

# From the ‘Republic of Fear’ to the Militias’ Republic of Terror

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Sep 10, 2020

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

In 1992, as I watched the celebrations for the inauguration of al-Tabiqayn Bridge in Baghdad (formerly, al-Qa'id Bridge) on Al-Shabab Television, I turned to my wife and said: “wouldn’t it have been better for us if the cost of this bridge had been spent on better flour for us to eat, rather than this awful flour that we get now?” The following day, I went to pick up my seven-year-old son from school when suddenly his teacher said, “Pay attention to what you say in front of your children—it could cost you your life!”

When I asked her what had happened, she replied: “When I was explaining the completion of al-Tabiqayn Bridge to them, your son told me that his father says it would have been better to use the amount of money it cost to buy flour! This criticism is not allowed!” Those words would have cost me my life back then had the teacher informed Iraq’s security forces.

I remembered that incident recently when I submitted an article draft to the Washington Institute, and received a letter from one of my friends advising me to prepare for violent reactions—which might go so far as my assassination—because of it. In that draft, I mentioned facts about the growing popular discontent in the Iraqi streets (specifically in the south) towards Iraq’s militias and armed groups. This anger has carried over even to the people’s view of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), though just two years ago no Iraqi governmental institution could compete with them in terms of popularity.

I also wrote that Iraqis are now impatiently awaiting the day in which they see their streets free from cars that lack license plate identification numbers and do not stop at any security checkpoint. Additionally, I wrote that Iraqis await the day when they can see their cities governed by the rule of law rather than the unrestrained flow of weapons and factions that have multiplied like mushrooms in a mere few years.

My American friend, an expert on Iraqi affairs, said to me that if such an article—supported by numbers and facts—were to be published, it would require that I either live with extreme caution or be fully prepared to confront this militia. He added that, unfortunately, Hisham al-Hashimi did neither of those two things, referencing the well-known Iraqi political analyst who was assassinated two months ago because of his opposition to the militias and their significant influence in Iraq.

My friend's advice compounded the pressure on my pen after the voices of my family and friends hounded me, prohibiting me then from expressing my opinions freely. They cautioned me against criticizing the militants further, as it could result not only in my death, but also harm my family and those I love. I decided to pull the publication of my initial article and listen to the voice of reason, enveloped in the voice of fright.

In the early 1990s, Kanan Makiya—inspiration and teacher to Iraq's Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi—published a famous book entitled *Republic of Fear*. In this book, Makiya described the state of terror in which Iraqis then lived as a result of the police state and its countless red lines that no one dared cross. I recall that I was unable then to publish my research about the corruption that proliferated in Iraq in the nineties. Instead, this danger forced me to publish outside of Iraq and without mentioning the country's name so as not to face legal issues for disseminating content that could damage the reputation of the nation.

The irony seems strange today given that Makiya's student who dreamed of a state of freedom now presides over the government and has in fact inherited the state. Yet it is a state in which everyone experiences a sense of terror on top of the fear that characterized the nineties.

Perhaps the sole major difference left between then and now is that in the Republic of Fear, the source of that fear was known, whereas its source is now obfuscated in today's Republic of Terror. The Iraqi people used to know exactly who it was who killed them, whereas today they are ignorant of the exact identity of their killers. What has perhaps improved about the situation is that while Iraqis were also required to sacrifice their children to the state to fight the state's wars then, there are no longer demands of sacrifice for the country.

Many of the Iraqis who were enraged at the invasion in 2003 that destroyed their country (myself among them) consoled themselves by thinking that they would finally achieve the state of freedom of which they had dreamt, wherein they would be able to criticize the regime without feeling afraid. Yet by all appearances, even this hope has since evaporated and become but a distant dream.

It is true that Iraqis have gotten to the point where they are able to critique the regime—or rather to insult the regime's leader without fear—but they do not dare criticize the unrestrained armed militias and those who founded them, lead them, or even support them. The fate of whoever has the courage to do so either will be assassination—as befell Hisham al-Hashimi, Reham Yaqoob, Tahseen Usama, and the many others who have been eliminated in the past year—or annihilation in the abstract sense at the hands of writers and a multitude of websites affiliated with and funded by these militias. Whoever dares condemn the militias' power will be labelled an agent of Israel or the United States, a pro-Saddam Baathist, possibly a radical terrorist, or a stooge financed by the American embassy.

In Iraq today, there are dozens of television shows, radio channels, and websites funded by these militias. These media networks work in accordance with unified, well-coordinated directives to attack any writers who publish facts or opinions at odds with their influence, or even those who oppose Iranian patronage networks in Iraq and the region. Thus, Iran—which established, trained, and supported these militias—has emerged as the red line for the Republic of Terror now reigning over Iraq. Any talk of Iranian influence or external allegiance in the militias' Republic of Terror has begun to resemble the red line of criticizing Saddam and his family that characterized the former Republic of Fear.

During his latest trip to Washington, Kadhimi faced a series of hard-hitting questions from his hosts about the influence of these steadily growing militias and their suppression of citizens' voices and freedoms. He was bluntly informed that it will not be possible to implement any of the economic projects that major American companies have pledged to carry out in Iraq in hopes of boosting desperately needed economic growth unless the security situation in Iraq is straightened out. This includes, above all, eradicating the unrestrained militias and their rising influence. Moreover, no one will be capable of assisting Iraq unless Iraqis first help themselves and, most

importantly, unless the government reclaims control over the state.

Kadhimi and his government realize that they have no chance of success so long as they are unable to recover the state and the people from the influence of the militias. For that reason, they have placed this goal at the top of the ministerial agenda. Even so, the public outrage—particularly among the Shia population—over these militias’ influence and their almost daily assassinations has mounted, placing Kadhimi between the hammer of external pressures and the anvil of popular anger for aforementioned reasons.

These pressures have only intensified after the militias’ relentless Katyusha rocket attacks on the Green Zone, the American embassy, and the military bases that housed the International Coalition Forces. It seems that what Kadhimi hoped for—to pacify the activity of these militias by getting the United States to explicitly announce its intention to leave Iraq within three years—has not occurred. The militias’ continued pressure is demonstrated by the evidence of the recent assassinations of civilian activists in Basra and the rocket attack on the evening of August 27 on the Green Zone Q.

Kadhimi has attempted to apply the maximum degree of both pressure and patience to delay his battle with the unrestrained armed militias, aware of the weakness of his leverage in the aftermath of his first confrontation with Kata’ib Hezbollah two months ago. However, it now appears that his plan to rely on patience from both the Iraqi people and the world’s nations is beginning to lose viability as a result of the militias’ numerous escalations and provocations which hastened the confrontation before Kadhimi was in a position to impose his total control over the Iraqi state.

Indeed, Kadhimi’s current strategy, which he implemented to strengthen the state’s security institutions and contain these militias’ activities by appealing to Shia leaders who have influence over them, has run out of time. Official security forces have not been able to present proof of their ability to pressure these militias, and Shia leaders do not seem satisfied with Kadhimi and his recent measures at home or abroad. Thus the confrontation between the two sides now appears closer than ever before. A formidable question arises: will the pupil of *Republic of Fear’s* author have the power to prevent Iraq from descending irretrievably into the militias’ Republic of Terror? ❖

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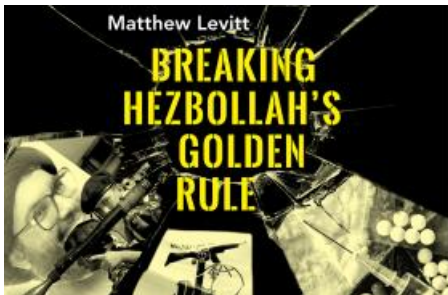
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