SAFETY&DEFENSE
ISSN 2450-551X

Non-State Actors as Security Providers: Dwekh Nawsha – Sectarian Militia, Counter-Terrorism Partner, or Proxy?

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.37105/sd.152

Abstract

Contemporary "premodern" conflicts, or "new wars" are characterized by the de-professionalization of the use of force and the emergence of various non-state actors: warlords, paramilitary units, sectarian militias, proxies, etc., and their growing role as security providers. This paper examines the status, activities and effectiveness of a non-state actor, Dwekh Nawsha (DN), as a security provider in northern Iraq during the Daesh (aka the so-called "Islamic State") invasion.
The author investigates DN's status as a self-defense group and ethno-religious militia; its independence and proxy status; its effectiveness in realizing self-assumed tasks of providing security to the local population; and group participation in combat operations and in the coalition counter-terrorism endeavors.
This article is based on the results of qualitative investigation methods, i.e., interviews with the DN members conducted by the author in Duhok, northern Iraq, in March 2015, follow-up e-mail and telephone exchange, social media analysis, complemented with an overview of existing academic reports, literature, and the news.
The research results allow us to conclude that non-state actors can be of various use to local communities, and not necessarily only combat-related, but also self-assurance for the local population and propagation of their challenges in the international media. However, in order for such a group to exist, it may be necessary to assume patronage and thus become someone's proxy. Considering DN's overall limited potential (modest manpower, lack of equipment, diverse training, operational limitations), the author favorably assesses (proportionally to its capacity) the group's role as a security provider in the Daesh-occupied Iraq.

Keywords

Daesh/Islamic State, Dwekh Nawsha, counter-terrorism, non-state actors, proxy, security

Submitted: 03.08.2021 Accepted: 23.11.2021 Published: 27.12.2021

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to examine the status, activities, functions, and effectiveness of a non-state actor, Dwekh Nawsha (DN), as a security provider in northern Iraq during the Daesh organization's (or the "Islamic State", as they unsoundly refer to themselves) presence in the region. The main research question behind the research can be stated as what were the functions of DN, and how did the group realize them? In order to answer this problem, the author's intention is to examine DN's status and function as a self-defense group and ethno-religious militia; its independence and proxy (auxiliary) role; its effectiveness in realizing its self-assumed tasks of providing security to the local population; and DN's participation in combat operations and in coalition counter-terrorism endeavors.

This paper is based on the author's own qualitative research conducted on the field, i.e., observations, interviews with the DN members conducted by the author in Duhok, northern Iraq (Kurdistan Regional Government, KRG) in March 2015, follow-up e-mail and telephone exchanges with former DN foreign volunteers, social media analysis (social media accounts related with DN) and complemented with an overview of existing academic reports, literature, and the news (Abouzeid, 2014; Associated Press, 2014; Cetti-Roberts, 2015; Collard, 2015; Dunn, 2015, Kozera and Klein, 2015; Metzger, 2015; Belz, 2016; API, 2020; Czyż 2020).

The first interviews with foreign volunteers were conducted in the early stages of DN's activity (March 2015) in Iraq, together with some follow-up conversations during volunteers' deployment to the area (April-November 2015). However, the most useful interviews for this study were conducted after the disbandment of the group and its volunteers' return to their homelands (July-November 2021). Both the geographical and temporal distance allowed us to take on the subject more objectively and openly. The inquiries were conducted in the form of in-depth interviews divided into two domains concerning the person and the group. Thus, questions were asked about the volunteers themselves – their background, motivations for joining, intentions regarding their role, perceptions of the group, their foes, and the surrounding reality. Another set of questions was devoted to the group itself and was more technical: its size, commanders, tasks, their realization; internal dynamics, issues, outcomes, group perception by the local population, cooperation with other actors, etc. The volunteers were interviewed separately, except for a common session on March 2, 2015 in Duhok. Although the author never had any doubts about interviewers' sincerity and accuracy of the information provided by the volunteers, all data were cross-checked with other available sources in order to establish the highest possible accuracy and quality of the research.

Based on the generated and collected data, the author aimed at establishing the full picture of the group, which has not yet been discussed in academic circles. Additionally, the author analyzes DN security-providing function: as an ethnic (sectarian) self-defense militia, counter-terrorism partner in an offensive against Daesh, and a KRG proxy – with a proviso that one role does not exclude another. That, in fact, reveals the author's hypothesis that DN, regardless of how limited its military potential, had realized all these functions, thus reflecting the typical complexity of non-state actors in irregular conflicts.

The author decided to postpone publishing this research to avoid exposing the DN's members and their activity when they were under direct threat from Daesh. Several years after the events and disbandment of the group, it seems that this topic can be approached

without the fear of endangering the group and its members or jeopardizing their activities. With passing time, it can also be treated with more objectivity.

2. New wars, (pre)modern conflicts and non-State actors: paramilitary units, self-defense groups, ethno-religious militias, and proxies

With the "old", conventional war increasingly becoming obsolete and a matter of historical studies, and with the (re)emergence of so-called hybrid conflicts and non-linear, or full-spectrum warfare, a various array of non-state actors appears more vividly in contemporary conflict zones. These are "paramilitary units, local warlords, criminal gangs, police forces, mercenary groups and also regular armies, including breakaway units from regular armies" (Kaldor, 2012, pp. 9-10), but also local tribal militias, self-defense groups, vigilantes, and various other often ad hoc emerging forces, including others' proxies. Mary Kaldor dubbed the conflicts characterized by these non-state actors' extended footprint "the new wars" (2012). Yet, in fact, they are more similar to the wars we had already seen in a more distant past.

Conflict zones over the last quarter of century more and more resemble the premodern battlefield than the postmodern battle-space. These armed conflicts are more of an internal character than international, even if they have been internationalized. They are decentralized, fragmentized, decomposed, or even degenerated. Such conflicts are of lower intensity than conventional state-to-state wars; however, they are bloodier. The lack of any respect for *ius in bello* (law of war), especially the protection of civilian populations, contributes to the emergence of brutal and barbaric use of force. In fact, such premodern conflicts do not distinguish between the military and the civilian, combatant and non-combatant – they are de-professionalized and thus convey war from the militaries onto civilians (Van Creveld 1991; de La Maisonneuve, 1997, p. 167; David, 2000, pp. 153-154; Kaldor, 2012, p. VI). War becomes *à la medievale*, and "erases the institutional role of the state in its monopoly on the use of force and encourages that of irregulars and feudal in service of bands, clans and ethnicities" (David, 2000, p. 154). Since nature abhors the vacuum, the lack of state institutions is filled with non-state actors of various sizes, motivations, and tactics who become security providers.

The environment in which Daesh, , intended to establish their feudal and archaic vision of the state was premodern and that of "new wars". By erasing any pre-existing institutions on territories of these modern, though failed, states of Iraq and Syria, Daesh contributed to this character of the conflict environment. Being inspired by selectively picked fragments of the Quran, not less selectively chosen examples of the medieval Muslim caliphate, Daesh intended to emulate the idea. The minorities were to be subjected to the strict and Salafi interpretation of sharia and deprived of full rights. Those who were not believers in one God (e.g., atheists or polytheists) were to be targeted with exceptional cruelty and ultimately eradicated (Cockburn, 2015; Weiss and Hassan, 2015).

In armed conflicts, some non-state actors serve the interests of other groups, governments or powers – thus, they become their proxy, surrogate, auxiliary or affiliated forces (Rauta, 2019). To facilitate understanding the term and without dividing it into sub-categories, one can assume that a "proxy is a substitute, an intermediary used by another" to pursue their patron's interests (Kozera et al., 2020, p. 79). For this study, it will be useful to narrow the definition down to non-state proxy armed forces as "irregular organizations that act wholly or partially on behalf of a foreign government in an internal armed conflict" (Wither, 2020, p. 19). However, let us refine this definition to the local context by

underlining that "foreign government" may not necessarily mean a foreign state's government, but also that of other, autonomous political entities (which may apply to the KRG in Iraq). Proxy forces are sponsored by their patron and realize their interests and aims. Yet, this does not mean that they lack their own goals or that they are entirely dependent on their patron – some of the proxies are even capable of abusing their patronage for their own gain (Kozera et al., 2020, p. 82). The potential role of DN as a KRG's proxy force is examined in this article as well.

3. The peril of Iraqi minorities as the genesis of Dwekh Nawsha's emergence

In such a deeply premodern, de-institutionalized, insecure and "everyone for himself" environment, various minority ethnic and religious groups felt susceptible to abuse or even genocide. After the fall of Mosul at the beginning of June 2014, dozens of thousands of Christians and other minorities fled the city. Yet the later Yezidi massacre around Mount Sinjar in northern Iraq in August 2014 brought world's attention to the plight of minorities under the Daesh rule and left them with no disillusion. Mass murder of men, rape and enslavement of thousands of Yezidi women and children by Daesh triggered feelings of peril among other minorities (Revkin and Wood, 2020, p. 2).

Assyrian Christians (some of them identify as Chaldeans or Syriacs) have lived in Iraq since the 1st century AD. They have felt persecuted and neglected by the central government already since 2003, which is reflected in their diminishing numbers. In the wake of the second Gulf War, there were ca. 1.5 million Christians in Iraq and a decade later, there were only between 200,000 and 500,000. As 2021 estimations show, less than 1/10 of the pre-intervention number – only ca. 142.000 people of this religious denomination remain (Lewis, 2003; Shlama, 2021). With the growing threat of radical Islam and terrorist attacks, many have left Iraq, seeking refuge elsewhere. By August 2014, with the Yezidi genocide, the situation seemed ever more perilous. Some of those who stayed in small pockets of Christian villages and communities in northern Iraq decided to organize themselves in desperate efforts to persevere in their homeland. Thus, several local militias affiliated with the Iraqi Assyrians and their major political parties emerged. The main groups were: the Nineveh Plain Protection Unit (NPU), the Babylon Brigade and DN. This article analyses the latter, primarily upon author's own observation and interviews with the group members.

4. Dwekh Nawsha – a self-defense Assyrian militia

In Assyrian (or Syriac), Dwekh Nawsha means those ready to sacrifice themselves or 'self-sacrificers'. The militia emerged during of the Daesh occupation of Iraq and Syria in summer 2014 (DN gives August 11, 2014 as the official date; Dwekh Nawsha, 2017), just after the Sinjar massacre. At that time, the name might not have been an exaggeration. Other sources point to the formation of the group in October 2014 with the help of Kurdish Peshmerga once the Kurds recaptured the Christian villages around Teleskuf and Bakufa, just a dozen miles north of Mosul (Associated Press, 2014). According to the group social media it ceded to operate on August 11, 2017 with their land being relatively safe again and handed back to local authorities.

The militia was affiliated with the Assyrian Patriotic Party (APP) that also hosted DN's headquarters in Duhok (see picture below, Figure 1). Although the other militia, the NPU, affiliated itself with a competing party (the Assyrian Democratic Movement), both militias were in contact and cooperated. Despite some minor political differences, the groups shared the vital interest of the same populations – their very survival. Also, DN worked with the KRG through their armed forces – the Peshmerga, while the NPU was believed to be in closer relations with the central government in Baghdad. In November 2016, Majid Eliya, a DN's commander and the APP spokesman, declared the unification of all Assyrian forces against Daesh (Dwekh Nawsha, 2016), yet it does not seem that it had any impact on the group's later activities.

DN was composed of local Iraqi Assyrians from the Nineveh Plains and around a dozen foreign volunteers, who were supported by the *Zeravani,* KRG's gendarmerie or military police. Early press estimates gave the number of 40-50 men in the second part of 2014 (Abouzaid, 2014; Metzger, 2015). According to the author, the group totaled no more than 50 militants at its peak. While the leaders boasted of having ca. 250 men, their number was also given by a journalist Mindy Belz (Belz, 2016), who spent some time with DN. In author's view, it is an exaggerated figure given to the media. In later follow-up exchanges (2021), former DN volunteers confirmed the number of 15-50 men rotating at the frontline every week, with ca. 10-15 being at the frontline at a given time. Among these numbers, the author's sources confirm between six and 20 foreign volunteers, with the total number reaching 25 for a short while. Thus the "official" number of 250 DN members most probably included around 200 potential volunteers that were not yet vetted nor confirmed and just expressed their willingness to join the group "on paper". We can thus optimistically assume that the manpower of 250 could be achieved under the direct threat of a renewed assault on the Assyrian settlements and favorable draft, yet the real manpower amounted to 40 Assyrians and about a dozen foreign fighters.

In some sources, DN's commander was (mis)identified as Lt. Col. Odisho Yousif, with Albert Kisso serving as his deputy (Belz, 2016). However, it was Majid Elya, an Iraqi army veteran, journalist and the APP spokesman, who was the acting chief of the unit or "field commander" (he is visible in virtually every frontline photo). The second commander was identified as Ameer. In fact, Odisho Yousif was not even known to DN's to foreign volunteers, so this points to the fact that it was rather a "representative figure". The group's political leader Emanuel Khoshaba, the APP president, was the party that was behind DN's creation.

The two-platoon size paramilitary unit complained about being under-equipped, lacking heavy weaponry (having only one RPG at the time of author's visit) and thus being outgunned by the enemy. The group operated one technical vehicle (a heavy-duty Chevrolet pick-up truck) with a mounted machine gun and at least one other unarmed Toyota pick-up (in rotation). The group, however, tried to make up for their lack of equipment with the high morale and religious devotion clearly visible in their manifestation of religious symbols.

Most of the members had Iraqi-army experience (including in the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s or the Gulf War 1991), while some helped the Kurdish resistance against Saddam Hussein. Despite that, the group members lacked cohesion, did not exercise or improve their skills and "had no true organization" as the author was informed in follow-up correspondence with one of the foreign long-time DN volunteers. Despite these shortcomings, DN's members attempted to provide security to local populations and their homes abandoned on the frontline.

Figure 1. A British volunteer by the DN's HQ gate marked with Arabic N-letter ("noon") for "*Nisrani*" (Arab. for Christians) in solidarity with Christians who were forced to mark their houses under the Daesh rule and suffer discriminatory treatment; Duhok, KRG, Iraq, March 2015. Own source. Copyright 2015 by Cyprian Aleksander Kozera.

5. Foreign fighters in the ranks of Dwekh Nawsha

After the Sinjar massacre and the growing feeling of discontent among Western societies that "not enough is being done" to stop the ordeal of Iraqi and Syrian civilian populations, some of the Westerners decided to join local armed groups facing the threat of Daesh. While over 40 000 volunteers from all over the world joined Daesh as foreign fighters (Barret, 2017, p. 7), only a fracture of that number fought on the other side (various armed group affiliated with governments or political entities), and among them around up to a dozen joined DN. The author met six of DN's Western volunteers during his visit to DN's HQ in Duhok. They were mostly American and British (but there were also a Canadian, Frenchman, Pole, and Spaniard) and ranged in terms of motivation, ideology and training. They were primarily motivated by the aforementioned lack of Western involvement on the side of the oppressed and the plight of the Yezidi and Christian populations: beheadings, crucifixions, enslavement and rape.

Foreign volunteers' motivations can be assessed as, mainly, constructive willingness to help the weak; however, one cannot exclude adventure, prestige, or sensation seeking among them. Those who quit the army might seek a sense of belonging and validation after unsuccessfully coming back to civilian life. Others might just have felt a necessity to be engaged in a purposeful activity. Interestingly, similar pull factors ("the need for a sense of belonging, fraternity and comradeship, respect, recognition, acceptance by a group, identity, adventure, heroism") were named as contributing to the engagement of Belgian and Dutch

foreign fighters in the ranks of DN's foe – Daesh (Bakker & de Bont, 2016, p. 846). We must bear in mind, however, that the same reasons are given by numerous national armed forces' volunteers.

One volunteer admitted to suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and though he could not have continued his military career, it did not prevent him from joining the paramilitary (he did not conceal his condition). His long and seemingly untroubled stay with DN proves that his condition did not affect his activity (he stayed with the group for two years, 2015-2016, with a couple-month-long interval between his "rotations").

While among some local DN's volunteers a religious devotion was visible (yet without a tendency towards intolerant, violent extremism), their foreign counterparts underscored their non-religious motivations, rather defining themselves as non-believers. However, one of the DN's foreign fighters might have been described as highly devout or even ideologically radical, yet all of them underlined that they were there to "protect people against Daesh" – no matter whether Muslims or Christians, or just "to kill Daesh".

The overall number of DN's foreign fighters is hard to assess, yet as it has been said: it fluctuated between 6 and 20, up to 25 at a given time. At different times, the number varied – some left quickly, some stayed longer. Those who left rapidly are believed to have been disappointed with the lack of combat. Some pointed to the "over-inflated egos, unbalanced individuals and a lack of professionalism" (Dunn, 2015) among volunteers as a reason for their departure. Many complained that they were used more as an advertisement tool to draw the media attention than soldiers. At the same time, however, they admitted that raising awareness in the West about Daesh crimes was one of their main goals there. "Whole world must come together to fight Daesh" – as an ex-Marine volunteer put it, underlining his commitment to spread the news and support the global effort against Daesh. By April 2015, they were finally sent to support the Peshmerga at Sinjar – as the author was informed in a follow-up e-mail. In 2016, they operated mainly in Bakufa and the surrounding areas.

The social media analysis (Dwekh Nawsha, 2015-2018) shows that there were several foreign fighters at the same time in the ranks of the militia (cf. Figure 2). One must, however, bear in mind that some of the members had a high level of operational awareness, protected their privacy and did not appear in pictures. One of them addressed the author in Duhok, saying that "he was not there", knowing that had his personality been revealed, he could face a prison sentence back in his home country for taking part in an armed conflict. Others worried about being detained by the Turkish authorities on their way home, questioned by their country security services or targeted by extremists at home.

The foreign volunteers complained about long bureaucratic procedures on the side of the KRG, which made them wait long until they could carry the weapon openly and take part in armed patrols. They pointed to lacking funds for their endeavor, spending all their savings (including selling one's own house), and having no prospects of earning anything on the spot – they considered their mission entirely benevolent, and thus counted on external and charity funding (that came from abroad but rather in modest amounts). Having to buy weapons on their own, they counted on the Western governments arming them. However, DN's volunteers admitted that having received some German supplies, the Peshmerga shared with them. However, they did not specify whether the package was official (governmental) or sent by German sympathizers. It is known that some DN's external followers supported the group with financial (mostly from the US and Australia) or material aid (e.g., military gear sent by the Eaglewatch Foundation, a Polish NGO).

The arrival of the foreigners, however, significantly impacted the group's internal dynamics. As a US Marine Corps Veteran and a long-time DN's volunteer stated: "In the first hear, DN members liked the volunteers, but the charm wore off as volunteers were comprised of two extremes: professional soldiers and inexperienced civilians. Professional soldiers found the DN members to be lazy and disorganized. They came to help the fight

against ISIS and sought a specific place along the front line, which the over-stretched Kurds loved. Inexperienced civilians had too much difficulty adjusting to the rigorous schedule and uncomfortable life and had several discipline issues. Ultimately, the professional soldier types found the Kurds to be far more accepting and engaging and the fighting ethos to be more in line with their own. DN became two separate elements. The locals and volunteers. This began a split in the relationship, which never improved" (The author's e-mail correspondence with a DN foreign volunteer, July 29, 2021). Another foreign volunteer whom the author interviewed for the purpose of this article confirmed the above, underscoring the lack of discipline and commitment on the side of local volunteers. Due to such an approach, the foreigners had limited trust towards the locals. In consequence, it led to certain operational independence on DN's foreign fighters. (The author's telephone conversation with a DN foreign volunteer, September 4, 2021).

Foreign fighters added to the group a new dynamic of professional training and recent battlefield experience, the media attention that helped to collect funding (e.g., $3,000 for a machine gun) but also the "X-Box" approach to warfare, and lack of discipline (Collard, 2015). Merging that with local habits often being at odds with the American or British Army ethos proved challenging. Thus, the group operated at various speeds, though they managed to keep its operational functionality.

Figure 2. DN on patrol by their technical with a mounted machine gun and the Assyrian flag. The picture date states October 25, 2016, posted at DN's Facebook profile on April 26, 2017. The picture represents a typical number of several, up to a dozen men taking part in patrol, suggesting that the group was not numerous. Copyright 2016 by DN.

6. Self-defense, counter-terrorism, or serving as a proxy? Tasks, activities and external relations

The presence of *Zeravani* among DN points to their close cooperation with the autonomous Iraqi KRG. *Zeravani* served as liaison officers between the Peshmerga and DN. In fact, as it was mentioned, some sources point that the group was established with Kurdish help after the Peshmerga recaptured the Christian villages north of Mosul and handed the patrol over to the newly created local militia with higher legitimization on the ground, and at times when the Peshemerga was overstretched. The group was partially supported by the Kurdish forces with weapons. The group stationed in the Nineveh Plains: firstly, in the village of Sharafya, then in Teleskuf, Bakufa and Batnaya, north of Mosul. DN patrolled the Christian villages after their recapture from Daesh by the Peshmerga (see picture below, Figure 3).

Figure 3. A US Marines veteran and DN's volunteer, Louis "Tex" Park, holding his AK-47-type rifle on patrol in the Nineveh Plains. The volunteers had to provide for themselves, including buying their own weapons – a basic AK-47 cost 700 USD at the Iraqi black market (the prices seemed highly inflated at that period). The author's archives (the picture sent by the volunteer) Copyright 2015 by Louis "Tex" Park.

As long as the threat of terrorist attacks was omnipresent, with Daesh taking a stronghold in Mosul, the civilian population could not return to their homes. The presence of DN was to show that their land was not abandoned. Thus, the main activity of the DN was to keep their post at the berm, man and guard 3 checkpoints on a road, patrol and secure the area behind the frontlines, detect improvised explosive devices (IED), document the damages to the property, mark their armed presence, and deter enemy attacks. DN's members claimed, however, that they also took part in active combat – being attacked by ca. 18 Daesh fighters, they repelled the attack, killing two terrorists. DN's social media account also posted pictures

and videos from the frontline documenting firing on Daesh positions, from the berm in the Nineveh Plains, probably around Bakofa (see picture below, Figure 4). DN's men stationed at the frontline were under regular, though not intensive, 12.7 mm machine gun, mortar and occasionally artillery fire. At least on one occurrence, American aviation destroyed a column of Daesh vehicles moving towards the frontline. Due to American support (American forces were also spotted on October 16 and 17, 2016, during the Mosul offensive), one volunteer was convinced that some foreign fighters served as informal liaison officers to their militaries operating in the region, providing them with intelligence from the field. However, most of the time, the frontline recalled the first world war's *sitzkrieg* ("sitting war").

With a limited force of several dozen paramilitaries and only light weapons, DN could not be considered as significant operational support for the coalition forces in their combat efforts to recapture the Nineveh Plains. The language difference is very significant: the Assyrians use mostly Arabic, while the Peshmerga communicates in Sorani Kurdish, which hampered the communication with the major force in the region. According to the Assyrian Political Institute, the group finally did not actively participate in operations to liberate the Nineveh Plains (API, 2020, p. 39). The social media account seems to confirm that with photos that show "coordination" with Iraqi forces, there was no serious combat engagement (see pictures below, Figures 5 and 6). According to a foreign volunteer, initially DN was kept away from the offensive but later they were allowed to "support" the effort. Another added: "[o]nly a few local members of DN served on the front line to legitimately contribute to the defense, and fewer were effective at doing so" – pointed to rather an individual participation in the combat than that of the group.

DN was thus serving as a policing unit in liberated villages (around Alqosh, Teleskuf, Bakofa, Batnaya), as a second-line military force to guard the Peshmerga rear, or some less important section of the frontline. DN also provided KRG with certain legitimization on the Assyrian grounds and among the Christian population. The APP that affiliated the militia allegedly supported the idea of incorporating the Nineveh Plains into the Kurdish autonomous region, though not officially. At this point, it was profitable for the KRG to gain local support in their attempts to create an independent state on the ruins of Iraq – at that time, both the independence of the Kurdistan Region was lively debated (and then favored in a referendum in September 2017), and the future of Iraq was unknown. However, when the Kurds voted for independence in their referendum, the Iraqi army forced KRG to leave the non-KRG Iraqi territory (the Nineveh Plains) and thus abandon the idea of expanding Kurdish-governed territories.

DN had its own goals of protecting the local Assyrian population and their land, yet due to the lack of resources and a type of refugee status in KRG, the group had to find a patron to survive. KRG's Peshmerga provided the group with some equipment and military support. Consequently, the Peshmerga gained significant control over the APP's militia operations and possibly as well APP's support in KRG's political ambitions. In this context, the KRG-dependent DN might be considered as an auxiliary Kurdish proxy – both in counter-terrorism operations against Daesh and perhaps even potential political actions towards the Baghdad government. However, the military goals of both actors were converging; therefore, it would be hard to prove that DN realized the specific interests of KRG. Most importantly, though the existence of DN primarily gave hope and reassurance to the local Assyrian population in times of the Daesh threat, and one cannot entirely dismiss their policing role in protecting the liberated Assyrian villages from Daesh attacks. A Polish volunteer to DN stated that their presence increased the morale of the local population and ensured them that they were not left to themselves. The people felt that DN would not abandon their own people what could not be said about the Iraqi Army (already gone) or the Peshmerga who had left Sinjar unguarded a day before the Daesh attack. In recognition of DN's presence, the local people of Alqosh supported the group with gifts and their hospitality.

Figure 4. A still from a video published on YouTube and the DN Facebook profile on March 26, 2016, showing men with DN badges firing at enemy positions during a night duty at the berm. Copyright 2016 by the DN.

Figure 5. DN's visit to the Peshmerga commander of the Teleskuf axis (in the center). Majid Eliyah, DN's "field commander" stands as the 3rd from the right. The national flags worn by the foreign fighters allow us to recognize them as citizens of the United Kingdom, US, and Poland. Posted on the DN Facebook profile on September 17, 2016. Copyright 2016 by the DN.

Figure 6. Coordination with the Peshmerga – note the same uniforms worn by both forces, and one (1st from the left) wearing German army fatigues (Flecktarn). Posted at the DN Facebook profile on March 12, 2017. Copyright 2017 by the DN.

7. Conclusions

With the emergence of Daesh, and the continuously decomposing security environment in northern Iraq, the mobilization of local populations and the creation of self-defense units was not a surprise but rather a desperate sign of the deteriorating security situation on the ground. Communities left to themselves, abandoned by effectively non-existent state institutions, attempted to organize themselves, look to the outside world for protection, calling on the international community and aligning with regional stakeholders. In this context, DN was established.

DN was an ethnic militia registered under the auspices of a political party, the APP. In a highly radicalized and Daesh-dominated northern Iraq environment, where virtually all non-Sunni communities were fighting for their survival, the group was inclusive and open for cooperation with other communities. Despite its sectarian affiliation and due to operational considerations, the group aligned itself with the autonomous KRG and its armed forces – the Peshmerga, a predominantly Muslim and Kurdish entity. The cooperation included participation in operations led by the Peshmerga, limited armament transfer to the group from local Kurdish forces, and perhaps some political backing in exchange. With DN officially being an independent Assyrian militia and self-defense group, the dependence on the Peshmerga was strong enough to consider DN as a de facto Kurdish auxiliary force in the Nineveh Plains, to which the autonomous KRG has territorial claims.

DN realized paramilitary and policing operations without avoiding occasional combat experience. Yet due to its insignificant size (equal to two platoons max.), light equipment, diverse training, paramilitary character, and thus limited overall military capability, the group did not play a significant role in the coalition counter-terrorism operations. However,

as an auxiliary to a greater unit (army) taking part in such operation, DN can be considered a counter-terrorism partner to the Peshmerga – although rather a very modest one. On the other hand, its role in providing assurance to threatened minorities and local populations, guarding the frontline, protecting their property in abandoned villages, and deterrence against Daesh raids should be assessed positively. The role of DN's foreign volunteers was also significant. They played a significant role in bringing world's attention to the threats and challenges to the local population. Considering DN's potential, local context, and cooperation with other regional actors (mainly the Peshmerga), the group's overall effectiveness in providing local security should be considered favorably. The group's complex character and functions reflect its multi-faceted nature: a self-defense ethnic militia, a Peshmerga auxiliary, and even a counter-terrorism partner. However modest, it is still a security provider in the precarious security environment of the Daesh-occupied Iraq.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Grzegorz Klein for his companionship and unwavering support on the field trip to conduct interviews with the Dwekh Nawsha members in Duhok during the Daesh presence in the region.

The author wishes to express his sincere thanks to Dawid Czyż and Louis "Tex" Park for extensively and openly sharing their personal experience and knowledge, and thus significantly contributing to this research.

Declaration of interest

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

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