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The King of Salah al-Din: The Power of Iraq's Sunni Elites

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About the Conflict Research Programme

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Our goal is to understand and analyse the nature of contemporary conflict and to identify international interventions that 'work' in the sense of reducing violence or contributing more broadly to the security of individuals and communities who experience conflict.

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	5
Abu Mazin's levers of power in Salah al-Din	6
Tribal connections	7
Transactional exchanges	9
Alliances with Shia militia parties and figures	13
Identity politics	16
Conclusions & Policy Recommendations	18

Executive Summary

Sunni marginalisation continues to be the principle narrative of Iraq experts and policy analysts when commenting on the status of Iraq's Sunni Arabs. Indeed, the Iraqi government's pursuit of sectarian and exclusionary policies towards the Sunni Arabs following the post-2003 invasion generated widespread feelings of marginalisation among members of the Sunni community. The Sunnis of Salah al-Din province have arguably been subjected to particularly acute forms of exclusion due to their real and perceived ties to the Ba'ath regime and later to anti-Baghdad insurgent and extremist groups such as the AQI and IS. The Iraqi authorities have systemically sought to prevent Salah al-Din from becoming the centre of Sunni power in Iraq and have kept the Sunni citizens in the province under the pressure of large numbers of security forces.

However, within this broader picture of marginalisation and security pressure the leader of a small Sunni Arab party with no armed wing —Ahmed Abdullah al-Jabouri (known as Abu Mazin)—has emerged as a key power broker in Salah al-Din and generated widespread influence in the province. Known as the “King of Salah al-Din”, Abu Mazin has proved adept at navigating and cultivating relationships with tribal groups, Iran-aligned Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), parliamentarians in Baghdad and other figures in order to shore up a strong political position in the province. He effectively controls the provincial government through proxies and has successfully warded challengers to his rule backed by powerful PMF figures.

How has a Sunni Arab figure like Abu Mazin accomplished this political feat? This research examines the roots and mechanisms of Abu Mazin's power in Salah al-Din from the lens of Political Marketplace. The research relies on both primary and secondary sources and demonstrates that Abu Mazin's influence is rooted in a set of levers of power that include tribal connections, transactional exchanges, alliance with Shia militia parties and figures, and identity politics. While each of these mechanisms has been important to Abu Mazin's control and influence in the province, his survival as a key power broker ultimately depends on his alliance with the Shia stakeholders powerful in both Baghdad and on the ground in Salah al-Din.

By examining the mechanisms of power that enabled Abu Mazin to gain and maintain oversized influence, this research engages broader debates around the role and marginalisation of Sunni Arabs in the post-2003 order. While it is accurate to say that subsets of the Sunni Arab population remain structurally disadvantaged in the post-2003 order, the same cannot be said for their top political leaders. Sunni Arab elites such as Abu Mazin are not excluded from the Muhassasah system that divides up the spoils of the state among a narrow cadre of leaders. On the contrary, they have embraced and perpetuated the very system they publicly disavow.

The research proposes that in order to influence the dynamics of the Political Marketplace in Salah al-Din, reform minded officials in the Government of Iraq (GoI) with the support of international community (UNAMI, European Union, US, and the UK) should take the following steps:

- Restore effective oversight mechanisms to fight corruption in the province's governing institutions.
- Hold provincial elections in order to change the current power dynamics and re-establish public authority in the province.
- Devise a security policy in Salah al-Din that is more appreciative of the Sunni citizens' concerns.

Introduction

In the years following the US-led invasion, de-Ba'athification and sectarian policies of Nouri al-Maliki led to widespread sense of political marginalisation among Sunni Arabs.² Salah al-din province was arguably dealt the most dramatic blow by such policies. The overwhelming majority of the governorate's inhabitants are Sunni Arabs whose real and perceived association with Iraq's former dictator Saddam Hussein and his Ba'ath regime subjected them to particularly acute exclusion in the post-2003 order.³ During Saddam's rule, Tikrit—the provincial capital and Saddam's hometown—operated as the centre of power and the city's residents became prominent members of the Ba'ath party and occupied significant military and government positions.⁴ Under the post-2003 political class, Tikrit residents of Salah al-Din were treated by influential political leaders as representing the former regime and have, as a result, paid a heavy price.⁵ Iraq's former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (2006-2014), for instance, systemically sought to marginalise the residents of Salah al-Din and prevent the province from becoming a locus of power again.⁶

Two key events in the governorate intensified this dynamic of marginalisation. The first was the AQI's 2006 bombing of the al-Askaria

Shia Shrine in the province's Samarra city that sparked the 2006-2007 sectarian war in Iraq.⁷ The second was the infamous Speicher massacre of 2014. After IS took over large parts of the province almost without a fight in June 2014, militants of the extremist group executed hundreds of Iraqi military recruits (mostly Shia) at Camp Speicher just outside Tikrit.⁸ Reports stated that members of some of the province's Sunni Arab tribes, including Abu Nassir and Abu Ajil, collaborated with IS and even participated in the massacre.⁹ These events have shaped the mind of Iraq's authorities and armed groups and influenced their policies towards the province and its Sunni residents.¹⁰ This is manifested, for instance, in the Baghdad government's hyper cautious approach to security in the province. Every corner of Salah al-Din is covered with the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Shia militia groups gathered under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF).¹¹ Different PMFs have carved out separate spheres of influence across the province, controlling roads, businesses,¹² and population movements.¹³ The same forces have prevented scores of IDPs from returning and have been involved in the violation of the Sunnis' human rights including harassment, illegal arrests,¹⁴ and enforced disappearances.¹⁵

1 The research depends on both primary and secondary data to support its arguments and analysis. The primary data was collected through in-person and phone interviews with key local politicians/party members, government officials (both current and former officials), observers, and journalists. Almost all interviewees demanded anonymity. The secondary data was collected from policy reports and journal articles as well as from Iraqi and international media (TV reports and programmes, news websites, and online journals and magazines).

2 Stephen Wicken, 'Iraq's Sunnis In Crisis', *Institute For The Study Of War's Middle East Security Report II*, February 2011. Available at: <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Wicken-Sunni-In-Iraq.pdf>

3 Ali Abel Sadah, 'Iraq: Mixed Legacy In Saddam's Hometown', *al-monitor*, (March 2013). Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/03/iraq-tikrit-marginalized.html>

4 Colin Freeman, 'Iraq dispatches: ten years on from Saddam's fall, his home town of Tikrit still mourns him', *The Telegraph*, (March 2013). Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/9934714/Iraq-dispatch-ten-years-on-from-Saddams-fall-his-home-town-of-Tikrit-still-mourns-him.html>

5 Mina Al-Lami, 'Tikrit: Iraq's City of palaces', *BBC Monitoring*, (March 2015). Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31850648>

6 Sadah, 2013, *Op.Cit.*

7 Robert F. Worth, 'Blast Destroys Shrine in Iraq, Setting Off Sectarian Fury', *The New York Times*, (February 2006). Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/22/international/middleeast/blast-destroys-shrine-in-iraq-setting-off-sectarian.html>

8 Road Nordland & Alissa J. Roben, 'Massacre Claims Shakes Iraq', *The New York Times*, (June 2014). Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/16/world/middleeast/iraq.html>

9 Ghazwan Hassan al-Jabouri, 'Family Feuds That Last, And Last: As Extremists Withdraw in Salahaddin, Iraqi Tribes Demand Justice', *Niqash*, October 2015. Available at: <https://www.niqash.org/en/articles/security/5138/>

10 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government and security officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1– September 25, 2020.

11 The Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre (Landinfo), '*Irak: Security and internally displaced people in Salahaddin province*', (March 2015). Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/55b7535d4.pdf>

12 Michael Knights, 'Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Group', *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 12, issue 7, August 2010, pp. 1-12. Available at: <https://ctc.usma.edu/irans-expanding-militia-army-iraq-new-special-groups/>, p.4-5.

13 Amnesty International, 'Iraq: Turning A Blind Eye: The Arming of The Popular Mobilization Units', January 2017. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE1453862017ENGLISH.PDF>, p.20.

14 Erica Gaston & Mario Domisse, 'At the Tip of the Spear: Armed Groups' Impact on Displacement and Return in Post-ISIL Iraq', *GPPI*, February 2019. Available at: <https://www.gppi.net/2019/02/18/at-the-tip-of-the-spear>

15 Belkis Wille, 'Iraq: Not a Homecoming', *Human Rights Watch*, June 2019. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/06/14/iraq-not-homecoming>

Within this broader picture of marginalisation and immense security pressure from both the ISF and the PMF, paradoxically the leader of a relatively small Sunni Arab political party with no military wing – Ahmed Abdulla al-Jabouri known as Abu Mazin¹⁶ – has garnered widespread influence and become known as the “King of Salah al-Din”.¹⁷ In recent years, Abu Mazin has proved adept at navigating and cultivating relationships with tribal groups, Iran-aligned PMF forces, parliamentarians in Baghdad and other figures in order to shore up a strong political position in the province. He effectively controls the provincial government through proxies and has successfully warded challengers to his rule backed by powerful PMF figures.

How has this political feat been accomplished? This research examines the roots of Abu Mazin's power in Salah al-Din from the lens of Political Marketplace framework¹⁸. The research demonstrates that Abu Mazin's influence is rooted in a set of levers of power that include tribal connections, transactional exchanges, alliance with Shia militia parties and figures, and identity politics. By examining the mechanisms of power that enabled Abu Mazin to gain and maintain oversized influence, this research engages broader debates around the role and marginalisation of Sunni Arabs in the post-2003 order. While it is accurate to say that subsets of the Sunni Arab population remain structurally disadvantaged in the post-2003 order, the same cannot be said for their top political leaders. Sunni Arab elites such as Abu Mazin are not excluded from the *Muhassasah* system¹⁹ that divides up the spoils of the state among a narrow cadre of leaders. On the contrary, they

have embraced and perpetuated the very system they publicly disavow.

Abu Mazin's levers of power in Salah al-Din

Currently an Iraqi MP, Abu Mazin is the most influential Sunni politician in Salah al-Din. In this province's fragmented political field, a number of Sunni parties and factions have intensely competed for local power and control.²⁰ In addition to Abu Mazin's al-Jamahir al-Wataniya party (حزب الجماهير الوطنية), other parties such the Iraq Islamic Party (IIP), al-Masar al-Madani party (حزب المسار المدني), al-Taquadum party (حزب التقدم), and al-Watan party (حزب الوطن) have competed for controlling the governing institutions in Salah al-Din and expanding influence within the province's Sunni community.²¹ Abu Mazin has been the principal winner of this competition for power. He has built a relatively large and stable support base in the northern and central part of the province allowing him to form his own coalition in the local and national representative bodies (in both the provincial council in Salah al-Din and the Iraqi parliament). More importantly, he has secured key positions in the local government – including the governor's office – for himself and members of his al-Jamahir party since 2011.²²

In a governorate that lacks large economic assets (oil infrastructure, border crossings, and ports), control over key government institutions has provided Abu Mazin and his followers with considerable power over designing and implementing the administrative and economic policies in the province and allowed them access

16 Abu Mazin is among the Iraqi officials sanctioned by the U.S. government in 2019 for violating human rights and corruption: Press Release, 'Treasury Sanctions Persons Associated with Serious Human Rights Abuse and Corrupt Actors in Iraq', *U.S. Department of The Treasury*, July 18, 2019. Available at: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm735>

17 See for instance: Asia TV, 'al-Munawara with Ghazwan Jasim: Abu Mazin, the King of Salah al-Din', February 27, 2019. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzolBHDuT84&feature=share>. Abu Mazin's followers and close associates also call him the “Strongman” زعيم.

18 Simply defined, a political marketplace is “a political system in which transactions or deals dominate institutions, laws and regulations.” Under such system, allegiances and political services are purchased in exchange for material gains. The ultimate goal of political leaders and elites in a political marketplace is to possess and maintain power. See: Benjamin Spats & Alex de Waal, 'Framing Paper: Political Marketplace Framework Methods and Metrics Workshop', *LSE/Conflict Research Programme (CRP)*, Unpublished Workshop Paper, February 18, 2019. Alex de Waal, 'Introduction to the Political Marketplace for Policymakers', *The Justice and Security Research Programme (JSRP)/World Peace Foundation*, March 2016. Available at: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/Conflict-Research-Programme/policy-reports/JSRP-Brief-1.pdf>. For the application of political marketplace theory on the national level in Iraq see: Toby Dodge et al., 'Iraq Synthesis Paper: Understanding the Drivers of Conflict in Iraq', *LSE Middle East Centre*, October 2018. Available at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/90514/>. For the application of political marketplace theory on the subnational level in Iraq see: Mac Skelton and Zmkan Ali Saleem, 'Iraq's Political Marketplace at the Subnational Level: The Struggle for Power in Three Provinces', *LSE/Conflict Research Programme (CRP)*, 2020. Available at: http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/105184/3/Iraq_s_Political_Marketplace.pdf

19 Toby Dodge, 'Beyond structure and agency: Rethinking political identities in Iraq after 2003', *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol.26, No.1, 2020.

20 Ghazwan Hassan al-Jabouri, 'Salahaddin government: conflict between cousins over money, power, and influence', *Niqash*, (March 3, 2016). Available at: <https://www.niqash.org/ar/articles/politics/5218/علي-المال-والسلطة-والنفوذ>. <http://www.niqash.org/ar/articles/politics/5218/علي-المال-والسلطة-والنفوذ>

21 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1– September 25, 2020.

22 Al-Arabiya.net, 'Iraq: arrest warrant issued for Salah al-Dina's former governor', (November 24, 2019). Available at: <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/Arab-and-world/iraq/2019/11/24/العراق-اصدور-امر-قبض-حزب-محافظة-صلاح-الدين-السابق>

to large funds received by the local government.²³ This government control has enabled Abu Mazin to side-line and remove government officials and administrators who opposed and challenged his influence in the province.²⁴

More importantly, Abu Mazin's influence survived the rise and fall of IS in Salah al-Din. The fall of Nineveh to IS, for instance, resulted in the demise of the influence of Atheel al-Nujaifi and his Sunni dominated al-Hadba coalition in the province. Held accountable for the fall of Mosul to the extremist group, Atheel was removed from the position of Nineveh's governor while his coalition collapsed after the defeat of IS.²⁵ The decision to remove Atheel from power was influenced by powerful Shia figures and militia parties who emerged as prominent actors in Nineveh in the post IS period.²⁶ In contrast, Abu Mazin did not come under scrutiny for the fall of Salah al-Din to IS even though he held the position of governor when the province was overtaken. After the defeat of IS, he regained control of the governor's position with the help of Shia influential figures and militia parties.

Tribal connections

*It is going to be the same. They will remove a Jabouri from office and replace him with another Jabouri. They already agreed on this.*²⁷

Salah al-Din is characterised by its tribal nature, and tribalism is a key factor that accounts for Abu Mazin's political and government influence in the province. He is a member of al-Jabour tribes,²⁸ the largest and most powerful confederation of Sunni Arab tribes inhabiting the northern and central cities and towns of the province including Shirgat, Beji, Tikrit, and al-Alam.²⁹ He has built strong ties with large sections of al-Jabour and successfully used these tribal connections to secure stable electoral and political support among them.³⁰ Observers and government officials from the province said that the relationship between Abu Mazin and his tribe was mutually beneficial. They explained that Abu Mazin prioritised serving the interests of al-Jabour by providing them with access to government jobs and funds, and in return, he received the tribe's votes and support.³¹

Like many of Iraq's Sunni tribes,³² al-Jabour is politically prominent and has retained significant authority in northern and central parts of Salah al-Din.³³ Unlike the tribes in Anbar, most of al-Jabour in Salah al-Din refused to become part of the U.S. sponsored tribal Awakening movement³⁴ and rejected direct co-optation by the Baghdad government.³⁵ During the rule of Iraq's former dictator, many members of the

²³ In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1– September 25, 2020.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Zmkán Ali Saleem, & J. Mac Skelton, *Mosul And Basra After The Protests: The Roots Of Government Failure & Popular Discontent*, IRIS Working Paper, 2019. Available at: <https://uis.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/Saleem%2C%20Skelton%20-%20Oct%202019.pdf>, pp. 15-17.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ A man on the streets of Tikrit said just before the national elections of May 2018. Al-Hadath al-Iraqi, 'Tribal authority and political money: will Salah al-Din remain in the hands of al-Jabour?', (March 8, 2018). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHQ1ENfnc8&feature=share>

²⁸ Abu Mazin's tribe is called al-Hajaj that inhabit the town of Beji. In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials from Salah al-Din, July 1– September 25, 2020.

²⁹ Almadapress.net, 'Courts and tribal balance impede the appointment of a new governor for Salah al-Din', (September 2017). Available at: <https://almadapaper.net/view.php?cat=175799>

³⁰ Al-Jabouri, (2016), Op.Cit.

³¹ In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1– September 25, 2020.

³² Osama Gharizi And Haider Al-Ibrahimi, 'Baghdad Must Seize The Chance To Work With Iraq's Tribes', *War On The Rock*, (January 2018). Available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/baghdad-must-seize-chance-work-iraqs-tribes/>

³³ Hosham Dawod, 'The Sunni Tribes in Iraq: between local power, the international coalition and the Islamic State', *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre*, September 2015. Available at: <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/193513/07671d6382e449e19b93ac98a0f69063.pdf>

³⁴ The formation of the Awakening movement beginning with 2006 centred on Anbar and only a small number of tribal fighters joined the movement in Salah al-Din. See: Najim Abed Al-Jabouri And Sterling Jensen, 'The Iraqi and AQI Roles in the Sunni Awakening', *Prism*, Vol.2, No.1, (2010), pp.3-18. Available at: https://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism_2-1/prism_volume_2_issue_1.pdf

³⁵ For instance, only a certain section of al-Jabour around the district of al-Alam joined Nouri al-Maliki's Tribal Support Council Initiative (known as Isnad) that aimed at co-opting tribes across Iraq. See: Nicholas A. Heras, 'Iraqi PMU Commander Shykh Wanas Naji al-Jabara al-Jabouri: Holding the Line in Salah al-Din', *Jamestown Foundation's Militant Leadership Monitor*, Vol.8, No.12, (2018). Available at: <https://jamestown.org/brief/iraqi-pmu-commander-shaykh-wanas-naji-al-jabara-al-jabouri-holding-line-salah-al-din/>

tribe occupied key positions within the state (in both the government and the army). However, they were removed from power in the post-2003 period via de-Bathification (2003-2007).³⁶ A government official from the province stated, “the tribes in Salah al-Din sympathised with the Sunni insurgency and the Ba’tahists and remained suspicious of both the Americans and the authorities in Baghdad. Not many tribes wanted to support the U.S. forces and the Iraqi government during the first decade after the invasion.”³⁷

While it retained large autonomy, al-Jabour still needed access to state funds and jobs. Abu Mazin provided the tribes with access to the state resources and directed al-Jabour’s mobilising power towards serving his political interests. A former affiliate of Abu Mazin stated, “tribal leaders support Abu Mazin because he delivers on his promises for providing jobs and other benefits.”³⁸ Abu Mazin built this credibility among the tribes through his uninterrupted access to state resources.

Since 2003, Abu Mazin has occupied several key state positions in both Salah al-Din and in Baghdad. He served as deputy governor for security affairs (2003-2009), a governor (2011-2014 and again 2016-2018), an MP from Salah al-Din (2014-2015 and again 2018-recent), and State Minister for Governorates’ Affairs (2015-2016). These are key government positions in Iraq that allow their holders to influence employment and resource/funds distribution. Abu Mazin ensured that Jabouris occupied significant government positions in the province (for example the position of the governor), that Jabouris were prioritised for employment in the public sector, and that Jabouri tribal leaders received government funds and resources (for instance, companies owned by members of al-Jabour secured contracts for implementation

of government service projects).³⁹ A former government official from the province stated, “Abu Mazin offered a lot to al-Jabour. He ensured that government service projects disproportionately benefited al-Jabour inhabited areas. He showered al-Jabour with jobs, cash, and service projects. He distributes large sums of the funds and resources that he obtains over members of his tribe. He was the best candidate for receiving the backings of al-Jabour tribes.”⁴⁰

But facilitating access to state resources does not entirely explain why Jabouris have favoured Abu Mazin over other politicians from the tribe. His acceptance among many Jabouris is partially related in his ability to maintain a balance between building alliances with powerful Shia figures and militia parties on the one hand and avoiding attachment to these militia parties and figures on the other hand. In an analysis on the Sunni tribal forces in Salah al-Din, an expert observed “many Sunni tribal leaders deeply mistrust Shi’a PMF and even those who later joined Shi’a PMF expressed mistrust for their motives in Salah al-Din.”⁴¹ Like the rest of the Sunni Arab tribes in the province, many Jabouris distrust the Shia militias and blame them for the destruction, killings, and lootings⁴² that took place in their province during and in the aftermath of the war with IS.⁴³ The province’s Jabouri politicians and government officials who failed to keep distance from the Shia militia leaders and groups were therefore unable to garner the support of the majority of their tribe.

This has been the case with Yazan al-Jabouri who came to prominence in the province during the fight against IS. He played a key role in forming brigade 51 of the PMF (commonly referred to as Salah al-Din brigade), a Sunni Arab fighting force that helped in clearing Shirqat from IS and still operates in the areas north of

36 Sada, (2013), Op.Cit.

37 Interview with a government official from Salah al-Din. Erbil, August 2020.

38 Phone interview with a former affiliate of Abu Mazin. August 2020.

39 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1– September 25, 2020.

40 Interview with a government official from Salah al-Din. Erbil, August 2020.

41 Erica Gaston, ‘Sunni Tribal Forces’, *GPPI*, (August 2017). Available at: <https://www.gppi.net/2017/08/30/sunni-tribal-forces>

42 Human Rights Watch (HRW), ‘Ruinous Aftermath: Militia Abuses Following Iraq’s Recapture of Tikrit’, (September 2015). Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/09/20/ruinous-aftermath/militias-abuses-following-iraqs-recapture-tikrit>

43 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1– September 25, 2020.

Tikrit (Beji & Shirgat).⁴⁴ Yazan formed the Sunni militia with the support of Abu Mahdi Muhandis,⁴⁵ the deputy head of the PMF and the leader of pro-Iran militia of Kataib Hizbullah (KH) killed in a US drone attack in January 2020. Yazan became a close affiliate of Muhandis and was later elevated to a leading position in the PMF.⁴⁶ He started to highlight and take pride in his close relationships with Muhandis during numerous media appearances.

Yazan's moves, however, were not acceptable to many Jabouris for whom Muhandis symbolised the radicalism of Shia militias causing large scale destruction and committed human rights violations in Salah al-Din, particularly in Tikrit and Beji.⁴⁷ Lack of support for Yazan among the Jabouris was manifested during the 2018 elections. Yazan ran for the elections as a candidate of Fatah alliance, the pro-Shia militia coalition, from the province but failed to secure a seat in Iraqi parliament.⁴⁸

In contrast, many Jabouris have continued supporting Abu Mazin despite the fact that he has enjoyed the backing of al-Maliki and entered into alliance with Shia militia parties such as Badr and the Asayib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), (as part of the Sunni Mihwar coalition, Abu Mazin sided with the Construction parliamentary bloc led by Shia leaders like Nouri al-Maliki, Hadi Ameri and Qais al-Khazali). Unlike Yazan, Abu Mazin did not become a member of Shia militia organisations. Instead, he made alliances and connections with Baghdad-based influential Shia leaders and militia parties to ensure his own survival and secure access to state resources. Simultaneously, he has operated on behalf of al-Jamahir party and its followers in Salah al-Din and beyond. This pragmatism of Abu Mazin, which also benefited the members of his tribe, has been acceptable to many Jabouris in the province. This, for instance, partly explains why Abu Mazin's coalition came first during the 2018

national elections in Salah al-Din by securing 3 seats out of the total 12 seats allocated to the province.⁴⁹

Alliance with al-Jabour tribes constitute a key element of Abu Mazin's power in Salah al-Din. As stated earlier, many Jabouris support Abu Mazin because the latter provided employment and resources for the former. The question now is how has Abu Mazin ensured stable access to state resources and jobs which allowed him to maintain his local support base? The next section looks at transactional exchange as another key lever of power that enabled Abu Mazin to control significant government positions and funds in Salah al-Din.

Transactional exchanges

Abu Mazin and his al-Jamahir party have operated in a highly competitive and fragmented political/tribal field where an array of other Sunni parties and figures aligned with non-Jabouri tribes competed for power and influence in Salah al-Din. For instance, Al-Sawamra tribes,⁵⁰ inhabiting Samarra and its outlining areas, opposed al-Jabour's domination in the province and became support bases for Abu Mazin's rivalling parties and personalities such as the IIP, Ahmed al-Krayeem's Taqadum party, and Muthana al-Samaraayee's al-Massar party.⁵¹ These parties have competed for power—government positions and funds—with Abu Mazin but have so far failed to contain the latter's large government influence. Abu Mazin has often relied on political transactions, defined as buying loyalties in return for material gains, to gain and maintain power within a highly competitive political/tribal field.

This lever of power was essential in allowing Abu Mazin to control and maintain the position of the governor, the key position in the province, through ensuring that the majority of the members of the Provincial Council (PC)

44 Nour Samaha, 'Iraq's 'Good Sunni'', *Foreign Policy*, November 16, 2016. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/16/iraqs-good-sunni/>

45 Ibid.

46 Biladi TV, 'Special interview with Yazan Mash'an the leader in the PMF', (February 2017). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_k1jgxWkaM&feature=share

47 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1–September 25, 2020.

48 Nrttv.com, 'The most known candidates who lost in the parliamentary elections', (May 2018). Available at: <https://www.nrttv.com/AR/News.aspx?id=603&MapID=2>

49 See the official results of the 2018 elections at: [http://ihcc.iq/getattachment/HOME/IconFiles/pageC3/salah-k-\(2\).pdf.aspx?lang=ar-IQ](http://ihcc.iq/getattachment/HOME/IconFiles/pageC3/salah-k-(2).pdf.aspx?lang=ar-IQ)

50 Almadapress.net, (2017), Op.Cit. See also this TV programme on the struggle between al-Jabour and al-Sawamra over power in Salah al-Din: Asia TV, 'Salahaddin after the Sawamra', *al-Munawar Show*, February 26, 2019. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FHLJiHi6oM>

51 Ghazwan Hassan al-Jabouri, 'Former Salahaddin governor included in the sanctions: U.S. treasury decision might change the political map in Salahaddin', *Niqash*, (October 2019). Available at: <https://www.niqash.org/ar/articles/politics/5998/>

remained loyal to him and his policies. During the rule of the Ba'ath regime, governors were selected from Baghdad with no local input. The post 2003 order introduced PCs to local government structures in order to allow for greater local participation in governance and politics.⁵² Elected via popular elections every four years (called provincial elections), the PCs were vested with crucial authorities including appointing and removing governors.⁵³ More importantly, the PCs were supposed to hold the local officials accountable and operate as an oversight mechanism on the policies of the governors whose authorities and powers were expanded through Iraq's decentralisation provisions including Law 21— Law of Governorates Not Incorporated into a Region.⁵⁴

Abu Mazin manipulated the authorities of the PC to consolidate his grip on power in the province. His coalition never secured a majority in the 29-member PC during the last two provincial elections (his coalition won 5 seats during the 2009 provincial elections⁵⁵ and 7 seats during the 2013 provincial elections⁵⁶). Despite this, he was able to control key government positions and development funds and has removed/replaced potentially challenging government officials mainly through buying off the loyalties of PC members aligned with other coalitions and rivaling parties.⁵⁷ He offered cash, cars, property, and promises of future government positions to PC members in return for their allegiances and votes on critical issues that included appointing and removing key government officials and approving local development projects and budgets.⁵⁸

Fragmentation, lack of coherence, and clear political purpose beyond achieving personal gains characterised the Sunni coalitions and parties⁵⁹ and allowed for expanding government control via political transactions. A government official from Salah al-Din stated, "The Sunni Arabs lack coherent and organised parties with clear political agendas and ideologies. Their members are often driven by personal interests and are ready to quickly shift side and move to other parties in pursuit of personal gains."⁶⁰ This fluidity of alliances and party membership enabled Abu Mazin to align members of other parties with his own coalition and shift the political marketplace in his favour.

As the two main parties in the province, Abu Mazin's al-Jamahir and the IIP failed to gain a majority in the PC during past provincial elections. Other local Sunni factions representing certain tribes and loosely connected to Sunni national coalitions also secured seats in Salah al-Din's PC. These PC members would cut ties to their Sunni national coalitions after elections and pursue personal/tribal gains.⁶¹ As local journalist Ghazwan Hassan al-Jabouri observed, "members of the provincial council here have happily flip-flopped to support whichever political party or person offers them money or some personal gain."⁶² Abu Mazin bought the loyalties of these PC members in return for material gains and used their support to side-line and weaken the IIP, his main local rival, and consolidate his control in government.

After the 2009 provincial elections, the IIP and Abu Mazin's coalition — that secured 5 seats and 7 seats in the 29-member PC respectively— formed a power sharing government which

52 Derick W. Brinkerhoff and Ronald W. Johnson, 'Decentralized local governance in fragile states: learning from Iraq', *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, Vol. 75, No. 4, pp. 585-607; Matthew S. Mingus, 'Progress and Challenges with Iraq's Multilevel Governance', *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 72, No. 5, September/October 2012, pp. 678-686.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Musingsoniraq.blogpost.com, 'Comparing The January 2009 to January 2005 Provincial Elections', February 1, 2009. Available at: <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2009/02/comparing-january-2009-to-january-2005.html>.

56 The formal results of the 2013 provincial elections in Salah al-Din are available at: <http://iheq.iq/ar/page53.aspx>

57 Almadapaper, 'Political coup in Salahaddin a week after a unique visit by the Iranian ambassador to Samarra', February 16, 2019. Available at: <https://almadapaper.net/view.php?cat=216912>

58 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1– September 25, 2020.

59 For an analysis of the fragmentation of Sunni Arab parties see: Renad Mansour, 'The Sunni Predicament in Iraq', *Carnegie Middle East Centre*, March 2016. Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_59_Mansour_Sunni_Final.pdf

60 Interview with a government official from Salah al-Din, July 2020, Suleimaniyah.

61 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1– September 25, 2020.

62 Ghazwan Hassan al-Jabouri, 'Power, Money, And Cousins: Political In-Fighting in Salahaddin Province Causing Municipal Chaos', *Niqash*, (March 2016). Available at: <https://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/5218/>

distributed the two key government positions between the two sides (the governor's position was given to an IIP member while the position of the head of the PC was given to Abu Mazin himself).⁶³ The arrangement soon broke down due to intensifying competition for power (control over employment in the public sector and government funds) between the two parties.⁶⁴ After he secured the backings of the majority of the PC members, Abu Mazin removed the IIP affiliated governor and appointed himself as the governor of Salah al-Din in 2011.⁶⁵

Fluidity of alliances and transactional politics enabled Abu Mazin to maintain the governor's position after the 2013 provincial elections in which his party only secured 7 seats in the PC.⁶⁶ After the elections, he side-lined the IIP, which won 5 seats during the elections, by forming a power sharing government with other local coalitions the largest of which was headed by Sheikh Sha'lan Krayeem. The head of the influential Albu Essa tribe in Samarra (part of al-Sawamra tribes), Sha'lan opposed the IIP's influence in the province.⁶⁷ Sha'lan's coalition won 5 seats during the provincial elections and aligned with Abu Mazin in return for appointing Sha'lan's brother Ahmed Krayeem as the head of Salah al-Din's PC. More than a governing coalition, this was a tribal pact through which Abu Mazin co-opted a key element of al-Sawamra tribes and weakened the IIP.⁶⁸ Indeed, the IIP lost much of its influence in the province when PC members affiliated with the party shifted their loyalties to Abu Mazin.⁶⁹

Abu Mazin's rivalling Sunni parties, mostly concentrated in Samarra, are uneasy about his large influence in the province. But they are too weak and too divided to pose serious challenges to his government control. For instance, Abu Mazin's 2019 removal of Ahmed Krayeem from the head of the PC generated condemnation in the Samarra based parties and amongst tribal leaders but did not lead to concerted actions to contain al-Jamahir's leader. In early 2019, Ahmed Krayeem joined Muhammed Halbousi's new al-Taqdum party and the two made preparations for expanding influence among Salah al-Din's Sunni community ahead of provincial elections which were expected to take place at the end of the same year (the elections never took place).⁷⁰ Halbousi, the speaker of Iraqi parliament, is Abu Mazin's national Sunni rival and the relationship between the two broke down in 2019 due to their competition over controlling Nineveh's governor.⁷¹ The alliance between Ahmed Krayeem was seen as a threat by Abu Mazin to his influence in the province who in response mobilised the PC members against Krayeem and removed him from his position.⁷² Samarra based parties such as Muthana Samarayee's al-Massar, joined by government officials and tribal leaders in the city, condemned Abu Mazin's move against Krayeem and accused him of unilateralism and corruption. However, they failed to influence Abu Mazin's course of action in Salah al-Din.⁷³

Indeed, the IIP, al-Massar, and Ahmed Krayeem's al-Taqdum see each other as political rivals and lack clear vision and political agendas for Salah al-Din.⁷⁴ Their presence and activities

63 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1– September 25, 2020.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Abu Mazin's local coalition called Qal'at al-Jamahir (اتحاد قلعة الجماهير) won 7 seats during the 2013 provincial elections in Salah al-Din. The formal results of the 2013 provincial elections in Salah al-Din are available at: <http://ihcc.iq/ar/page53.aspx>

67 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1– September 25, 2020. See also: alnoornews.net, 'The Islamic Party files a lawsuit against the MP Sha'lan al-Krayeem after his confession that he received funds to work against it', (July 2017). Available at: <https://www.alnoornews.net/archives/123662/الجزب-الاسلامي-يرفع-دعوة-قضائية-ضد-الن>

68 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1– September 25, 2020.

69 Interview with a top member of the IIP in Salahaddin, August 2020, Erbil.

70 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1– September 25, 2020.

71 Zmkan Ali Saleem, 'Prisoner of the Deal: Nineveh's governor and local state capture', LSE/Middle East Centre, March 2020. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/crp/2020/03/12/prisoner-of-the-deal-ninevehs-governor-and-local-state-capture/>

72 Alsumaria.tv, 'Salahaddin's council removes its chairman Ahmed Karayeem', February 25, 2019. Available at: <https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/261817/>; Alaraby.co.uk, 'Iraq: political pressure behind removing the head of the local council in Salahaddin', February 27, 2019. Available at: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk> العراق-ضغوطات-سياسية-تسبب-إقالة-محافظة-صلاح-الدين

73 Baghdadtoday.new, 'Representatives and notables of Samarra: behind removing al-Krayeem is a corrupt party that wants to impose its control over Salahaddin's resources', February 25, 2019. Available at: <https://baghdadtoday.news/news/76213/نواب-سمرقاه-يسلمون-إقالة-أقالمة-الدين>

74 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1– September 25, 2020.

have focused on Samarra and failed to expand their support bases throughout the rest of the province. Both the IIP and al-Massar are led by two Iraqi MPs who are simultaneously rich businessmen. Muthana al-Samarayee and Ammar Yousif—the IIP's key figure in Salah al-Din—own government projects and large businesses in and outside the province.⁷⁵ Key informants from the province stated that the two politicians were using their political influence in both Baghdad and the province to achieve greater business gains. They said the IIP's Ammar Yousif was in fact now part of Abu Mazin's commercial/government network through which Yousif secured government funds and projects.⁷⁶

Controlling government funds and businesses have been key to Abu Mazin's political and government influence in Salah al-Din and beyond. He needs control over funds to finance his political transactions through which he maintains and expands his government control. A government official from the province referred to a network of individuals that Abu Mazin relied on for siphoning off public funds. He stated, "The local government allocates contracts for implementing service projects to rich individuals who then pay shares to Abu Mazin and people who are close to him. Between Abu Mazin and implementing companies are brokers who are often local officials and have administrative and security positions. Others are tribal leaders and businessmen."⁷⁷

Salah al-Din is famous for rampant government corruption.⁷⁸ According to Iraq's central financial watchdog committee, the province ranks the first among Iraq's 18 governorates for widespread corruption in the local government institutions.⁷⁹ The key oversight mechanism in the province disappeared as politicians like Abu Mazin

streamlined the PC with their policies allowing him to re-direct public funds to himself and to the pockets of his allies and followers.⁸⁰

Abu Mazin's power of shaping politics in the governorate has not waned with the suspension of the PCs by the Iraqi government in December 2019.⁸¹ He continues to command a strong patronage network that includes high ranking officials (the governor, district mayors, Director Generals, Police Chief, and etc.) and influential tribal and business leaders.⁸²

Among the Sunni parties and factions, Abu Mazin is the most influential power broker in the province but has not established absolute dominance there. His influence, however, needs to be understood in the context of a local power structure dominated by Baghdad based powerful Shia figures and militia leaders who supported and allied with Abu Mazin. The following section looks at the roots of the alliance between Shia political stakeholders and Abu Mazin and assesses how this alliance impacted the latter's local power and control.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.

77 Interview with a local official from Salahaddin, August 2020, Suleimaniyah.

78 For instance, a June 2020 government report revealed large corruption cases in the local health directorate in Salahaddin. Investigation carried out by the federal integrity commission showed different types of corruption including the disappearance of material and equipment worth 6000,000,000 million Iraqi Dinars and finding forged receipts for buying fuel reaching 500,000,000 million Iraqi Dinars that was not bought in reality. See: Nasnews.com, 'Detecting corruption cases in a directorate in Salahaddin', June 24, 2020. Available at: <https://www.nasnews.com/view.php?cat=33883>

79 Thebaghdadpost.com, 'Financial Watchdog Committee: Salahaddin takes the lead among the governorate for corruption', April 16, 2019. Available at: <https://www.thebaghdadpost.com/ar/Story/163405/الرقابة-المالية-تصالح-الدين-تتصدر-المحافظات-في-الفساد>

80 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1– September 25, 2020. See also this 2013 report in Iraqi News Network in which the Iraqi MP from Salah al-Din Suhad al-Obeidi accused Abu Mazin of involvement in corruption cases through capturing service provision projects in the governorate. Available at: <http://aliraqnews.com/العراقية-تصالح-الدين-متورط-بملفا>

81 Aljazeera.net, 'Under pressure from the protests the Iraqi parliament dismisses the provincial councils and fails in elections law', November 11, 2019. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2019/11/27/المظاهرات-العراق-البرلمان-العراقي>

82 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1– September 25, 2020.

Alliances with Shia militia parties and figures

Various Shia militia groups, gathered under the umbrella of the PMF, participated in the fight against IS in Salah al-Din.⁸³ Militia groups like Badr, the AAH, and Saraya al-Salam (SS) maintained military presence in Salah al-Din well beyond the defeat of IS and pursued political/ideological, security, and geostrategic goals in the province. In the Shia populated areas of the province such as Tuz-Khurmatu, Balad, and Djel, Badr and the AAH have mobilised members of the Shia community within their militia forces and took over their governing institutions.⁸⁴ They have justified their presence in these areas in the name of protecting the Shia community and religious sites with symbolic significance (the SS militias are present in large numbers in Samarra for guarding the city's Shia Shrines). In the Sunni areas of the province (Shirgat, Beji, Tikrit, al-Alam, Awja, and al-Dor), Shia militias have sought to prevent the re-emergence of extremist Sunni groups that could again pose threats to Baghdad and the Shia dominated government there (Baghdad shares its northern borders with Salah al-Din).⁸⁵ For the pro-Iran Shia militia groups territorial/population control in Salah al-Din has a strategic value. They see the province as part of the land-bridge that connects the Islamic Republic of Iran to its allies in the Levant.⁸⁶

As stated, the Shia dominated government in Iraq treated Sunnis of Salah al-Din with great suspicion for their associations with Iraq's former Ba'ath regime and did what they could to prevent the province from becoming the locus of Sunni power in Iraq. How then have Shia influential leaders and militia parties allowed, and even supported, a Sunni Arab politician to hold power and exert influence in this province?

As an exception to their marginalization policy, both Baghdad government officials and Shia militia parties backed and even built alliances with Abu Mazin for a number of reasons.

Firstly, Abu Mazin operated as a bridge between Baghdad based authorities and the al-Jabour tribes, the largest and most powerful tribes in the north and centre of Salah al-Din. Since 2003, the majority of al-Jabouris refused co-optation by the Baghdad government but simultaneously needed access to state resources and jobs. This access has been provided by Abu Mazin who has enjoyed considerable support among al-Jabour tribes. Backing Abu Mazin allows the Iraqi federal government to indirectly control the al-Jabouris and stabilise its authority in significant parts of Salah al-Din province⁸⁷ where a restive Sunni population oppose Baghdad's rule.⁸⁸

Secondly, Abu Mazin has been consistent in supporting and gaining the trust of the ISF and powerful Shia leaders like Maliki. As the deputy governor for security affairs (2003-2009), Abu Mazin collaborated with the existing ISF in Salah al-Din against insurgent and extremist groups in the province. During this period, he gained a reputation for being pro-government and anti-Sunni insurgency. He continued maintaining strong ties with the government security forces when he became the head of the PC (2009-2011) and then governor (2011-2014).⁸⁹

Abu Mazin consistently backed Maliki and his policies in Salah al-Din. He was a member of Ayad Allawi's al-Wataniyah coalition between 2003 and 2009. But after the provincial elections of 2009, he cut ties with Allawi's alliance and became close to Maliki⁹⁰ who ordered the ISF in Salah al-Din to back Abu Mazin in his local struggle for power with the IIP.⁹¹ More

83 Reuters Staff, 'Special Report: After Iraqi forces take Tikrit, a wave of looting and lynching', April 3, 2015. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-tikrit-special-re-idUSKBN0MU1DP20150403>; Erica Gaston & Frauke Maas, 'Iraq after ISIL: Tikrit and Surrounding Areas', *Global Public Policy Institute (GPPI)*, August 29, 2017. Available at: <https://www.gppi.net/2017/08/29/iraq-after-isil-tikrit-and-surrounding-areas>; Andras Derzsi-Horvath, Mario Domisse, and Hana Nasser, 'Iraq after ISIL: Baiji', *GPPI*, September 13, 2017. Available at: <https://www.gppi.net/2017/09/13/iraq-after-isil-baiji>

84 Mac Skelton & Zmkan Ali Saleem, 'Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries After ISIS: Heterogenous Actors Vying for Influence', *LSE/Middle East Centre Report*, February 2019. Available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100100/3/DIBsReport.pdf>, pp.15-20.

85 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1– September 25, 2020.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

88 Eric Robenson, Daniel Egel, Patrick B Johnnosn, Sean Mann, Alexander D. Rothenberg, and David Stebbins, 'When the Islamic State Comes to Town: The Economic Impact of Islamic State Governance in Iraq and Syria', *RAND*, 2017. Available at: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1900/RR1970/RAND_RR1970.pdf, pp.163-164.

89 Ibid.

90 Al-Jabouri, (2019), *Op.Cit.*

91 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1– September 25, 2020.
Ibid.

importantly, Abu Mazin refused to support the anti-Maliki Sunni protests of 2012-2013 that reached Tikrit and he remained loyal to the Baghdad government and the ISF.⁹² He even publicly stated that the protests were infiltrated by the AQI and foreign countries like Qatar.⁹³

Finally, in his formal capacity as the governor and an MP from Salah al-Din Abu Mazin did not oppose the presence of Shia militia groups in the province. In return for the backing of the Shia militia leaders, Abu Mazin and his affiliated officials in Salah al-Din have for the most part, turned a blind eye to the presence and activities of militia groups in the province.⁹⁴ For instance, the government officials in Tikrit have not tried to practically assert authority over the local administrations in the Shia areas of the province such as Tuz-Khurmato, Balad, and Djel that are under the control of Badr and the AAH.⁹⁵ The authorities in Tikrit have also failed to stop and act against the illegal practices of the Shia militias in Salah al-Din that included economic extortion (seeking rents from government projects, private businesses, and oil infrastructure—smuggling oil from the major oil refinery in Beji), land grab, and abusing the rights of local Sunni citizens.⁹⁶ As such, Abu Mazin secured support from powerful militia leaders like Hadi Ameri, the leader of Badr and Qaiys Khaz'ali, the leader of the AAH.⁹⁷

Without the support of these Shia militia parties and powerful figures— influential in both the Baghdad government and on the ground in Salah al-Din— it would have been difficult for Abu Mazin to survive as a key power broker. Abu Mazin has had his vulnerabilities exploited by his rivals in the province. One of his key

weaknesses is that his party lacked clear structure and cohesiveness. Indeed, al-Jamahir does not possess clear identity/ideology nor economic and political agendas. Further, the party has little presence on the ground and lacks clear organisational structure (for instance the party does not have many visible offices and its members rarely hold regular meetings).⁹⁸ A local politician with knowledge about the party stated, “The party is a coalition based on shared personal economic and political interests of some figures who come together during elections in order to secure seats and positions within the local and national governing institutions. Instead of working for the implementation of clearly defined governing agendas and policies, the post-election coordination between the key figures of al-Jamahir aimed to secure economic gains of the same figures and preserve their positions within the government”.⁹⁹ This characteristic of Abu Mazin's al-Jamahir allowed for occasional defections from the party.

Shia influential figures and militia parties came to the aid of Abu Mazin when in 2015 the governor of Salah al-Din, Ra'aid al-Jabouri defected from Abu Mazin's coalition and threatened the latter's control over the province. After he secured a seat in the Iraqi parliament in 2014, Abu Mazin appointed his cousin Ra'aid as Salah al-Din's governor.¹⁰⁰ But in 2015 Abu Mazin returned to the province and sought to reclaim his former job as governor having lost his ministerial seat in Baghdad (he was appointed as State Minister for the Governorate's Affairs in Haider Abdi's government in 2015 but soon lost the position after Abadi decided to reduce the

92 Ibid.

93 Al-Fayha TV Channel, 'Salah al-Din Governor swears to Quran that he knows of terrorists within the protestors in Anbar and Salah al-Din', May 2013. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTDCpJ9Or7A&feature=share>

94 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1– September 25, 2020.

95 Ibid.

96 Officials from other Sunni factions, such as Ahmed Krayeem, were vocal about militia activities and practices. In 2019, Krayeem said, “most of the parking garages in Salahaddin are contracted to a leading figure in the PMF called (Ahmed Kabreta) who manages most of the corrupt deals and oil smuggling to the north of the country.” He added “some elements within the PMF are not welcomed in our governorate given their involvement in theft, bribery, and kidnaping. Their presence constitutes a threat to the security of the governorate.” Quoted in: The Baghdad Post, 'Ahmed al-Krayeem: a leader in the sectarian PMF manages corruption deals that erode the state in Salah al-Din', December 2018, 2018. Available at: <https://www.thebaghdadpost.com/ar/Story/139938/أحمد-الكريمي-قيادي-في-الحشد-الشعبي-الطائفي-يدين-صفقات-فساد-تتخرق-الدولة-في-صالح-الدين>

97 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1– September 25, 2020.

98 Ibid

99 Interview with a local official from Salah al-Din. August 2020, Erbil.

100 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1– September 25, 2020.

number of ministries in his cabinet).¹⁰¹ Backed by the powerful militia leader Abu Mahdi Muhandis and his local Sunni allies, including Yazan al-Jabouri along with his father Mash'an al-Jabouri, Ra'aid first refused to abandon the post for Abu Mazin.¹⁰²

Unexpectedly, however, Ra'aid decided to resign from his post and give way to Abu Mazin to regain the governor's position in 2016.¹⁰³ Key informants, including government officials and observers from Salah al-Din, attributed Abu Mazin's successful return to the governor's position mainly to the support he received from Maliki, Khaz'ali, and Ameri. The Shia leaders convinced Muhandis to abandon his support for Ra'aid and ordered four Shia members of Salah al-Din's PC to express their support to Abu Mazin. They added that Khaz'ali's AAH militiamen were providing protection to Abu Mazin when he was visiting the province during the crisis over the governor's position.¹⁰⁴ Abu Mazin himself stated, "I have strong relations with the AAH leader Qayis Khaz'ali".¹⁰⁵ With no viable alternative to support, the powerful Shia leaders decided to help Abu Mazin re-establish his formal authority in the province.

Sunni leaders who lacked Abu Mazin's aforementioned qualities failed to gain long-term support of the Shia militia parties and leaders. Even though they joined the anti-IS war in Salah al-Din, local figures like Yazan and Mash'an al-Jabouri (the head of al-Watan party) lacked Abu Mazin's consistency in supporting the ISF and maintaining stable and durable ties to Shia powerful leaders in Baghdad. Mash'an is known for frequently shifting alliances and political stances and along with his son Yazan they publicly supported the anti-Baghdad Sunni insurgency.¹⁰⁶ They both were under charges of supporting terrorism before the rise of IS.¹⁰⁷

These charges were dropped against them for purely tactical reasons, namely the Shia leaders' needs for their help in mobilising local Sunni fighters against IS in the province.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, they failed to gain the support of Shia leaders and militia parties to take control of Salah al-Din.

Both Mash'an and Yazan are staunch opponents of Abu Mazin and have tried to weaken and end his role in the province. They attempted to achieve this by supporting Ra'aid during the crisis over the governor's position in 2016 and via bringing corruption charges against Abu Mazin. Indeed, Abu Mazin was imprisoned by government authorities in 2017 based on numerous corruption charges that were brought against him.¹⁰⁹ Those charges were later dropped and Abu Mazin was freed by the courts. Key informants asserted that the court's decision to release Abu Mazin was influenced by his alliance with powerful Shia political figures and militia leaders.¹¹⁰ Again, the alliance with powerful Shia stakeholders ensured Abu Mazin's survival as a key power broker.

While they cooperated with Shia militias, Yazan and Mash'an failed to deal with the contradictions associated with such cooperation. In contrast, Abu Mazin allied with key Shia stakeholders within the Iraqi system and this allowed him access to national funds which he used to maintain and strengthen his patronage network. Abu Mazin secured the support of the Jabouris by providing members of the tribe with access to state resources and by refraining from direct attachment to the Shia militias. To further balance the contradictions associated with the alliance with Shia militias and leaders, Abu Mazin relied on identity politics, another key lever of his power addressed in the following section.

101 Almadapaper.net, (2019), Op.Cit.

102 Al-Jabouri, (2016), Op.Cit.

103 Rudaw.net, 'Salahaddin provincial council: al-Jabouri resigned because he could not take the responsibility for the position', April 6, 2016. Available at: <https://www.rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/060420161>

104 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1 – September 25, 2020.

105 Al-Samarra TV, 'Interview with Salah al-Din Governor Abu Mazin', April 2016. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvIBjkLWZRg&feature=share>

106 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1 – September 25, 2020.

107 Samaha, (2016), Op.Cit.

108 Ibid.

109 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1 – September 25, 2020.

110 Ibid.

Identity politics

The trauma of displacement and enduring the violations of Shia militias have become defining features of the Sunnis' identity and consciousness that Abu Mazin and his allied government officials have tapped into through their public rhetoric. They have continued relying on *moral populism*¹¹¹ as a mechanism of power, despite their public denunciation of sectarianism (الطائفية). Abu Mazin and his affiliated government officials adopted a discourse that sought to: (1) mobilise members of the Sunni community in their own favour; (2) evade the responsibility for their failure to provide services and reconstruction in the province; and (3) distance themselves from human rights violations committed by Shia militias against Sunni citizens.

The war with IS brought countless sufferings to the members of Salah al-Din's Sunni community and large numbers of them fled their homes and became IDPs outside the province.¹¹² For many of those IDPs the road to return has been difficult and complicated. Some of them have lost their entire sources of their livelihoods (homes, lands, and properties),¹¹³ while others have been forced to pay compensations for crimes they have not committed.¹¹⁴ The defeat of IS in the province has not ended the sufferings for the Sunnis.

Shia militias are still present across the province and are applying security pressure on the Sunni Arabs.¹¹⁵ They stop, harass, and arrest Sunnis based on their perceived ties to extremist groups like IS.¹¹⁶ The militias have been accused of extreme human rights abuses including unlawful killings of Sunni citizens.¹¹⁷ Shia militia

involvement in land grab and economic extortion in Salah al-Din has led to damages to the private and general economic interests of the Sunnis in the province.¹¹⁸ In Awja, for instance, militias of Brigade 35 have confiscated farming lands that are owned by local Sunnis.¹¹⁹ In Samarra, Sunni citizens are prevented by SS militias from reaching their business lands located near the Shia Shrines in the city.¹²⁰ The militias have used their coercive power to profit from government service projects, slowing down and preventing reconstruction and development in the province. The AAH militias, for instance, have forced private companies working on infrastructure projects around Balad district to pay them shares.¹²¹

Abu Mazin appealed to Sunni moral populism during election times in order to enhance his party's electoral gains among the province's Sunni citizens. During the May 2018 elections, for instance, he increased his anti-Shia militia rhetoric to ally with the concerns and sufferings of Salah al-Din's Sunni community and secure their votes.¹²² He specifically highlighted the coercive and intimidating behaviour of the Shia militias towards members of the Sunni community through his discourse. During a May 2018 TV interview Abu Mazin stated, "The existing armed factions in Salah al-Din force citizens in the southern, eastern, and northern parts of the province to vote for the candidates that those armed actors prefer...in the town of Yathrib men are gathered by AAH militias everyday and are told to vote for a certain candidate who is aligned with the AAH...they want to gain peoples' support via intimidation and threat...They threaten people with re-

111 In the Political Marketplace framework, moral populism refers to the ability "to both mobilize and divide populations by deploying exclusivist and religious and ethnic rhetoric." De Waal, *Op.Cit.*

112 Landinfo, *Op.Cit.*, pp.17-19.; IOM, 'Return Dynamics In Salah Al-Din Governorate', July 2020. Available at: http://iraqdtm.iom.int/images/ReturnIndex/2020722736598_iom_dtm_Return_Dynamics_In_Salah_al_Din_Jul2020.pdf.

113 Gaston & Domisse, *Op.Cit.*

114 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1 – September 25, 2020.

115 Gaston & Domisse, *Op.Cit.*

116 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1 – September 25, 2020.

117 Shelly Kittleson, 'Killing of Sunni youths prompts calls for end to impunity in Iraq', *al-monitor*, October 2020. Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/10/iraq-salahuddin-sunni-pmu.html>

118 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1 – September 25, 2020.

119 *Ibid.*

120 Ali Mamouri, 'Conflict erupts over properties surrounding Samarra shrine', *al-monitor*, January 23, 2019. Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/01/samarra-askarian-shrine-saladin-iraq.html>

121 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1 – September 25, 2020.

122 *Ibid.*

displacement to Kurdistan Region and with arrests ...I cannot accept this violation of citizens' rights...there is no freedom for Arabs, especially for Sunni Arabs."¹²³

Both Abu Mazin and his affiliated current governor of Salah al-Din Ammar Jabr Khalil have employed moral populism to escape criticism directed against them for lack of services and reconstruction in the province. In their discourse, they blamed Shia militias for preventing reconstruction and private investment.¹²⁴ They used this discourse specifically in regards to areas in the province they ignored such as Samarra which operated as a base for rivaling parties to Abu Mazin. In response to a question for why he did not pay attention to Samarra, Abu Mazin appealed to the city's Sunni citizens by stressing on the economic hardship they endured under the rule of SS militias. He stated, "How do I help Samarra while the city has become a prison for its citizens?... The city is militarised and the militarisation of society is very dangerous. It does not allow for reconstruction and investment and leads to corruption and restriction of freedom... They use the protection of the shrines as a justification for keeping large armed forces there. The people there are starved to death and the hotels and restaurants are closed...do they want to create another Daesh by starving people to death?"¹²⁵

Moral populism allows Abu Mazin and his affiliated governor to distance themselves from Shia militia extreme violations of the rights of Sunni citizens in Salah al-Din. Since the defeat of the IS in the province, Shia militias have occasionally engaged in unlawful killings of innocent Sunni citizens without impunity. No security force in the province, including the ISF, has been able to defend the Sunni citizens from

the Shia militias, particularly in the far southern district of Balad where AAH militias (Brigades 41 and 42) have been present alongside formal government forces (Commando regiments from the interior ministry).¹²⁶ In this mixed Sunni-Shia district, Sunnis who had returned after the defeat of IS have been intimidated and threatened by the existing AAH militias and some of them have consequently chosen to leave their homes again (re-displaced) out of the fear of being targeted by the militias.¹²⁷ In October 2020, eight Sunni citizens from the district's Farhatiyah village were abducted and executed by unknown armed men but the perpetrators of the massacre were widely believed to be members of the AAH militias.¹²⁸ The response of governor Khalil to the Farhatiya incident shows how Abu Mazin and his allies use discourse to distance themselves from Shia militia violence and side with the victims of that violence and the larger Sunni community in the province.

The governor presented himself as the victims' defender who sought to reveal the perpetrators and hold them to account. He ruled out IS members as perpetrators of the killings by stating that "the incident was not a terrorist act but a criminal one".¹²⁹ He blamed the forces who held ground in the area (AAH militia and a Commando regiment of interior ministry) for their negligence and for allowing the perpetrators (20 armed men) to enter to the village and abduct the victims. He stated "as governor and the head of the security committee in the province I am unable to go to the area where the incident took place without the permission of the existing security forces there. Then how come 20 armed men (the perpetrators) passed through to the village without the permission of the security forces that hold ground in the area?"¹³⁰ Short of directly accusing the Shia militias of conducting

123 Al-Arabiya al-Hadath TV, 'Salahaddin governor Ahmed Abdullah al-Jabouri described security oppression and threats of voters by the PMF in the governorate as disaster', May 9, 2018. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfzROa-vk7M>

124 See two consecutive TV interviews with the current governor Ammar Jabr Khalil: Al-Tagheer TV Channel, 'From Baghdad: interview with Salahaddin governor', First Episode, July, 7, 2019. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNkywGOerjs>; Al-Tagheer TV Channel, 'From Baghdad: interview with Salahaddin governor', Second Episode, July, 9, 2019. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DT19wJTMJQY&feature=share>; and this interview with Abu Mazin: al-Sharqiya TV, 'Luabat al-Karasi', May 2020a. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h83pd3jVWr4&feature=share>

125 NRT Arabic, 'Tjina al-Salifa', May 2019. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0lcB5yHbt2o&feature=share>

126 In-person and phone interviews with several current and former government officials, local journalists, and observers from Salah al-Din, July 1 – September 25, 2020.

127 Ibid.

128 Kittleson, (2020), *Op.Cit.*

129 Alsharqiya TV, 'Luabat al-Karasi: the Balad massacre shocks the country', October 2020b. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGC_RzrB-70w&feature=share

130 Ibid.

the killings he left no question for the existence of some form of collaboration between the security forces in the area and the perpetrators. He thus sided with the Sunni citizens and against criminals and their collaborators among the Shia militias and formal security forces.

In his discourse, governor Khalil suggested for the removal of the Shia militias in Salah al-Din to prevent the reoccurrence of future violations despite the fact that he held no power over the movement of armed forces in the province. He criticised the way in which the province was blanketed with multiple security forces by stating, "in one village there are security forces from three different ministries. Why and how is this reasonable? How security is administered in the light of the lack of a clear command structure and coordination between these forces?"¹³¹ He then demanded that the PMF and the army to be removed from the province, and for the local police to be tasked with protecting the security of the cities and towns of Salah al-Din. He stated, "We are absolutely convinced that the local police are capable of providing security to the province...We don't need these other overlapping security forces... This is the only solution".¹³² This discourse allowed Khalil to align himself with the members of the Sunni community whose security and physical existence were threatened by the presence of the Shia militias in their province. Further, the governor's suggestion for local police to take control of the province's internal security resonated with the Sunni citizens given the fact the majority of the members of the local police were Sunni Arabs from the province and were unlikely to engage in extreme violence against their own community.

Through his discourse, Khalil highlighted how incidents like the one in Farhatiyah increased the feelings of insecurity among the Sunnis of Salah al-Din and enhanced the idea of creating an autonomous region in the province among them. He stated, "Today we listen to our people and all of them seek the creation of an autonomous

region...They seek a place where they feel secure. We are against tearing Iraq apart but go to Salah al-Din and conduct a survey and ask people whether they want an autonomous region and see what they say... I would say that no less than 70% of the province's people would say yes for the creation of an autonomous region."¹³³

The idea of creating an autonomous region which denotes greater local control over the affairs of the province has had support among the Sunni elites and ordinary citizens of Salah al-Din. In 2011, for instance, the majority of the PC members of the governorate voted in favour of creating an autonomous region but the motion was opposed and rejected by the Baghdad government under Maliki.¹³⁴ It is not a surprise that the idea now has greater resonance among the Sunnis of the province given their sufferings under the rule of the Shia militias. Khalil's discourse must be understood within this context in which he attempted to ally with the demands and ambitions of Salah al-Din's Sunni community in order to enhance his local acceptance.

Conclusions & Policy Recommendations

Through the case of Salah al-Din, this research has shown that Sunni exclusion in Iraq exists but is layered. While the Sunni population remained marginalised and structurally disadvantaged, the Sunni elites became fully part of the post-2003 system and benefited from it. Unlike ordinary Sunni citizens, who continued to suffer under the rule of Shia militias and the ISF, the Sunni elites operated on a different level and integrated themselves into the *Muhassasah* system and accessed state resources and prerogatives via different tactics and mechanisms. This dynamic of both Sunni marginalisation and empowerment was demonstrated through examining the sources and levers of Abu Mazin's power in Salah al-Din that included tribal connections, transactional exchanges, alliances with Shia influential figures and militia parties, and identity

¹³¹ Aldijla TV, 'The detail of the crime in Balad provided by the governor of Salah al-Din', October 2020. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RALJn5BIJwQ&feature=share>

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Alsharqiya TV, (2020b), Op.Cit.

¹³⁴ Iraq-business news, 'Salahaddin Province Declares Autonomy', October 2011. Available at: <https://www.iraq-businessnews.com/2011/10/28/salahad-din-province-declares-autonomy/>

politics. Leveraging these mechanisms, Abu Mazin became a key power broker within a fragmented, but at same time competitive, political marketplace.

Abu Mazin's influence is partially tied to the continuing relevance and power of tribes in the Sunni areas of Iraq, namely the authority of al-Jabour tribes in Salah al-Din. He satisfied the needs of al-Jabour for state resources and jobs via his connections with Shia influential figures. Meanwhile, he addressed a key concern of the Jabouris (their distrust and resentment for Shia militias) by maintaining pragmatic relations with the Shia figures and militia groups as opposed to direct attachment to Shia militia organisations. The ability to deal with such contradictions allowed Abu Mazin to secure a stable electoral support base in the province. In addition to tribal ties, Abu Mazin relied on transactional politics in order to maintain and expand his government control. Fluidity of alliances and party membership allowed him to purchase the loyalties of government officials (particularly PC members) tied to other parties and factions in exchange for material rewards shifting the political marketplace in his own favour.

Abu Mazin, however, owed his survival as an influential player mainly to his alliance with Shia figures and militia parties powerful in both the Baghdad government and on the ground in Salah al-Din. As a Sunni Arab government official, Abu Mazin proved himself as a trustworthy ally to Shia influential figures and militia leaders by supporting their policies and serving their strategic and economic interests in the province. In return, the alliance provided him with access to the government in Baghdad which had been key to maintaining his control in Salah al-Din. Meanwhile, he attempted to prevent this alliance from damaging his reputation and acceptance among the province's Sunni Arab citizens— who continued to suffer from the same Shia militias—, by relying on identity politics and appealing to the Sunni identity of Salah al-Din's Sunni citizens. Abu Mazin and government officials allied with him used discourse in order to distance themselves from the violations of the Shia militias and ally with the concerns of the Sunni community and to mobilise the Sunni citizens for their own support.

The survival of Abu Mazin as a key power broker in the future depends on his ability to deal with his vulnerabilities. Given Iraq's financial crisis, caused by Covid 19 and the plummeting oil prices, allocation of funds from the national budget to the governorates could lower considerably. This, in turn, could shrink Abu Mazin's political budget and undermine his ability to maintain the support of local government officials and the loyalties of al-Jabour tribes. Further, Abu Mazin's competition with other Sunni influential figures like Muhammed Halbousi on the national level has blown back against him in his core area of support in Salah al-Din. Both national and local rivals could possibly try to undermine Abu Mazin's influence by encouraging defections within his coalition in the province as was the case with Ra'aid al-Jabouri in 2015.

Moreover, Abu Mazin's survival ultimately depends on his alliance with Shia influential figures and militia party leaders and if these Shia stakeholders decided to abandon him, he would have little chance to survive as a key power broker. In December 2020, the Iraqi appeal court banned Abu Mazin from participating in future elections due to the fact that he was previously pardoned for involvement in corruption cases. To change the court's decision, Abu Mazin needs the backing of Shia influential leaders such Maliki, Ameri, and Khaza'ali whose role proved crucial in helping him out of prison in 2017 after he was formally charged with corruption by the courts.

The research proposes that in order to influence the dynamics of the political marketplace in Salah al-Din in favour of the Sunni citizens, reform minded officials in the Government of Iraq (GoI) with the support of international community (UNAMI, European Union, US, and the UK) should take the following steps:

1. **Restore effective oversight mechanisms to fight corruption in the province's governance institutions.** Large amounts of the funds allocated to Salah al-Din from the national government are wasted in the dynamics of political transactions, formation of patronage networks and political competition. Only provincial elections can help in restoring robust oversight mechanisms over the

local institutions in the province in the long run. Until provincial elections are held, the Gol with the support of the international community should devise alternative oversight mechanisms that help in holding local officials accountable and in distributing funds and resources among the province's population in a fair manner.

2. Hold provincial elections in order to change the current power dynamics and re-establish public authority in the province.

The lack of provincial elections since 2013 perpetuated the current power dynamics that favours certain elites. Local officials, including PC members, sold their loyalties for personal gains thinking that provincial elections would not take place and voters would not have the chance to punish them for their behaviour by not voting for them in future elections. Provincial elections could potentially allow ordinary citizens to elect candidates they prefer and, thus, have greater control over the local government. However, provincial elections may not pave the way for the re-establishment of a more accountable and cohesive public authority in the province unless those elections take place under robust international oversight.

3. Devise a security policy in Salah al-Din that is more appreciative of the Sunni citizens' concerns.

In tandem with fighting terrorism in the province, the Gol should ensure that the multiple and large security forces in Salah al-Din operate according to clear and coherent command and control structure. Realistically, this is the least that the Gol can do to prevent the recurrence of cases of mass killings of Sunni citizens such as the October 2020 incident in Farhatiya/Balad. Such incidents deepen the sense of marginalisation among the Sunnis and only enable local power brokers to capitalise on them.



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