THE WAR AT HOME: THE NEED FOR INTERNAL SECURITY SECTOR REFORM IN IRAQI KURDISTAN

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

With the emergence of ISIS in 2014, Western governments quickly increased military aid to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's (KRI) Peshmerga forces to defeat the group. After ISIS's territorial defeat in Iraq in 2017, support to Kurdish forces continued with a reform package designed to professionalize and unify the Peshmerga forces commanded by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). However, focusing only on the Peshmerga leaves out approximately half of the KRI armed forces. Formed to counter external threats such as ISIS, the Peshmerga is no longer the main security actor in the region. After the withdrawal of Kurdish forces from the disputed territories in October 2017, this role has been subsumed by the forces and agencies of the Ministry of Interior (MoI) and the Kurdistan Region Security Council (KRSC), collectively referred to the Kurdistan Region Interior Forces (KRIF) in this report. Formed for the purpose of preventing crime and protecting regional institutions from terrorism and sabotage, partisan divisions within these units now pose the greatest risk to stability in the KRI. The KDP and PUK mobilize the interior forces in furtherance of political feuds, leaving little room to meaningfully implement reform within the security sector as a whole. Thus, reform within the KRIF is urgently needed to stabilize the region, but also to promote the reunification of the Peshmerga.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

KEY ACRONYMS

- Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)
- Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)
- Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)
- Ministry of Interior (MoI)
- Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs (MoPA)
- Kurdistan Region Security Council (KRSC)
- Kurdistan Region Security Institution (KRSI)
- Defense and Emergency Forces (DEF)
- Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)
- Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)
- Kurdistan Region's Interior Forces (KRIF)
- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

Cover photo: Members of the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga forces attend a ceremonial line-up during a training session by German military officers during the German defense minister's visit at a facility on the outskirts of Erbil, on August 21, 2019. Photo by SAFIN HAMED/AFP via Getty Images.

Photo above: Smoke billows on the front line as Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga fighters hold a position near Hasan Sham village, 45 km east of the city of Mosul, during an operation aimed at retaking areas from ISIS on May 29, 2016. Photo by SAFIN HAMED/AFP via Getty Images.

> **Political power is increasingly linked to power in the interior forces.**

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, Western governments have regarded the security forces of the KRI as reliable partners in Iraq. With the U.S. invasion in 2003 and the collapse of the Ba'ath regime, the United States in particular relied on the forces of the KRI to support its presence in the country. Since 2014, the Kurdistan Region's armed forces — the Peshmerga, Zeravani (also known as Zeravani Peshmerga), Defense and Emergency Police (DEF), and Asayish (security forces) — collectively played a critical role in defeating ISIS in Iraq alongside coalition forces as part of *Operation Inherent Resolve*. Yet, notwithstanding coalition efforts to professionalize and depoliticize the KRI's security sector, command of these units remains divided between the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) two ruling parties: the KDP and the PUK. Historically, these forces were formed for the primary purpose of protecting the KRI, but they have

> ## "The KRIF are now the main security actors in the region, but their role as instruments of partisan rivalry and enforcers of public loyalty to the political bureaus threatens the stability of the KRI."

also been exploited for partisan control over territory and economic assets, and to suppress dissent within the region. These objectives have increased in importance after Kurdish forward lines withdrew from the disputed territories in October 2017 (i.e., the districts of Diyala, Kirkuk, Salah al-Din, and Nineveh provinces claimed by the KRI).

Minimizing partisan influence over the KRI's security forces has been at the core of Western governments' military and diplomatic missions in the region in recent years. Reform has focused primarily on the Peshmerga forces of the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs (MoPA) — the region's forward operating military force that serves as its army — and has included training, funding, and arming 14 "mixed" brigades of the KDP and PUK Peshmerga forces.[1] After the territorial defeat of ISIS in Iraq in 2017, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany established an advisory group through an agreement with the KRG and announced a 35-point reform package (now refined to 31 points)[2] to unify and reorganize the forces over a period of five to 10 years.[3] Yet these efforts exclusively address Peshmerga forces and leave out the police and paramilitary units under the MoI and KRSC, or KRIF, even as the role of the interior forces eclipses that of the Peshmerga, both militarily and politically.

Although the MoI and KRSC control slightly less than half of the total number of KRI armed forces, they receive over 62% of the region's security budget.[4] As the KDP's and PUK's elite "enforcement arms," their loyalty to the political bureaus is also stronger than that of the Peshmerga[5] and they are heavily involved in the region's day-to-day security and administrative affairs. Historically, the KRIF have been used to balance power between the KDP and PUK, which has at times resulted in serious escalations between them, including mobilizations of armed units against one another and accusations of espionage and assassinations.[6]

The KDP's and PUK's withdrawal from the disputed territories in 2017,[7] along with the deterioration of the local economy (which resulted from the KRG's loss of oil fields located in

the disputed area, especially Kirkuk) and the emergence of destabilizing protests,[8] caused the parties to prioritize maintaining order within the region itself and to reinforce control over local revenue channels. As a result, the role of the Peshmerga was reduced relative to that of the KRIF and control over the command of the interior forces, their budgets, and their political leadership in the KRG has become a priority for both parties.

Through semi-structured interviews with commanders and members of the KRIF and Peshmerga, politicians, journalists, and experts conducted from October to December 2020, and analysis of primary documents and the existing literature on the KRI security forces, this report makes the case for refocusing coalition security sector reform (SSR) efforts on the KRIF. The KRIF are now the main security actors in the region, but their role as instruments of partisan rivalry and enforcers of public loyalty to the political bureaus threatens the stability of the KRI and is responsible for grave violations of human rights. Therefore, although Peshmerga reform is necessary to improve the KRI's ability to combat external threats, it is equally, if not more important to start the same reform within these internal forces and agencies to achieve durable stability for the KRI and the wider region. In the absence of a comprehensive SSR package that includes interior forces, efforts to professionalize and unify the Peshmerga forces will likely result in wasted time and resources.

This report focuses on the following points:

1. The KRIF are now the primary security actors in the KRI. Since the withdrawal of KRI forces from the disputed territories in 2017, the forces of the MoI and the KRSC have been the most prominent security actors in the KRI. They receive more rigorous training than their Peshmerga counterparts[9] and their ranks are filled by trusted loyalists of the political parties,[10] making them ideal for suppressing an increasing number of protests against the KRG.[11]

2. Political power is increasingly linked to power in the interior forces. While the previous generation of KRI

Photo above: Brig. Gen. E. John Teichert speaks during a ceremony held for the delivery of armored vehicles, logistics, and other military supplies sent by the U.S. for the 14th and 16th Infantry Brigades of the Peshmerga forces in Erbil, Iraq on November 10, 2020. Photo by Yunus Keles/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

"Economic crises and the escalation of rivalry between the KDP and PUK create an unstable security environment in which the mobilization of interior forces could result in the return of partisan armed conflict."

leadership had achieved political power through its role in the guerrilla war against Ba'ath forces, the new generation of KDP and PUK leadership cut its teeth in the KRIF security and intelligence agencies that expanded throughout the civil war and the period of separate party administrations. Both Prime Minister Masrour Barzani and PUK coleader Lahur Sheikh Jangi once commanded their parties' intelligence agencies and led the KRSC.

3. The KRIF are increasingly mobilized to advance partisan agendas and to participate in regional conflicts. Economic crises and the escalation of rivalry between the KDP and PUK create an unstable security environment in which the mobilization of interior forces could result in the return of partisan armed conflict. Control over the MoI and KRSC is now more contested as the power-sharing scheme that once defined relations between the KDP and PUK has broken down.[12] In particular, fighting between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) within the borders of the KRI proper creates a potentially explosive situation in the KRI where the KDP and PUK engage in escalations of force that the other perceives as threatening.

4. SSR that neglects interior forces is illusory. Because the parties focus heavily on their interior forces to consolidate their power, recent plans to reform the Peshmerga without addressing the relationship between the KRIF and Peshmerga, and the partisan structure of the KRIF, will fail to bring about comprehensive reform to achieve coalition goals.

This report is organized into the following sections:

- First, it will discuss the historical background and institutional structure of the MoI and KRSC forces.
- Second, it will examine the partisan, economic, and security functions of these forces and their role in the politics of the KRI from 2009 to the present.
- Third, it will describe how these forces increased in importance and prominence with the withdrawal of the KRI administration from the disputed territories and the subsequent deterioration in partisan relations.

- Finally, it will discuss policy implications and recommendations for stakeholders in the international community and the KRI.

Although the KRIF have participated in military operations and administration in the disputed territories, this report focuses primarily on the role of the KRIF within the KRI proper.

2. Structure of the KRI Internal Security Forces

The Kurdish uprising and the subsequent U.N. Security Council Resolution No. 688, which established a no-fly zone in the northern Kurdish area in Iraq in 1991, paved the way for the formation of the Kurdish government in 1992, under which both the MoPA and MoI were established. The MoPA focused primarily on professionalizing and regulating the parties' existing armed forces and the MoI supervised the establishment of police and "Asayish" (security forces) to "preserve the security of the interior" and "prevent crime." However, the outbreak of the Kurdish civil war in 1994 resulted in a breakdown of the government and it became the turning point for the KDP and PUK to utilize them to form their own separate governments in their respective territories. Although the U.S.-mediated Washington Agreement brought an end to the war in 1998, the parties' de facto governments remained intact until 2006.

After collapse of the Ba'ath regime, the KDP and PUK signed a power-sharing deal, known as the Strategic Agreement, in 2006.[13] This led to the re-establishment of the KRG, with the KDP and PUK sharing power on a 50:50 basis.[14] This power-sharing scheme extended to the KRG's formal security sector institutions, which consist of the MoPA, the MoI, and the KRSC. Under this system, the PUK has maintained relative control over the MoPA while the KDP has assumed

the leadership of the MoI and the KRSC. The MoPA oversees the affairs of the KRI's forward-operating military forces that "protect the Kurdistan Region, defend it, and promote its national interests."[15]

The MoPA commands 14 KDP and PUK integrated Peshmerga brigades with a combined 42,000 troops to which foreign military training and aid have been directed.[16] Yet power over these brigades is also divided along partisan lines. For example, if the KDP commands a brigade, the PUK holds deputy commandership, and vice versa. Additionally, the other two largest Peshmerga units are the KDP and PUK 80 and 70 Peshmerga units, respectively, which together comprise nearly 100,000 forces.[17] Commanders of these forces are selected by parties' leadership and the MoPA merely issues their appointments.[18]

Table one below shows the breakdown of the number of Peshmerga fighters:

MoPA	Unit 80 of KDP Peshmerga	Unit 70 of PUK Peshmerga
Oversees 14 mixed brigades of KDP and PUK that together comprise 42,000 fighters	50,000 fighters	48,000 fighters

Seeing the detrimental role of KDP and PUK influence on the discipline of the Kurdish security forces in the war against ISIS, the U.S., the U.K., and Germany, in agreement with the KRG, announced a 35-point reform package, in furtherance of continuing operations to combat ISIS in Iraq.[19] The reform package was designed to ultimately unify all Peshmerga forces under the MoPA. However, it has yet to be applied to the KDP and PUK 80 and 70 units as parties continue to withhold critical information, such as the names and ranks of the soldiers and officers of the units, from the MoPA.[20]

Notwithstanding the near-exclusive focus on the MoPA (along with the 70 and 80 units) as the subject of SSR since 2017, the Peshmerga is only one part of a much larger security sector that is now dominated by the forces of the MoI and the KRSC (collectively, the KRIF) in terms of expenditures and political influence. Together, the KRIF agencies employ over half of the region's security personnel and are allocated more than 60% of its security budget.[21] The MoI and KRSC have also eclipsed the MoPA in terms of political influence: The current prime minister of the KRG and the co-president of the PUK, arguably the two key power brokers in the KRI today, are former leaders of the KRIF.

This section describes the legal, institutional, and partisan structure of the interior forces under the MoI and the KRSC.

a. The Ministry of the Interior

The MoI is widely regarded as the most powerful ministry in the KRG. It is perceived as "the real government" or "a smaller KRG"[22] due to its expansive power under KRI law to regulate most aspects of security and administration within the KRI proper. Its authority stretches to the administration of provinces and their units as well as the execution of government public policy.[23]

Today, the MoI oversees approximately 90,000[24] armed forces and it has the largest budget allocation of any ministry in the KRG. Notwithstanding the economic crisis that the KRG has faced since 2014, when the federal government suspended the transfer of its portion of the federal budget, expenditures on the MoI have continued to increase. The MoI was allocated 1.357 trillion Iraqi dinars (IQD) — equivalent to a monthly payment of 113 billion IQD or $94.2 million[25] — in 2013, nearly 12% of the KRG budget for that year.[26] The ministry's monthly expenditure increased by 63.3% by 2020, to 178.4 billion IQD, or over $148.7 million.[27]

From 2009 to 2019, the MoI was led by Minister Karim Sinjari, the KDP's former intelligence chief.[28] Sinjari's leadership brought the MoI primarily under the KDP's sphere of political influence, thus effectively sharing authority over the security affairs with the PUK's minister of the MoPA.

Like other KRI ministries, the division of power within it reflects that of the KRI as a whole. The ministry also has two secretaries: one for administration and the other for security, which are delegated authority by the minister. Secretary portfolios were distributed to the PUK from 2007 to 2014

Photo right: Armored vehicles sent by the U.S. for the 14th and 16th Infantry Brigades of the Peshmerga forces as part of the United States' $250 million support package, in Erbil on November 10, 2020. Photo by Yunus Keles/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

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> "The MoI is widely regarded as the most powerful ministry in the KRG. It is perceived as 'the real government' or 'a smaller KRG' due to its expansive power under KRI law."

and functioned as de facto PUK "ministers" with almost total discretion to manage all administrative and security affairs in the PUK-dominated provinces, Sulaymaniyah and Halabja.[29]

Today, the ministry oversees an array of units ranging from lightly armed provincial police to gendarmes. Most of these troops fall within the latter category as Zeravani or DEF, which are the KDP- and PUK-controlled paramilitary units, respectively. There is no significant difference between Zeravani, DEF, and Peshmerga units in their function or structure. This is attributable to the MoI's unofficial function as a "warehouse" for Peshmerga units as the KDP and PUK came under international and domestic pressure to demobilize their Peshmerga forces following the regime change in Iraq in 2003.[30] According to former secretary of the MoI, Jalal Karim:

> "The Americans, [the government of] Iraq, and the Iraqi constitution did not allow for the existence of so many Peshmerga in the region. At that time, our colleagues [the KDP] came to us and told us to establish these forces under different names with the Ministry of the Interior."

The KDP and the PUK have since transferred 61,000 Peshmerga — the KDP transferred 45,000 Zeravni Peshmerga, and PUK 16,000 Peshmerga — to the MoI and reclassified them as "internal security forces."[31] Like the Peshmerga, these paramilitary elite forces participated in the fight against ISIS and received international aid and training coordinated through the MoPA as part of *Operation Inherent Resolve*. During the fight against ISIS, they fell under the command of different KDP and PUK fronts, which were directly controlled by the parties' military commanders.

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Together, the KRIF agencies employ over half of the region's security personnel and are allocated more than 60% of its security budget.

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Photo above: Prime Minister Masrour Barzani meets Adam Smith, member of the U.S. House of Representatives and current chair of the Armed Services Committee, on November 04, 2019 in Erbil. Photo by Yunus Keles/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

Table two below shows the number of Peshmerga that the KDP and PUK transferred to the MoI in 2006, as well as their expansion since then.

Armed forces in the MoI	Forces transferred to MoI in 2006	Forces now
KDP's Zeravani	45,000	60,000
PUK's DEF	16,000	Nearly 30,000

b. Kurdistan Region Security Council

The origins of the Asayish date back to the aftermath of the 1991 uprising and the subsequent buildup of the parties' armed forces as they absorbed unemployed young men as well as former Iraqi Army, police, and intelligence officers into their ranks.[32] The KDP and PUK established Asayish as elite units dedicated to the investigation of espionage, drug and contraband trafficking, and violations of domestic security.[33] Agents were recruited on the basis of partisan loyalty as they were entrusted with investigations of a politically sensitive nature.[34] Simultaneously, the KDP and PUK established their respective intelligence agencies, Parastin and Dezgayi Zanyari. Unlike Asayish units, which were attached to the MoI in 1993, the parties' intelligence apparatuses existed independent of government regulation.[35] After 2003, with the help of the U.S., the KDP and PUK also formed their own counterterrorism forces, led by figures within the Barzani and Talabani families. In February 2011, widespread protests in Sulaimaniyah, in which the KDP and PUK both deployed their Asayish to suppress unrest, demonstrated a need for government regulation and closer coordination between the parties' Asayish within official institutions.

The KRSC was formed in April 2011[36] to consolidate all of the region's Asayish and intelligence forces within one institution

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and is attached to presidency. The KRSC is composed of three departments: the Kurdistan Region Security Institution (KRSI), the General Directorate of Military Intelligence, and the KDP and PUK intelligence agencies, Parastin and Zanyari, respectively. The KRSC chancellor is appointed by the president at the rank of a minister and has two deputies.

The laws establishing the KRSC structured it in a way that balances the KDP's and PUK's interests in maintaining separate partisan chains of command, while providing both with access to the KRG's security budget. For example, the KRSI, an agency of the KRSC governed by its own law with responsibilities that overlap significantly with the KRSC,[37] is tied to the premiership[38] rather than the presidency.[39] This was a power-sharing scheme to accommodate both the KDP and PUK, as the PUK's Barham Salih held the position of prime minister at the time the law was passed, and the KDP's Masoud Barzani held the presidency. Later, Masrour Barzani, the current KRG PM, became the KRSC chancellor and a PUK figure, Dr. Khasraw Gul, became head of the KRSI. The formation of two institutions with similar duties, in this case, indicates an intention to resolve inter- and intra-party rivalries by sharing power within security institutions rather than by structuring a hierarchical chain of command to ensure efficiency.

Owing to the continuation of an intense rivalry between KDP and PUK intelligence units, the KRSC has not held a meeting since its creation[40] and the former chancellor, Masrour Barzani, and Dr. Khasraw Gul Mohammed, the head of the KRSI, continued to work in parallel to one another in their parties' (the KDP and PUK, respectively) zones of influence. However, the official establishment of the KRSC and KRSI had two important effects: First, it legitimized the parties' Asayish and intelligence forces; and second, it provided for the allocation of an official budget to these agencies and official appointments to their leadership. In 2013, the KRSC and KRSI employed 37,897 personnel and their budgets together comprised over 7.17% of the total KRG budget.[41] Thus, leadership positions on the KRSC and the KRSI are coveted

and, as discussed below, have become points of contention in government formation talks.

3. The Need to Reform the Internal Security Forces

The KRIF were created to protect citizens and the government of the KRI from both internal and domestic threats. However, these forces are also instruments of partisan leverage in a long-standing rivalry between the KDP and PUK, which limits their effectiveness as security forces. Today, the KRIF are powerful political and security actors, and their presence is felt in nearly every aspect of life in the KRI.

After the withdrawal of KDP and PUK forces from the disputed territories in 2017, the balance of power between the parties in the KRI proper became dangerously unstable. Making matters worse, deepening economic crises stirred popular resentment of the government's failure to pay salaries and of the parties' abuses of power. As a result, the KDP and PUK have increasingly used the internal security sector in furtherance of partisan rivalries, to stake their claims to valuable economic assets, and to intimidate dissidents. This section examines the various roles of the KRIF in reinforcing partisan hegemony within the KRI and the instability it has caused.

a. The Partisan Security Dilemma: Protecting the Territorial and Economic Balance of Power

Since the Kurdish civil war in the mid-1990s, the parties have regarded the expansion, professionalization, and bureaucratization of their internal security apparatuses as critical to their ability to maintain control over territory and guard against encroachments by their political rivals. The lack of a credible commitment to oft-touted SSR programs perpetuates a security dilemma in which both parties engage

Photo above: A member of the Iraqi Kurdish *Asayish* security organization at a security checkpoint in the city of Sulaimaniyah, on March 14, 2020. Photo by SHWAN MOHAMMED/AFP via Getty Images.

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> **The lack of trust and coordination between the KDP and PUK has led to serious security vacuums and administrative inefficiencies.**

in constant force expansion to check the other's anticipated incursions. The state of insecurity, in turn, justifies the parties' arguments for remaining in power: Without their security forces, their constituents, it is claimed, would be abandoned to the abuse and tyranny of the other party.

In continuation of this conflict, the KDP and PUK often use their intelligence and paramilitaries to conduct surveillance of their political rivals and engage in tit-for-tat kidnappings.[42] The threat of kidnapping and assassination[43] is so pervasive that intelligence agents must seek permission to travel to areas controlled by the rival party, and in certain cases their location is tracked by their intelligence unit until the agent returns.[44]

The KRIF are also critical to securing significant economic assets for the KDP and PUK such as oil reserves and border crossings. Throughout the war against ISIS, both parties mobilized their forces to Kirkuk, with KDP-affiliated Oil

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and Gas Police Forces securing the fields of Bai Hassan and Havana in July 2014, prompting a tense standoff with the PUK's own police forces stationed in the province.[45] In March 2017, the rivalry approached a crisis point when an elite brigade of the PUK's DEF, known as the Black Forces, seized North Oil Company stations in Kirkuk[46] in retaliation for a KRG agreement with the federal government that it perceived as "cementing the KDP interest" in the city.[47] Concerningly, these shows of force continue within the KRI proper after Kurdish forces withdrew from the disputed territories. In January 2020, Asayish and Oil and Gas Forces under the PUK were ordered to prevent shipments of natural gas from being sent from the PUK-controlled district of Chamchamal to Erbil by a non-PUK company that had received a contract from the KDP-controlled Ministry of Natural Resources.[48]

The parties also use the KRIF to reinforce their control over border access and customs revenues to maximize their wealth in lieu of timely budget payments from the federal government in Baghdad. The Iraqi government has consistently asked for the establishment of its authority over these border crossings in exchange for resuming budget payments to the KRG, but the KRG has declined to hand them over, at least in part because its constituent parties benefit from customs revenues.[49] Goods that pass through the custom points are taxed to generate revenue for the KRG Ministry of Finance and Economy. However, government officials and independent observers have alleged that the KRIF manage extensive smuggling operations to evade taxation[50] by importing goods — including those that pose serious threats to public health such as spoiled food and toxic fuels[51] — through the Asayish line on the border[52] and that as much as 80% of this revenue goes to party coffers.[53] Smuggling has also become an issue of contention between the KDP and PUK as they accuse one another of it in their areas of authority.

The lack of trust and coordination between the KDP and PUK has led to serious security vacuums and administrative inefficiencies. Where it exists, cooperation is ad hoc and begins when a serious crime has occurred, or an urgent security concern poses a threat to the KRI. For example, criminal suspects can evade capture by fleeing to the other party's zone. One suspect in the July 2019 assassination of a Turkish diplomat in Erbil confessed that he was told by his handlers to "get out of Erbil, or to go to Sulaymaniyah or anywhere, just outside of Erbil,"[54] knowing that intelligence cooperation does not exist between the two ruling parties' intelligence agencies.[55]

The lack of a consolidated database also inhibits citizens' freedom of movement throughout the KRI. For example, a student from the southern provinces studying in the PUK-controlled province of Sulaymaniyah will receive an Asayish code for their residency permit. However, if the same person wished to travel through the KDP checkpoint in Degala — where territorial division between the KDP and PUK begins — to Erbil Province, the PUK Asayish code is not recognized. Instead, the KDP will issue permission for a 30-day residency. Consequently, the KRIF's role in perpetuating difficulties for citizens traveling or transferring residency from KDP- to PUK-controlled areas reinforces civil war-era social divisions by keeping "Yellow" and "Green" zone populations physically separated.

b. Patronage

The KDP and PUK have primarily relied on their ability to provide employment in the public sector to cement their authority over their territorial strongholds. Today, the KRIF is the single largest source of employment opportunities in the KRI.[56] The beginnings of the MoI and Asayish forces are rooted in the early KRG, in which a large unemployed and/or recently displaced population suffered under both international and Iraqi economic sanctions. The Peshmerga, police, Asayish, and other interior forces provided a mutual benefit: For the throngs of young men who filled the ranks of these units, it provided them with gainful employment, and for the parties, it provided a dependent army of loyalists who would obey commands.

Photo above: Demonstrators throw rocks, burn tires, and block a road while clashing with riot police during anti-government protests in Sulaymaniyah on December 18, 2017. Photo by Feriq Ferec/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images.

"Successive economic crises since 2014 have eroded the popularity of the KDP and PUK and have led to more frequent and more destabilizing protests, which at times have threatened the security of their party offices."

> "The KRI's international partners have increasingly expressed concerns about the KRG's mass arrests and prosecutions of activists and journalists critical of the government."

The armed rivalry between the KDP and PUK has resulted in a swelling of the ranks of military, police, and intelligence units. Monthly expenditures for the MoPA, MoI, and KRSC account for 41.89% of the KRG's public sector spending of 894 billion IQD per month.[57] Of this amount, 57% is earmarked for the KRIF.[58] The MoI (Zerivani and DEF) forces now number approximately 90,000 — an increase of approximately 30,000 since their transfer to the MoI in 2006.[59] With a flow of $74.877 billion to the KRG as its share of the federal budget from 2004 to 2013,[60] the MoI security forces became an important channel through which the KDP and PUK could enlarge their patronage networks and provide gainful employment opportunities to tens of thousands of young men.[61]

The KDP in particular has used the MoI to enlarge its military forces. In 2012, former KRI President Masoud Barzani formed the Rojava Peshmerga,[62] a unit composed of 5,000 Kurds from Syria.[63] Although referred to as "Peshmerga," these forces belong to Zeravani and thus fall under the MoI. These units were deployed against ISIS in the battle for Mosul,[64] and to Sinjar to attempt to root out PKK influence in the district and re-establish KDP control.[65]

Elite forces under the KRSC and MoI are paid substantially more than the Peshmerga, a reflection of their relative importance to the parties. A Peshmerga soldier with the rank of *serbaz* (private)[66] receives a monthly salary of 501,000 IQD ($345) while a police officer employed by the MoI of comparable rank receives 790,000 IQD ($544) — a 58% disparity.[67] Counterterrorism forces and intelligence agents, who are the most loyal to the party,[68] receive more than 1.1 million IQD per month ($758), which is 119.56% higher than the salary of a Peshmerga force and 39.24% higher than the salary of a police officer.[69] Members of intelligence and counterterrorism forces receive other exclusive benefits from the political bureaus such as funding for medical treatment abroad.[70] The KDP and PUK have specifically targeted the rural and semi-rural districts, sub-districts and villages, under

their control for recruitment into the KRIF.[71] This has allowed them to exert significant influence over and expand bonds of patronage into these less affluent communities.[72]

c. Coercion and Surveillance

The KRI's international partners have increasingly expressed concerns about the KRG's mass arrests and prosecutions of activists and journalists critical of the government.[73] In this regard, it becomes necessary to understand the KRIF's reputation as an instrument of coercion and surveillance of dissidents. Throughout the civil war period, the KRIF gained a reputation for being party "enforcers"[74] who used surveillance and coercive tactics to identify, harass, arrest, and assassinate suspected dissidents and loyalists of the rival party.[75] As the borders of the partisan enclaves became fixed, these forces embedded themselves in every aspect of life in the name of preserving security and continue to do so.

Today, the KRIF are pervasive in the most mundane aspects of local administration, giving them access to intimate details of citizens' lives for surveillance purposes. Asayish permission is required to establish residency in a new neighborhood.[76] Asayish also collects personal information[77] about residents of the KRI, such as whether or not they drink alcohol, and works with village and neighborhood headmen, *mukhtars*, who receive a commission from the MoI to "report [to relevant authorities] ... any suspicious activity that threatens the security of the Kurdistan Region."[78]

Successive economic crises since 2014 have eroded the popularity of the KDP and PUK and have led to more frequent and more destabilizing protests, which at times have threatened the security of their party offices. Thus, after the withdrawal of the KRG's armed forces, including the KRIF, from the disputed territories in 2017, the KRIF have increasingly been used to mount massive crackdowns against protestors and protest organizers. Demonstrations

in Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, and Duhok from 2017[79] to 2020[80] resulted in the arrests of hundreds of organizers and activists and their imprisonment in Asayish detention facilities for extended periods without access to a lawyer or their families.[81] Meanwhile, Prime Minister Masrour Barzani responded to protests in Duhok Governorate by appointing as governor a former officer of the KDP intelligence agency, Parastin, Dr. Ali Tatar Nerway, who immediately declared zero tolerance for demonstrations.[82]

4. The Internal Security Forces in a Changing Political and Security Landscape

The expulsion of the Kurdish parties and their armed forces from the disputed territories after the ill-fated independence referendum dramatically altered the political and security landscape in the KRI.

First, the federal government called the KRG's bluff on its secession threats and forced it to abandon its trump card in negotiations for greater economic and territorial autonomy. Second, the retreat of KDP and PUK security forces from the disputed territories resulted in the prioritization of security within the KRI proper. Third, the political fallout cemented the roles of Lahur Sheikh Jangi and Masrour Barzani, leaders and rivals in the KRSC, as the decisive actors in the future of Kurdish politics. The aftermath of the referendum had the effect of intensifying the intra-Kurdish conflict. Under these circumstances, the KRIF are playing an increasingly important role in the KRI.

Without access to economic pressure points, such as oil fields in Kirkuk, to extract short-term profit-sharing agreements from the federal government, the parties increasingly relied upon their KRIF to secure access to sources of local revenues such as border crossings and natural gas fields within the KRI.[83] Utilizing the KRIF, the KDP and PUK also escalated the use of force against members of the opposition as economic conditions worsened and destabilizing protest activity surged in late 2017. In both cases, the KRIF has been fundamental to advance their partisan interests and silence their opponents. The prioritization of internal security is now reflected in the current political leadership. While the leaders of the previous generation had been drawn primarily from the Peshmerga forces, the new powerbrokers emerged from the ranks of the Asayish and intelligence bureaus. Arguably, the key influential figures now in the KRI are PM Masrour Barzani and PUK co-leader Lahur Sheikh Jangi, who led the KRIF agencies. Entrenching their dominance and authority over the KRIF institutions has been instrumental to their rise to power within their parties. Both have a reputation as strongmen whose command of paramilitaries induces fear in their political enemies and they have cultivated a mystique around these units as protectors of the nation and of the party's advancement of its true ambitions.

The renewed emphasis on internal security has made the attainment of positions in the MoI and KRSC more contentious since the 2018 elections and the formation of the ninth KRG cabinet under PM Masrour Barzani. The 2018 KRI parliamentary elections demonstrated decisively that the balance of electoral power now favors the KDP, which controls not only the MoI, but also holds the premiership, the presidency, and other important ministries such as the Ministry of Natural Resources, in addition to a plurality in parliament.[84]

PUK power now primarily originates from its security forces and the only KRG security institution over which the party has significant influence is the MoPA. However, the ministry has diminished in importance and funding relative to the KDP-controlled MoI and KRSC. KDP Zeravani are better trained[85] and equipped,[86] and their numbers exceed those of the PUK DEF by nearly double, with approximately 60,000 members.[87] According to one PUK commander, "You cannot compare the PUK 70 [Peshmerga] units to KDP 80 [Peshmerga] units. Instead, it is PUK 70 units versus KDP Zeravani, in terms of numbers and weapons."[88] Therefore, PUK leaders have expressed reluctance to submit the largest contingent of its forces to SSR and integration under the MoPA, while the KDP's Zeravani under the MoI would remain unaffected.[89]

Notably, it was not the MoPA, but negotiations over the distribution of portfolios in the MoI and KRSC that proved a stumbling block in negotiations over government formation for nearly a year.[90] Even today, several of those positions remain unfilled. The PUK, which is dominant in the MoPA but has never held the position of MoI, has sought to increase

"The continuation of support to the KRG armed forces requires the U.S. and its partners to reevaluate their approach to SSR to include the most powerful and politically significant branches of the KRI's security sector: the KRIF."

its power within the latter ministry with the appointment of a Lahur Talabani loyalist, Liwa Chato Salih, as the administrative secretary of the ministry.[91]

Meanwhile, the transfer of power within the KRSC has exposed conflicts within the KDP. Masrour Barzani was the KRSC chancellor for eight years under the supervision of his father, Masoud Barzani, former KRI president. Since becoming prime minister, and the ascension of the former PM and Masrour's cousin, Nechirvan Barzani, to the presidency, feuding between the cousins has prevented the nomination of a new chancellor. Although the KRSC chancellor must be chosen by the KRI president, the new prime minister has refused to accept the installation of a chancellor that is loyal to Nechirvan.[92]

The emergence of populist party leaders backed by paramilitary armies that use their forces in a contest for control over a factious economic landscape to violently suppress dissent and to engage in inter-party brinksmanship evokes bitter memories of partisan warfare during the civil war. The escalation of partisan disputes is exacerbated with the involvement of the KRIF in international conflicts. In particular, the involvement of the Roj Peshmerga, a branch of the KDP-aligned Zeravani, in operations against PKK-affiliated militias in Sinjar and in Duhok Governorate has drawn condemnation from the PUK and opposition groups that it is supporting a Turkish occupation of the KRI.[93] The Roj Peshmerga have also emerged as the center of the recent escalations of transnational conflict between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the KDP along the Syrian border when the KDP claimed that these units were attacked by the SDF in December 2020.[94] Turkish military operations within the KRI proper now threaten to draw the KRIF further into this conflict, destabilize the region, and frustrate coalition efforts to prevent an ISIS resurgence.

5. Conclusion and Policy Implications

Like the Peshmerga, the KRSC and MoI operate as partisan agencies. These institutions were created to preserve the KRI's safety, integrity, and stability, but now present the greatest threat to it. Although KRI security forces played an important role in U.S.-led coalition efforts to defeat ISIS, the use of the KRIF to further partisan interest now poses significant challenges to the interests of the KRI's Western allies. Therefore, the continuation of support to the KRG armed forces requires the U.S. and its partners to reevaluate their approach to SSR to include the most powerful and politically significant branches of the KRI's security sector: the KRIF.[95] Stakeholders should take the following recommendations into account while attempting to implement SSR in the KRI.

1. Stakeholders must understand that the KRI's primary security actor is now the KRIF. The forces charged with preserving stability and order within the borders of the region, the KRIF, have eclipsed the Peshmerga in relative importance within the KRI security sector, particularly since the withdrawal of the region's front-line forces in October 2017. Control over the KRIF is regarded by both parties as being more important, and politically contentious, than command of Peshmerga units. These internal security units have become channels of political power that have given rise to a new generation of Kurdish elites and have been at the center of the political wrestling between the KDP and PUK. As a result, while the Peshmerga reform package is important to effectively countering external threats, it is equally crucial to initiate reform within the KRIF.

2. The security apparatus of the KRI must be treated as a whole. Command of security forces effectively lies with the political parties. The KDP and PUK utilize the MoI, MoPA, and KRSC as shell organizations to legitimize their paramilitary forces, distribute appointments, and draw

salaries. The structure of the KRI security sector allows the parties to transfer units within and between the ministries at their convenience to avoid demobilization and unification. Thus, an exclusive focus on reorganizing the MoPA without addressing the MoI or the KRSC is insufficient to respond to inter-agency dynamics and address the full scope of the problems within the KRI security sector.

3. Policymakers must understand how the imbalance of political power affects the security landscape. Currently, the imbalance of power between the KDP and PUK is significant.[96] The KDP now controls most of the official security institutions and is thus more amenable to consolidating partisan paramilitaries under its supervision. The PUK, however, has been more reluctant to do so because it lacks what it feels is adequate supervisory power through the KRG. Moreover, the division of military power along partisan lines has meant that the PUK has controlled the MoPA while the KDP has maintained control over the MoI and KRSC. Therefore, SSR that focuses exclusively on the MoPA is perceived as a way to dissolve PUK forces[97] while permitting those of the KDP such as Zeravani to continue operating under the guise of the MoI. Consequently, the exclusive emphasis on the Peshmerga as the subject of SSR will inhibit the PUK from taking meaningful steps to conform with security measures. As a result, a comprehensive SSR package that includes all KRI security institutions is needed for the PUK to accept SSR.

4. Building confidence in the SSR mission requires a clear plan. While the current SSR package has been approved by the KRG, it is not sufficiently clear to the KDP and PUK leadership how it will be implemented. This lack of clarity leads to a lack of confidence that reforms will not benefit one party at the other's expense. To build confidence in reform measures, the KRI's coalition partners should provide a clear picture of what the future of the region will look like if the parties continue under their current institutional and security arrangement. Moreover, international stakeholders should ensure that information on the execution of the plan is regularly and clearly communicated between the parties. This provides them with the opportunity to present concerns and comments on the process, which is essential to build trust and commitment to SSR.

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25. Based on the 2013 rate of 1,200 dinar per USD.

26. The last time that the KRG had an annual budget was in 2013. Since then, the KRG has allocated funds for different ministries based on their monthly expenditures, which is the reason why there is a monthly comparison between expenditure of MoI in 2013 and 2020. See, Rebin Fatah, "Peshmerga and Asayish; Corruption and Securitization," *Kurdistan Times*, June 26, 2020, http://bitly.ws/bJ48.

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28. Sinjari also became the acting minister of Peshmerga from 2015 to 2019 as the KDP dismissed the Gorran Movement's ministers, including the minister of Peshmerga, from the government over disputes about the KRI presidential law amendment.

29. The current PUK secretary to the MoI works exclusively in the MoI directorate in Sulaymaniyah and is supplied with a staff of bodyguards and a convoy of cars by his political bureau and several members of the PUK counter-terrorism forces. PUK's former secretary of the MoI spent two business day a week in his office in Sulaymaniyah, facilitating people's work in the ministry,

in general, and helping the PUK supporters in the ministry, in particular. However, the PUK was forced to cede the position of secretary of security to the Gorran Movement after the latter joined the governing coalition in 2014. Gorran's power was constrained compared to the KDP and PUK, which retained control over the paramilitary units under MoI command – the Zeravani and DEF, respectively. Interview with an official in the MoI, Erbil, December 21, 2020.

30. "The regional government shall be responsible for all the administrative requirements of the region, particularly the establishment and organization of the internal security forces for the region such as police, security forces, and guards of the region." See Article 121(5) of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution; https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005.pdf?lang=en.

31. Small number of other Peshmerga personnel were also transferred to the MoI, but were reassigned as special forest, electricity, civil defense, and oil and gas police brigades. Interview with Jalal Karim and a commander of a brigade of interior forces, Kurdistan Region, November 4, 2020.

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33. Chapman, p. 181-182.

34. Amnesty International, p. 28.

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36. See, Law of the Security Council of the Kurdistan Region Iraq (Law No. 4 of 2011).

37. The KRSI, although subordinated to the KRSC, is regulated by its own law (passed exactly one day after the KRSC law) which establishes it as a "corporate entity with independent finances and administration, and its own budget." Its jurisdiction largely overlaps with the umbrella organization and its head, like the

KRSC chancellor, may issue orders and regulations and is appointed at the rank of "minister." See, Law of the Kurdistan Region Security Institution No. 5 of 2011.

38. At the time the law was passed, the prime minister was Barham Salih of the PUK and his deputy was Azad Barware of the KDP. The plural word of *Sarokayati* Anjumani Waziran (instead of the singular *Saroki* Anjumeni Waziran) is typically used when it is intended for both the KDP and PUK to participate in decision-making.

39. Like the KRSC chancellor, the head of the KRSI must receive confirmation from the president, but he is nominated by the prime minister.

40. Interview with a member of the KRSC intelligence agencies, Kurdistan Region, November 25, 2020.

41. Based on the 2013 budget. The KRSI in that year was allocated 487.4 billion IQD and the KRSC 344.6 billion IQD, or nearly 600 million IQD. See, Rebin Fatah, "Peshmerga and Asayish; Corruption and Securitization," *Kurdistan Times*, June 26, 2020, http://bitly.ws/bJ48

42. In March 2020, KDP Asayish released a statement, in which it accused a guard of the former minister of finance of acting under the supervision and guidance of the PUK intelligence to spy for a "foreign party." In response, the PUK intelligence rejected the accusation and attacked the KRG PM for "leading a failed government … [that is] led by losers, who lack any sense of responsibility." Their intelligence rivalry goes as far as striving to buy members of the rival parties to obtain the opponent party's intelligence. For instance, tensions behind the scenes mounted between the KDP and PUK when a member of one of the party's intelligence joined the other and took intelligence related to "the party' dealing with a country." Interview with a member of the KRSC intelligence agencies, Kurdistan Region, November 25, 2020.

43. In January 2020, the KDP Asayish units arrested a PUK Peshmerga on the charge of drug possession. The Peshmerga later died in the KDP Asayish's custody, raising suspicions that he was murdered. The KDP's Erbil Medico-Legal Department conducted an autopsy, claiming he hanged himself. However, the PUK transferred the corpse of its Peshmerga to Sulaymaniyah, a city under its control, to conduct another autopsy, which showed it was a homicide. The incident eroded the trust in the public health institutions. The former head of the human rights committee in the KRI parliament criticized the different results of the autopsies, stating, "This is the problem with the non-independent institutions of Kurdistan — that they also interfere in deaths, too, to change the realities of the incidents." Available at https://www.facebook.com/drawmedia/posts/625638971598423; see also, Mohammed Rwanduzy, "PUK Peshmerga's death in custody raises tensions with KDP," *Rudaw*, January 21, 2020, https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/21012020#:~:text=ERBIL%2C%20Kurdistan%20Region%20–%20Tensions%20have,controlled%20Asayesh%20(Security)%20officers.

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67. Interview with a member of the MoI's armed forces, Kurdistan Region, October 27, 2020.

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70. Interview with a member of the KRSC intelligence agencies, Kurdistan Region, November 25, 2020.

71. Employment in the security sector is also a revenue generator for the two ruling parties in the form of *abunay hizbi*, or "party dues," a small deduction (approximately 5,000 IQD or $3.50) from the monthly salary payment of each member of the security forces, which adds up to hundreds of thousands of dollars going directly to the parties each month, Interview with a commander of a brigade of interior forces, Kurdistan Region, November 4, 2020.

72. The focus on employment in the security sector has been costly to the region's agricultural sector and rural development,

which were destructed by the former Iraqi Ba'athist regime. Instead of rehabilitating and investing in them, the KDP and PUK disproportionately targeted these areas for recruitment to fill the employment gap that, on one hand, further neglected rural developments as a way to create job opportunities, and, on the other, increased the incentive among local communities not to go back to farming, but to join the security sector.

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87. Ibid.

88. Interview with a Peshmerga commander from the PUK's 70 unit, Sulaymaniyah, November 8, 2020.

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