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Iraq: armed influence in education and sub-national governance and their implications for statehood

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the influence of Shia armed groups on sub-national governance structures in Iraq, focusing on the education sector in Nineveh province. Drawing on Bourdieu's conceptualisation of the state as a field of power, the study investigates how these groups extend their influence beyond security by embedding themselves in local governance and education. Based on twenty-one interviews with educators, academics, and community representatives, the paper shows that armed groups use educational activities to consolidate power, accumulate cultural and symbolic capital, and shape ideological narratives. The findings highlight a dual strategy: these groups operate within existing state frameworks while simultaneously reshaping state authority. This research contributes to scholarship by moving beyond security-focused analyses to demonstrate how armed groups' educational interventions represent a sophisticated form of governance contestation. By examining education as a previously unexplored site of power accumulation, the study reveals mechanisms through which armed actors transform from military forces into governance entities capable of shaping future generations, challenging conventional distinctions between state and non-state governance.

KEYWORDS

Iraq; armed groups; education; Nineveh; field of power

Introduction

Following the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 and the subsequent fight against it, various established and newly formed Iraqi Shia armed groups united under the umbrella organisation known as *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* (the Popular Mobilisation Forces). Since then, several scholarly inquiries have attempted to conceptualise the nature, structure, and activities of these armed groups.¹ However, the process of the transition of these armed groups into sub-national governance structures in Iraq, particularly in sectors beyond security, remains underexplored. This paper addresses this gap by analysing the involvement of these armed groups in sub-national governance and examining its implications for understanding the nature of the Iraqi state and the broader question of peace in the country.

The defeat of ISIS in 2017 and the aftermath of the Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum created new political dynamics that allowed Shia armed groups to expand

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into regions such as Kirkuk and Nineveh. These areas are characterised by ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian diversity, mirroring Iraq's broader demographic complexity. While Shia armed groups were officially tasked with providing security, their presence has evolved beyond this mandate. They have extended into governance and service provision,² blurring the boundaries between state and non-state actors. Despite their formal status as state-affiliated forces, they continue to operate autonomously, shaping sub-national power structures in ways that challenge traditional understandings of the state. This phenomenon aligns with Bourdieu's conceptualisation of the state as a disaggregated field of power, which serves as the theoretical framework for this study.

Existing scholarship on *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* has approached these groups through various analytical lenses, including frameworks of 'limited statehood', 'informal governance', and 'hybrid security and governance' to highlight state weaknesses and the emergence of non-state armed groups.³ Other studies have examined them through the lens of civil wars, proxy warfare, and rebel governance. While these approaches acknowledge that traditional Weberian conceptualisations of the state are problematic when applied to Middle Eastern contexts, their approach is not without issues.⁴ First, some analyses still label non-Western cases as anomalies requiring intervention.⁵ Second, hybrid security literature continues to rely on Western conceptualisations of statehood as implicit standards. Third, terminology such as 'rebel organisation' or 'civil war actors' does not fully capture the complexities of armed groups' influence in Iraq, where groups like *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* are not 'rebels' in the conventional sense but operate in a unique context where their relationship with the state blurs traditional distinctions.

This paper offers a distinct contribution by employing Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualisation of the state as a disaggregated field of power to understand Iraq's governance structures. Dodge defines the 'disaggregated state' as a form of statehood where authority is divided across multiple, overlapping fields of power.⁶ These fields operate at different levels and are influenced by competing actors, both state and non-state.⁷ This framework recognises Iraq's post-2003 political system as aligning with pluralist interpretations of the state as an arena for various fields of domination.⁸ Crucially, this approach captures how armed groups in Iraq extend beyond security to integrate into local government and administrative institutions without establishing distinct territorial control separate from 'formal' institutions.⁹ Instead, they operate within and alongside existing state mechanisms, blurring the lines between state and non-state actors.

Case study and scope

This paper examines the influence of armed actors on sub-national governance in Iraq's most ethnically diverse province, Nineveh. Nineveh presents an ideal case for studying armed groups influence at the sub-national level for three key reasons. First, it hosts a variety of armed factions within the same territory, enabling observations that can be applicable to the rest of the country. Second, the province is home to diverse ethno-sectarian and religious communities therein, colloquially dubbed 'little Iraq'. Parts of the province are within disputed territories between the Iraqi federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Third, the profound infiltration of armed

groups into the sub-national governance apparatus within this province has overarching ramifications for the disaggregation of Iraq's statehood.

Given the multifaceted nature of activities and interactions occurring within the sub-national context between citizens and the state, the scope of analysis is refined to concentrate on armed groups' role into sub-national governance in Nineveh, specifically within the education sector. This sector is chosen due to its traditional association with state authority, rendering it a strategic domain for analysing power dynamics and state fragmentation. This involvement echoes broader discussions in the literature on fragmented security and governance,¹⁰ further reinforcing the argument that Iraq's governance model is best understood as a fragmented field of power.

This research makes three distinct contributions to existing scholarship on armed groups, governance, and state fragmentation. First, it moves beyond security-focused analyses to show how education serves as a critical arena for governance contestation, revealing dimensions of power accumulation previously underexplored in the literature on Iraq. Second, it details the specific mechanisms through which armed actors transform from military forces into governance entities, demonstrating how they leverage educational institutions to consolidate symbolic and cultural capital. Third, it challenges conventional state-building frameworks by documenting how these groups shape ideological narratives among future generations, creating sustainable pathways for long-term influence. These insights contribute to broader debates on disaggregated statehood by revealing how non-state actors contest state authority not through parallel institutions, but through strategic infiltration of existing ones. By examining education as a site of power contestation, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of how armed groups entrench themselves within Iraq's governance landscape.

The paper adopts qualitative methods, primarily semi-structured interviews, and direct observations. Between July and December 2024, I conducted twenty-one interviews in Erbil, Baghdad, and Nineveh. Participants included educators, academics, researchers, community representatives, and civil society activists. The interviews were conducted in both Arabic and Kurdish, ensuring accessibility across diverse linguistic groups. Given the sensitivity of the topic, all participants were anonymised, and informed verbal consent was obtained. Additionally, I analysed the online activities of *al-Hashd al-Shaabi's* Directorate of Education and Learning, particularly its website and social media presence, to assess its self-representation and engagement with educational institutions.

This paper is structured as follows: The next section explores the conceptual framework, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the state as a field of power to contextualise Iraq's governance structures. This discussion is followed by an examination of Nineveh's complex sub-national power dynamics. Subsequent sections present empirical findings on the role of armed groups in education, highlighting their influence over curriculum development, institutional appointments, and extracurricular activities. Finally, the conclusion discusses the broader implications of these findings for understanding the nature of statehood and governance in Iraq, particularly within the context of armed group entrenchment in state functions.

State as a field of power

The conceptualisation of the state has been a pivotal topic in social and political science. John Brooke and Julia Strauss summarise this debate into two primary perspectives.¹¹ The first, rooted in Weberian theory, conceptualises the state as an autonomous entity, distinct from society. Max Weber provided a seminal definition of the state that remains influential: the entity ‘that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory’.¹² Despite Weber’s acknowledgement that not all states establish such monopoly, scholars have applied his criteria to evaluate states beyond the European context. In contrast, the second perspective defines the state as ‘embedded’ in relations, practices, and cultures within society. The distinction between these approaches is sometimes summarised as the difference between focusing on institutions and capacities versus viewing the state through cultures, peoples, and practices.¹³

Studies have explored ways to combine Weberian elements with the concept of the state as a dynamic field of power and competition. Pierre Bourdieu’s understanding falls within this category, providing the theoretical foundation for this paper. Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of the state positions it not as a static object or fixed entity, but rather as a dynamic field of forces, integral to the broader field of power.¹⁴ He describes the state as

the sector of the field of power, which may be called ‘administrative field’ or ‘field of public office’, this sector that we particularly have in mind when we speak of ‘state’ without further precision, is defined by possession of the monopoly of legitimate physical and symbolic violence.¹⁵

Bourdieu argues that the state represents the culmination of a prolonged process of concentrating various forms of capital, thereby encapsulating the complexities of political, economic, social, and cultural power.¹⁶ He recognises that the state is an autonomous social field with its own rules and practices but is not coherent, as several groups struggle to influence its nature and functions.

Bourdieu’s concepts of *field*, *habitus*, *doxa*, and *capital* are essential to understanding his views on state as a field of power and power competition between individuals and groups. Bourdieu defines a field as a social arena within which people compete for resources and influence. Each field (e.g. education) has its own rules and types of capital that are valued. A field, in Bourdieu’s framework, is a structured social space with its own rules, norms, and practices. Within any given field, the functioning is regulated by *doxa*—an implicit set of beliefs and assumptions that are accepted and seen as natural by members of the field.¹⁷ His concept of ‘*habitus*’ is related to *doxa*. *Habitus* refers to the ingrained habits, practices, and dispositions that individuals acquire through their life experiences.¹⁸ These shapes how they perceive the world and behave within it, influencing their ability to compete within various fields.

Bourdieu identifies four types of capital that actors use to gain power. Economic capital encompasses financial resources,¹⁹ which for armed groups includes external funding, state budget allocations, and control over local economies. Social capital involves networks that facilitate resource access, helping armed groups establish

community alliances and recruitment channels. Cultural capital includes educational knowledge, which groups leverage by promoting ideologically aligned programmes. Symbolic capital refers to perceived legitimacy,²⁰ which armed groups cultivate through displays of piety, charity, and public service provision.

Migdal incorporates Bourdieu's concept of 'field' in his state theory, defining the state through: (1) its image as a coherent organisation and (2) the actual practices of its components.²¹ With Schlichte, Migdal distinguishes between 'seeing the state' (unitary image) and 'doing the state' (varied practices).²² These practices involve competing groups promoting different conceptions of social order, with actors struggling to establish their rules as the routine basis for social action.²³ The outcome of these struggles shapes societies' distinctive structures and characteristics.

Central to understanding the image (*seeing the state*) and practices (*doing the state*) of the state are the dynamics and processes involved, which shape and reshape its nature and function. Viewing the state as a dynamic and disaggregated field of power provides a valuable framework for analysing the actions of armed groups in the context of Iraq, particularly within the sub-national field and non-security domains.

Nineveh's complex field of power

Nineveh exemplifies a highly contested sub-national field of power where multiple actors – state, non-state, and transnational – compete for control and legitimacy. The province includes many communities found throughout Iraq: Shia and Sunni Arabs, Kurds, Ezidis, Chaldo-Assyrians, Turkmen, Shabaks, Kaka'is, and Sabeen-Mandean. This demographic diversity, combined with historical disputes over governance, has made Nineveh a central battleground for competing political and military forces.

Following the regime change in Iraq and particularly during the incursion of ISIS in 2014, these communities experienced intense violence.²⁴ Nineveh was the largest province of Iraq occupied by ISIS for the longest duration, with its capital, Mosul – the second-largest city in Iraq – serving as the ISIS capital from 2014 to 2017. Mosul was retaken from ISIS between mid-2017 and late 2017. The population of Nineveh is estimated to be around three and half million people.

What is special about this province is that it is a primary region for specific identities and groups within Iraq. For instance, it is the largest province for Ezidis, Shabaks, and historically, for Chaldo-Assyrians. This diversity makes administration and governance in Nineveh particularly sensitive and crucial for the broader governance of the country. Nineveh is divided into nine districts,²⁵ five of which are part of the disputed territories between the KRG and the Iraqi federal government.²⁶

Diverse populations in Nineveh have experienced influence by various governments and political powers over the past two decades. Following the regime change in 2003, the administration of many districts in the province was shared between the Iraqi government and the KRG. This mixed or dual administration was in place from 2003 to 2014. The collapse of the Iraqi security forces (ISF) in northern Iraq in mid-2014, as the ISIS advanced, once again altered the governance of Nineveh. Following the ISF's withdrawal from these areas in June 2014, Masoud Barzani, former Kurdistan Region President (2005–2017), ordered the deployment of Peshmerga²⁷ to Nineveh's disputed territories and other regions along the contested border between the KRG and federal Iraq.²⁸ Less

than a month after Kurdistan's independence referendum, on 16 October 2017, ISF, supported by *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*, seized Nineveh's disputed territories, prompting Peshmerga to retreat from all territory taken from ISIS since late 2014. These actions introduced a new power dynamic and administration to Nineveh, resulting in different political mobilisations,²⁹ or in Bourdieu's terms, *symbolic capital*, encountered by the populations in these regions.

Nineveh's contested governance is not limited to domestic actors. The province is engaged with broader transnational fields of power, where external states project influence through military and political means. For instance, Turkey has maintained a military base in Bashiqa since the rise of ISIS, leading to periodic tensions with Baghdad.³⁰ Similarly, Iran exerts influence through specific Shia armed groups, shaping governance dynamics.³¹ The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), originally from Turkey, has also entrenched itself in Nineveh's Shingal district, contributing to the province's militarised political competition. These transnational engagements reinforce Nineveh's fragmented governance and demonstrate how political fields extend beyond Iraq's borders.

Since 2014, Shia armed groups have entrenched themselves in Nineveh, competing for both political authority and symbolic capital. While formally part of *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*, factions such as the Badr Organisation, Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, the 30th Brigade, the Babylon Movement, and Nujaba operate with varying degrees of autonomy.³² Their presence reflects Bourdieu's notion of the state as a non-coherent field where multiple actors struggle to define its nature and function.³³ The competition among these groups is not solely for military control but also for symbolic capital, as they seek legitimacy through public services, religious narratives, and governance initiatives.

One crucial avenue through which these groups shape the field of power is education. Bourdieu emphasises that education is a critical mechanism for reproducing dominant ideologies and structuring social perceptions.³⁴ Nineveh's education landscape is divided between the KRG and the Iraqi federal government, each operating distinct curricula and policies. Linguistically, the 2005 Iraqi constitution grants ethnic groups – specifically Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, and Chaldo-Assyrians – the right to education in their native languages. In addition to linguistic diversity, the region also features different education systems. Areas under the control of the KRG adhere to the KRG Ministry of Education, which operates under a separate system and set of education policies. Conversely, areas under the control of the Iraqi federal government follow the policies of the Iraqi Ministry of Education.³⁵ This distinction was particularly evident in Nineveh's Bashiqa, Nineveh Plains, Telkaif, Shingal, and Makhmour, which followed KRG education policies from 2003 until October 2017, when administrative control shifted. The presence of separate Kurdish and Arabic education systems highlights the symbolic power wielded through curriculum control, shaping not only identity but also future political allegiances.³⁶

Education and consolidation of power

The educational activities of Shia armed groups in Nineveh represent a strategic deployment of Bourdieu's conceptual toolkit within a contested field of power. These activities span a spectrum that includes both formal and informal interventions: from the placement of affiliated educators and the influence over school curricula, to extracurricular

programmes such as summer training camps, religious education sessions, and cultural outreach events. While these initiatives vary in scale, frequency, and institutional embeddedness – ranging from one-off commemorations to more structured and recurrent forms of instruction – they collectively reveal how armed groups seek to accumulate different forms of capital. Some, such as formal involvement in school and university systems, carry greater institutional weight, while others play a symbolic or ideological role. Rather than privileging one type over another, my approach aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how these varied interventions function as mechanisms of symbolic, cultural, and social capital accumulation. As the study will demonstrate, these groups accumulate different forms of capital through educational initiatives, thereby transforming their position within Iraq's governance field. Their educational practices both reflect and reproduce certain forms of *doxa*—shared beliefs about authority, identity, and legitimacy – while simultaneously challenging others. The following analysis examines how various educational interventions serve as mechanisms for capital accumulation and field positioning.

In an interview with an academic from the University of Mosul, it was noted that 'Shia armed groups have both declared and undeclared objectives in their educational activities'.³⁷ This quote provides a framework for analysing the educational activities of these groups and understanding the underlying objectives that guide their efforts. While each Shia armed group independently influences education, the Commission of *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* oversees a centralised educational agenda through a specific entity known as the Directorate of Education and Learning. The establishment of this directorate in 2020 demonstrates that these groups have broader and long-term governance objectives beyond their initial security-focused mission of combating ISIS from 2014 to 2017.³⁸ Additionally, the directorate has a branch in Nineveh. When referred to by its Arabic name, this institution is often confused with the Iraqi Ministry of Education's Directorate of Education. Like state education directorates, this directorate comprises sub-departments and various branches, representing the 'image' of the state.

According to official websites of *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*, its Directorate of Education and Learning develops an annual education plan; however, this plan is not publicly available online. News articles, statements, and videos from the Director of the Directorate of Education and Learning emphasise the educational support provided to members of *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*. This aligns with what the academic I interviewed referred to as *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*'s 'declared objective'. These activities include offering ongoing educational support, facilitating additional learning opportunities, and overseeing examinations for its members.

Many who joined *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* during and after 2014 had little or no education. Over the past few years, *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* has enabled thousands of its members to complete their education, including overseeing the final exams for the 12th grade. Consequently, many members have been promoted, and their salaries have increased. Although these processes are complex and require significant bureaucratic effort, the power they wield allows them to expedite these actions.³⁹

Al-Hashd al-Shaabi support various educational activities beyond the specific context of Nineveh. For instance, the Ministry of Education incorporated *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* military battles and 'sacrifices' in their fight against ISIS into the 12th-grade Arabic

curriculum.⁴⁰ The Directorate of Education and Learning associated with *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* views this integration as an achievement of the institute.⁴¹ The inclusion of *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* in educational curricula extends into higher education as well. Most of the interviewees highlighted that it has become increasingly easier for Shia armed groups to influence educational activities at both national and sub-national levels. This is particularly evident in the affiliation of the current Iraqi Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research with Asaib Ahl al-Haq,⁴² a prominent Shia armed and political organisation. These dynamics underscore the blurred boundaries between non-state actors and formal state institutions in Iraq. The minister's affiliation exemplifies how armed groups can embed their influence within formal governance structures, thereby leveraging state apparatuses to advance their agendas. In October 2022, Imam Al-Kadhim College announced that one of its professors had been selected by *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* to serve on a central committee. This committee, which included members from the Ministry of Higher Education, the Ministry of Education, and various Iraqi universities, was tasked with developing curricula and educational materials. Notably, these materials emphasised examples and narratives showcasing the 'sacrifices and heroism of *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* in defending Iraq, its land, its people, and its sanctities'.⁴³ This involvement demonstrates *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*'s capacity to integrate their perspective into national educational frameworks, potentially reflecting their prioritisation of symbolic capital in shaping public narratives.

The Directorate of Education and Learning seeks to establish legitimacy within Iraq's education sector by forging ties with governmental institutions. In January 2024, a joint meeting between the Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and *Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi* Education Directorate emphasised countering extremism, promoting community peace, and organising university seminars on these issues.⁴⁴ The following news reports and social media posts are examples from the Directorate: '*The Minister of Education and Scientific Research receives Director of Education and Learning in The Commission of al-Hashd al-Shaabi*'⁴⁵; '*The Director of the Education and Learning Directorate visited the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research to offer his congratulations on assuming his new position*'⁴⁶; '*Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi strengthens its relationship with the Iraqi Ministry of Education*'.⁴⁷ These interactions also enhance symbolic capital, reinforcing the *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*'s image as a legitimate actor in education through visibility, authority, and perceived alignment with state institutions.

Al-Hashd al-Shaabi also seeks to position itself as a provider of educational services, thereby bolstering its role within Iraqi society. For example, in 2014, they inaugurated what they referred to as a 'factory of *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* for the production of school chairs'. This initiative exemplifies the deployment of economic capital, as conceptualised by Bourdieu, enabling *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* to establish material contributions that serve practical needs. In a video posted on their YouTube account, they claimed that this initiative was a response to the government's inability to deliver these essential services.⁴⁸

Another key area in the work of the Education Directorate of *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* is the signing of scholarship agreements with Iranian universities. For instance, in 2024, they signed an agreement with a public university in Iran, the University of Tehran, to allow their members to pursue MA and PhD programmes 'through the free scholarship programme in the Islamic Republic of Iran'.⁴⁹ In August 2024, the Director of the Directorate of Education and Learning announced the signing of an agreement with Al-

Mustafa International University, an Iranian institution located in Qom, to provide educational training for its members.⁵⁰ Providing scholarships by *Hashd* intersects with economic capital, social capital, cultural capital, and symbolic capital, reinforcing armed groups' influence within Iraq's broader political and educational fields.

The Directorate of Education and Learning also conduct conferences and academic events in collaboration with public and private universities in Nineveh. These initiatives exemplify the use of cultural capital, as demonstrated below. The following headline is from a news article on *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*'s website: '*The General Directorate of Education of al-Hashd al-Shaabi coordinates to hold scientific conferences in three universities*'.⁵¹ The universities involved were Mosul, Telafar and Hamdaniah, all located in Nineveh. Examples of these events include: In April 2024, Telafar University, in collaboration with *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*, organised a conference titled '*Strengthening Youth Against Extremist Ideas*'⁵²; In December 2023, the University of Mosul, in cooperation with *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*, hosted a conference titled '*The Role of Education in Consolidating the Principles of Peaceful Coexistence*'.⁵³

Moreover, Shia armed groups have used educational institutions to enhance their public image. These educational initiatives align with the broader objective of cultivating symbolic capital. For instance, in August 2024, a senior administrative at the University of Mosul visited the office of *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* in Mosul to organise a series of activities aimed at '*archiving the sacrifices and heroism of al-Hashd al-Shaabi*'.⁵⁴ Such actions reflect a deliberate effort to construct and legitimise their symbolic capital by embedding their narratives within educational and academic spaces. In discussing the ability of the Shia armed groups to collaborate with public universities and bypass bureaucratic procedures, a university professor from Mosul commented:

In 2023, we wanted to organise a conference. It took us a year to obtain permission from the university presidency as well as secure funding. However, a few months ago, a group within Hashd approached us to organise a conference. They informed us a week before the event and wanted to proceed quickly. We went ahead with it. This demonstrates that these groups can bypass bureaucratic procedures that we typically have to navigate.⁵⁵

In the context of joint academic conferences organised with public universities in Nineveh, concerns have been raised regarding the influence exerted by certain armed groups over the agenda and thematic focus of these events. As a result, academic discourse may be shaped in ways that align with their perspectives and priorities. For instance, one academic sought to conduct research on religious freedom in the Nineveh Plains. However, the study was not approved by university authorities, who were under pressure from armed actors. According to accounts from local stakeholders, topics deemed sensitive or potentially controversial – particularly in this diverse and historically complex region – face scrutiny and possible restrictions.⁵⁶ More broadly, concerns persist that academic freedom and freedom of expression in Nineveh may be constrained when research or scholarly activities are perceived as challenging certain interests.⁵⁷

These educational activities have implications for social cohesion, particularly in regions already marked by communal tensions over demographic changes and power dynamics – such as between Shia Shabaks and Christians in Telkaif and Hamdaniah.⁵⁸ The *Hashd*'s educational activities empower and mobilise specific groups, such as Shia Shabaks and Shia Turkmens, while marginalising others,

effectively privileging certain narratives about the state that exclude diverse community perspectives. For instance, many of these activities incorporate content expressing solidarity with regional events, such as condemning the killing of Hassan Nasrallah or supporting positions in the Iran-Israel conflict. Such messaging reflects sectarian and ideological viewpoints that may alienate students and faculty from other religious and ethnic backgrounds. The impact is amplified by the fact that some of these activities take place in universities (e.g. the University of Hamdaniah) and schools with mixed ethnic and religious populations, where students from different communities are compelled to participate in or witness activities that may contradict their own identities and perspectives, thereby reinforcing rather than bridging existing communal divides.

Furthermore, armed groups have been conducting seminars in both primary and secondary schools, addressing topics such as drug prevention, environmental protection, and preparation for summer break.⁵⁹ These activities form part of a broader range of extracurricular programmes supported by ‘awareness’ and ‘scouting’ centres. Interestingly, while topics like environmental protection appear to be neutral, their framing may carry ideological underpinnings. During many of these events, students are dressed in military uniforms and participate in singing religious and military songs,⁶⁰ further reinforcing the symbolic dimensions of these programmes. A teacher from Nineveh Plains, whom I interviewed, remarked:

I consider the educational activities of armed groups as recruitment. The youth are already being shaped by these groups. Armed groups have mobilised and attracted many of them through job opportunities and salaries. Now, they are targeting younger children, ages 9 to 15, preparing the next generation of fighters.⁶¹

In recent years, Iraqi universities have become increasingly complex environments for civil society organisations to conduct activities. In November 2023, the Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education issued directives restricting collaboration with several long-standing local and international organisations. Universities were also required to report any funding linked to the US State Department and to secure prior security approval for any external organisation seeking to operate on campus.⁶² Amid these changes, a newly established student group, the *Sons of al-Muhandis*,⁶³ primarily led by Kataib Hezbollah⁶⁴ and associated with *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*, has gained visibility within university settings.⁶⁵ The group engages in diverse activities including organising educational workshops, providing scholarships to students to study in Iran, and mobilising political demonstrations – such as the student protest they organised in June 2025 following Israeli attacks on Iran.⁶⁶ Their presence is significant as they represent one of the few organisations permitted to operate within higher education institutions, especially in Baghdad, at a time when local civil society groups face restrictions. According to interviewees, the group also serves as a recruitment pathway, aiming to attract ‘new blood’ of youth to join armed factions. This dynamic reflects broader shifts in how different actors engage with academic institutions, with some groups mobilising social capital – following Bourdieu’s concept – to establish networks of influence.

Shaping minds

A recurring theme in my interviews was the involvement of armed groups in educational initiatives and the significance of their role in shaping political, ideological, and religious narratives. Many participants emphasised that these groups actively engage in education as a means of advancing their ideological objectives. This involvement spans various institutions, including the Directorate of Education and Learning and other organisations associated with local groups operating in the region.

Armed groups believe it is essential to mobilise a new generation, particularly in traditionally non-Shia areas. They aim to incorporate topics such as jihad, enmity, and religious beliefs into educational institutions. Their goal is to prepare people for future leadership, as they view themselves as the potential governing authority.⁶⁷

There are evident interventions in educational activities, such as imposing topics that favour one sect over another, mandating the celebration of certain religious occasions within schools, and displaying posters and slogans related to these events on school walls.⁶⁸

Armed groups prioritise education as a fundamental building block for shaping a new generation. Through education, these groups can influence the minds of young people, using it to impose their ideologies. By instilling new values and principles, they want to cultivate a future that aligns with their visions.⁶⁹

One interviewee noted the ways in which armed groups promote certain cultural practices and norms through educational channels, such as emphasising the importance of military service for men.⁷⁰ In Bourdieu's terms, these practices are forms of embodied cultural capital – internalised dispositions that shape individual actions and ways of thinking. At the same time, this educational engagement also operates at the intersection of social capital. The promotion of shared cultural and religious values creates social networks that bind individuals together, fostering relationships based on solidarity and loyalty. The establishment of educational centres, such as the *Baqiyatullah* Scouts Association in Nineveh illustrates the strategic use of cultural capital to embed ideological perspectives within diverse social contexts. This group's significance becomes clearer when viewed against the backdrop of shifting power dynamics in the region. Historically marginalised and primarily residing in rural areas of Nineveh, the Shia Shabaks experienced a dramatic transformation in status following the rise of *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* in Nineveh after 2014. This shift culminated in the formation of the 30th Brigade, composed predominantly of Shia Shabaks, which emerged as a dominant force in the Nineveh Plains. Building on this newfound influence, the *Baqiyatullah* operates under the leadership of local Shia Shabak members and primarily engages with children aged 9 to 15, guiding them through various educational and cultural activities.

The *Baqiyatullah* Association implemented 1,943 activities during 2024, targeting over 55,000 individuals in Nineveh Governorate.⁷¹ According to interviews with teachers from the region who have observed these programmes, the Association's activities adhere to the religious and sectarian principles of Iran's Wilayat al-Faqih. The *Baqiyatullah* illustrates the complex international field of power in which Nineveh is embedded. It frequently hosts delegations from Iran and posts updates about events and activities tied to the country, reflecting the influence of broader geopolitical dynamics. Through initiatives like educational training and activities for

students, particularly during the summer, the association contributes to a larger network of ideological and political alignment. Notably, the association organises student groups under labels derived from Shia figures, embedding religious and political symbolism into its activities. Online posts reveal that students are often assembled in halls adorned with images of Iranian and Shia religious figures, alongside slogans such as 'No to Normalisation' (opposing normalisation with Israel). These activities are concentrated in rural areas, with groups named after prominent Shia religious figures, such as the Imam Hassan Regiment in Abu Jarbua village, the Abbas Regiment in Bazwaya village, and the Imam Mahdi Regiment in Bashbitha village.⁷²

The association's engagement with students is further highlighted through large-scale events such as Quds Day, where hundreds of young participants are mobilised. These events include young female students under the age of 15, who raise flags and chant slogans associated with Quds Day.⁷³ In its social media posts, the association refers to these young female participants as 'the sisters' group', using the Arabic term *krdous*, which carries military connotations. Through such activities, the *Baqiyatullah* Association demonstrates how local educational and extracurricular programmes are leveraged to promote specific ideological narratives while embedding Nineveh within a broader regional field of power.

Another centre exists in Shingal, an Ezidi-majority district that is also a disputed area between Erbil and Baghdad, known as the Cultural Centre for Guidance and Development. The centre provides informal religious and educational instruction and issues its own certificates of participation. While it does not follow a formal curriculum, it holds regular training sessions for children and parents throughout the week, with heightened activity around religious commemorations such as Ashura. This centre's role in training children and fostering a sense of obligation among parents reflects the use of social capital as a form of influence. Parents, often linked to armed groups themselves, feel compelled to engage with such educational programmes due to a combination of social pressure and the desire to align with powerful local actors.⁷⁴ This dynamic reinforces the social networks of support that armed groups build through their educational initiatives, ensuring continued cooperation and participation.

Religious events, sermons, and commemorations are increasingly becoming annual cultural fixtures within schools and universities in Nineveh. Examples include the Day of *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* and the commemoration of various battles fought by Hashd, among other religious and sectarian observances. For instance, 'in a school in Bartila, students performed a play depicting the story of the army of Yazid [the second Umayyad caliph]'.⁷⁵ 'In Arabic language class, students are required to write essays. Some teachers ask them to write about the heroes of *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* and the liberation of Quds'.⁷⁶ The divisive impact of these activities is particularly pronounced given that these regions are disputed territories between Baghdad and Erbil, historically contested spaces that are home to Iraq's most diverse communities. Local communities perceive these educational activities as promoting a singular sectarian narrative that empowers one specific community while excluding others from representation and voice. By framing historical events and heroes in ways that align with the armed groups' visions, these activities serve to reinforce the groups' symbolic capital, imbuing them with cultural and political legitimacy. Such symbolic acts are essential to the process of cultural reproduction, as

Bourdieu would put it, as they ensure that future generations internalise and perpetuate the ideological goals of these armed groups.

Institutional influence

A recurring theme in the interviews regarding the influence of armed groups on the education sector is their role in shaping institutional appointments, particularly within higher education. This influence is reinforced by the requirement that senior appointments receive approval from entities such as the *Hashd* Security (*amin al-Hashd*). Without this approval, securing leadership positions in education or higher education becomes highly challenging. This dynamic reflects Bourdieu's concept of the field of power, in which different actors compete to control institutions that shape social and cultural reproduction. Education, as a key site for the accumulation of cultural capital, becomes a strategic domain where control over personnel decisions ensures that ideological and political interests are embedded within academic structures. One interviewee highlighted: 'No dean or deputy dean is appointed without the approval of the *Hashd* Security. Similarly, no Head or Director General of Education is appointed without this approval'.⁷⁷

The ability of armed groups to shape higher education policies and practices highlights the conversion of political capital into cultural capital – where political influence is used to legitimise and sustain their authority within academia. Most Shia armed groups operating in Nineveh, for example, are closely aligned with the Shia Coordination Framework, the dominant coalition in Iraq's current government. Their involvement in education has been facilitated by reduced bureaucratic obstacles, particularly given that the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research is affiliated with a prominent armed group. This form of institutional access allows these groups not only to place loyal figures in key positions but also to shape university activities. If a senior official diverges from their interests, they can exert pressure or create administrative barriers to challenge that individual's authority.⁷⁸

Such dynamics were evident in the case of the Director General of the Education Directorate in Telkaif, where a Shia armed group applied pressure for his removal. As one interviewee noted: 'They have also been successful in limiting and controlling the budget allocated to Telkaif's education directorate until their demand is met – removing the director and appointing their own'.⁷⁹ This reflects Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power, where control over economic and bureaucratic resources enables groups to shape institutional decisions and perceptions of authority. Educators interviewed for this research emphasised that new private universities and schools are particularly vulnerable to such influences. In contexts where obtaining contracts and permissions requires approval from powerful local actors, armed groups play a key role in facilitating access. Gaining government authorisation to establish private educational institutions is difficult without the involvement of these groups, who often function as intermediaries in the process. This creates a system in which economic capital – in the form of access to regulatory approval – is mediated by social capital, as personal and institutional connections determine who enters the education sector.

In addition to regulatory influence, armed groups also seek to integrate themselves into academic and educational spaces through the power of recognition and legitimacy. *Al-Hashd al-Shaabi*, for example, has honoured educators and academics as a way of reinforcing its presence and fostering ideological alignment. This includes formal acknowledgements such as: ‘*The esteemed Dean of the College was honoured for his efforts and exceptional cooperation with al-Hashd al-Shaabi*’; ‘Gratitude was expressed to the Dean for his writings, which have immortalised the heroism of the revered *Hashd al-Shaabi*’.

Similarly, in May 2023, a delegation from the 30th Brigade of *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* visited a newly established private university in Nineveh to congratulate its president.⁸⁰ These public displays of recognition serve to consolidate the symbolic capital of both the educational institutions and the armed groups themselves, further embedding their influence within the academic and social fabric.

Implications for the state in Iraq

Armed groups’ involvement in education-related activities illustrates both the Weberian state model’s limitations and the reality of infiltration within state institutions. Neither the Iraqi Constitution nor the law governing *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* mentions their right to engage in education. As one constitutional expert explained, such actions lie outside Iraq’s formal legal framework.⁸¹ Despite legal ambiguities, these groups have carved out space in Iraq’s fragmented state. They follow a dual strategy: state-building and armed resistance. This duality, reflected in their engagement in education, points to a more complex dynamic—one where groups are not simply seeking to destabilise the state but also to shape it according to their vision.⁸²

The influence of armed groups in education is not confined to ideological and political messaging; it has broader implications for societal cohesion and local governance. Local communities, especially the youth, feel abandoned by a government that seems to stand by as a spectator to their uncertain futures. The involvement of armed groups in education feeds into this sense of abandonment. While these groups may provide educational opportunities, they also deepen societal divisions. In Nineveh’s ethnically and religiously mixed communities – particularly areas with significant minority populations – educational programming by the *Hashd* and its affiliated armed groups empowers local Shia groups while marginalising others who do not share the same religious and ideological beliefs. The mandatory essay assignments about *Hashd* heroes and sectarian commemorations in mixed schools and universities effectively exclude students from Christian, Ezidi, Kakai, Sunni, and other backgrounds, forcing them to engage with narratives that may contradict their own identities. Moreover, the appointment of *Hashd*-affiliated individuals to key educational positions at both school and university levels sends a clear message that professional advancement requires allegiance to Shia armed groups, thereby institutionalising exclusion based on sectarian and ideological affiliation. In this context, the educational system, under their influence, begins to mirror the fractured nature of Iraq’s governance itself, where loyalties are tied not to a unified national identity but to local and ideological allegiances.

The broader implications of armed groups’ influence in education are significant. As highlighted by an academic with extensive on-the-ground experience in

Nineveh's Hamdaniah District, the presence of armed groups in education and governance has led to a diminishing of state authority, contributing to feelings of marginalisation and disenfranchisement among local youth. 'Young people feel the absence of the state, as it stands by as a mere spectator to their uncertain future'.⁸³

The concept of the state as a 'spectator' (*mutfarij* in Arabic) has been highlighted in numerous interviews, reflecting a recognised expression in the region used to describe entities or actors that remain passive or lack power, observing without exerting influence. This portrayal of the state as a bystander is essential for understanding the dynamics of armed groups in Iraq, as well as the factors that drive individuals or communities to feel compelled to align with these groups. This dynamic, wherein the state is positioned as a spectator while armed groups emerge as influential actors, is exemplified by the scholarships offered by *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* to young Iraqis for study in Iran. Interviewees indicated that these scholarships are particularly attractive and comparatively accessible for youth. However, securing such opportunities requires a support letter, known in Iraq as a *tazkia*, from the *Hashd* or indirectly from a Shia armed group.⁸⁴ The *tazkia* is not merely a support letter; it is a requirement that indicates alignment with these groups, ensuring their backing and approval beyond this specific opportunity.

This entrenchment within the educational sector is not only about controlling knowledge; it is about embedding themselves in the very fabric of local governance and societal structures. By embedding themselves in critical sectors like education, armed groups ensure that their influence continues to grow. Their involvement is part of a long-term strategy to become indispensable actors in the local governance structure, not just as military forces but as ideological leaders as well. The groups are not merely building military power; they are shaping the future of Iraq's youth, fostering loyalty, and reinforcing their dominance over local governance structures.

In the long term, the activities of these groups have the potential to reshape the very nature of Iraqi statehood. The relationship between the state and these armed groups exemplifies the tension between the image of the state and its actual practices, concepts drawn from Migdal's theoretical framework. The image of the state, in this case, is one of a coherent entity that oversees public life. However, in practice, Iraq's state structures are fragmented, and power is dispersed across multiple actors, each seeking to impose their own form of governance. Iraqi scholar Fanar Haddad, in his analysis of the lack of substantial change following the 2019–2020 protests, argues that the diffusion of power across multiple networks intensifies the country's dependency on these structures, thus hindering change: 'with no leading party to overthrow, no king to dethrone, no statue of Dear Leader to topple'.⁸⁵ Armed groups leverage their economic, social, and symbolic capital to influence and shape state functions, particularly in sectors like education.

The educational initiatives led by armed groups are not solely about controlling knowledge; they are embedded in the process of militarisation. In the Nineveh region, where armed groups have flourished, particularly after the defeat of ISIS in late 2017, education has become a crucial tool in the formation of localised military identities. As one civil society activist from Nineveh described, many in the community now believe that if they had their own armed forces in 2014, the atrocities they faced could have been avoided.⁸⁶ This sentiment reflects a widespread belief in the militarisation of society,

where reliance on the state for security is seen as insufficient and where armed groups are perceived as the primary protectors of local communities.

The local dynamics of power, in which educational activities are leveraged to accrue power, also have implications for the broader national power structure. Armed groups, particularly those consolidating power in Nineveh and other areas reclaimed from ISIS, perceive their local authority as distinct from their performance within the national political arena. This perception is rooted in their militarised presence, which emerged from the war against ISIS and the subsequent withdrawal of Kurdish forces from northern regions, including Nineveh. However, this does not imply that the local power field operates in isolation from national or transnational power dynamics. On the contrary, these armed groups have benefited from both leadership roles within and alignment with the national government in Baghdad, while simultaneously constituting local fields of power that mirror Iraq's disaggregated state.

Shia armed groups such as Badr, Kataib Hezbollah, and Asaib Ahl al-Haq established affiliated forces in Nineveh – such as the 30th Brigade and Babylon Brigade – thereby constituting what Bourdieu describe as a localised field of power. In the case of Iraq, these groups are not external to the state but are embedded within it, often emerging from or directly tied to dominant political elites. They function simultaneously as national political actors and influential local powerholders. This dual position complicates conventional distinctions between 'state' and 'non-state' actors, requiring more nuanced analytical frameworks that account for how armed groups are constitutive of the Iraqi state rather than merely operating outside or against it.

These dynamics reflect Bourdieu's insight that the state is not a monolithic actor but a historically contingent field where multiple agents struggle over the accumulation and recognition of various forms of capital – symbolic, political, and coercive. ". In the case of Nineveh, armed groups' educational activities reveal not just competition over resources or territory, but a struggle over the power to define what constitutes legitimate authority. By simultaneously operating within state frameworks while transforming them, these groups navigate a complex field position that cannot be reduced to simple categories of 'state' versus 'non-state' actors.

Conclusion

This study has examined Iraq's fragmented governance by analysing the role of armed groups in the education sector, revealing how state power is reconfigured at the sub-national level. Armed groups in Iraq do not merely function as territorial rulers or exclusive service providers in areas beyond the federal government's reach; rather, they operate within a complex governance framework that blurs the lines between state and non-state authority. The case of *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* illustrates this dynamic, as its officials emphasise adherence to Iraqi state policies while simultaneously exercising influence beyond formal state structures. This dual positioning challenges conventional distinctions between formal and informal governance.

By applying Bourdieu's framework of the state as a field of power, this research highlights how Shia armed groups leverage cultural, social, and symbolic capital through their involvement in education. This engagement allows them to

consolidate local influence, demonstrating that their role extends beyond security provision to governance, ideological dissemination, and institutional shaping. The findings underscore that these groups do not merely exist outside the state but actively participate in its reconfiguration, complicating traditional conceptions of sovereignty and authority.

Empirical evidence from the Nineveh province illustrates that armed groups employ a dual strategy: they engage in state-building efforts while resisting full integration into the state apparatus. Their educational initiatives serve both to legitimise their presence and to promote ideological objectives, embedding their influence within local governance. This entrenchment in the education sector has societal implications, as it shapes future generations' worldviews while deepening community divisions and reinforcing perceptions of marginalisation and disenfranchisement.

These findings align with the broader debates explored in *Making Sense of the Arab State*,⁸⁷ which examine the paradox of state power in Arab-majority regions such as Iraq and Syria. These states often exhibit a dual character – appearing both strong and weak, repressive yet unable to govern effectively. This study contributes to these discussions by illustrating how armed groups in Iraq exploit fragmented and disaggregated governance structures to establish themselves within state-like roles, thereby reinforcing the argument that state authority in the region is constantly being renegotiated.

The implications of this research are twofold. First, it challenges traditional Weberian conceptions of the state by demonstrating that governance in Iraq is increasingly dispersed across multiple actors, undermining the notion of a singular, autonomous state. Second, it highlights the long-term consequences of armed groups' involvement in education, particularly concerning societal cohesion and the militarisation of local identities. By shaping curricula and institutional frameworks, these groups risk entrenching ideological divisions and complicating efforts to build a unified national identity.

This study illustrates that Iraq's governance landscape is defined by competing forces that assert control over various aspects of governance. Armed groups, such as those within *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*, have embedded themselves within the education sector, expanding their influence beyond security provision into governance and ideological control. This reflects a broader transformation in Iraq's statehood, where authority is increasingly shared between governmental and non-state actors, challenging conventional notions of sovereignty and offering a nuanced perspective on how non-state actors shape governance in fragmented political landscapes.

Moreover, the role of armed groups in education carries significant implications for Iraq's future. Their efforts to shape young minds through ideological curricula contribute to the militarisation of society, reinforcing their legitimacy as both security providers and community leaders. By challenging conventional notions of sovereignty, this study offers a nuanced perspective on how non-state actors shape governance in fragmented political landscapes. Iraq's statehood, as conceptualised through Bourdieu's framework of power fields, is best understood as a contested space of overlapping authorities rather than a singular, unified entity. These findings open new avenues for research on Iraq's evolving governance structures and the enduring role of armed groups in shaping its political trajectory.

Notes

1. Haddad, 'Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units'; Knights et al., 'Honoured, Not Contained'; Mansour, 'Networks of Power'; Dodge, 'Iraq's Informal Consociationalism'.
2. Mansour, *Networks of Power*, 27; Haddad, 'Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units', 51.
3. Costantini and Cozzolino, 'Limited Statehood'; Cambanis et al., *Hybrid Actors*.
4. Dodge, 'Rethinking the Postcolonial State', 86.
5. Heydemann and Lynch, 'Making Sense of The Arab State', 2.
6. Dodge, 'Rethinking the Postcolonial State'.
7. Dodge, 'Understanding the Role'; Dodge, 'Iraq's Informal Consociationalism'; Dodge, 'Rethinking the Postcolonial State'.
8. Dodge and Mansour, 'Sectarianisation and De-Sectarianisation', 60.
9. Mansour, *Networks of Power*, 27.
10. Ahram, 'Hybrid Security'; Huber and Woerts, 'Resilience, Conflict'.
11. Brooke and Strauss, 'Conclusion', 1.
12. Weber, *Essays in Sociology*, 58.
13. Brooke and Strauss, 'Conclusion', 1.
14. Bourdieu, 'Rethinking the State', 67–72.
15. Bourdieu, *On The State*, 3–4.
16. Bourdieu, 'Rethinking the State', 57–58.
17. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 424.
18. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72.
19. Bourdieu, 'Rethinking the State', 52.
20. Ibid, 62.
21. Migdal, *State in Society*, 15–16.
22. Migdal and Schlichte, 'Rethinking the State', 14.
23. Ibid, 15.
24. Costantini and Palani, 'Unpacking the Displacement-Migration Nexus'; Johansen et al., 'Ninewa Plains'.
25. These districts include Mosul, Telafar, Shingal, Hamdaniya, Telkaif, Ba'aj, Hadar, Shekhan, and Makhmour.
26. The dispute over these territories was supposed to be resolved by Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution, which has yet to be implemented.
27. Peshmerga is a complex security and military organisation whose loyalty is divided along party lines in the Kurdistan Region.
28. Palani, *Kurdistan's De Facto Statehood*, 39.
29. In 2015, the PKK-affiliated groups established their own schools in Nineveh's Shingal District; however, these schools were later shut down by the Iraqi government. See: Rudaw, 'PKK Opens Schools for Kurdish Yezidis in Shingal'. *Rudaw*. 31 March 2015.
30. Palani et al., 'Turkey and the European Union', 16.
31. Dodge, 'Understanding the Role', 6–7.
32. For more information about the profile of these groups, see, Militia Spotlight: Profiles. *The Washington Institute*. Available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight-profiles>
33. Bourdieu, 'Rethinking the State', 57–58.
34. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 424.
35. Shanks, 'The Changing Role of Education'.
36. Shanks, *Education and Ethno-Politics*; Shanks, 'The Changing Role of Education'; Kirmanj, 'Kurdish History Textbooks', 373.
37. Anonymous interview with a male teacher from Mosul, conducted by the author in Erbil, 25 July 2024.
38. Mumayiz, 'Profile'.
39. Anonymous interview with a male academic and administrative official from the University of Mosul, conducted by the author in Erbil, 5 August 2024.

40. Alhurra, 'alearaq. 'iishadat bi''iidafat alhashda" lilmanahij fi 'ghiaba' kutub aldirasat walmaqaqid' [Iraq. praise for 'incorporating the Hashd' into the curriculum despite textbook and seating shortages]". 20 October 2022.
41. Ibid.
42. See Mahdi, 'Injecting New Blood'; Mumayiz, 'Profile'.
43. Alhurra, 'Iraq'.
44. Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi Commission, 'The Committee Formed'.
45. The Ministry of Education and Scientific Research, 'The Minister of Higher Education'.
46. The Directorate of Education and Learning, 'The Director of the Education'.
47. The Directorate of Education and Learning, 'Al-Hashd al-Shaabi Commission'.
48. The Directorate of Education and Learning, 'A Report on the Factories'.
49. The Directorate of Education and Learning, 'Free Scholarship'.
50. The Directorate of Education and Learning, 'Speech of The Director General'.
51. Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi Commission, 'The General Directorate of Education'.
52. +964, 'In Cooperation with al-Hashd Al-Shaabi and The Ministry of Education, Telafar University Discusses "Extremism" Through A Scientific Conference'.
53. University of Mosul, 'University of Mosul Holds a Scientific Conference'.
54. University of Mosul, 'The Dean of the College Visits'.
55. Anonymous interview with a male professor from the University of Mosul, conducted by the author in Erbil, 2 August 2024.
56. Anonymous interview with a male civil society activist from Shingal, conducted by the author in Duhok, 4 August 2024.
57. Anonymous interview with a female civil society activist from Mosul, conducted by the author in Erbil, 29 July 2024.
58. See: Wirya & Fawaz, 'The Christians'.
59. Anonymous interview with a male teacher from Bashiqa, conducted by the author in Erbil, 30 July 2024.
60. Anonymous interview with a female civil society activist from Shingal, conducted by the author in Duhok, 20 July 2024.
61. Anonymous interview with a male teacher from Hamdaniah, conducted by the author in Erbil, 30 July 2024.
62. Al-Aalem Al-Jadeed, 'limadha yamnae altaeamul mae munazamat almujtamae almadanii?' [Why is collaboration with civil society organisations prohibited?].
63. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a prominent leader of Hashd al-Shaabi, was assassinated in a US airstrike in Baghdad in 2020.
64. Fieldwork and secondary sources indicate that educational initiatives are shaped by intra-Shia rivalries and Baghdad-Erbil tensions. For instance, the Sons of al-Muhandis student group is closely aligned with Kataib Hezbollah, reflecting competition over influence within the broader *Hashd* structure.
65. The Sons of al-Muhandis. (n.d). Available at: <https://abbna.org/>
66. The Sons of al-Muhandis, [@al_muhandise]. 2025, June 19. 'Iran is not alone. The Al-Muhandis Students Group invites all university students to actively participate in the mass rally. In solidarity with the Islamic Republic of Iran and in loyalty to its firm stance in supporting the just causes of the Islamic nation'. *Instagram*.
67. Anonymous interview with a male professor from the University of Mosul, conducted by the author in Erbil, 18 July 2024.
68. Anonymous interview with a male professor from the University of Hamdaniah, conducted by the author in Erbil, 11 August 2024.
69. Anonymous interview with a male teacher from Bashiqa, conducted by the author in Erbil, 30 July 2024.
70. Anonymous interview with a female civil society activist from Mosul, conducted by the author in Erbil, 29 July 2024.
71. The Baqiyatullah Association, 'Nineveh Commission'.
72. The Baqiyatullah Association, 'During the Holy Month'.

73. The Baqiyatullah Association, 'The Training Secretariat'.
74. Anonymous interview with a female civil society activist from Shingal, conducted by the author in Duhok, 20 July 2024.
75. Anonymous interview with a male civil society activist from Shingal, conducted by the author in Duhok, 4 August 2024.
76. Anonymous interview with a female civil society activist from Shingal, conducted by the author in Duhok, 20 July 2024.
77. Anonymous interview with a male professor from the University of Mosul, conducted by the author in Erbil, 18 July 2024.
78. Ibid.
79. Anonymous interview with a male civil society activist from Duhok, conducted by the author in Erbil, 18 July 2024.
80. Al-Noor University. 'A Delegation from the 30th Brigade of Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi Congratulates the Al-Noor Family on The Occasion of The College's Transformation Into Al-Noor University'. 16 May 2023.
81. Anonymous interview with a legal expert and academic from Erbil, conducted by the author in Erbil, 10 August 2024.
82. See, also, Al-Mawlawi, 'Iraqi Shia Factions'.
83. Anonymous interview with a male professor from the University of Hamdaniah, conducted by the author in Erbil, 11 August 2024.
84. Anonymous interview with a researcher based in Baghdad, conducted by the author in Baghdad, 24 December 2024.
85. Haddad, 'Perpetual Protest'.
86. Anonymous interview with a minority rights activist and head of a local NGO, conducted by the author in Erbil, 13 August 2024.
87. Heydemann and Lynch, 'Making Sense of the Arab State'.

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