

Iran's Hezbollah Franchise in Iraq: Lessons from Lebanon's Shiite Militias

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As Shiite militias in Iraq attempt to become potent political actors, they may follow Hezbollah's Lebanese model: using military leverage over the government to wrestle power on Iran's behalf.

Following the rapid spread of ISIS in the summer of 2014, Shiite Marja Ali al-Sistani issued a fatwa calling all able-bodied men to defend Baghdad and push back against ISIS. Men of all sects and ethnicities, overwhelmingly Shiite, took it upon themselves to fight this "great evil" that had overtaken their country. These Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) have made a fundamental difference in the battle against ISIS and are hailed as heroes in Iraq.

A problem arises, however, when one looks at the large number of hardline Shiite factions of the PMUs that are directly funded, trained, and armed by Iran. This Iranian support has rightly worried many, as the rise of the PMUs unnervingly mimics multiple aspects of Hezbollah's rise in Lebanon. By looking at parallels between how Hezbollah and factions of the PMUs use politics, foreign influence, and propaganda to increase their power, the United States might be able to track similar trends in Iraqi's hardline Shiite militias, and move to stop this before a similar situation occurs.

POLITICAL SUFFOCATION

In the mid 1980s, Hezbollah was a rather simple resistance militia in South Lebanon that formed in response to the Israeli occupation. Initially, they slowly amassed power through their performance on the battlefield, absorbing smaller Shiite militias and taking advantage of a weak political system. The group would later confront Israel again on the battlefield in 2006, inflicting heavy casualties and forcing an Israeli withdrawal.

Hezbollah's consistent military success in Lebanon translated well into politics. Some worry that Hezbollah will try to dismantle the Taif Accord and reconstruct the country's governing arrangement to their benefit. While they were participating in elections in 1992, they were able to publicly threaten former prime minister Saad Hariri in 2006 after he called on them to lay down their arms. Now, Hezbollah leads a powerful bloc in the Lebanese parliament, essentially bestowing their ally Michel Aoun with the presidency after two years of deadlock.

The PMUs in Iraq are hinting they want to transform from militias into organized political structures. Hezbollah provides a potential model as they attempt to do so. The PMUs are trying to use their military leverage over the Iraqi government to wrestle power on behalf of Iran, much like Hezbollah did in Lebanon.

The PMUs have used their allies in parliament to weaken current prime minister Haider al-Abadi and his cabinet through an anticorruption committee designed to oust Abadi's allies. The PMU's greatest ally in government is corrupt former premier Nouri al-Maliki, whose marginalization of Sunni communities paved the way for the rise of ISIS. Maliki has also backed PMU leaders who want to further institutionalize their militias into more permanent structures, akin to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Recently, Iraq's Supreme Court ruled against a decision by Abadi to eliminate the three largely ceremonial vice presidential positions, one of which is held by Maliki. This further weakens Abadi's political standing by overruling one of his most important measures to streamline popular support for curtailing government corruption and thus leaving his main opponent in power. In effect, with Maliki's help, what Hezbollah took twenty years to accomplish the PMUs could accomplish in two years.

IRANIAN INVOLVEMENT

Hezbollah has received Iranian-supplied weaponry, monetary aid, and combat training, with over 3,000 Hezbollah militants having undergone training in Iran on guerrilla warfare tactics, firing missiles and rockets, operating drones, and marine warfare. Iran has launched airstrikes in Iraq in support of PMUs, and there are many examples of Qasem Soleimani, senior Iranian military officer and commander of the Qods Force, advising and directing Iraqi forces into battle. In addition, there are strong parallels between how the Iraqi PMUs mimic Hezbollah by sidelining any non-Iranian-backed Shiite groups or figures, as they have done with the Amal Movement.

Iran's Hezbollah brand has existed in Iraq since 2003 in the form of Kataib Hezbollah, which fought against American and coalition forces during Iraq's sectarian strife in 2007 and has a near exact copy of Hezbollah's logo on its flag. One of the group's leaders, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, was a former advisor to Iran's Qods Force, openly received training and funding from the Qods Force and Lebanese Hezbollah, and worked with the IRGC during the Iraq-Iran War. He is now the deputy chairman of the Popular Mobilization Committee for the PMUs in Iraq. Another PMU leader and prominent Shiite cleric, Qais al-Khazali, said that the "Mosul battle is revenge against the descendants of the killers of Hussein." Khazali, who backed Maliki in the 2014 elections, is notorious for supposedly backing Iran during the Iraq-Iran War.

PMU commander Hadi al-Ameri, the former Iraqi minister of transportation and head of the Badr Organization, similarly fought alongside Iran during the Iran-Iraq War. He has been accused of overseeing flights of Iranian weapons shipments headed to Syria and recently expressed praise for Qasem Soleimani. This cross-pollination of Shiite groups, PMUs, the Qods Force, and Lebanese Hezbollah is seen even more clearly in the Syrian theater, where many of these forces are bridged by land and brought closer together by common enemies and direct Iranian support.

THE PILLARS OF PROPAGANDA AND POPULAR SUPPORT

Traditional Shiite resistance theology, specifically the martyrdom of Hussein, is used by Hezbollah and the PMUs to justify their actions. Both groups are adept at tapping into nationalist pride and collective national sentiment in order to bolster their cause. Hezbollah drew popular support from many Lebanese civilians, including many non-Shiites, for the rockets they launched at Israel and subsequent guerrilla warfare in 2006. Hezbollah even runs the Museum for Resistance Tourism a few hours from Beirut, where they tout their victories by showcasing exhibitions of destroyed Israeli tanks and large portraits of Hassan Nasrallah. More recently, Hezbollah received praise from many Lebanese for protecting the border with Syria from any ISIS/Jabhat al-Nusra incursions, and continues to

receive praise by advocating for the Palestinian cause.

While PMUs cannot boast the same amount of institutionalized support, they are still admired by millions in Iraq for putting their lives on the line to fight ISIS. Similar to Nasrallah's sympathy for suffering Christians in Iraq and Egypt, the PMUs regularly lament the genocide of Christians with flashy videos featuring soldiers liberating churches, protecting nuns from ISIS, and praying alongside old Christian women and children. Leaders of the PMUs have even promoted a Chaldean Catholic leader, Rayyan al-Kildani, who purportedly runs a Christian PMU.

A FUTURE FOR IRAQ

Shiites in Lebanon and Iraq exist as two separate and unique communities; they have varied histories, narratives, theological doctrines, and unique social dynamics. However, what is clear is that in both situations, Iran has taken advantage of chaos to bolster its proxies. The future of Iraq has a wide range of possible outcomes, from national reconciliation to an all-out intra-Shiite conflict in the south when militias return to places like Dhi Qar or al-Muthanna provinces. Even though it is yet to be seen what will happen, an outcome in which the PMUs run for parliament or back a political party will have disastrous consequences, possibly providing fodder for the rise of ISIS 2.0.

It has yet to be seen how the PMUs will act after Mosul, but the United States and Abadi would be wise to plan ahead and ensure that Iran doesn't have its way again. The Abadi government can take certain steps to prevent the rise of PMUs after Mosul. Not all Iraqi Shiites are pro-Iranian puppets: in fact, many are fervently nationalistic. Abadi can tap into Iraqi nationalism to combat further sectarian division. These battle-hardened men must be rewarded for abandoning the PMUs, collected into the Iraqi army, and either trained in formal military rules of engagement or funneled into the workforce.

The United States must pull whatever strings it can in Baghdad, Tehran, or Moscow to prevent PMU leaders from transforming into institutionalized political leaders. If no precautions are taken, the Middle East will end up with a country over five times the population of Lebanon under direct control of Iran. With Iraqi nationalism at its highest in years due to the Mosul offensive, the United States should take advantage of this to unify Iraq. The PMUs' powers will need to be widely curtailed once ISIS is defeated, and Washington should condition military aid on political progress. Lastly, the United States should promote good governance through meritocracy and accountability in government. This will go a long way toward preventing outside forces from having their say in Iraq's affairs.

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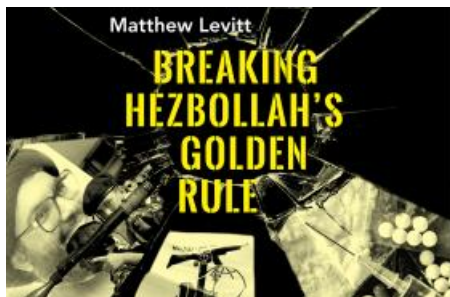
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