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The End of Heterodoxy? The Shabak in Post-Saddam Iraq¹

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Introduction

Small ethnic minorities like the Shabak and the Kākā'is have long been claimed as unambiguously Kurdish by Kurdish nationalists. Located along the fringes of Iraqi Kurdistan, religiously long associated with the *ghulât* (heterodox Shi'ite groups), and speaking varieties of Hawrami or Gorani, these groups have long been the object, and repeatedly the target, of rival nationalist claims. Up until the 1990s, debates raged as to whether these people were really Kurds, Arabs, or Turkomans; as many members of these groups were in fact multilingual, it was generally easy to make such rival nationalist cases. In the wake of the 2003 war, however, and especially in the wake of increasing attacks by radical Sunni groups against religious minorities during the following years, a rearticulation of these groups' identities could be witnessed: increasingly, they started expressing their identities in religious rather than ethnolinguistic terms; at the same time, they emphasized the religious orthodoxy of their views, in aligning themselves with relatively well-established religious groups like the Twelver Shi'ites. The present paper traces these realignments, which are suggestive of both the variability and the permanence of ethnoreligious fault lines. I will do so by focusing on one specific group, the so-called Shabak, a non-tribal group of heterodox Shi'ite leanings, who have traditionally been living in the Mosul area.

The Shabak have received rather less scholarly attention than other religious minorities of Kurdistan, like the Alevi, the Yezidis, the Ahl-e Ḥaqq or Kākā'is,

1 Earlier versions of this paper were presented at a workshop on heterodox movements in Eurasia, EHESS, Paris, October 2009, and at a panel during the second international conference on Kurdish Studies, Exeter University, September 2012. I am indebted to the organizers and to the audiences at both meetings, in particular Mojan MEMBRADO, Andrea FISCHER-TAHIR, Hashem AHMADZADEH, and Khanna OMARKHALI. And, of course, I owe a large debt of gratitude to a number of local informants, Shabak and others, in Iraqi Kurdistan, who over the years have been willing to enrich me with their knowledge; unfortunately, given the circumstances, I cannot thank them by name. I should emphasize the present paper's preliminary character; responsibility for any remaining errors is, of course, my own.

and of course the Christians: the literature on them consists of merely a handful books by local authors, and a handful of articles by foreign scholars.² I will not speculate about the reasons for this relative dearth of information here; but it is all the more deplorable because, as I will argue below, in Saddam's Iraq and after, the Shabak have been caught up in a violent process of major social and sectarian transformations, which have put their distinctive religious, linguistic, and cultural traditions, and indeed their very physical survival, at risk. After a brief introduction discussing the numbers and geographical spread of the Shabak, I will discuss some of the existing theories concerning their language and religion. Next, I will discuss some of the major social changes the Shabak have undergone in the 20th and early 21st centuries, especially under and after the Ba'th regime.

1. The Shabak and their neighbours

The numbers of Shabak have been variously estimated; moreover, all of these estimates have been contested, often for political reasons. In 1925, British mandate authorities had put the number of Shabak at around 10,000; the 1960 census, held not long after the official recognition of the Shabak as a distinct minority (*ta'ifa*), lists 15,000 Shabak, and states they live in some 35 villages to the East of Mosul; VINOGRADOV, writing in 1973, reproduces these figures. EDMONDS³ lists 17 Shabak villages in the Sheikhan area; more recently, a

2 For the former, see in particular AL-KARMALI, Anastase Marie, *Tafkihat al-adhhân fi ta'rîf thalathat adyân* (Delectation of minds in instruction about three religions), in *al-Mashriq* 5, 1902, pp. 576–582; AL-SARRAF, Ahmad Hamîd, *al-Shabak min firaq al-ghulât fi'l-'Irâq* (The Shabak from among the Ghulât groups in 'Iraq), Baghdad, 1954; ABBOUD, Zuhayr Kazim, *Lamahât 'an al-shabak* (Glances at the Shabak), n. pl. 2000. <http://www.alshabak.net/htm/villages/index.htm> (accessed 27.07.2013); for the latter, see VINOGRADOV, Amal, Ethnicity, Cultural Discontinuity and Power Brokers in Northern Iraq: The Case of the Shabak, in *American Ethnologist* 1, 1974, pp. 207–218; RASSAM, Amal, Al-Taba'iyya: Power, patronage, and marginal groups in Northern Iraq, in GELLNER, E., WATERBUR, Y. J. (eds.), *Patrons and Clients in Mediterranean Society*, London, Duckworth, 1977, pp. 157–166; LEEZENBERG, Michiel, Between Assimilation and Deportation: History of the Shabak and the Kakais in Northern Iraq, in KEHL-BODROGI, K., KELLNER-HEINKELE, B., OTTER-BEAUJEAN, A. (eds.), *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East*, Leiden, Brill, 1997, pp. 155–174; BRUINESSEN, Martin van, The Shabak, a Kizilbash community in Iraqi Kurdistan, in *Les Annales de l'Autre Islam* 5, 1998, pp. 185–196. Two other sources, MOOSA, Matti, *Extremist Shi'ites: The Ghulat Sects*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1988 (esp. ch. 1) and ALI, Salah Salim, Shabak: A Curious sect in Islam, in *Revue des etudes islamiques* 60.2, Paris, 1992, pp. 521–528 are mostly based on earlier Arabic-language sources, rather than on primary texts, interviews with Shabak informants, or ethnographic fieldwork.

3 EDMONDS, Cecil John, *A Pilgrimage to Lalish*, The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain

Shabak website listed 57 villages in Mosul plain as ‘Shabaki’, but it does not indicate whether these are partly, predominantly, or exclusively inhabited by Shabak.⁴ Present-day Shabak activists’s estimates, or claims, range from 100,000 to 500,000 Shabak, living in over 60 villages in the Mosul plain; but in the absence of reliable recent statistic data, it is impossible to verify these figures. As will become clear below, no reliable recent census exists of the area’s minorities.

The exact character of the relations between the Shabak and some of the groups claimed to be geographically closest to them, like in particular the Bajalan, the Rozhbeyan, and the Gergeri, has never been adequately described; the reports I have gathered from local informants are hopelessly at odds with each other. During my own fieldwork, I have only been able to gather more reliable information on the Sarli, or Sarlû, who live slightly further to the East of Mosul, in a string of villages near Eski Kalak. EDMONDS⁵ states that the former are Ibrahimi Kākā’is, and expresses doubts as to whether they themselves would accept the name ‘Sarli’. When I asked the Sarli’s patron, an Ibrahimi Kākā’i sayyid living in Erbil, he confirmed that they do not.⁶ EDMONDS further states that the Shabak are Kurdish *qizilbash*, and as such are quite distinct from the group called ‘Sarli’ by their neighbours; below, however, it will emerge that – at present at least – the Sarli have significant links with the Shabak.

The Mosul plain is an ethnically and religiously very mixed area, with not only heterodox groups like the Yezidis and the Shabak, but also more orthodox Sunni and Shi’ite Arabs and Turcomans, and Christians (mostly Jacobites, or Syrian Orthodox, and Chaldaeans), living in neighbouring or even the same villages. Sunni Kurds are relatively few in number on the Mosul plain itself; generally, they dwell in the nearby foothills further north rather than in the Mosul plain itself. The groups in the plain mostly consist of non-tribally organized settled agriculturalists; historically, there are to have been relatively few reports of conflicts concerning land or other resources between them, and social and cultural contacts between them are intensive. Various sources, for example, report Shabak and Yezidis mutually participating in each other’s religious festivals. Thus, C.J. EDMONDS describes how hundreds of local villagers, including Shabak, Christians and orthodox [i.e., Sunni] Muslims joined in for the celebration of the Yezidi New Year festival, and had both their men and women actively participate in the dancing (*govend*) that was part of the celebrations.⁷

and Ireland, The University Press, 1967, p. 87.

4 <http://www.alshabak.net/htm/villages/index.htm> (accessed 27.07.2013).

5 EDMONDS 1967, p. 195.

6 Interview, Erbil, October 1992.

7 EDMONDS 1967, esp. pp. 75–76.

Socially, the Shabak and the Yezidis may in general be good neighbours; theologically, however, they are very much at odds with each other. The Shabak, like other *ghulât* or extremist Shi'ites, carry the worship of Shi'ite imams like 'Ali and Husayn to extremes, while the Yezidis venerate Yazîd b. Mu'âwiyah, who is traditionally cursed by orthodox and extremist Shi'ites alike. Some of these theological antagonisms have recently received some scholarly attention. Thus, Mustafa DEHQAN describes a 124-page manuscript dating from 1978, *al-muhâdarât hawla al-diyânâh al-yazîdiyyah* (Precautions concerning the Yezidi religion), which contained an anti-Yezidi polemic written by a Kurdish-speaking Shabak religious leader, Mullah Halîl b. Sulaymân al-Habûrî, claimed to hail from 'Ayn Safan ('Ayn Sifni?) east of Mosul, and dedicated to a Shi'ite *faqîh* in Yazd in Iran.⁸ Mullah Halîl was born in or around 1903, studied in Aleppo, and later in life migrated to Yazd, where he reportedly converted to Twelver or Imâmî Shi'ism. His anti-Yezidi *risâla* deals with questions like 'Who are the Kurds?' and 'Who are the Yezidis?'. Apparently basing himself on orthodox Twelver Shi'ite sources, Mullah Halîl defends the veracity of Shabak doctrines concerning the worship of imam Husayn and the *Ahl al-bayt*, and the cursing (*la'n*) of Yazîd, against apparent attacks by Yezidi polemicists. He concludes that the Yezidis are themselves apostates (*murtaddûn*), except for the brief period under the Ottoman Farîq Pasha, during which, he writes, they were actively converted 'to Islam'.⁹ Reportedly, a similarly polemical text on the Kâkâ'i or Ahl-e Haqq is preserved in his personal library.¹⁰ Apparently, in such polemics against neighbouring sects, Mullah Halîl implicitly delineates some of the doctrinal aspects of the Shabak religion, in the same gesture drawing them closer to orthodox Shi'ism. This makes it all the more deplorable that DEHQAN has not yet published Mullah Halîl's treatise, or at the very least given a detailed analysis of its theological contents. For the time being, then, many questions regarding Shabak doctrine remain unanswered.

At times, affinities between these groups have been so close that some actors have even attempted to blur the distinctions between them altogether. Thus, C.J. EDMONDS relates the story of the mayor of the predominantly Turcoman town of Tell 'Afar, who belonged to the Taifa-i Wahhab Agha family living in Mosul, from which the mayor had traditionally been elected already in Ottoman times. This mayor, he writes, was "so anxious to consolidate their authority, temporal and spiritual, over the community that they were inclined to blur the distinction between the Kakais and the more numerous Qizilbash of the town under a common Shi'a veil."¹¹

8 DEHQAN, Mustafa, A Shabak contemporary polemic against the Yezidi religion, in *Oriente Moderno* LXXXVIII, 2008, pp. 1–5.

9 DEHQAN 2008, p. 4.

10 DEHQAN 2008, p. 3n.

11 EDMONDS 1957, p. 195.

It is not clear exactly when these events allegedly took place; presumably, EDMONDS is referring to the 1920s or 1930s. A similar rapprochement between Kākā'is and Qizilbash, however, also occurred in more recent times in the Eski Kalak area; and we will see that even in the most recent past, the temptation to gather different heterodox groups under one orthodox Twelver Shi'ite banner has proved quite strong.

2. *The Shabak in history*

Not much is known with any reasonable degree of certainty about the early history of Shabak, and unfortunately, a number of folk-theoretical myths and mystifications have found their way into the scholarly literature. These mystifications primarily concern the Shabak religion, language, and ethnic origins. One such myth is that of ritual orgies. Over the centuries, the religious practices of the Shabak, like those of various other heterodox Shi'ite groups in the wider region, have often been the subject of malicious slander by Sunni and Christian neighbours. In the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, the myth about 'orgies that may not be described' is reproduced both in MINORSKY's lemma on the Shabak and in KRAMER's article on the Sarli. The source of both appears to be Père Anastase AL-KARMALI's writings.¹² Similar tales have traditionally circulated among Sunni Muslims about other heterodox groups, like the Ahl-e Haqq and the Anatolian Alevis, which makes the fact that they are uncritically reproduced by major scholars of the time all the more surprising, and deplorable.

Another widespread myth about the Shabak is the claim that their vernacular is a mixture of Persian, Turkish, Kurdish, and Arabic, a claim reproduced as recently as MOOSA¹³ and ALI.¹⁴ There is in fact nothing mixed about the Shabak mother tongue, which is called 'Shabaki' or 'Machô' (from the dialectal expression *maçô* – 'I say') by its speakers, and which is close, but not quite identical, to the Bâjalâni dialect described by D.N. MACKENZIE in 1956.¹⁵ Both the Shabaki and the Bâjalâni dialect are, in turn linguistically close to the vernacular spoken by the Kākā'is in the Tawûq area near Kirkuk, and to the varieties known as Hawrâmi, spoken in the area, near Halabja, of Byâra and Tawêla on the Iraqi-Iranian border and beyond. Jointly, these dialects are commonly labelled 'Gorâni' or 'Gûrâni', and their speakers 'Gorân' or 'Gûrân' in the academic literature; but in Iraq at least, I have never heard any local

12 Cf. BRUINSEN 1998, p. 187.

13 MOOSA 1988, pp. 1, 4.

14 ALI 1992, p. 522.

15 MACKENZIE, David Neil, Bâjalânî, in *BSOAS* 18, 1956, pp. 418–435; cf. MACKENZIE, David Neil, The Origins of Kurdish, in *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 1961, pp. 68–86. (= *Iranica Diversa* II, pp. 369–387).

informant use these terms in anything near this sense, or group these dialects – let alone their speakers – together as Gorani; one Shabak informant, interviewed in 1992, stated that the Shabak speak ‘Hawramâni’ and are ethnically Kurdish. As a term of a superordinate ethnolinguistic identity, then, the term *Gorân/Gorâni* appears to be a scholarly invention rather than a native category; at best, it applies to the Iranian rather than the Iraqi side of the frontier.

The persistence of the myth of Shabaki as a mixed language shows not only the divergence between structural linguistic and language-ideological factors (which in itself is not a very remarkable phenomenon), but also points at how the latter factors may be implied in political claims: if the Shabak’s language is not simply or unambiguously, say, a Kurdish dialect, the Shabak themselves cannot be unambiguously seen as Kurds either; conversely, the claim – or more generally, the tacit assumption – that the Shabak’s ‘real’ language is, say, Kurdish or Turcoman has on various occasions been used to justify claims that also ethnically, the Shabak are ‘really’ Kurds, Turcomans, etc. Below we will encounter several episodes where the ethnic identity of the Shabak has been contested, partly on language-ideological grounds. If anything, the tenacious folk theory that these groups speak mixed languages, which I have also heard from several local Kurdish informants, may indicate that the attempt to group them as ‘really’ or ‘purely’ Kurdish is actually resisted by the Shabak themselves.

The Shabak, as many of the other abovementioned Ghulât groups, are in fact a highly multilingual community, and consequently the question which one language is their ‘original’ or ‘real’ tongue may be misguided to begin with; rather, they seem to have been multilingual, or at least diglossic, from early on. Macho is the primary vernacular they speak in domestic settings; but the language predominantly used in their religious rituals, and the language in which their sacred text, the *Buyruq* or *Kitâb al-Manâqîb* (“Book of Exemplary Acts”), is written, appears to be a variety of Turcoman. It is not clear how many, if any, of the present-day Shabak laity also speak a local variety of Turcoman, or whether this language is used only in ritual contexts by their religious specialists. Apart from these, a good many Shabak also speak Kurmanji or Badîni and, increasingly, Sorani Kurdish, as well as the local dialect of Arabic.

The Shabak’s ‘origin’, or more correctly the ethnogenesis of the Shabak as a distinct group, has been most plausibly traced to the Safavi-Ottoman confrontation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; but it cannot be stated with any degree of confidence that they have migrated as a group to their present area of settlement from Iran, Anatolia, or elsewhere.¹⁶ AL-SARRAF (1954) was the first to trace the Shabak to the Bektashi order; VINOGRADOV sees the Shabak as non-tribal regrouping of remnants of *ghulât*, or extremist Shi’ite,

16 AL-SARRAF 1954; VINOGRADOV 1974, pp. 209–210; LEEZENBERG 1997, pp. 155–159; van BRUINSEN 1998, pp. 186–187.

tribes that had been defeated in the Ottoman-Persian confrontations of the sixteenth century, and separated from their allies, the Safavids.¹⁷ This is not necessarily to say that the Shabak are originally Bektashis, but rather that they, like other heterodox groups living on Ottoman lands, sought protection from persecution by associating themselves with the Bektashi order, which was seen as politically loyal by the Ottoman authorities.¹⁸ One local informant, who had made an extensive study of the group, more specifically claimed that only the Shabaki sayyids were Bektashis coming from Turkey; he did not specify, however, when this alleged migration took place, nor what the relation between these religious specialists and the Shabak commoners was.

In short, the religious and especially the linguistic affinities of the Shabak with, on the one hand, Turcophone Anatolian Alevi-Bektashism and, on the other, Gorani- or Hawrami-speaking heterodox groups further South-East have not yet been explained in a fully satisfactory way. Doctrinally, they may be closer to the former; but linguistically, they are rather closer to the latter, also in comparison with the closely related Zaza varieties spoken in Anatolia. The Shabak's linguistic situation, in particular, is rather more complex than any narrative of 'original' languages, pure and unadulterated ethnic 'origins', and pre- or proto-historical migrations of entire groups would suggest. Origins are usually assumed to be ethnically pure or homogeneous, but in the Shabak case at least, there is in fact no good reason for this assumption. What little information we have concerning the Shabak actually suggests they have been exposed to linguistic and religious contacts at all stages of their known history. Hence, origins as an explanation of ethnic identity may well be simply the wrong kind of thing to look for.

Another development that has yet to adequately explained is the – frankly hypothetical – origin of the Shabak as an armed Qizilbash tribe, which contrasts sharply with their twentieth-century status. In early modern times, the Shabak may have been a nomadic and tribally organized group of warriors; but at least since the 1858 reforms, they appear to have generally been sedentary agriculturalists who worked as sharecroppers on lands owned by absentee landlords, typically Twelver Shi'ite families living in the city of Mosul.¹⁹ As a result, and as reflected in some of the stories told about the Shabak by both others and by Shabak themselves, they had a rather low status both in the eyes of urban town dwellers and rural nomadic tribesmen, and were apparently even seen as little better than gypsies by some. VINOGRADOV makes the somewhat paradoxical-sounding assertion that the Shabak were protected by their very

17 VINOGRADOV 1974, p. 216.

18 Comparing the *Buyruq*, the Shabak sacred scripture, with other Turkish-language sources, Martin van BRUINSEN describes the points of convergence between Shabak doctrines and those of the Anatolian Alevis (BRUINSEN 1998).

19 VINOGRADOV 1974, pp. 210–214.

weakness: “as self-declared pacifists, they carried no weapons and were known as an especially cowardly and inferior people”.²⁰ It may be useful, *pace* VINOGRADOV, to see this low status as resulting from historically changing conditions, alliances, patronage relations, and strategies, rather than as enduring features of a Shabak ethnic or religious identity. Thus, in contradiction with the (self-) image of the Shabak as ‘self-declared pacifists’, VINOGRADOV herself already mentions a number of Shabak seeking employment with the British army in Iraq during the 1920s; later, in Saddam’s Iraq, a reportedly large and possibly disproportionate number of Shabak pursued a career in the Iraqi army, perhaps precisely because they had few if any powerful backers on the national stage,- or perhaps simply because the military provided an easy way to secure employment and upward social mobility.

In the centuries after the Qizilbash disturbances and their violent repression, the Shabak appear to have been largely left alone by the Ottoman government, which preferred to see them, as it did with the Anatolian Alevis, as associated with the Bektashi order, which because of its political loyalty to the Ottomans was treated as orthodox in official sources. In the nineteenth century, however, when the Ottomans started pursuing an increasingly anti-Shi’ite line, it adopted more assimilationist policies towards the Shabak and other minorities. Thus, Selim DERINGIL mentions how in the 1890s, the Ottoman general Ömer VEHBİ PASHA humiliated a number of Yezidi and Shabak (or ‘Shebekli’, as they are called in the official documents) leaders by inviting them to Mosul and next forcing them to publicly convert to the ‘True Faith’, i.e., the Hanafi *madhhab* of Sunni Islam.²¹ VINOGRADOV reproduces another version of these events, which apparently lives on in Shabak folklore: according to this version, the Shabak *pîrs* and their followers, upon hearing of the general’s intentions to convert and conscript them, decided to send a delegation of elderly members or *rîspî* (lit. ‘white beards’) to Mosul. This delegation arrived at the governor’s headquarters riding on donkeys and playing music while being followed by a jeering crowd. The general was told that the Ottoman government must be pretty desperate to conscript the stupid and cowardly Shabak, who had never fought a day in their lives and were good for nothing but making music. Upon hearing this, the general gave up his plans for the Shabak’s conversion and conscription, and just let them be.²² This story may well be apocryphal, but it was told with apparent relish by VINOGRADOV’s interlocutors: it would seem, then, that they had internalized their low status and – at least among themselves – could comment ironically on it.

20 VINOGRADOV 1974, p. 210.

21 Quoted in DERINGIL, Selim, *The Well-protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire 1876-1909*, London, I.B. Tauris, 1998, p. 71.

22 VINOGRADOV 1974, p. 216.

The upshot of this history, and its political significance, is that there is no one universally accepted view of the Shabak's ethnic identity, and of what, if any, superordinate ethnic or sectarian group they belong to. Are they 'really' Kurds, Turcomans, or Arabs? Are they 'really' Sunnis, Shi'ites, Christians, or of a distinct religion altogether? As we will see below, in recent decades, answers to these questions have often been politically motivated; all too often, they have also had dramatic political consequences for the Shabak themselves.

3. *The Shabak under Saddam*

VINOGRADOV analyzes the complexities of the Shabak's social life in the early 1970s using FURNIVALL's theory of the plural society, which is integrated economically only in the marketplace, and held together politically by state coercion rather than societal consensus. Her writings suggest that under the Ba'th regime, which had (re-)gained power in a 1968 coup, and which had effectively come under the leadership of Saddam Husayn from 1969, the Shabak seemed on a steady path to disappear as a distinct group. VINOGRADOV²³ already mentions a tendency among the Shabak to become submerged or assimilated into orthodox and scripture-based Twelver Shi'ism, a tendency which must have been visible already in the early 1970s. Equally, and perhaps even more strongly at the time, the Shabak were as much subject to secularizing pressures as any Iraqi population group, especially as a result of a steady process of migration to the cities to work in local factories or to pursue a career in the army. In the 1970s, then, it seemed as if the Shabak were in the process of being integrated economically and culturally into the Iraqi state, which at the time pursued strictly secular – if not anti-religious – policies and espoused a socialist and Arab, or Iraqi nationalist, ideology. Given the increased opportunities for urbanization, education, and upward social mobility, the Shabak would in time disappear as a religiously and linguistically and culturally distinct group.

At present, it is unclear exactly how the traditional relations between the rural Shabak and their urban patrons in Mosul were affected by these socio-economic developments of the 1970s and 1980s. The successive land reforms, which initially aimed at nationalizing and collectivizing agricultural sector but made an about-face towards liberalization and privatization (*infitah*) in the early 1980s, must have been a particularly important factor.²⁴ Originally intended to weaken the social power of the large landowners, these reforms acquired an

23 VINOGRADOV 1974, p. 216.

24 For an overview of economic developments up to the 1990s, including the agricultural reforms and the emergence of new patronage relations, see LEEZENBERG, Michiel, Urbanization, Privatization, and Patronage: The Political Economy of Iraqi Kurdistan, in ABDUL-JABAR, F., DAWOD, H. (eds.), *The Kurds: Nationalism and Politics*, London, Saqi Books, 2007, pp. 151–179.

additional ethnic dimension in the Kurdish North, where they were widely perceived as anti-Kurdish measures; they were paired with Arabization policies, which the Ba'th regime had originally initiated with the aim of changing the ethnic balance of the contested and oil-rich Kirkuk region, but which gained pace after the collapse of the Kurdish front in 1975. Thousands of Kurdish villagers were resettled in *mujamma'ât* or relocation camps, and lands formerly owned or worked by Kurds were leased to Arabs. Although the information we have at present is sketchy and ambiguous, it seems that these land reforms weakened the Shabak's dependence on urban landlords, and increasingly allowed them to lease lands directly from the state. This is not to say, however, that the economic and political base for all patronage relations disappeared, but rather that it underwent a qualitative change: Ba'thist authoritarianism tended to create new middlemen as much as it destroyed old ones. In the case of the Shabak, Iraq's changing socio-economic conditions could also lead to shifts in, rather than the simple disappearance of, patronage relations. I encountered one such shift in 1992, when visiting a community of Sarli – claimed, as seen above, to be Ibrahimi Kākā'is – who were originally from the Eski Kalak area but were living in the Tobzawa *mujamma'a* at the time. When I asked one of them whether any Shabak had lived in or near their native village, she said, much to my surprise: “we are Shabak ourselves”. Upon further questioning, it emerged that under an earlier Kākā'i sayyid, Fattāh Agha, a significant number of Shabak had become Kākā'is and accepted Fattah's patronage; this relation persisted under Fattah's son, who consistently referred to these villagers as “our people”.²⁵ Apparently, the distinction between Shabak and Sarli, and thus between Kākā'is and Kurdish Qizilbash, is not as clear-cut as EDMONDS (1957) thought, and the ethnic boundary between them is far from impermeable.

The Shabak appear to have remained relatively unaffected by the Kurdish insurgency of the early 1970s. Following the 1975 collapse of the Kurdish front, a large number of Kurdish villages were destroyed and their inhabitants deported to other parts of the country; the Ba'thist government also intensified its ongoing Arabization process, in particular in the oil-rich province of Kirkuk. Initially, the Shabak, who lived outside the main contested areas, and who had not, or at least not unambiguously, sided with the Kurdish movement, remained under the lee of these drastic measures. In the early 1980s, some Shabak leaders reportedly joined the so-called National Defence Battalions, and formed militias that (at least in theory) were pro-government. In the course of the decade, however, the renewed confrontation between the Ba'thist state and the Kurdish insurgency, now playing against the background of the protracted Iran-Iraq war, increasingly started taking its toll on smaller ethnic groups. In this increasingly violent context, even siding with the government did not protect the Shabak

25 Interviews, Eski Kalak, Tobzawa *mujamma'a*, Erbil, October-November 1992.

from government persecution: in September 1988, some 22 Shabak villages were evacuated and destroyed by the fifth division of the Iraqi army, which at the time was stationed in Mosul area; their inhabitants, numbering some three thousand souls, were resettled in several different *mujamma'āt* or relocation camps in Erbil province, like, most importantly, Desht Harir and Basirma North of Shaqlawa, and Bazian, Takkiya and Chor camps near Chamchamal. Their lands and livestock were confiscated by the government; one Shabak deportee stated that his lands had subsequently been leased to Arabs from the South of Iraq; he also claimed that elsewhere, rich Arabs from Mosul city had bought some twelve Shabak villages and the lands surrounding them, and had subsequently settled Arab farmers there. The Shabak villages, he added, were divided into groups and destroyed in phases in order to maintain secrecy; likewise, the traces of the demolitions were erased by loading the rubble of the destroyed houses onto trucks and dumped elsewhere.²⁶

The character of these deportations and the chain of command that led to them have been confirmed by a government document dated August 31, 1988, which was among the classified materials captured by Kurdish forces during the 1991 uprising, and which has been reprinted in the 1995 Human Rights Watch study of the Anfal operations. The governmental directive gives the explicit order for the deportation of Shabak:

We were informed as follows:

1. There are elements from the Shabak who joined the National Defence Battalions and who changed their ethnicity (*qawmiyya*) from Arab to Kurd and who are residents of Nineveh governorate.
2. The struggling comrade 'Ali Hasan al-Majîd, head of the Northern Bureau, has ordered the destruction of all their houses, and their deportation to *mujamma'āt* in our governorate [i.e., Erbil]. They will absolutely not be compensated.²⁷

This document, brief as it is, shows some significant points: first, it states that some Shabak had joined the National Defence Battalions, i.e., the irregular troops of (mostly) Kurdish tribal or quasi-tribal status that had been created by the central government with the aim of maintaining security in the Northern part of the country. The wording of the text suggests that it was specifically these pro-government Shabak who were targeted for deportation.

Second, it clearly states the decisive role of the central authorities in the deportations, explicitly mentioning al-Majid's direct orders. Although written by

²⁶ Interview, anonymous Shabak spokesperson, Desht Harîr *mujamma'a*, May 1992.

²⁷ Human Rights Watch, *Iraq's Crime of Genocide: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds*, Yale University Press, 1995, p. 289, HRW Ref. 45/5-B; cf. LEEZENBERG 1997, pp. 164–165.

the director of security of Erbil governorate, it refers to the authority of Saddam Husayn's cousin, Ali Hasan al-Majid, who at that time served as the director of the Ba'th party's Northern Bureau (*maktab al-shimâl*), and had been granted sweeping powers for the execution of the Anfâl operations. The deportations of the Shabak, however, were not themselves part of the 'Final Anfâl' (*Khâtimat al-Anfâl*) operation then being carried out in the Bahdinan region.²⁸ Third, it alludes to the 1987 census, which, according to Human Rights Watch (1995), was a key antecedent in this process of steady escalation towards the Anfâl operations, as it helped to define the territory that fell outside the census area as targets for the operations. For the Shabak, the 1987 census had less murderous but nonetheless dramatic consequences: it reflected the regime's increasingly intolerant Arabization policies, only allowing two options regarding ethnic identity, Arab and Kurdish, leaving smaller ethnic groups like the Christians of various denominations and the Turcomans only the choice between two superordinate categories. Apparently, the Shabak were not even given this choice: the government wished to consider them Arabs, and had registered them as such in advance. When some Shabak, or more probably some of their leaders or representatives with the regime, protested that they were Kurds rather than Arabic, the government had them deported.

The reason why almost a year passed between the census, the protests and the deportations is probably in part the fact that the government initially had its hands tied by the war effort against Iran. More importantly, in late 1987 and early 1988, 'Ali Hassan al-Majîd, was still engaged in the first phases of the Anfâl, which covered areas that lay further away from the Mosul plain. It was not until the late summer of 1988, when the Final Anfâl was being carried out in the nearby Bahdinan area, that the Shabak were targeted for deportation. Although the deportations of the Shabak were not part of the Anfâl operations proper, as the Shabak area lay well into government-held territory, they appear to have followed the same logic of drastically dealing with any form of insubordination, and of forcibly assimilating whole population groups by removing them from their villages and rendering them entirely dependent on the state for a livelihood.

The outbreak of the Gulf crisis following Iraq's occupation of Kuwait in August 1990, the subsequent war and the 1991 uprising against Saddam's regime provided new chances for the Shabak, but few of these materialized. In the autumn of 1990, most Shabak were reportedly allowed to return to their villages, apparently after Iraq – which had become heavily dependent on food imports over the preceding two decades – had been forced to revive its agricultural sector by the imposition of UN sanctions. One Shabak informant claimed, however, that they were forbidden to buy cars or seek employment in

28 For details of this subpart of the Anfâl operations, and an interpretation of these operations as a whole, see Human Rights Watch 1995, especially chapter ten.

Mosul province; in 1992, the fifth army division was said to remain in the Mosul area, and to be preventing the reconstruction of Shabak villages.

Thus, during the 1990s, the situation of the Shabak showed little improvement; moreover, a new rival came among the claims to their ethnic identity. The area traditionally inhabited by the Shabak fell outside the territory that came under Kurdish control following the spring 1991 uprising and the withdrawal of Iraqi troops from large parts of Northern Iraq in October of that year. Following the uprising, Eski Kalak, and with it the Sarli community, the villages of which straddled Kurdish-held and government-held territory, became one of the centers for petrol smuggle across the demarcation line, where oil barrels would be carried by small boats across the Zab river. Generally, however, the Sarli population, rather than living with the daily risks and dangers of a life in the front lines, preferred to remain in the nearby Tobzawa *muamma*²⁹, where they had been resettled in 1988, and which now lay well into Kurdish-held territory, thus maintaining a physically secure if economically dependent existence, supported by their Ibrahimi Kākā'i sayyid in Erbil.

But also a new kind of would-be patrons emerged following the 1991 withdrawal of Iraqi troops. Circles in neighbouring Turkey started making ever greater claims about the numbers and the rights of Turcomans in Iraq, or, as they called them, 'Iraqi Turks' (*Irak Türkleri*), stating that they numbered two millions. In later years even higher numbers circulated – all vastly inflated in comparison with earlier Iraqi censuses (except, of course, the 1987 one, which had not recognized the existence of any ethnic group other than Arabs and Kurds). Likewise, these actors claimed that Iraq knew a genuine 'Turcoman area' ranging from Tel 'Afar over Mosul, Erbil and – most importantly – oil-rich Kirkuk all the way to Tuz Khurmatu and Khanaqin, arguing that if the Kurds had a right to an autonomous or federated region of their own, then so did the 'Iraqi Turks'. Obviously, these claims were intended to counter Kurdish aspirations, which had all of a sudden acquired a measure of reality with the establishment of a de facto autonomous zone; but, most importantly in the present context, these actors also started claiming the smaller heterodox Shi'ite groups in Northern Iraq, like the Shabak, the Bājalān, the Sarli and the Kākā'is, as unambiguously Turcoman. In an interview, the then IMTP leader Muzaffer Arslan asserted that groups like the Shabak and the Kākā'is are Turcophone, and hence Turks.²⁹ Thus put, this is certainly an oversimplification: it overlooks that, although the Shabak may have a Turkic variety as a written liturgical language, their spoken vernacular used in domestic settings (like that of the Kākā'is) is a variety of Gorani; moreover, although some – though certainly not all – Kākā'i commoners in Tawûq area also speak a Turcoman dialect, it seems that among the Shabak it is only the religious specialists who have a command of Turkish.

²⁹ Interview, Erbil, October 1992.

Such claims were accompanied by active efforts to change the ethnic balance of the region, using humanitarian aid as a weapon. In the economically hard-hit Kurdish region of the early and mid-1990s, organizations like the Iraqi National Turcoman Party (*Irak Milli Türkmen Partisi*, or IMTP) and the Turkish Red Crescent were said to supply financial support and food aid to locals on condition that they signed a document stating that they were Turcomans.³⁰ Local Kurdish officials acknowledged that these practices occurred, but stated they were powerless to do anything about them. Such efforts at Turkification, however, do not appear to have had any lasting effect; with the establishment of the Oil for Food program in 1997 and the ousting of Saddam Husayn's regime in 2003, the economic situation of the region gradually improved, and the need for external financial support slowly decreased; moreover, the IMTP, which had not participated in the 1992 elections, and which had few if any concrete achievements to boast, fell into oblivion in subsequent elections. In short, efforts to redefine the Shabak and other minorities as 'really Turks' have largely failed to achieve any enduring results. What does appear to have gained a rather wider currency among Shabak in Kurdish-held territory, however, is a narrative that in the 1980s, they had been persecuted *as* Kurds. This narrative would have major policy implications in the early twenty-first century.

4. The Shabak today

The 2003 removal of Saddam Husayn's regime in an American-led invasion of Iraq led to considerable changes in the ethnic and sectarian dynamic of the country, which would also have major consequences for the Shabak. In the early phases of the war, forces associated with one of the two main Kurdish political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party or KDP, quickly overran the rural areas around Mosul, and subsequently established a *de facto* political authority there. *De jure*, however, these areas remained under the jurisdiction of the provincial authorities residing in Mosul city. Subsequent elections brought the situation no closer to a resolution. The resulting constitutional stalemate created a potential for political violence that was extremely dangerous for the local population, and especially for the smaller, and relatively weak, minority groups, like the Yezidis, Shabak, and Christians. The Shabak living in the city of Mosul, which *de jure* remained under the control of the central government in Baghdad, and after a brief occupation by Kurdish forces in 2003 was ruled by a local Arab nationalist coalition (cf. ICG 2009), have largely been left exposed to the violence of local insurgent groups. Since 2003, and especially since the dramatic rise in sectarian violence in 2006, hundreds of Shabak have been abducted or assassinated, often after receiving threats. For the most part, these kidnappings and other assaults

30 Interviews, local observers and representatives of foreign aid agencies, Erbil, autumn 1992, and summer 1994.

appear not to be simply brutal armed robberies; rather, Shabak individuals and even entire families became assassination targets for no apparent reason other than that of being, or of being seen as, Shi'ites. Few if any of these assaults are ever claimed, but they are most likely to have been carried out by local radical Sunni militants. After the November 2004 US assault on nearby Fallujah had led to a massive walkout of the (ethnically mostly Arab) Mosul police force, large amounts of arms were captured by insurgents; the American administrators then had to call in Kurdish *peshmerga* forces to maintain order in the city, thus further exacerbating Arab-Kurdish antagonisms. Apparently, the situation escalated especially in 2006, with thousands of Kurdish civilians and members of other ethnic groups leaving the city after receiving death threats.³¹ In all, the GfbV claims that between 2003 and 2009, no fewer than 675 Shabak were killed in terrorist attacks.³²

Pro-KDP sources claim, generally correctly, that the areas under Kurdish *peshmerga* control are much safer for the Shabak and other minorities than areas under central government control. A good many Shabak, however, feel treated as second-class citizens by the KDP, which has installed its own administrative personnel in the region and is seen as keeping the local population out of positions of influence. Although I have not seen any signs of an actively assimilationist policy on the KDP's part, it is clear that the official party line is that the Shabak are Kurds pure and simple, or rather "80% Kurds, and 20% Arab and Turcoman", as a widespread slogan has it.³³ This attitude, and the KDP cronyism more generally, have repeatedly led to protests from the local population, and even to violent confrontations between Shabak demonstrators and KDP forces. Thus, the website of the Shabak Democratic Assembly reports KDP forces violently suppressing Shabak demonstrations as early as 2006. Reportedly, in 2009, KRG prime minister Nechirwan BARZANI visited the region and pledged the equivalent of US\$ 4 million for its development; but, Shabak sources claim, most of these funds were embezzled by local officials, leaving the population disillusioned with the KRG (or more correctly, KDP) rule.³⁴

31 COCKBURN, Patrick, A final explosion looms, in *Counterpunch*, September 2006 <http://www.counterpunch.org/2006/09/27/a-final-explosion-looms/> (accessed 27.07.2013).

32 Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker, Ein Gespräch mit Kalid Wale, Präsident der Verein der Shabak im Irak, <http://www.gfbv.de/inhaltsDok.php?id=1790&highlight=shabak> (accessed 27.07.2013).

33 Interview, pro-KDP Shabak spokesman, Duhok, July 2009.

34 Cf. International Crisis Group, *Iraq's New Battle Front: The Struggle over Ninewa*, Middle East Report 90, 28 September 2009; available via http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/files/middle%20east%20north%20africa/iraq%20syril%20lebanon/iraq/90_iraqs_new_battlefront_the_struggle_over_ninewa_web.pdf (accessed 08.07.2013).

Perhaps even more important for the Shabak than this novel confrontation based on Kurdish ethnic claims, however, was the emergence of new religious fault lines in Iraq. After the ousting of Saddam's regime, Shi'ite Islam quickly became a dominant political factor as it had never been before in Iraq. In particular ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistâni, the highest spiritual leader, or *marja'a*, of Iraq's Shi'ites, quickly rose to prominence, initially leading to fears that a Shi'ite theocracy would be established in Iraq in a similar way as ayatollah Khomeini had done in Iran after the 1979 revolution. But al-Sistâni's record is of rather a different character: he immediately called for a constitutional convention, and has asserted the importance of free and fair elections in which all Iraqis could participate; in later years, when sectarian violence was at its peak, he called on Shi'ites not to respond in kind to violence by Sunni extremists; moreover, unlike Khomeini, he also stayed outside party politics as a matter of principle. What comments he *did* make on social and political matters, however, generally carried great weight with Shi'ites, including heterodox ones like the Shabak.³⁵ But the turn towards Twelver Shi'ite leaders seems to be part of a broader pattern among Shabak in post-Saddam Iraq. One local told me that the *Buyruq*, the Shabak's holy book, has fallen into disuse in recent years; he also claimed that the Shabak are '65% Shi'ites and 35% Sunnis'; elaborating that a majority of Shabak nowadays follow al-Sistâni's statements and recommendations. It is as yet unclear if this shift reflects a temporary strategic siding with Twelver Shi'ite forces or an enduring religious shift towards (Shi'ite) orthodoxy.

The new political constellation led to a new kind of split among the Shabak community, not as to whether they were really Kurds, Arabs, or Turcomans, but whether to ally themselves with the Kurdish KDP or rather with the Shi'ite bloc in Iraq's national politics. A Democratic Shabak Assembly (Ar. *tajammu' al-shabak al-dîmuqrâtî*) was established in 2003; its secretary general, Hunayn Qaddo, ran in the January and December 2005 national elections on a joint list with the Shi'ite Islamist coalition, the United Iraqi Alliance, winning a seat on both occasions. Subsequently, he joined the Iraqi Minorities Council, while retaining his DSA position. In recent years, Qaddo has generally sided with the Shi'ite bloc in Iraqi national politics, and consistently criticized the Kurdish role in the Shabak-inhabited area. Thus, in 2012, he expressed his support for Iraqi prime minister al-Maliki, who at the time was locked in an enduring conflict with KRG president Mas'ud Barzani. Another, pro-Kurdish Shabak organization that emerged was the Consultative Shabak Committee.³⁶ It would be difficult to

35 On al-Sistâni, cf. e.g. COLE, Juan, *The Ayatollahs and Democracy in Iraq*, *ISIM Papers* 7, Amsterdam University Press, 2006; available online at https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/10072/paper_cole.pdf;jsessionid=092299E722CCAC08E7E28D243E356751?sequence=1 (accessed 28.07.2013).

36 Iraqi Crisis Group 2009, pp. 34–36.

dismiss either group as mere strawmen for, respectively, the Shi'ite Islamists and the Kurdish parties. If past elections are anything to go by, there appears to be a genuine split in the Shabak community as to the best options for political alliances and protection, with a slight majority favoring an alliance with the Shi'ites, and a large minority favoring attachment to the Kurdish region, despite misgivings about KDP rule.

These alliances do not appear to lead to rigid or enduring cleavages, however; there are reports about elected local officials switching sides from the pro-Shi'ite to the pro-Kurdish camp and vice versa; likewise, Reidar VISSER emphasizes the ambivalence with which the Shabak and other heterodox groups have 'moved toward mainstream Shi'ite Islamism': on the one hand, they participate in Twelver Shi'ite rituals and openly sport Twelver Shi'ite religious symbols, with some Shabak leaders even publicly making pilgrimages to the Shi'ite holy cities of Najaf and Karbala; in 2005, he adds, Shabak leader Hunayn Qaddo joined what he calls the 'Shi'ite Islamist' United Iraqi Alliance in parliament. On the other hand, they Shabak are keen to preserve a Shabak particularism, which is now defined in ethnic and territorial rather than religious and sectarian terms; thus, Qaddo fiercely resisted schemes like the proposal by the Shi'ite SCIRI to redraw the map of Iraq along purely (orthodox) sectarian lines, which would redefine the Shabak areas as part of Iraq's Shi'ite territory.³⁷

In Mosul, the January 2009 provincial elections were won by the al-Hadbâ' list, which combined a (Sunni) Arab nationalist ticket with virulently anti-Kurdish rhetoric. This climate created a new potential for violence. On August 10, 2009, the Shabak village of Khaznah, some 20 kilometers East of Mosul, was hit by a coordinated action of two truck bombs, which left at least 28 people dead and 100 wounded; the German Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker even estimates the number of dead at 36. A month later, the nearby town of Wardak was similarly hit by a truck bomb, which reportedly killed 24 people and wounded 45; a second truck loaded with explosives was stopped by local Kurdish security forces before it could be detonated.³⁸ The following years showed a slight improvement but no structural resolution of the security situation, let alone a political settlement for the Mosul region, leaving the question of the status and indeed the very lives of the local Shabak and other population groups in suspense. Thus, the month of October 2012 saw another

37 VISSER, Reidar, Sectarian coexistence in Iraq: The experiences of the Shi'a in areas North of Baghdad, in I. PANJWANI (ed.), *The Shi'a of Samarra*, I.B. Tauris, 2012, pp. 163–176, esp. p. 173.

38 BBC News, August 10, 2009: Bomb attacks in Iraq kill dozens. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8192669.stm; *New York Times*, September 10, 2009. Bomb kills 25 in Northern Iraq, stirring fears of instability. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/11/world/middleeast/1iraq.html? r=0> (accessed 27.07.2013).

spate of violence directed against Shabak, including several car bombs, kidnappings, and assassinations of entire Shabak families in their homes. Pro-Shabak newspaper *al-yaqîn* blamed Mosul governor Athîl al-Nujaifi for the violence, who earlier in the month had claimed that the Shabak villages near Mosul harboured Shi'ite militias that posed a threat to the city's population.³⁹

Although it has generally remained unclear exactly who was responsible for such acts of violence, various actors were quick to capitalize on them politically. Especially in the wake of the 2009 bombings, renewed calls were made by some members of the Shabak and other minorities in the region for their areas to be separated from Mosul province and attached to the Kurdistan region; predictably, such calls were fiercely resisted by Arab nationalists. The legal basis for such a redrawing of the country's internal boundaries is given in article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi constitution, which in turn is based on article 58 of the Transitional Administrative Law. The article, often invoked by minority members, and especially by Kurds as a legitimation for their claims, called for the competing claims on Kirkuk and other disputed territories to be settled in a referendum to be held by the end of 2007. As of 2013, however, no such referendum had been held for any of the disputed territories, which apart from Kirkuk, also included the Mosul plain and Jabal Sinjar. No other efforts to reach a final negotiated settlement have materialized either. Instead, the KRG, anticipating possible future confrontations concerning the status of the Mosul plain, has strengthened its physical presence there. On the main road from Mosul to Duhok, one can today see a heavily fortified gateway to the Kurdish region, which has clearly been built in such a way as to be able to resist an onslaught not of insurgents but of a conventional army. The Shabak villages in the KRG-held part of the Mosul plain right behind this fortification openly, and indeed almost defiantly, show Hussayiniyehs and flags of imam 'Ali being shown openly, almost defiantly. Clearly, the Shabak have found new forms of political alliance and protection; but it is an open question at what price.

Amidst these attempts to draw the Shabak into others' ethnic and sectarian projects, Shabak newspapers, like the monthly *al-Yaqîn* (Certainty), and *Sawt al-Shabak* (The Shabak's Voice), and websites of the Shabak Democratic Assembly, like www.alshabak.net and www.shabaknews.com, have generally insisted on the Shabak's distinct identity, which, they hold, cannot be reduced to any superordinate category. Most if not all of these publications are in Arabic, and to a lesser extent Kurdish; apart from the occasional patriotic poem, no texts appear to be written in Macho. All this gives one the distinct impression that at present, Shabak particularism has been able to assert itself with unprecedented strength, but is generally articulated in cultural or territorial rather than sectarian or ethnolinguistic terms. A wish to be classified as Shabak, and an active

³⁹ For claims to this extent, see various late 2012 items on the Shabaknews website (accessed 27.07.2013).

resistance against attempts to be grouped under larger headings as, in particular, Kurds or Shi'ites, has been accompanied by calls for a distinct region or canton to be called *Shabakistan* (witness the slogan that could be seen on banners during several Shabak demonstrations: “*Na Kurd û na ‘Arab, Shabakistân âlâ Shabakî!*” (‘neither Kurd nor Arab, Shabakistan for the Shabak!’).

Similar claims for a distinct region of Shabakistan can also be found on the shabaknews.com website, notably in the verse of the Shabaki poet ‘Abbâs Agha. There, one can also find other expressions of a desire not to be reduced to any of the major ethnic and sectarian groups of Iraq, and to be recognized as a distinct group in the Iraqi constitution, in an anonymous Arabic-language poem, *man ana?* (Who am I?):

Ana ‘Irâqiyyah aslan
 Ana Shabakiyyah far‘an
 Ana muslimah aqîdah
 Sunniyyah wa shi’iyyah...
 Tuthbît haqqî wa qawmîfî
 Fî al-dustûr al-‘irâqî
 I am Iraqi by origin
 I am Shabak in denomination
 I am Muslim in faith
 Both Sunni and Shi’ite...
 Enshrine my right and nation
 In the Iraqi constitution.⁴⁰

Conclusions

The above overview hardly allows for any firm descriptive conclusion concerning the present state of the Shabak, let alone predictions for future tendencies or developments; but there are many reasons for not being very optimistic. The unresolved legal and political status of the Mosul plain has already taken a heavy toll on the smaller local groups. A new rise in ethnic and sectarian tensions following the final pullout of American troops from Iraq in December 2011, and the escalation of the anti-government protests in neighbouring Syria into a violent civil war with increasingly violent sectarian dimensions, carry the potential for further violence against the smaller minorities. At the time of writing, in mid-2013, Iraq as a whole witnesses a steady rise in sectarian violence, primarily between Sunnis and Shi’ites, but also against smaller groups like the Shabak. Being a Shi’ite-leaning minority in an area known for harbouring Sunni extremist militants in the post-Saddam era, the Shabak risk being exposed to acts of political violence whenever tensions

40 http://www.alshabak.net/htm/poetry/im_iraqi.htm (accessed 27.07.2013).

between Sunnis and Shi'ites – or between Arabs and Kurds – are on the increase at the national, or even at an international, level. Prospects for enduring improvements are dim, at least as long as local political leaders believe they have more to gain by pursuing a hard line than by seeking compromise and mutual accommodation.

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