The Dangers of the Institutionalization of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units

by Sardar Aziz **(/experts/sardar-aziz)**

Apr 25, 2017
Also available in
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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sardar Aziz (/experts/sardar-aziz)

Sardar Aziz is a senior adviser in the Kurdish parliament as well as a researcher and writer. His areas of interest include civil-military relations, Middle East regional politics, and governing. He has a Ph.D. in Government from the University College Cork.

The emergence and legitimization of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU or Hashd al-Shaabi) represent a continued phenomenon in modern Iraqi history: a weak state and divided armies. For democracy to emerge, the army has to be united and neutral so that it can provide a space for competition among various civilian groups in a civil manner.

Iraq's PMU forces emerged as a response to the gravest threat to Shia majority rule in Iraq – the Islamic State (IS). The genesis of the PMU forces as a concept dates back to Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's fatwa on June 13, 2014. However, since the fatwa was a response to a particular threat, it was temporary in nature and thus not sufficient to provide grounds for the permanency of these groups. As an al-Kifai fatwa, it also had limited appeal, differing from an al-A'in fatwa in that it does not obligate all individuals to follow. Rather, a few can carry out this duty on behalf of the greater good. Immediately after this 2014 proclamation, however, the limited number of groups mushroomed to form a hybrid – but not wholly unified - security force with the Iraqi military.

The fatwa was couched in a rather nationalistic tone, calling on all able citizens to defend the country, its people, and their honor and sacred places. Against this background, the PMU forces face two challenges to their credibility. First: if IS loses power, why should these forces continue to exist at all? Additionally, since Sistani's fatwa was conditional and temporary, the grounds for their continued existence would eventually not have a religiously legitimate backing.

On November 26, 2016, when Iraq's parliament passed a law to transform the PMUs into a separate, official, and presumably permanent military corps, this raised questions concerning Iraq's long-term civil-military relationship. The law sets the premises for the emergence of two parallel armies, empowered both by Western military doctrine and techniques and by domestic religious and sectarian tenets. Spurred by the Shia groups in Parliament, this move was not necessarily surprising. This is not the first time that the Iraqi state has sponsored an irregular army or non-state militia. The phenomenon of the paramilitary, whether as a party wing or as a state apparatus, dates back to the infamous Haras-al-Qawmi (National Guard) of the early 1960s. Indeed, throughout the existence of Iraq, all governments have sought to use the military as a means to buttress their power. There emerged, as a result, a symbiotic relationship between the Iraqi government and the military; they both used each other and depended on each other. Hence, a dominant feature of Iraq's political process has been the military's attempts to control the fate and identity of the nation. While the military is one of the country's preeminent institutions, it has hardly contributed to Iraq's stability, interfering in its political development on numerous occasions by either dictating the formation of a government or overthrowing it.

The PMU are different from earlier Iraqi militias. Not only are they supported by the majority of the population, but they were voted in by Shia, Kurdish, and Sunni Arab parliamentarians. Moreover, according to the new law, the group is part of Iraq's armed forces, directly commanded by the prime minister. It shares all of the army's rights and resources – but without having all of its terms and conditions. For example, they are exempt from age and diploma requirements for recruitment. Moreover, beyond the battle against IS, the PMU forces exist to defend and remain loyal to a Shia-centered Iraq – primarily as a security apparatus for the regime. Coupled with the partially sectarian character of Iraq's regular army, the power of Iraqi nationalism is clearly weakening; Iraqi identity no longer holds much influence over individuals in Iraq.

Replacing Iraqi nationalism is the emboldened status of the Shia in Iraq, who now have democratic rights in addition to military security. How, then, will this shift in structural and military power affect influential non-Shia groups in Iraq, such as the Kurds and Sunni Arabs?

The Kurds exhibit a mixture of wariness and unenthusiastic support towards the Hashd al-Shaabi. The new law benefits the Peshmerga, Kurdistan's military forces, since it sets a precedent for the existence of other forces outside the conventional army in the country. It also provides the justification that, similar to the Shia, the Kurds also require their loyal forces to defend them from potential radical groups. Sunni Arabs, on the other hand, view this move mainly as a threat. The presence of a Shia army signifies the permanent danger of a sectarian other. Nevertheless, like the Kurdish case, it sets a precedent for the emergence of a sectarian Sunni army.

Compounding the problem is that, in addition to their local functions, the PMU will also have a regional role clearly linked to Iran and Turkey's scramble for dominance over the region. They will be part of Iranian hegemonic ambitions for the region for a variety of reasons: sect, security imperatives, the balance of power against rivals, and economic leverage. The question is also raised about the possible emergence of internationally sponsored militias that could match state-led armed services.

This issue is hardly unique or new: the Islamic Republic of Iran has supported irregular armies in the region ever since its formation in 1979. In fact, Iran has a particular apparatus dedicated to starting non-institutionalized military forces abroad. The PMU forces will reinforce the relationship between Iran and Iraq and bring them ever closer, and not only on a military level but on a political one as well. For example, in the coming local and national elections of 2017 and 2018, PMU leaders will probably do well by their 'heroic acts.' This will usher in more PMU influence into state institutions, consolidating future support for the group.

With the emergence of this new parallel army, the country's institutions will be weakened further. This imbalance in the civil-military relationship will dash all hopes for the development of a genuinely democratic government, not only in Baghdad but perhaps in Kurdistan as well. Using the Parliament to legitimize this illegitimacy, as recently occurred with the PMU, is a recipe for long-term instability Henceforth, an irregular and confessional army will be part of the political sphere in the country and block any attempts at creating a more secular - or at least inclusive - system. ❖

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