

Tall Tayyibah and Najma, 6 December

Tall Tayyibah

Having briefly visited Tall Tayyibah, a village under PMF (Hashd al Shaabi) control, on 25 November (*see previous Rise report*), we returned on 6 December to collect detailed information on the local water project and the extent of repairs that are needed, and to assess the needs of nearby villages in the area, which we were unable to reach the last time. We also wanted to learn more about the PMF's attitude towards humanitarian access in areas under their authority.

Access

Although there is often a congregation of FedPol, PMF and Hashd Ashaari at the Qayyarah junction, where the Qayyarah road meets Highway 1, the FedPol checkpoint at the junction is loosely guarded and – in our experience – it is not usually necessary to stop. The turning for Tall Tayyibah is about 13km up Highway 1, on the west side. Approximately 3km further up Highway 1 is a PMF checkpoint, which we were previously unable to pass. The water facility is on the west of the road, just south of the checkpoint.

The entrance to Tall Tayyibah is guarded by a PMF checkpoint. We had arranged to see the local sheikh, who met us there, and after a short wait we were escorted to the PMF headquarters, as had happened on our last visit.

PMF in Tall Tayyibah

The Harakat al Nujabba are the PMF militia based in Tall Tayyibah with control of the local area. The group emerged from Asaib Ahl al-Haq in 2013 and has very close ties with Iran.

Upon our arrival in Tall Tayyibah the PMF were suspicious of us and our intentions – more so, it seemed, than on our previous visit – although they remained friendly and courteous. The commander, whom we'd met before, was not there, but the deputy commander was present. Having sat down in an office in the PMF headquarters, we were asked a number of questions over the course of about an hour, particularly whether we had any American staff or links with US organisations. The deputy commander told us that they were concerned about spying and fearful of US airstrikes.

Our request to see more of Tall Tayyibah and other inhabited villages in the area to conduct rapid assessments on the humanitarian situation was denied. We were told that foreigners are not allowed in this area and that we would need signed and stamped letters of approval from the PMF leadership in Baghdad to be granted future access. When we asked how we could apply for this permission we were not given a clear answer.

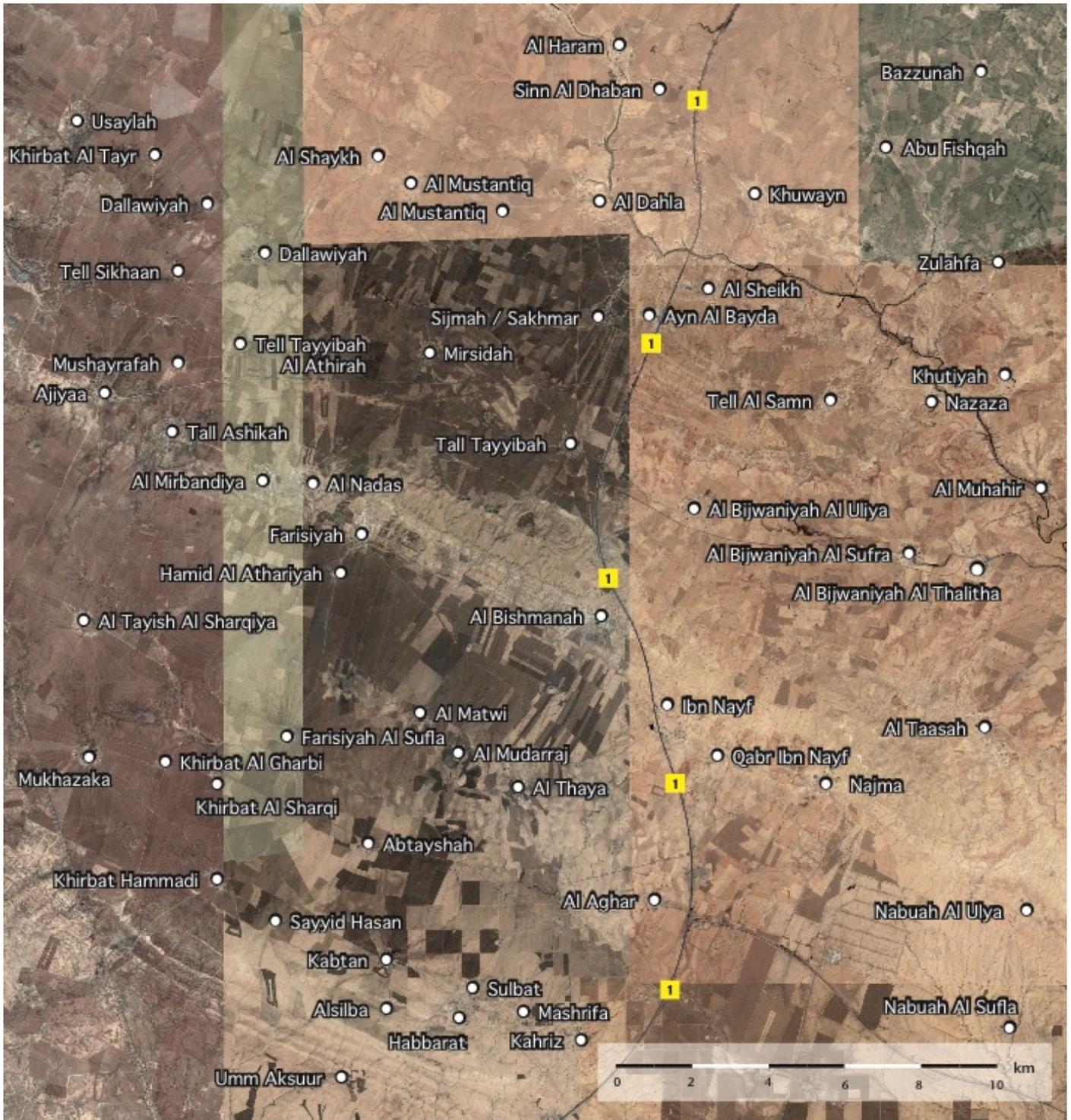
As was emphasised on our last visit, the PMF stated that they are the only group giving any assistance to civilians. Their own food supplies are limited and they only give what they can spare. It was difficult to get a rounded view of the needs in the village as we were not able to talk to ordinary civilians. We were also not allowed to talk with the sheikh in private. However, we did witness civilians coming to the PMF headquarters – which was also their clinic – and being given medicine.

The PMF stressed that they want support for civilians but were also open about their suspicion of foreign organisations. The deputy commander said that he would permit another visit to Tall Tayyibah only if it came with supplies for distribution – either food, medicines or NFIs – or a team to begin work on rehabilitating the water project. He understood the probable concerns of humanitarians regarding the diversion of aid, and he insisted that any distribution would be carried out in coordination with the local sheikh and that all supplies

would go to the civilians. He also said that any medicines would be unloaded in the local PHC (now closed due to a lack of medicines), which would then be opened and staffed by a nurse who lives in the village.

We said it would be important to conduct a rapid assessment of the other villages in the area before distributions in these villages could take place – particularly security and access. The deputy commander replied that this would be permitted only if and when assistance arrived in Tall Tayyibah.

Despite their suspicion, we were treated politely by the PMF throughout our time in Tall Tayyibah.



Population and displacement in Tall Tayyibah and surrounding villages

The current population of Tall Tayyibah is 1,600 individuals according to the local sheikh, PMF and another civilian resident. Of this number, 65 families are IDPs from Ajiyaa, a village around 12 km west of Tall Tayyibah. They were brought by the PMF from their village to Tall Tayyibah about a month ago as their village was on the frontline and unsafe. They are now staying with the host community or in empty houses. We were unable to talk to any of the IDPs. Ajiyaa and Tall Tayyibah both belong to the Haddidi tribe, as do most villages in the area.

According to the local sheikh and PMF the other inhabited villages in the area are Al Sheikh, Mustantiq, Abu Fishqah, Al Bijwaniyah Al Ulya, Al Bijwaniyah Al Sufra, and Al Bishmanah. There may well be others. Including Tall Tayyibah, the total population of these 7 villages is reportedly 7,000 individuals (the PMF refused to give us any further breakdown of this figure, or what the needs were in the 7 villages). We were told that 50 IDP families from Ghuzayl Al Sufra, a village roughly 25 km north-west of Al Bishmanah, were brought by the PMF to Al Bishmanah about a week ago for their safety. We were told that around 70% of the inhabitants of villages in the area fled towards Mosul ahead of the PMF advance.

Priority needs in Tall Tayyibah

Our previous report touched on the priority needs in Tall Tayyibah (feel free to contact Rise if you did not receive a copy). The main need remains the rehabilitation of the water project, followed by food and medicine.

We met with the engineer in charge of the water project and he was able to give us clear, detailed information regarding it. The water project is a part of the larger Shura Water Project which pumps from the Tigris at the Mishrak pump station around 32 km east of Tall Tayyibah (following the pipeline). The water project reportedly feeds 15 villages: Tubiyah, Nannah, Tall Wai, Nus Tall, Nizaza, Al Aithat*, Tall Khutyah, Um Al Mahahir, Shurtania*, Al Ain Al Harrow*, Tall Al Samn, Tall Tayyibah, Al Bijwaniyah Al Uliya, Al Bishmanah, and Qabr Ibn Naif. A lack of electricity is the main issue. Ideally, mains electricity would be restored with the rehabilitation and fuelling of the Qayyarah Gas Turbine, which requires 36,000 litres/hour to run at 80mw. In this case only relatively basic repairs would be necessary to return the water project to full functionality. Failing that, four generators are required for the project, including one with a 6.6 kv capacity at the Mishrak pump station, which apparently is not available. We can provide further information on request.

As mentioned above, food is supplied chiefly, if not only, by the PMF. Some people have basic stocks they can survive on. Milk for babies was highlighted as a major need. There is reportedly one small shop in the village. The shopkeeper is permitted to travel to Qayyarah once a week to purchase goods. However, the rest of the population is not allowed to leave the village unless special permission is granted by the PMF. It is the same for other villages under PMF control in the area.

Common medical conditions in the village reportedly include inflammation of the stomach, kidney stones, chest infections, respiratory problems, and skin diseases. The cold weather is a major cause for a recent uptick in illnesses. A male PMF medic is the only active medical worker in the village and therefore women suffer especially. There have been two recent complications with pregnant women giving birth. The women were taken to Qayyarah for treatment and then on to Tikrit as the issues were reportedly beyond the capacity of Qayyarah hospital. The PMF will allow freedom of movement and provide help in emergencies. The PMF medic reported that a number of residents require operations but the machinery and expertise are lacking in Qayyarah. As mentioned above, there is a Private Health Clinic (PHC) in the village but it is closed due to a lack of medicines. Should medical supplies be delivered, the PMF said they would reopen the PHC and staff it with a civilian nurse who lives in the village. Regarding the cold, we were told that blankets and clothes were needed for the population.

* Village name and location to be confirmed.



Supplies at the PMF medical centre inside their headquarters, where civilians come to be treated.

Recommendations

As highlighted in our last report, the PMF have taken a large swathe of land leading west from Highway 1 to beyond Tel Afar. Very little is known about the civilians that remain in these villages and the conditions they are living under. To be able to reach civilians in the small area surrounding Tall Tayyibah and respond to their needs, NGOs must first respond in Tall Tayyibah. From there, NGOs can gain the trust of the PMF and possibly be granted further access to villages under PMF control.

As mentioned in the last report, different PMF groups have different attitudes towards foreigners and this is likely to relate directly to the ease of access for international organisations. When dealing with certain groups, it is not recommended to take staff from the USA. Careful coordination between organisations considering working in these areas is also essential. The PMF need to see the results and benefits of humanitarian action rather than assessments, which play upon their suspicions.

We are available to meet bilaterally to discuss further impressions of the situation in PMF-controlled areas.

Najma

Najma (35.53375 43.06235) is located at the base of some hills on the east side of Highway 1, approximately 5km north of Qayyarah junction.

Access and population

The village is accessed via a 4km dirt track, which diverts from the highway at a point 3km north of the junction (35.52543 43.04056), just south of a former petrol station which now functions as a Hashd Ashaari

base. When following the track, a right fork should be taken early on. The track then leads on a winding course directly to Najma, which can be seen clearly from the main road. The surface of the track is relatively solid and passable, despite recent rains. Later, the track turns into a (poorly) metalled road. It is recommended that permission to go to the village be sought from the Hashd Ashaari either at the Qayyarah junction or at the base.



The track leading to Najma village.

Najma reportedly had an original population of around 100 families. In July the frontline came to rest near the village and remained there for around 2 months. ISIS originally fled the village ahead of the ISF advance, but when the advance stalled just to the south, they reportedly returned to Najma and used it as a frontline base. At this time around half the civilian population fled to Al Tassah, a village beyond the nearby hills, 3km to the north-east. We were told that the other half were taken forcibly by ISIS to Mosul, although it's suspected that there would have been some voluntary relocations to Mosul as well. The 50 families (possibly an overestimate based on the number of civilians we saw in the village) that fled to Al Tassah returned voluntarily to Najma around 20 days ago. The population consists chiefly of the Haddidi tribe with some from the Shammar tribe. There are no IDPs among them.

Destruction and IEDs

There is heavy destruction the village. Some buildings were targeted by airstrikes while others were burned. Locals estimated the destruction to be at around 50%, although this seemed to be a high estimate. Numerous families returned to find their home burned or destroyed – they now live with neighbours or relatives.

There are IEDs situated around Najma, in the hills to the north, and on some alternative routes into the village – only the dirt track from Highway 1 should be used for access. There was a recent incident involving an IED in which some sheep were killed but there have not yet been any human casualties. Set back from the town at the foot of a hill is a historical Ottoman palace which apparently is booby-trapped.



Houses destroyed by airstrikes.



An IED beside an alternative track leading into the village.

Priority needs

The villagers say they have made multiple requests to the UN (generic for aid organisations) for support since they arrived back in the village, but have not yet received anything. Livelihoods are based primarily around agriculture, and seeds were highlighted as a need. There are no boreholes in Najma and the village is not serviced by a water project so, as before, people continue to use private trucking firms to access water. A 10,000-litre tanker comes once a week from Qayyarah costing 50,000 IQD, which is apparently an inflated price. Food is also bought from Qayyarah, as are medicines. The village is connected to the electrical grid but the power was cut when fighting started. Few people have generators and fuel. Blankets and carpets were also highlighted as needs for the winter. The priority, however, is food and cash assistance.

Screening

The population have been security screened twice by the ISF – the first time in Al Tassah and then again upon their return to Najma. They did not report any issues regarding the screening process.