal Talabani—has had to contend

with internal rifts, growing opposition in its core area of Sulaimaniyah and the emergence of significant competitors (Palani 2022; Tinti 2021).

By strengthening its presence in Diyala, the party aimed not only at expanding its constituency in a phase marked by the evident weakening of its political weight, but also at securing control over an area rich in resources and economic opportunities. In doing so the group partially replicated the *modus operandi* adopted by Badr in the territories under its authority, developing patronage networks within the administration, cementing its control over trade and diversifying its sources of income. In this context, the Khanaqin district was seen as extremely important also because of the revenues it generated through its border crossing of Parwez Khan (near the northern town of Kalar) and of al-Munthriya (near Khanaqin) as well as from its oil reserves. The Naft Khana oil field is one of the oldest producing fields in Iraq, and although it is estimated to produce only around 10,000 b/d, it is thought to have significant resources (Saleem and Skelton 2019).[25]

PUK influence over Diyala reached its apex in the years that followed the 2014 offensive launched by IS: PUK military support proved fundamental to halting IS advances and to launching a joint operation with Badr and other Hashd units to liberate the subdistricts of Saadiya and Jalawla. From its main operational base in Khanaqin the group provided shelter to thousands of refugees who were forced to abandon their homes, receiving Iraqi and international acclaim for its crucial contribution to the battle against jihadist forces. Yet the party was also accused of having exploited the crisis to benefit its Kurdish brethren and to further its own interests, damaging the rights of non-Kurdish communities. Accusations that, as we will see, would have allowed some of its competitors to strengthen their positions and to bid their time to exploit Diyala's sectarian tinderbox to their own advantage.

The political fortunes of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in the province of Diyala ebbed in 2017, following the end of major combat operations against IS, the KRI referendum on independence, and the subsequent battle for Kirkuk (Degli Esposti 2021). The aftermath of these events further cemented division and mistrust among the two primary KRI political parties, thereby weakening their position in relation to their counterparts. *Peshmerga* units had to withdraw from most of the disputed territories, relinquishing control of areas considered crucial to the future of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and its people.

In Diyala, the PUK leveraged its historical relations with Tehran and other key Iraqi political actors to avoid a complete rout from the province.[26] In ex-

change for withdrawing most of its forces, it retained a presence within the administration of Khanaqin and was allowed to keep members of its intelligence units stationed in critical areas. The party had also to relinquish control of the Parwez Khan and al-Munthriya border crossings and the Naft Khana oil field, in this way losing a source of revenue that had proved crucial to sustaining its fragile economic foundations.[27] While the withdrawal proceeded without major incidents, it left PUK influence severely weakened. The party's good relationship with Badr, coupled with its robust connections with Tehran, played a crucial role to maintain a modest degree of influence, particularly within the context of the Khanaqin district. While the PUK maintained a significant presence in the local administration and at the security level, the party's limited resources have led to considerable challenges in preserving its extensive patronage networks and protecting its local constituencies from local competitors, especially the ones aligned with ʿAsaʾib Ahl al-Haqq. A trend well reflected by the meagre results PUK obtained in the 2021 and 2025 national elections and by the fact that it only succeeded in securing one seat in Diyala in the 2023 provincial elections.

ʿAsaʾib Ahl al-Haqq

If the longstanding relations PUK established with Badr proved useful to partially protect what remained of its interests in the area, the same did not hold true for ʿAsaʾib Ahl al-Haqq, which quickly turned into one of the PUK's most formidable rivals. The organization emerged after 2003 within the ranks of Muqtada al-Sadr's militia Jaish al-Mahdi and was mainly known for its strong ties to Tehran as well as for its marked hostility towards the United States' presence in Iraq. The Shiʿa militia played a significant role during the Iraqi civil war but, once it ended, had to keep a low profile. Differently from Badr, it did not enter the Iraqi security institutions and, as such, it was *de facto* operating outside the provisions of the Iraqi constitution.

It is in this framework that, especially after having split from the Mahdi Army, the group moved into the shadows and even closer to Tehran, becoming one of the leading forces of the so-called special groups (Knights 2010).[28] Under the leadership of Qais Khazali, the group operated at the margins of the Iraqi system until Mosul fell into jihadist hands. By entering the PMF in 2014, ʿAsaʾib Ahl al-Haqq succeeded in getting the long-sought legal recognition that would allow it to operate in the open: while contributing to the fight against IS, the movement strengthened its network of licit and illicit activities, expanding

its reach within the Iraqi system and beyond. Yet until 2017 ʿAsaʾib Ahl al-Haqq influence in Diyala was limited at best: it was only after the pullout of PUK forces that it significantly strengthened its positions, mainly thanks to the strong ties it developed with parts of local communities that deeply resented the Kurdish party.

As mentioned, IS' control over the subdistricts of Jalawla and Saadiya lasted only for a few months but forced thousands of families to flee their homes: once they were liberated, Badr took charge of Saadiya while PUK-aligned *peshmerga* units were assigned to Jalawla. This inevitably rekindled old rivalries, which ʿAsaʾib Ahl al-Haqq proved adept at exploiting. By promising financial support, weapons, land, and the right to return to their towns, the group secured the support of a significant number of Arab Sunnis who accused the PUK of having prevented them from returning home on the basis of forged linkages to IS.[29] An impressive result, especially if we consider how ʿAsaʾib Ahl al-Haqq has been accused in the past of having been responsible for crimes and atrocities against Arab Sunni communities.[30]

This had clear implications also at the economic level, integrating the important resources the group already disposed of: "[...] the AAH generate enormous cash flows in Jalawla. For instance, the AAH collects money through illegal taxing of trucks carrying trading goods from the KRI to the rest of Iraq. The AAH man checkpoints on commercially strategic roads and impose taxes on vehicles passing through, earning an estimated amount of $300,000 daily through checkpoint fees across Jalawla, according to a government official."[31]

Far from being limited to the security and economic areas only, ʿAsaʾib Ahl al-Haqq influence expanded dramatically at the political level too. In 2018, the group joined the Badr-led al-Fatah Alliance, securing 15 seats in the parliament. Despite suffering a significant electoral defeat in the 2021 national elections, ʿAsaʾib Ahl al-Haqq was able to maintain its political relevance by supporting the Coordination Framework and the al-Sudani cabinet. This stance proved instrumental in strengthening its position at the national level and advancing its interests in Diyala. Although Badr's political platform in Diyala was the most successful in the December 2023 provincial elections, the group was unable to appoint its candidate to the position of governor. Following an eight-month impasse, the provincial council nominated Adnan Jaber al-Shammari, a member of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition. Despite initial reluctance, his appointment was ultimately accepted by Badr as part of a broader agreement reached with former Prime Minister

Nuri al-Maliki. Nevertheless, the appointment of Omar al-Kerwi as chair of the Provincial Council and of Salim al-Tamimi as his deputy appears to be of even greater significance in terms of local power dynamics. Al-Kerwi hails from a leading Sunni tribe known for its ties to ʿAsaʾib Ahl al-Haqq, while al-Tamimi, despite originating from a family that had traditionally been aligned with Badr, defected to ʿAsaʾib Ahl al-Haqq amidst a feud that seems to have weakened Badr's once semi-absolute hold over Diyala's ruling elites.[32] While these events may be important, it is unlikely that they will be able to curtail Badr's influence in Diyala, which continues to be the group's main stronghold in Iraq.[33] Nevertheless, such an occurrence is indicative of the fact that the power dynamics in the province do not necessarily align with identity politics but often overcome them when more pragmatic interests are at stake.

The Organization of the Islamic State

No analysis of Diyala could be complete without mentioning the role the province plays for the remnants of the organization of the IS. As mentioned, the area has always represented a significant, albeit secondary, operational theatre for the group: apart from the few months jihadist forces were able to seize and control the subdistricts of Jalawla and Saadiiya in 2014, the movement tended to avoid holding ground, preferring to set up a series of rear bases aimed at supporting its battles in more critical battlegrounds. In this regard both IS and its previous iterations designated as their heartland the so-called Jazira: a string of territories located between the mid-upper Tigris and Euphrates river basins, whose value—*inter alia*—stemmed from their proximity to the Iraqi-Syrian border, its complex terrain and the presence of communities resenting their subalternity to Baghdad (Plebani 2021).

It was only when the movement lost momentum and began to crumble under the attacks of its enemies that it decided to focus eastwards, along an axis stretching from Kirkuk to Diyala. The latter proved particularly suited for IS schemes: not only was the province ideally located to connect multiple operational theatres (Baghdad, the disputed city of Kirkuk, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and potentially even Iran), but it was also marred by ethno-religious fractures the group could have exploited to its own advantage. Finally, the governorate extends over terrains ideal to hide in and to wage protracted guerrilla warfare: "In most rural areas of Diyala, it is impossible to drive for more than two kilometers without meeting a canal or irrigation ditch, complicating counterinsurgency raids. The 90-kilometer Diyala River delta is lined with

dense palm groves that extend for one to three kilometers on either side of the river, making this one of the largest rough-terrain corridors in Iraq, twice as big as the hard-to-secure palm groves between Ramadi and Fallujah. The river is sparsely bridged, presenting a serious obstacle to motorized security forces, but is easily traversed by small boat at dozens of points, making monitoring and interdiction difficult for security forces."[34]

These factors rapidly transformed Diyala into one of the epicenters of the new strategy of attrition developed by the jihadist organization. It comes as no surprise then that Diyala was one of the provinces with the highest number of IS-related attacks since 2017.[35]

Yet it would be wrong to consider Diyala as a sort of "Jazira 2.0": the governorate allows the group to keep exerting pressure over its enemies, but it is far from presenting the same conditions IS could exploit in Western Iraq. Despite the limited influence the state exerts over the area and the depth of the local fissures, the governorate is home to a broad array of actors able and willing to protect their interests and to prevent the emergence of possible competitors, especially if hailing from jihadist circles.

Conclusions

Marred by conflicting power dynamics that exploit the limited authority of the central government, Diyala can be considered a fully-fledged ALS. As such the province witnessed the emergence and consolidation of a wide array of hybrid movements, sub-state players and non-state actors that succeeded in taking root through coercion and/or through sophisticated networks operating at the socio-political, economic, and security levels.

Although influenced by the ethno-sectarian processes that deeply affected post-2003 Iraq, these actors developed strategies and agendas aimed at maximizing their positions within the governorate, not hesitating to exploit identity politics when necessary and to circumvent it when it suited them better. While intra-Shi'a solidarity proved to be a powerful tool to counter the offensive launched by the IS organization, the competition between Badr and ʿAsaʾib Ahl al-Haqq clearly bypassed this dynamic. The same is true of ʿAsaʾib Ahl al-Haqq's strategy towards local Arab Sunni communities, which, despite a bitter legacy of hatred and competition, were co-opted by the movement to challenge the semi-absolute monopoly that Badr had developed over Diyala's socio-economic and political levels and counter the influence of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. As for the latter, while intra-Kurdish solidarity proved

useful in the past in countering Baghdad's attempt to redefine the balance of power within the disputed territories, it was not strong enough to protect the PUK's positions in Diyala, especially after the debacle of the Battle of Kirkuk. Without the support of the KDP and under increasing pressure, the PUK was forced to withdraw most of its forces from the province but managed to partially limit its losses thanks to the solid relationship it established with Badr and Tehran: another example of how ethnic and religious divisions do not necessarily translate into political ones.

Far from being confined to Diyala, these dynamics reflected the Iraqi state's growing difficulty in reasserting control over the provision of defense, security, and governance, alongside the increasing influence of actors operating both within and outside state institutions. In such conditions, as Yezid Sayigh observes, the exercise of defense and security functions by sub-state actors can "offer an entry point for interventions that serve wider geopolitical agendas."[36] It is in this framework that Iranian support for some of the most important Hashd units and its ability to develop solid ties with Shiʿa and non-Shiʿa partners helped Tehran to strengthen its presence within Iraq, at the same time securing its ability to project its influence well beyond its borders. Exploiting the ties developed with local proxies and longstanding partners, the Islamic Republic not only secured a solid foothold over an area close to the very heart of the Land of the Two Rivers, but also succeeded in exerting a crucial influence over a critical communication juncture linking its western borders to Baghdad, Kirkuk, Sulaimaniyah, the *ʿatabat* and the Syrian desert.

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Notes

1 An earlier version of this article was originally presented at the Thirteenth Gulf Research Meeting (11–13 July 2023) organized by the Gulf Research Centre Cambridge. The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

2 Ariel I. Ahram, "Hybrid Security Governance and the Search for the State in the Middle East," *War on the rocks*, Jan. 29, 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/hybrid-security-governance-and-the-search-for-the-state-in-the-middle-east/. Volker Boege, Anne Brown, Kevin Clements, and Anna Nolan, "On Hybrid Political Orders and Emerging States: State Formation in the Context of 'Fragility'", Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2008, https://berghof-foundation.org/library/on-hybrid-political-orders-and-emerging-states-state-formation-in-the-context-of-fragility.

3 Fabrice Balanche, "From the Iranian Corridor to the Shia Crescent," *Hoover Institution*, August 18, 2018, https://www.hoover.org/research/iranian-corridor-shia-crescent.

4 International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, 2019, https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier/.

5 The term refers to a series of Shi'a holy cities. Amongst them Najaf, Kerbala, Kadhimiya and Samarra.

6 European Union Agency for Asylum, "Iraq Security Situation, Country of Origin Information Report", January 2022, p. 120, https://coi.euaa.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/2022_02_EUAA_COI_Report_Iraq_Security_situation.pdf

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10 Ali T. al-Hamoud, "Iraqi Turkmen: The Controversy of Identity and Affiliation", *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung*, Aug., 2021, https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/18225.pdf; Erkmen, S. (2009), "The Forgotten Turkmen Land: Diyala", Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies, https://orsam.org.tr/dosya/Analiz_7_eng.pdf

11 The term refers to a power sharing system based on ethno-religious quotas. Albeit not inscribed within the constitution approved in 2005, this model exerted a huge influence over Iraqi politics.

12 Mac Skelton and Zmkan A. Saleem, "Iraq's Political Marketplace at the Subnational Level: The Struggle for Power in Three Provinces," *The London School of Economics – Institute of*

Regional and International Studies, 2020, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/105184/3/Iraq_s_Political_Marketplace.pdf.

13 Literally "those who face death." The term is widely employed to designate Kurdish fighters of Northern Iraq.

14 The Iraqi Constitution approved in 2005 set a series of steps aimed at solving the status of the disputed areas located in the governatorates of Niniveh, Salahaddin, Diyala, Kirkuk and Wasit. These include: a process to facilitate the return of those displaced during the Arabization campaigns, the conduct of a census and the organization of a referendum. As of today, these measures have not been implemented. The only exception is the national census hold in November 2024, which, unlike previous counts, excluded ethnicity from the information collected.

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16 Robert M. Perito, "The Iraq Federal Police: U.S. Police Building under Fire", *United States Institute of Peace*, Oct., 2011, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-Y3_P31-PURL-gpo19354/pdf/GOVPUB-Y3_P31-PURL-gpo19354.pdf; International Crisis Group, "Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State", 2018, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/188-iraqs-paramilitary-groups-challenge-rebuilding-functioning-state.

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20 Mac Skelton and Zmkan A. Saleem, "Iraq's Political Marketplace at the Subnational Level: The Struggle for Power in Three Provinces", *The London School of Economics – Institute of Regional and International Studies*, 2020, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/105184/3/Iraq_s_Political_Marketplace.pdf. On the economic and financial networks established by Badr Forces and other PMFs see Inna Rudolf, "Tracing the Role of Violent Entrepreneurs in the Iraqi Post-Conflict Economy", *New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy Intelligence*, May 17, 2023, https://newlinesinstitute.org/iraq/tracing-the-role-of-violent-entrepreneurs-in-the-post-conflict-iraqi-economy/.

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tracking-iranian-soft-power-influence-kri; Kamal Chomani, "Evolving Relations Between Iran and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq", *Clingendael*, Mar. 2022, https://www.clingendael.org/publication/evolving-relations-between-iran-and-kurdistan-region-iraq.

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leaning-maliki-remain-competitive.

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