

Iranian Influence in Iraq: Between Balancing and Hezbollahization?

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Three Iraq experts probe the rising influence of Shiite militias -- many backed by Iran -- on Iraq's security and political landscapes.

On May 28, Michael Knights, Phillip Smyth, and Ahmed Ali addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Knights is a Lafer Fellow with the Institute and author of [The Long Haul: Rebooting U.S. Security Cooperation in Iraq](#). Smyth is a researcher at the University of Maryland, editor of the blog "Hizballah Cavalcade," and author of the Washington Institute report [The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects](#). Ali is an Iraq analyst and visiting senior fellow at the Education for Peace in Iraq Center (EPIC). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

MICHAEL KNIGHTS

Formed in June 2014, the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), or al-Hashd al-Shabi, have established themselves as effective fighting forces in Iraq. These Shiite units were raised in the aftermath of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's June 2014 fatwa calling for defensive jihad against the so-called "Islamic State"/ISIS, and legitimized by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's subsequent establishment of a government "PMU Commission." Although they operate independently for the most part, it is inaccurate to call them militias because they are part of the Iraqi security forces (ISF) joint command.

Technically, Abadi has formal command and control over the PMUs through Iraqi national security advisor Faleh al-Fayyad. In practice, however, these units are largely controlled by Iranian-backed political groups in Iraq such as the Badr Organization, and ultimately by the Qods Force, a branch of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. Some PMU elements fought against U.S. troops during the Iraq war and were only rolled into the anti-ISIS campaign as a result of Sistani's fatwa. At the same time, PMUs have been critical in retaking territory from ISIS, with much of the ISF in a defensive posture around Baghdad. The PMUs act as a mobile strike force, effectively doubling Iraq's available offensive potential. This presents a dilemma for Washington, as many fighters within the PMUs remain fiercely anti-American.

Last summer, following the fall of Mosul and much of northern Iraq, the PMUs prevented further loss of territory to ISIS. In autumn they began clearance operations, retaking territory in places such as Tikrit and Amerli. They have been less effective in battles of attrition, requiring the support of federal forces to drive ISIS out of Tikrit's urban precincts. While they act inhumanely at times, PMUs have a reputation of getting the job done. In some areas, they are clearing areas of ISIS, purging Sunni administrators, and preventing displaced Sunnis from returning, possibly as part of a larger effort to change the demographics of traditionally Sunni areas and preempt another ISIS-type insurgency. In other areas they are clashing with Kurdish and Sunni forces and creating buffer zones to protect Shiites. And in southern Iraq, they are filling the void left by withdrawn ISF troops and blocking attempts to backfill these departed federal units.

The PMUs maintain between 60,000 and 90,000 men under arms on a rotating basis. They are capable of working with Sunnis, particularly in Sunni-only areas. Elite PMU elements are supported by Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Lebanese Hezbollah, who supply them with intelligence, advisors, logistics, and weapons. This gives them an edge over the ISF, though the PMUs as a whole are spread fairly thin at this point. Beyond the fighting, the PMUs are gaining popular influence and could become a major political force, with members benefiting from their association with battlefield successes.

The PMUs seem to have two potential paths in the long term. They could become a cross-sectarian force that operates similar to a National Guard. Or they could become a parallel military akin to Iran's Revolutionary Guards, operating as a permanent Shiite security force that undermines the ISF and rejects Western support. Which outcome materializes will depend on whether the various PMU groups cooperate or compete with each other, and whether they look to Abadi and the Iraqi government or Tehran for leadership.

PHILLIP SMYTH

More attention should be devoted to the ethnic cleansing activities being carried out by PMUs. Such incidents have been occurring largely around Baghdad, where most Sunnis have been expelled, as well as Diyala and the corridor running from Baghdad to Samarra. The current focus of these activities is to create a protective cordon around the capital; in that sense they resemble the massacres that took place in Lebanon between 1975 and 1978, where the goal was to protect the lines of communication that encircled the capital area and connected urban areas with the countryside.

As for Iran's role, while one can find many photos of PMU-associated vehicles decorated with photos of Sistani (whose relationship with Tehran has traditionally been tense), this is likely part of an Iranian-inspired effort to co-opt his image and followers for other purposes. Sistani views the PMUs as an essential element in the fight against ISIS, but he continues to pressure them. For example, in his June 2014 fatwa, he called for Shiites to join Iraq's armed forces, not militias, and his representatives have asked fighters to "raise the Iraqi flag" rather than flying militia banners. (Some groups have responded by sewing militia logos onto Iraqi flags.)

Tehran has also been pushing symbolic cross-sectarian alliances against ISIS by creating small minority militias within the PMUs. Examples include the Christian groups Kataib Babiliyoun and Kataib Rouh Allah Issa ibn Miriam, as well as smaller Sunni factions. These militias have been formed to create a nonsectarian face for the PMUs and expand Iran's influence beyond its traditional Shiite base. Yet tensions between Shiite PMUs remain a problem for Tehran. Last month, for instance, the group Kataib Hezbollah attacked the offices of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) in Basra. Moreover, Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr has refused to support the jihad in Syria, spurring Iran to form Syria-focused PMUs that claim to belong to the Sadrist current in order to create the perception that he backs the fight next door. This in turn has forced Sadr to disavow any connection with these groups.

AHMED ALI

Iran's influence in Iraq is at its highest since 2003. This influence began in 1981 with the formation of ISCI and the Badr Brigades, and has reached its current peak because of ISIS battlefield successes and the subsequent Iranian deployment to counter them. The PMUs are a product of this deployment, though it should be noted that they were mobilized to fight in Syria even before Sistani's fatwa, returning to Iraq in early 2014 to combat a resurgent ISIS.

While the United States needs to be realistic about what it can accomplish in Iraq, Tehran's own influence there is self-limiting in many respects, and the PMUs reflect these limitations. Iran largely controls them at the moment, but Abadi is struggling to take charge of them as well. Moreover, many of the PMUs have different assets, goals, and ideology, so competition between them is inevitable. For now, most Iraqis do not concern themselves with the strategic risk of relying on the PMUs because the threat posed by ISIS is existential, and the capabilities provided by the PMUs are essential. Yet Iraqi Sunnis clearly do not feel the same about the militias as Shiites do -- in fact, many believe the PMUs and ISIS are equally problematic. Sunnis are particularly worried about PMU activities in mixed communities around Baghdad and Diyala, though Sunni tribes have sometimes had to rely on PMU protection from ISIS out of necessity.

In northern Iraq, PMUs have emerged as the only force available to protect the local population because the Kurdish Peshmerga have chosen not to operate in certain Shiite areas where they would be unwelcome (e.g., Tal Afar). The same holds for areas where Sunni tribes have proven unwilling to stand up to ISIS, at least for now.

The PMUs have established themselves in Iraq through significant recruiting, fundraising, and other activities, and while they might not be highly influential in the long term, they will be part of the political scene for years to come. In the past, militia figures have not done as well in elections as expected, but they will continue to compete with each other for parliamentary seats. The PMUs also have a tendency to overplay their hand and a reputation for internecine violence, which turns public sentiment against them. Going forward, Sistani will be an important figure in monitoring and curbing these competing factions, though what will happen after he is gone is unclear.

These concerns aside, Iraq will not succumb to "Hezbollahization." The Iraqi state is relatively strong, and the PMUs are being forced to work within that system. The country has too much political diversity and competition for one armed group to dominate like Hezbollah does in Lebanon.

Finally, it should be pointed out that if ISIS is eventually expelled from Iraq, many Iraqi Shiite militias would likely return to Syria to resume their efforts in support of the Assad regime.

This summary was prepared by Ian Duff.