

## **Hashd al Shaabi-controlled villages along Highway 1, 25 November**

The Hashd al Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation Forces) have taken control of a large swathe of land west of Highway 1 to beyond Tel Afar. They also have significant presence alongside ISF units in the northern advance towards Mosul. As far as we are aware there are currently no international humanitarian organisations operating in Ninewa in the areas under direct Hashd al Shaabi control.

### **Access and security on Highway 1, north of Qayyarah junction**

We received contrasting reports regarding the security of Highway 1, north of the Qayyarah junction (Qayyarah junction on Highway 1 lies 23 km north-west of Qayyarah bridge, 4 km beyond the turning to Qayyarah West Airbase). It is officially under Federal Police (FedPol) control but other than a minor FedPol checkpoint at the junction and minor presence along the road, the Hashd al Shaabi have full control on the ground in the area we visited – between Qayyarah junction and just north of Tayyibah village.

The Hashd al Shaabi advance west of Highway 1 has been rapid and there is speculation regarding the level of security in territories they have taken and the capacity of the holding forces left behind. We were told by IDPs who had come from Ba'aj and settled near Qayyarah West Airbase that ISIS members remained in some of the villages nearby. This is unverified and according to the Hashd al Shaabi the area is safe and free of ISIS. There have reportedly been no ISIS attacks along this stretch of Highway 1 in the past month. However, ISIS-controlled villages are still a short distance away and the possibility of new IEDs being planted over night in this area or attacks being launched should not be ruled out.

Highway 1 is not busy with traffic although there is a steady flow of vehicles driving back and forth. Judging from the banners and insignia they carry, most are affiliated with various Hashd al Shaabi groups. The last 5 km before this checkpoint is slow as every 20m or so there is a metre gap in the tarmac where IEDs have been detonated or excavated. The road leads directly to the frontline just north of Adhbah village, which further suggests that the Hashd al Shaabi have significant involvement in the northern advance towards Mosul.

Travelling independently in our own vehicle, we were unable to proceed beyond the checkpoint 15 km north of the junction. The checkpoint guards (from the Harakat al-Nujabba militia) told us that there was an order from Hashd al Shaabi leadership for no Americans to be allowed beyond this point. When we said we were not American we were told that the rule applied to all foreigners. They said we'd have to present signed documents from senior commanders in the Hashd al Shaabi to be allowed through. We were also given the firm impression that the Ninewa Operational Command would not be the appropriate authority to apply to for special permission. When we asked if we could visit the nearby Water Project, within sight and on our side of the checkpoint, we were told that we could not and that we should return the way we had come. The checkpoint guards were friendly and relaxed throughout the exchange.

### **Displacement and villages in the area**

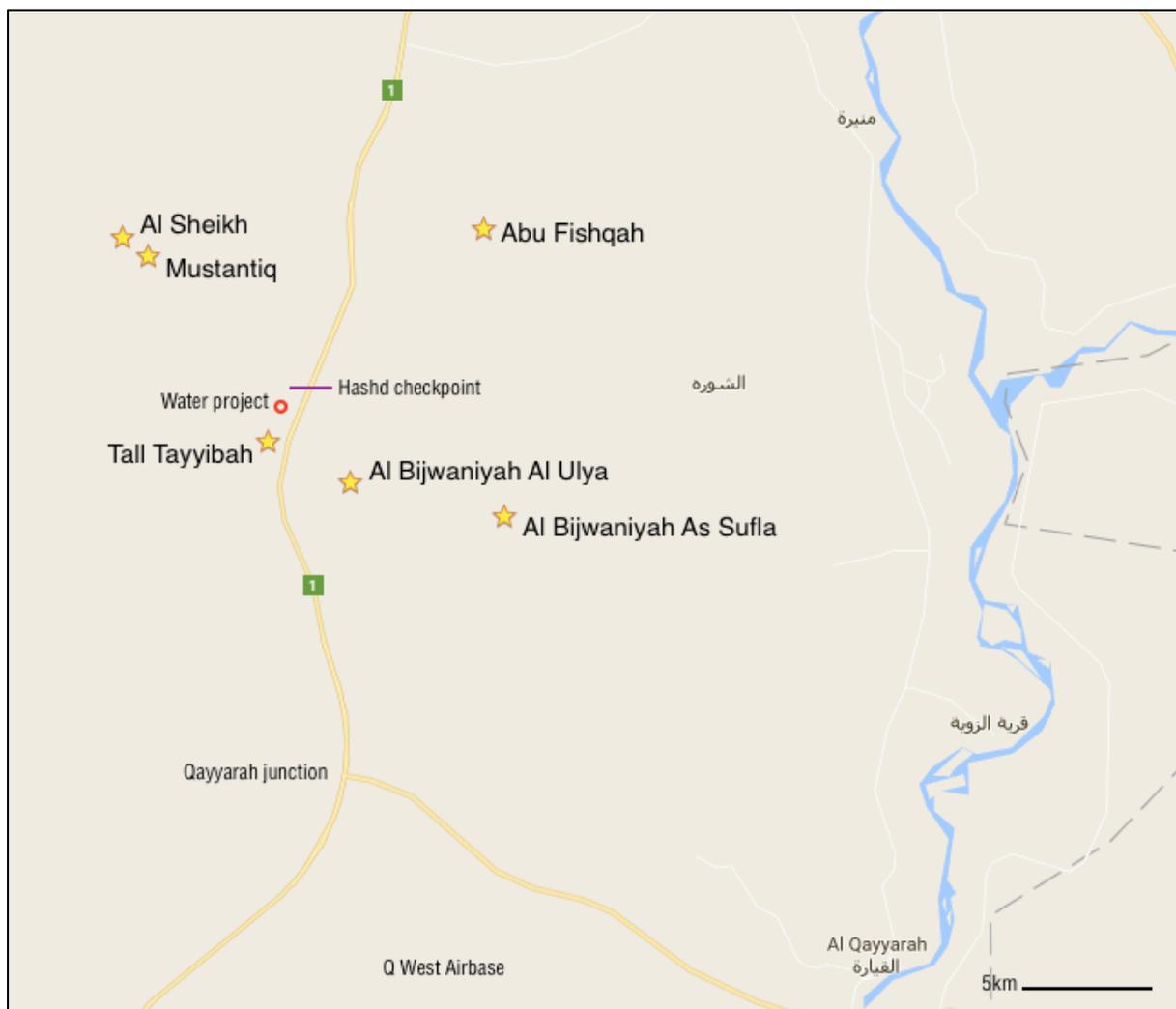
We heard from various sources that the villages in the area are not inhabited. In reality, although some are empty, others are fully or partially inhabited. Around a month ago, before the Hashd al Shaabi arrived in the area, there was significant displacement from the area, mostly towards Mosul. Families displaced in this direction because they either had some association with ISIS and/or because they feared the arrival of the

Hashd al Shaabi. Over two years of ISIS propaganda will undoubtedly have heightened fears of sectarian revenge. There has also been local displacement whereby families have travelled to nearby villages and stayed there to avoid the conflict or to escape from ISIS – we heard that the Hashd al Shaabi has helped to transport people from local villages to Tall Tayyibah. Some people from these villages have also reportedly been displaced to Jadaa camp.

We were told that in this immediate area, near Highway 1, there are 6 inhabited villages. Their names and coordinates are as follows:

- Al Sheikh, 36°2'54"N, 42°58'16"E
- Mustantiq, 36° 2'30.00"N, 42°58'56.25"E
- Abu Fishqah 36° 3'4.00"N, 43° 7'30.99"E
- Tall Tayyibah 35°58'38.20"N, 43° 2'00.47"E
- Al Bijwaniyah Al Ulya 35°57'46.81"N, 43° 4'4.80"E
- Al Bijwaniyah As Sufla 35°57'3.89"N, 43° 8'4.13"E

They are all within the Al Shura sub-district and reportedly have a current combined population of around 7,000 individuals. There may well be other inhabited villages in the area. All of these villages have reportedly been cleared of IEDs by the Hashd, but we were unable to confirm this.



### Tall Tayyibah

We visited only one village in the area: Tall Tayyibah, which is located just off Highway 1 on the west side, around 12 km north of the Qayyarah junction. To enter the village we had to cross a secure Hashd checkpoint (manned by Harakat al-Nujabba) where permission for us to enter had to be granted over the radio. Various sources reported that the village has a current population of around 1,500 people. About half this number are IDPs from nearby villages. They are living in houses that were abandoned by those families from the village that fled to Mosul ahead of the Hashd advance. Regarding security, we were told that ISIS still controls territory around 35km to the west of Tall Tayyibah. The northern frontline is near Adhbah, around 30km north. The Hashd told us that there had not been any recent attacks by ISIS along this section of Highway 1.

The main needs, as reported by the Hashd and local population, are food, water and medicine. There is also a need for fuel. The only assistance being provided in this village and others in the area comes from the Hashd al Shaabi, the ISF and religious groups connected to the Hashd. The lack of outside support was emphasised repeatedly by the Hashd commander, the local sheikh and ordinary civilians. The Hashd and ISF give from their own supplies but these are limited and they will only give what they can spare. Civilians can buy water from ISF tankers, but many cannot afford to do this. Many are therefore forced to drink dirty water from wells. There are no functioning civilian medical centres in the area but we were told that civilians are treated in the Hashd medical centre in Tall Tayyibah.

The commander told us that the Hashd al Shaabi want support from international NGOs in this area. When asked about access to the area, he said that he would be able to facilitate this.

### Tall Tayyibah water project

The rehabilitation of the local water project was highlighted as the priority need for civilians in Tall Tayyibah and surrounding villages. It reportedly supplies all the villages in the local neighbourhood.





The water project lies 2km north of Tall Tayyibah, on the west side of the road, just south of the Hashd checkpoint. As mentioned above, we were initially denied access by the nearby checkpoint guards, but later the Hashd commander at Tall Tayyibah allowed us to go there.

We were told that ISIS removed the generator and we could see that the tanks had been punctured by bullets and possibly a small IED. The pipes connecting the water project to the villages are undamaged. From a brief visual inspection the damage did not appear extensive. The engineer in charge of the water project lives in Tall Tayyibah but was away during our visit. We were told he would be able to write a full report on the water project and the extent of the damage should this be needed. The area has not been fully cleared of IEDs, but the Hashd said they would clear it should any NGOs want to carry out a technical inspection.

### Perception of the Hashd al Shaabi

We have come across several members of the Hashd al Shaabi who are aware of their negative public image in the international press regarding the treatment of civilians. Those that we have spoken to think that this is unjustified. During our own encounters with the Hashd they have been keen to show us how they are providing assistance for civilians, and have been vocal about the perceived lack of support from international NGOs and the UN. Overall – with some exceptions – we hear positive reports from civilians about the Hashd.

It should be remembered the Hashd al Shaabi is made up of well over 40 individual militias with differing reputations; it is counter-intuitive to make a single judgement. International partners should attempt to further engage with the Hashd al Shaabi in order to monitor the situation in the territories they control and provide support for civilians.

We noticed six different militias of the Hashd al Shaabi in the area we visited, as well as local Sunni Hashd Ashaari. In order of prominence, these included:

- Harakat al Nujabba
- Saraya al Salam
- Ansar al Marja'iyah
- Badr
- Liwa Ali al-Akbar
- Kata'ib Jund al-Imam