

# Militias in Iraq's Security Forces: Historical Context and U.S. Options

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Brief Analysis

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**Washington should adopt a quiet but well-planned approach to Baghdad's demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration of militias, learning when to be flexible and when to stand firm.**

**D**espite facing continued Islamic State attacks in seven of eighteen provinces, the Iraqi government has begun to allocate precious state security forces to the task of reining in rogue militias. In recent weeks, special operations forces have been diverted to disarm militias operating in unstable towns such as Tuz Khormatu and Basra—the latest iteration of a cycle in which successive governments have relied on militias at times of weakness, then tried to suppress them after becoming stronger. The question is whether the current period of empowered militias is uniquely dangerous in historical context, and whether the United States can help Baghdad break the cycle for good.

## IRAQ'S PAST MILITIA CYCLES

**T**he problem of arms outside state control is as old as Iraq itself. In 1933, King Faisal I complained that the country's tribes had around 100,000 rifles while the government had only 15,000. The government's oil wealth eventually reversed this disparity, though Kurdish Peshmerga forces, Iranian-backed Shia rebels, and tribal smugglers on the Iraq-Syria border continued to resist state authority throughout the Baath Party's rule.

Saddam Hussein's regime fought fire with fire, creating Arab and Kurdish militias to combat local forces outside his

control. During the Iraq-Iran War, the Baath distributed weapons and ammunition to state-backed militias such as Jaish al-Shabi (People's Army). During the 1991 and 2003 conflicts against U.S.-led coalitions, the regime armed the Fedayin Saddam (Saddam's Men of Sacrifice) and Jaish al-Quds (Jerusalem Army). Fedayin militiamen assisted with regime security but quickly became a criminal menace, deeply resented by Iraq's formal military.

After 2003, it was Washington's turn to lean on militias for support. Technically, Article 9 of Iraq's 2005 constitution made such forces illegal, stating, "The formation of military militias outside the framework of the armed forces is prohibited." Militias reacted to this prohibition in two ways. Some—most notably the Iranian-backed Badr Brigades—simply entered the federal security forces en masse in a process known as *damj* (amalgamation). As a result, the 5th Army division in Diyala developed a pronounced Badr affiliation, and the group seeded militia operatives in key federal ministries and intelligence agencies. Similarly, over twenty brigades of Peshmerga in the Kurdish north became "Regional Guard Brigades" under Article 121 of the constitution, while some northern-based Army brigades were Peshmerga units in all but name.

Other militias pointedly stayed outside the federal framework, however. Among the Peshmerga, two units remained independent in roughly equal numbers to the officially recognized Kurdistan Regional Guard Brigades: Yakray 70, a unit affiliated with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, and Yakray 80, belonging to the Kurdistan Democratic Party. Both forces retained tanks, artillery, and other heavy weapons that were not declared to the Iraqi state. Among the Shia, Muqtada al-Sadr's followers maintained a large militia, Jaish al-Mahdi (Mahdi Army), that launched two multi-province uprisings in 2004, developed powerful oil-smuggling operations in Basra, and eventually splintered into Iranian-backed offshoots like Asaib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous, or AAH). As for Sunni insurgent groups, many of them essentially served as the armed wings of tribal factions and former regime elements that operated outside the political process.

By 2007-2009, though, various militias began to suffer setbacks. Jaish al-Mahdi and AAH were militarily defeated by the U.S.-backed Iraqi military in major security campaigns such as Operation Saulat al-Fursan (Charge of the Knights) in Basra. To defeat the first iteration of the Islamic State, the Iraqi government convinced some Sunni insurgent factions to join the *sahwa* (awakening) campaign, forming them into units such as Abna al-Iraq (Sons of Iraq). Meanwhile, Baghdad enforced laws limiting Iraqis to keeping one assault rifle and one magazine of ammunition inside their homes; the weapons and armored cars used by private security companies were placed under tighter regulations as well.

Yet the government quickly lost its handle over the militias once again. The Sons of Iraq were demobilized and largely abandoned, only to be picked off by a resurgent Islamic State after 2011. Meanwhile, the outbreak of the Syria war and the simultaneous weakening of the Iraqi security forces through politicization and corruption led Baghdad to depend on Shia militias such as AAH, the Sadrists, the renamed Badr Organization, and Kataib Hezbollah (Hezbollah Brigades). By 2012, militia checkpoints were reappearing in Iraqi cities, and militia leaders were executing an independent foreign policy by intervening in the Syria war.

## THE FUTURE OF MILITIAS IN IRAQ

**W**hen the Popular Mobilization Commission was formally established within the Office of the Prime Minister in June 2014, it gathered a diverse range of militias under one umbrella, including the predominantly Shia collective al-Hashd al-Shabi (Popular Mobilization Forces) and the predominantly Sunni groups al-Hashd al-Ashair (Tribal Mobilization Forces) and al-Hashd al-Watani (National Mobilization Forces). The PMC structure has given an estimated 150,000 militia members a government paycheck and legal status within the "framework of the armed forces," but also placed them under the prime minister's nominal command and imposed military discipline on its forces. In contrast, the Peshmerga Regional Guard Brigades have not received payment from Baghdad despite being a notional part of the armed forces.

A key point of contention is whether PMC and Peshmerga forces are truly willing to accept federal command and control, or merely seeking federal resources while remaining operationally independent. One option being strongly considered in Baghdad is downsizing the PMC this year in order to reduce the commission's budget in 2019. (The PMC was allocated \$1.63 billion in the 2018 budget.) Under that plan, PMC forces would be gradually broken down into three subgroups:

- **Integrated into the armed forces.** Some active PMC militiamen would be individually recruited into the Army, the Department of Border Enforcement, the Federal Police, local police services, and other state forces.
- **Permanent PMC reserve.** Other eligible fighters would remain under the PMC but be subject to gradual professionalization as a reserve force, potentially operating on a part-time basis or only when mobilized.
- **Independent militias.** Remaining PMC component militias would be removed from the PMC and struck off the government payroll, but their existence would be tolerated as long as they keep their heavy weapons on their known bases and cease all military operations. Militias in this category would probably include the best-armed portions of the Badr Organization, AAH, and Kataib Hezbollah, who would thereafter draw most of their sustainment from Iran. This arrangement may be alarming to American eyes. Notably, though, many aspects of it would parallel the Iraqi government's attitude toward independent Peshmerga units, which Baghdad does not actively seek to demobilize but which are not paid, trained, or equipped by federal authorities.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

History shows that Iraqi dependence on militias is a recurring phenomenon, and that demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) is a recurring challenge. Yet there is a troubling difference this time around—while government-supported militias in previous cycles were mainly just arms of the Iraqi state (albeit semiautonomous ones), some of them are now self-declared foreign proxies as well, drawing major financial, material, and advisory support from a powerful neighboring state, Iran. The fate of Iraq's militias should rest with the sovereign Iraqi nation, but today it is questionable whether Iraqis alone are making decisions regarding the future of groups like AAH, Badr, and Kataib Hezbollah.

As a key ally and aid provider, the United States has every right to openly explain the factors that will make bilateral security cooperation easier or more difficult to sustain. U.S. policy on the militia issue should therefore be guided by the following principles:

- **Be pragmatic.** Historically, Washington has worked with Iraqi militias when such cooperation was in America's interest, and when the groups in question were responsive to Iraqi government command and control. When deemed expedient, the United States has ignored the existence of large extra-constitutional militias such as independent Peshmerga units; cooperated with militias guilty of attacking U.S. forces in the past if they seemed to present no future threat, as seen during the *sahwa* campaign; and worked with militia-saturated Iraqi military units during the 2003-2011 occupation period and the 2014-2018 campaign against the Islamic State. These criteria—responsiveness to government control and presenting no future threat—should continue to guide Washington's attitude toward militias in Iraq.
- **Establish redlines.** Pragmatism and flexibility aside, the United States still needs to operate within a set of firm, well-designed redlines—otherwise it could end up further empowering the Iranian-backed militias embedded in Iraq's security forces. Unlike Peshmerga or *sahwa* forces, some Iranian-backed groups (e.g., AAH and Kataib Hezbollah) continue to openly threaten Americans in Iraq. Accordingly, AAH and spinoffs such as Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (Hezbollah Movement of the Outstanding) should join Kataib Hezbollah on the list of U.S.-designated terrorist groups, and their leaders should be designated as well. Any attack on Americans must be a redline—one that triggers a well-developed set of response options targeting the interests of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps inside or

outside Iraq. Protecting sensitive U.S. technologies should be another redline. The recent news that nine U.S.-supplied M1 Abrams tanks were diverted to PMC units is a case study of Iraq flagrantly violating U.S. conditions.

- **Gradual PMC contraction.** Washington should back Iraq's slow and steady DDR effort, which is more likely to yield positive results than launching military confrontations akin to 2008's Operation Saulat al-Fursan—a campaign that almost failed until the United States stepped in with intense military support. The coalition can provide Iraq with biometric registration technology to tighten up PMC payroll and human resource management. In return for a patient and sustained effort to reintegrate loyal militiamen and isolate renegades, Washington and its allies should reassure Baghdad that they have a contingency plan to help support Iraq's defenses if a large-scale fight with militias erupts in the capital or elsewhere.
- **Maintain situational awareness.** Following its 2011 military withdrawal, the United States lost much of its ability to understand what was happening on the ground in Iraq. To reverse that problem, Washington should devote significant intelligence assets—human and technical—to understanding what militias are really doing in Baghdad, oil-rich Basra, and the borders with Syria and Iran. Part of this effort would entail monitoring any Iranian or proxy efforts to establish a permanent land bridge along these frontiers. U.S. authorities should also focus on how militia leaders have shaped Iraqi decisionmaking at key moments such as the October 2017 clashes with the Kurds over Kirkuk. Finally, there is ample room to improve Iraqi intelligence tracking of the tactical situation, including up-to-date knowledge on the movements and locations of heavy weapons, command-and-control structures, ammunition, and fighters belonging to key militias.

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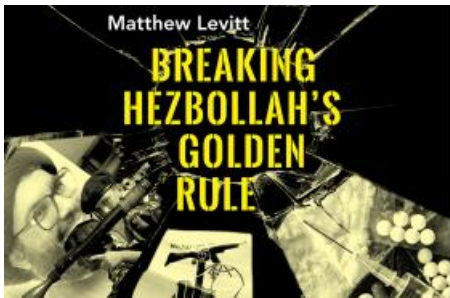
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