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Iraq's Dilemma: The Uncertain Future of the Popular Mobilization Forces

Unit for Political Studies

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The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq have seen some of their factions sporadically attacked in recent weeks, with Israel believed to be the aggressor. This has been coupled with US pressure to place these forces under the control of the Iraqi government and shield them from Iranian influence. The attacks have sparked fears among Iraqi politicians and officials that Iraq could become an arena for a US-Israeli conflict against Iran. It also propelled the issue of the future of these factions to the forefront and raised questions about the ability of Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi to continue attempts to appease all parties, at a time of mounting US and Iranian pressure for him to take a clear stand.

Mike Pompeo's Visit and Tehran's Response

Following an unannounced visit by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Baghdad in May 2019, PMF units began to be targeted. According to various sources, Pompeo disclosed information to Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi about missiles that Iran had transferred to PMF units, some of which boast a 700km range. This development compromises Iraq's neutrality in the conflict between Tehran and Washington. Pompeo threatened that if Iraq did not remove the missiles, they would be destroyed.⁽¹⁾

It is believed that these pressures were behind Abdul Mahdi's decision, in early July 2019, to issue a detailed decree to integrate PMF militias into the armed forces. The decree stipulates the abolition of PMF ranks and the closure of their offices in various cities and the transfer of their weapons to military camps outside urban areas, as well as steps to achieve a gradual integration of the entire PMF within the regular forces. Abdul Mahdi declared that he aims to protect the PMF from internal and external problems, clearly alluding to the pressure on the government accompanying the escalation of the US-Iranian crisis.⁽²⁾ Although most PMF factions have at least verbally endorsed Abdul Mahdi's decree, an Iraqi unit close to Iran, the Hezbollah Brigades, issued a statement on July 4, 2019 denouncing the government's position and suggesting a US conspiracy against the PMF.⁽³⁾

Ahead of the 30 July 2019 deadline set by Abdul Mahdi to implement his decree, PMF chairman Falih Alfayyadh asked for an additional two months to enforce the measures, revealing that some factions had rejected the government's plan in an attempt to gain more time. A few days later however further complications in the relationship between the militias and the Baghdad government arose. At the beginning of August 2019, Tehran exaggeratedly celebrated the visit of leaders of the Nujaba Movement, another prominent Iraqi militia, in which senior leaders said during meetings with Iranian leaders such as Ali Akbar Velayati, an advisor to the Supreme Leader that the factions could overthrow Abdul Mahdi's government within two weeks.⁽⁴⁾ Observers considered this as a message from Tehran responding to Abdul-Mahdi's moves, despite the prime minister being seen as keen to calm the Iranians, even if this angers his US ally.

1 "Pompeo briefs Iraqi leaders on U.S. security concerns over Iran," *Reuters*, 7/5/2019, accessed on 9/9/2019, at: <https://reut.rs/2iLDm2P>

2 "Abdul Mahdi restructures the PMF in Iraq", *Asharq al-Awsat*, 2/7/2019, accessed 9/9/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2iEAG7g>

3 "Pro-Iranian Insurrection: Refusal to bow down to the Iraqi Army Command," *The New Arab*, 8/7/2019, accessed 9/9/2019 at: <http://bit.ly/2kpB6hK>

4 "Al-Nujaba movement threatens to overthrow the Iraqi government if it acts against Iran," *Sputnik Arabic*, 6/8/2019, accessed 9/9/2019 at: <http://bit.ly/2iJPbqe>

PMF Contradictions and Its Relationship with the State

No sooner had the delegation of the Nujaba movement returned from Tehran on 6 August than an explosion in the Abu Dshir area south of Baghdad hit a warehouse storing missiles belonging to the militias, amid rumors over Israel's role in bombing the site and the type of weapons used. At the same time, the leader of the Nujaba Movement, Yusuf al-Nasseri, called for the dissolution of the Iraqi army, calling him a "mercenary," demanding to rely only on the PMF to protect the country. This led to widespread condemnation, prompting most PMF leaders to disown these statements. Meanwhile, the leader of the Nujaba movement Yousuf al-Nasseri called for the Iraqi army to be dissolved, describing it as a "mercenary" force and demanded sole reliance on the PMF to protect the country. This led to widespread condemnation, with most PMF leaders disowning these statements.⁽⁵⁾

Divisions have appeared to emerge within the PMF over the Iran standoff along with concern over the increasing frequency with which PMF factions have been targeted, beginning in Amirli, south of Kirkuk and Diyala, adjacent to the Iranian border on 19 and 28 July 2019 respectively. The bombings of PMF camps near the Balad airbase north of Baghdad on 20 August 2019 clearly demonstrated the existence of these divisions. The deputy chair of the PMF, close to Tehran, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, has explicitly accused the United States and Israel of being behind them, threatening to respond with "more sophisticated weapons".⁽⁶⁾ The following day, PMF chairman Falih Alfayyadh issued a statement in which he disavowed the position of his deputy, and restricted statements on the matter to the Prime Minister or his delegate. This was considered a direct blow to al-Muhandis, who enjoys widespread influence in Baghdad and is treated as a representative of Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

PMF Divisions

The Popular Mobilization forces can usually be broken down into three divisions, with the first - formed as ISIL invaded large parts of the northwest in June 2014 – made up of volunteers to support the army as described by Najaf's supreme authority, Ali al-Sistani. They are also part of the group of fighters loyal to the cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and the leader of the National Wisdom Movement, Ammar al-Hakim and others. The second division represents militias formed before the ISIL invasion and known for their controversial role supporting Bashar al-Assad's forces in the Syrian war, described as a "loyalist mobilization" that believes in the mandate and leadership of Iranian leader Ali Khamenei.⁽⁷⁾ The third division consists of a mixture of fighters affiliated with officials and politicians, such as former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, and Sunni leaders such as Misha'an al-Juburi and Atheel al-Nujaifi, whose stances waver to serve their interests. The Iraqi government's problems lie with the

5 "Official PMF website issues a statement about comments against the Iraqi army", PMF website, 14/8/2019, accessed 9/9/2019 at: <http://bit.ly/2lF4Bw4>

6 'Statement by the Deputy Chairman of the PMF Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis on targeting the Balad base', PMF website, 21/8/2019, accessed 9/9/2019 at: <http://bit.ly/2kBlZjX>

7 "Iraq is late to assume the external factor in the bombing of the PMF camps," *Asharq al-Awsat*, 27/8/2019, accessed on 9/9/2019 at: <http://bit.ly/2m4AhLv>

second division, which is smaller in number, but has more equipment, experience and better training and boasts “commando” units considered a force to be reckoned with in Iraq and Syria.

But these divisions do not account for the positions of Hadi al-Amiri, leader of the Badr Organization, the largest militia faction, and the most traditionally disciplined going back to the beginning of the war between Iraq and Iran. They fought alongside Tehran against Saddam Hussein regime. Al-Amiri is very close to Tehran, but he did not stand with the loyalist militias in their confrontation with the government, nor did he stand with his ally and old weapons comrade Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who became embroiled in a public confrontation with Abdul Mahdi. This indicates that al-Amiri appears to be trying to distinguish himself and find the middle ground among the various external powers. For example, he supports the normalization of relations with the Arab world, maintaining relations with the United States and the preservation of strong ties with Tehran.

Proxy Wars

Frequent targeting of PMF units has prompted Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi to take steps that would place various and gradual restrictions on militia activity. It seems that Abdul Mahdi's move was motivated by public demand for clarification after the contents of the PMF stores were blown up, and strong statements issued by Muqtada al-Sadr and Ammar al-Hakim, who demanded the government take a clearer stand. Al-Sadr briefly discussed his position on 30 August 2019, calling for an investigation, albeit under international supervision, into Israel's possible involvement in the bombing of warehouses, but he cautioned against emotional statements and demanded the need to keep Iraq from paying the price in vain, referring to the position of the factions advancing Iranian policy.⁽⁸⁾ Ammar al-Hakim has publicly demanded that the country not be a repository for the arms of any other country, in reference to Iran, and that the skies of Iraq should not be the arena for a fight between foreign countries, in reference to Israel and the United States.⁽⁹⁾ This is a remarkable development for Iraqi Shi'i leaders who refuse to turn Iraq into a battleground between Iran and its allies on the one hand, and Washington and its allies on the other, indicating that the Iraqi political scene does not simply follow Iran.

The Fall of the PMF?

With ISIL invading Iraqi territory in the summer of 2014, the Popular Mobilization of various factions received a great deal of popular sympathy, especially among the Shi'is in the south, following the collapse of the army in Mosul and the west of the country. But the process of rebuilding regular forces, which culminated in the battles to liberate Mosul from ISIL in 2017, rehabilitated the Iraqi army

8 "Iraq worries about the external factor on the issue of the bombing of the crowd camps," *Asharq al-Awsat*, 27/8/2019, accessed 9/9/2019 at: <http://bit.ly/2m4AhLv>

9 Ammar Al-Hakeem "The land of Iraq is not a storehouse for any non-Iraqi weapon and is not the arena for any external aggression," Twitter, 31/8/2019, accessed 9/9/2019 at: <http://bit.ly/2m1seit>

and its elite forces in the public eye. The popularity of the PMF factions began to decline following political confrontations that led to the failure of Haider al-Abadi's government and then toppled him. But pro-Iranian factions have been seeking an occasion to reinstate the PMF at the forefront. An important opportunity arose in the Hormuz crisis to do just that, driven by an Iranian desire to get Iraqi fighters to play a prominent role in the confrontation with Washington, especially as Israel enters the fray. Israel is considered a historical enemy in the Iraqi conscience, one that usurped Arab land in Palestine, and with which Iraq fought in the wars of 1948, 1967 and 1973. Israel bombed the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981, and Israel was hit with Iraqi missiles in the 1991 Gulf War. However, certain currents in Iraq refuse to hand over the Iraqi national decision regarding the confrontation with Israel to foreign forces. While this movement condemns Israeli aggression regardless of its justifications, it refuses to allow the Iranian Revolutionary Guards decide when and where the two countries should collide, or to serve a non-Iraqi agenda, as Iran attempts to plunge Iraq into a proxy war by supplying its militias with missiles. It will not be used to defend Iraq but to defend Iran.

As a result of what appears to be a sharp decline in support for the militias, Ayatollah Kazem al-Haeri, a resident of Iran, issued a fatwa stipulating that PMF factions must be protected in this confrontation, even if war on US forces in Iraq is required. However, this fatwa was not held in regard by even the religiously committed public, becoming instead a reason to attack al-Haeri even to the point of ridicule. Prominent leaders in the PMF such as Qais Khazali had to issue pleas calling for respect for this elderly jurist, and moreover al-Haeri failed to gather support even among the factions.

Important signs have recently emerged that Iran's influence is waning among Shi'is in southern Iraq, where, nearly a year ago, angry demonstrators burned the headquarters of Iran-aligned militias in Basra, which led to the headquarters of the Iranian consulate there being set alight. These incidents have alarmed the militias, who have doubled up their attempts to build a broad social base, benefiting from significant budgetary allocations in the state budget and growing economic activity, and establishing close ties with thousands of young people from poor families, repeatedly declaring that they represent the destitute in contrast to the veteran politicians mired in corruption scandals.

Abdul Mahdi's Politics

Much of the focus of the conflict between Tehran and Washington as it plays out in Iraq is focused on the role of Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi. While he is an Islamic-oriented Iraqi politician close to Tehran, he also sees himself as an Arab nationalist. Before that he was a leftist, who spent part of his life in the West, with which he is committed to partnership. At a time when his opponents accuse him of siding with Iran, the Iran's Revolutionary Guards are indicating their dissatisfaction with many of his positions. In reality, Abdul-Mahdi, conducts a discreet screening of pro-Iranian armed factions, using the other part of the PMF closer to his own stance, while also refusing to besiege and target Iran. The Prime Minister consequently finds himself obliged at times to take decisions that restrict Iran's influence and others that restrict Washington's movement, such as removing the PMF



weapons stores from the cities, and deciding to restrict the movement of US warplanes after a PMF camp in the city of Balad was bombed. Abdul Mahdi is finding it increasingly difficult to continue with this approach, as he slowly loses Iran's confidence as he fails to win Washington's trust.

At the same time, Abdul-Mahdi is facing increasing pressure from Iraqi public opinion and prominent clerics, such as Muqtada al-Sadr and Ammar al-Hakim, as well as other political forces, to move against the PMF factions, not only regarding weapons, but also because of their growing social, political and economic role around the regions liberated from ISIL, especially Mosul. At present, Iran is trying to calm tensions between Abdul Mahdi and the Tehran affiliated PMF factions, fearing that Abdul Mahdi will be pushed toward Washington. This explains Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis' temporary silence as he avoids confrontation.

Once Iraq saw national unity in the face of ISIL and began to rebuild its institutions, the struggle for Iraqi sovereignty over Iranian and American influence (and, to a lesser extent, Saudi attempts to build influence) began. The issue of political loyalty to the PMF was the most important arena of the conflict. This conflict will have a profound impact on the future of Iraq, and perhaps the Arab Mashreq in general.