



Abadi and the PMF

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Feb 7, 2018

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Brief Analysis

February 07, 2018

In the past few weeks, Iraqi politics were thrown into confusion as Prime Minister Haider [al-Abadi](#) briefly aligned his electoral coalition with the Fatih Coalition, the electoral alliance led by some of notorious Iran-backed Iraqi militia (PMF) leaders. The union lasted less than 24 hours, but for many in Iraq and outside, the episode brought into serious question the Prime Minister's true colors.

Why did Abadi seek such a cringeworthy alliance? Possibly a lapse of judgment. Possibly he did it with the containment of his competition in mind—an act of keeping one's friends close and enemies closer. The fact that it was the militia-affiliated politicians who [announced](#) pulling the plug suggests that they thought it was a mistake. In fact, the militia's withdrawal from this coalition was intended to discredit Abadi and his disarmament plan. It all had started with Nouri al-Maliki, who tricked Abadi by registering both Dawa Party blocs under his name, contrary to deals he made with Abadi — who then overreacted by joining forces with the PMUs. What is clear though is that the events of last week left Abadi weaker in the eyes of his supporters, and Iraqis not any closer to finding a solution for the biggest question for post-Islamic State Iraq: what to do with all the armed groups leftover from the war?

Establishing the state's monopoly on violence has eluded the Iraqi government since 2003. After declaring victory over the Islamic State in December, the next major challenge for Prime Minister Abadi or his successor after the May 2018 election will be finding a way to amicably demobilize or take actual control of the PMF. The volunteer force played a major role in augmenting Iraq's state security forces as they struggled to recover and rebuild following the Islamic State onslaught in 2014.

It is fundamental to note that the PMF is not a monolithic group. Broadly speaking, there are two categories: units organized under and loyal to the senior clergy of Ayatollah Sistani and the holy Shiite shrines aka, "the good PMF;" and units organized by and loyal to proxies and allies of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps — including Badr, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Kata'ib Hezbollah, aka, "the bad PMF." The challenge is dealing with this second category: those factions of the PMF that maintain close relations with Iran, have engaged in criminal acts or human rights abuses —

including extrajudicial killings and preventing IDPs' return — and whose leaders have political ambitions with Iranian flavors and sectarian underpinnings. These have stuck around, and their leaders have begun to translate the battle gains to political ones. They have already formed a party list to compete in the next election, and their leader, Hadi al-Amiri, is one of the few politicians who could give Abadi a run for his money.

There were expectations -- mainly outside Iraq -- that Sistani might demobilize his follower after the war; if he said the word, they would. For now, however, [Sistani](#) thinks his followers within the PMF should remain under arms and be used in the service of the state. This decision is ostensibly out of concern about possible resurgence of the Islamic State. It may also imply that the senior cleric is wary of Iran's allies and wants to keep units loyal to him as a counterbalance to Iran's proxies. There are corresponding [reports](#) of consolidation among the "good PMF" units.

Demobilizing or reining in the militias deserves closer attention as Iraq is headed toward its first general election since the 2014 fall of Mosul. This elections is important because it offers a chance to reboot the political process after four destructive years, in which many representatives lost their credibility. The unregulated presence of militias at this time of elections puts Iraq at a crossroad. The future of Iraq will be measured by whether the election outcome sets the conditions for more of the same: a stacking of the deck by old oligarchs and new warlords. The much better alternative would be for this election to allow Iraqis to make a free choice, producing an empowered government that can undertake an invigorated anti-corruption push and respond to the public rather than entrenched interests.

Setting aside the fleeting moment of cozying up to the Fatih Coalition, Abadi's tone in recent weeks has been warning of an "imminent breakthrough" against the "heads of corruption" and toward [disarmament](#) of armed groups. Since then, state forces conducted operations to confiscate illegal arms in [Sadr City](#), and more recently arrested the son of the sitting governor of [Najaf](#). These may be probing operations designed to test the water before a larger effort. In Iraq, the problems of corruption and militias are highly intertwined. It is difficult to imagine that a serious crackdown on one could proceed without backlash by the other.

[Reports](#), whether fake or simply strangely transparent, describing how Abadi supposedly plans to disarm the militias will make surprise action difficult. Could Abdi be contemplating a large-scale campaign similar to the 2008 operation Charge of the Knights? Abadi's predecessor, Nouri al-Maliki, sought then to neutralize the major menace of that time, the [Mahdi Army](#) of Moqtada al-Sadr. Maliki's gambit nearly ended in disaster, but for the hands-on support of the U.S. military. The Iraqi military today is battle-hardened and has acquired a capable air power, but the militias too have grown increasingly capable.

The U.S. can play a role again. For Washington, the focus should be threefold: stay in close contact with Abadi to prevent rash uncoordinated military action; help him prioritize the right targets for sensible anti-corruption and disarmament measures; and have a contingency plan for coming to Baghdad's aid if a large-scale armed confrontation with militias ensues. Beyond the immediate security considerations, events such as next month's reconstruction forum in Kuwait offers an opportunity for the broader community of stakeholders to discuss economic and political initiatives that can encourage voluntary demobilization.

The unrestrained presence of the PMF — and their possible growth and transformation into another IRGC or Hezbollah — is a threat to Iraq, as well as to the U.S. and Iraq's Arab neighbors, who are wary of Iran's expanding influence in Iraq and Syria. There is a shared interest in demobilization, and this common interest is served by working with Abadi. The United States and its allies should avoid making counterproductive, poorly informed statements asking "Iranians" to [leave](#) Iraq, or other grossly undiplomatic comments that [undermine](#) cooperation. The objective should be to help Baghdad steer away from open conflict while the country gradually phases out the militias and pursues the elusive government reforms, while being prepared to come to its aid should 2008 scenario play out again. Countries advocating a policy to rein in the militias should be ready to back its implementation with more than just wishes. ❖



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