

Militias Are Threatening Public Safety in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

Exploding ammo dumps are only one of many problems posed by out-of-control militias, making it more urgent than ever to warehouse heavy weapons, halt mass detentions, and protect Iraqis and Iraq's investors alike.

On August 12, a large militia ammunition dump caught fire in southern Baghdad, sending rockets careening across the skies over the capital. The incident is one of several major explosions at such facilities around the city in recent years; it also follows other recent hazards directly tied to Iran-backed groups, from militia attacks on Western investors to suspected Israeli strikes against militia bases. With the government thus far proving unable to rein in even the smallest militias, the negative impact of unchecked foreign-backed armed groups is increasingly falling on Iraqi civilians, a consequence that the international community should devote much more attention to when engaging Baghdad.

EXPLOSIONS AT AMMO DUMPS

Perhaps the most pressing public safety issue is the growing pattern of major explosions in densely populated urban areas, caused by militias storing explosives and projectiles in unsafe conditions during periods of high heat.

- The August 12 explosion occurred at an ammunition storage facility at Camp al-Saqr, killing one civilian and wounding twenty-nine others. Debris rained down as far as three miles away. The base was used by two militias from the Popular Mobilization Forces—Kataib Jund al-Imam (PMF Brigade 6) and Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada (PMF Brigade 14)—

along with various armed groups affiliated with the Iran-allied Badr Organization.

- On November 3, 2018, a munitions explosion occurred at a base in Tuz Khormatu used by Kataib Hezbollah (PMF Brigades 45, 46, 47), wounding thirty-six civilians.
- On August 6, 2018, a blast occurred at an ammunition storage warehouse owned by al-Abbas Combat Division (PMF Brigade 26) on the highway between Baghdad and Karbala, killing one and wounding nineteen.
- On June 6, 2018, an ammunition cache exploded inside a Shia mosque in Baghdad's Sadr City district, killing eighteen civilians, wounding ninety, and reducing an entire city block to rubble. The cache likely belonged to either Asaib Ahl al-Haq (PMF Brigades 41, 42, 43) or Saraya al-Salam (PMF Brigade 313)
- On September 2, 2016, another arms cache belonging to AAH exploded in the Ubaidi district of east Baghdad, killing fifteen civilians, wounding dozens more, and igniting eight rockets that landed within the city.

EXPLOSIONS AT MISSILE-RELATED SITES

At least two such incidents have occurred at militia bases where Iranian long-range rockets and other explosives are reportedly stored. In at least one case, the evidence points to precision military strikes, perhaps by Israel.

- On July 19, an explosion rocked a militia base in Amerli operated by Quwat al-Turkmen (PMF Brigade 16) and Fawj Amerli (PMF Brigade 52). One member of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was killed, according to related funeral announcements. Numerous indications suggest a very precise military strike against an Iranian-provided missile system, with the intention of minimizing harm to civilians.
- On July 28, three explosions were reported at Camp Ashraf, the Badr Organization's main militia facility in Iraq, located northeast of Baghdad. The nature of the incident—simultaneous explosions at three widely separated locations in a 10 kilometer by 10 kilometer camp—rules out accidental causes. Iraqi and U.S. analysts consider it likely that the camp contains Iranian-provided missile systems.

ATTACKS ON CIVIL SOCIETY AND CIVILIANS

Militias associated with Iran have also been credibly accused of violence against civil society groups and individual civilians.

- **Large-scale illegal detention.** Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have issued substantial reports documenting the disappearance of 643 Sunni Muslim males from Fallujah and Saqlawiyah, and further mass disappearances of Sunni males at Razzaza. These were largely attributed to Kataib Hezbollah, which maintains an illegal detention facility with at least 1,700 prisoners in Jurf al-Sakhar just south of Baghdad. The Iraqi government has taken no action to free these detainees or investigate human rights abuses related to their captivity.
- **Suppression of civil society.** In Basra, where public discontent has been simmering due to poor services and unemployment, some militias have been allowed to disrupt demonstrations against the government. This tactic—reminiscent of Iran's use of Ansar-e Hezbollah vigilantes to break up protests in its own cities—has resulted in dozens of assassinations and violent abductions of civil society activists in southern Iraq this summer.
- **Attacks on clergy.** In Baghdad, even the most politically connected members of society are not safe if militias choose to target them. Alaa al-Musawi—appointed head of the Shia *waqf* (religious endowment) by Iraq's most senior cleric, Ali al-Sistani—suffered a home invasion by AAH forces on July 10 and thereafter had to be sheltered in a government safe house. Although the exact identity of his attackers is widely known in Iraqi society, nothing has been done to punish the AAH militiamen involved.

ATTACKS ON FOREIGN PARTNERS AND INVESTORS

In recent months, Iraq's most important investors—oil companies—have suffered escalating violence.

- **Attacks on Basra consulate.** Militias launched a series of rocket strikes on the U.S. consulate in Basra on September 7, 8, and 28, 2018. Armed groups also threatened local employees of the consulate, menaced vehicle movements to and from the facility, and issued kidnap warnings. The consulate was shuttered soon after these incidents, [damaging investor confidence in Iraq \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/washington-should-reverse-its-retreat-in-basra\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/washington-should-reverse-its-retreat-in-basra).
- **Rocket attacks on oil company sites.** On June 18-19, 2019, rockets were fired at three foreign engineer camps in Basra's Rumaila oil field and nearby Burjesia. Three Iraqis were wounded when the strikes hit the state-owned Iraqi Drilling Company, damaging the government's efforts to achieve greater energy self-sufficiency.
- **Rocket attack on defense contractors.** On June 18, a rocket was launched at U.S. contractors in Balad who were providing technical services to help Iraq's F-16 fleet continue striking Islamic State forces.
- **Attack on U.S. embassy supply vehicles.** On July 6, three roadside bombs detonated against a U.S. embassy logistical truck convoy in Safwan. Fragmentation-type munitions packed with ball bearings were used, injuring one driver.
- **Attack on investor vehicles.** On August 6, Western oil industry personnel were struck by a roadside bomb in Basra, seriously damaging their vehicle. The incident involved the same type of fragmentation device seen in the Safwan attack, which likewise resembled four devices found in Rumaila, Ratawi, and Halfaya within a week in early December 2018. All of the latter devices had been placed near oil field highway entrances used by foreign engineers.

NEED FOR GREATER INTERNATIONAL SCRUTINY

Iran-backed militias are implementing an independent foreign policy in Iraq, making a mockery of the country's government and constitution. They are not just threatening Westerners—Iraqis are the principal victims of their activities, and always have been. More attention should be focused on these effects, which include greater security risks for Iraqis, disruption of their ongoing struggle against the Islamic State, and the loss of much-needed foreign investment and international prestige.

Militia control of heavy weapons is a particularly pressing issue. For the most part, Iraq's cities are no longer threatened by regular Islamic State attacks; instead, Iraqis have more to fear from a militia ammunition dump exploding in their neighborhood. Militias have evolved from a source of protection to one of the last remaining sources of threat to urban populations. In particular, when they hide large Iranian missiles in smaller towns like Amerli, they put the entire local citizenry at risk.

The United States and other international actors should doggedly raise the heavy weapons risk in all meetings with senior Iraqi government leaders. PMF brigades do not require rocket artillery for their counterinsurgency missions against the Islamic State, much less Iranian short-range ballistic missiles. All such weapons should be declared, accounted for, documented, and moved to secure government storage facilities outside the cities.

International actors should also draw Baghdad's attention to ongoing human rights violations perpetrated by some militias, in many cases Iran-backed players such as Kataib Hezbollah, AAH, and lesser-known units. Kataib Hezbollah's well-documented mass detention center just outside Baghdad is a travesty, and one that human rights watchdogs should keep focusing on. This same facility—Jurf al-Sakhar—was the launch point for drone attacks on Saudi oil facilities on May 14, further underlining the consequences of the Iraqi government's failure on this crucial issue.

Michael Knights, a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, has spent considerable time since 2003 embedded with the Iraqi security forces. Alexandre Mello is the lead security analyst at energy advisory service Horizon Client Access. ♦

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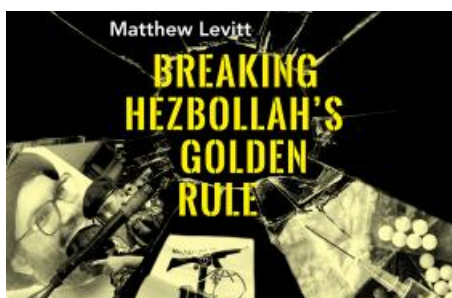
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