

HANDLING THE IRAQI POPULAR MOBILISATION FORCES IN THE POST-ISLAMIC STATE IRAQ

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Abstract

This article examines the future of the Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) after the fall of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Iraq. The PMF is an umbrella organization of armed militias that assisted the coalition forces in liberating Iraqi cities from ISIS control. However, in the aftermath of that operation, the PMF now poses a major threat for the future of state-building in Iraq. Their armed strength and loyalties to leaders other than the Iraqi government, combined with evidence from existing research on pro-regime militias, suggest that the PMF poses a high threat in an unstable environment if not managed carefully. Therefore, this article addresses the following question: What can be done with the various militias of the PMF to ensure a secure and sustainable future in Iraq? The Iraqi government has already taken the first steps to mitigate the PMF's threat by integrating them into the national army, but further integration is required. Since undergoing any disarming, demobilizing and reintegrating (DDR) program is unlikely in Iraq at present, this article recommends employing the PMF for the purpose of infrastructure reconstruction or its support.

Introduction

This article examines the future of the Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), formally known as Al Hashd Al Sha'bi, after the fall of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS/ISIL/IS) in Iraq. The PMF is an Iraqi state-sponsored umbrella organization consisting of more than 60 different heavily armed and trained militias who were relied upon extensively by the Iraqi government during the liberation of Iraqi cities, towns, and villages from ISIS control (Nada & Rowan, 2018). At its peak in October 2014, ISIS controlled a territory the size of the UK with roughly 10 million people living under their control (BBC, 2018; Johnston, 2014). By October 2017, the Iraqi Army - with the support of numerous groups, including the PMF and the international coalition against ISIS - had successfully retaken important Iraqi cities like Fallujah, Mosul and Tikrit from ISIS (Kranz & Gould, 2017), reducing the organization's presence to the sparsely populated peripheries of Iraq and Syrian border regions. The PMF's participation in the liberation efforts saw the militias that made up the organization become legitimized and grow in the process. However, despite their legitimization and

participation in liberating vast amounts of territory from ISIS, they now pose a serious threat to the future of Iraq's security if they are not carefully managed. This is mainly because after the fall of ISIS in Iraq, there is a reduced need for the PMF's military assistance for the Iraqi government, which risks leaving this heavily armed group sidelined and ready to act in the interest of their foreign affiliates, specifically Iran and Iranian backed armed groups.

The article, therefore, asks the following question: What can be done with the various militias of the PMF to ensure a secure and sustainable future in Iraq? The Iraqi government has to ensure that the PMF has a role within the post-ISIS Iraq, and is not left unemployed, sidelined and ready to fight, only to recreate a similar environment that led to the rise of ISIS - the oppression of Sunni Iraqis by a majority Shia government (Beauchamp, 2015), and a dysfunctional national military (Tharoor, 2015). Instead, the government should find ways to create sustainable peace between the various religious and ethnic groups within Iraq using the PMF. This research question is strongly in conversation with the literature on sustainable peacebuilding and the recent political history of Iraq. As such, this article will consist of three sections: firstly, it will attempt to show how the formation of the PMF was in reaction to ISIS in Iraq; secondly, through a combination of research on pro-regime militias and the role of the PMF during the liberation process, this article assesses the threat posed by the PMF if they are sidelined; and finally, it analyzes peacebuilding literature to assess whether the PMF should disarm, demobilize and reintegrate (DDR) into the post-conflict society or play a supporting role in the Iraqi security apparatus in the immediate future. In the analysis, this article argues that since undertaking a DDR process is highly unlikely in the present in Iraq, the PMF should instead be formally integrated into the national army, then their services should subsequently be used for the purposes of infrastructure reconstruction, either directly or as security support for others who will.

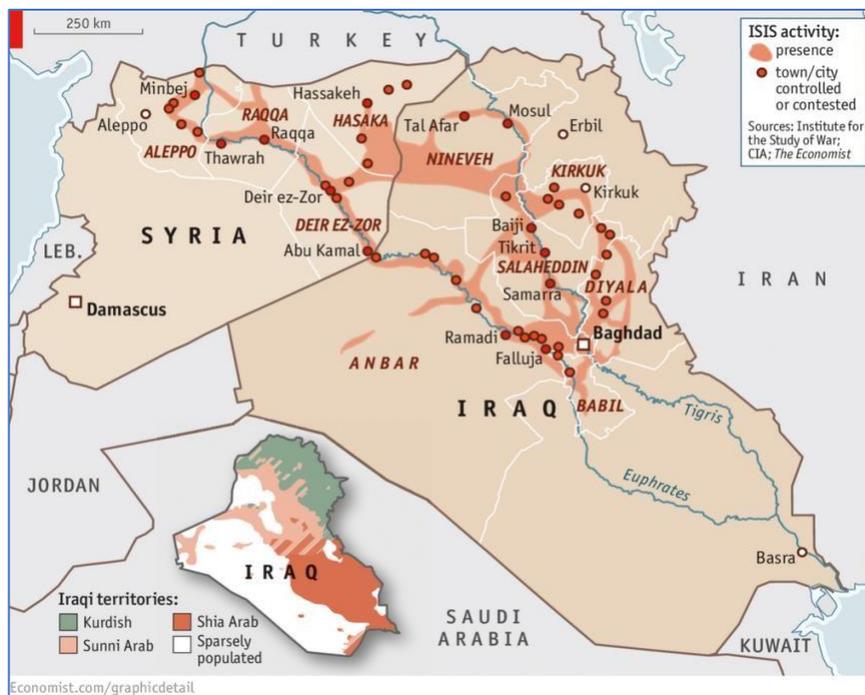
The Rise of PMF

Before discussing the role of the PMF in the liberation process, it is important to understand the political environment in Iraq from which they emerged, particularly to the situation in Iraq in 2014 just before the formation of the PMF. On 4th January, ISIS killed more than 100 people in Fallujah right after taking control of a city less than 100 kilometers away from Iraq's capital of Baghdad. On 4th June, ISIS sent approximately 1500 fighters to Mosul, the largest Sunni Muslim city in Iraq, where roughly 30,000 soldiers from the national army were stationed, and they managed to take control of the entire city within six days. On

11th June, they attacked Tikrit (140 kilometers from Baghdad) and Baiji (130 kilometers from Baghdad) simultaneously, with only 60 vehicles, managing to take control of Tikrit in the process. The following day, the PMF executed 1500 Shia government soldiers in Tikrit; by the end of that summer, they had established a Caliphate, executed several thousands of civilians of differing faiths, and, as illustrated in figure 1 below, they took control of major Iraqi cities like Tal Afar, Baiji (with all its oil) and Sinjar as well as most of the Nineveh governorate (Mohamedou, 2018, p. 205-207). This list does not even account for their actions in Syria, where in addition to executions and genocides, they also destroyed ancient cultural and religious infrastructure and artifacts (AFP News Agency, 2016). It is evident from this brief overview of ISIS's actions that the political environment in Iraq was total chaos. ISIS posed a serious threat not only to the government of Iraq, but also to all Iraqi citizens and residents, particularly non-Sunni Muslims who constitute between 66 to 71 percent of the population in Iraq (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2018).

Figure 1

Map areas under ISIS control in October 2014, from Brittany Bennett; The ISIS Crisis: An Overview of the Western Media Coverage; 24 October 2014; Web; 09 May 2019.



It is important here to understand some consequences of ISIS's existence in Iraq. Figure 2 below shows the extent of ISIS's control within Iraq and Syria on the day the Fatwa was issued. In terms of consequences, however, ISIS's continuous growth in Iraq had reached a point where they threatened to march into cities like Baghdad, Karbala and Najaf (Khalil, 2017, p. 15). These cities, particularly Karbala (the Shia Muslims' holy city), are important cities for both the government of Iraq, and Shia Muslims globally. In reaction to this threat, Iraq's most-senior Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani, issued a fatwa - a religious decree of the highest order - on June 13, 2014, announcing the following message: "Citizens who are able to bear arms and fight terrorists, defending their country and their people and their holy places, should volunteer and join the security forces to achieve this holy purpose" (Morris, 2014). The fatwa obligated all Shia Iraqis to volunteer for the army and fight against ISIS immediately. According to Khalil (2017), "[the] response to the fatwa was both immediate and enormous; hundreds of thousands of volunteers, particularly from the Shia areas, rushed to sign up," regardless of whether they had formal military training or not (p. 2). The fatwa and its immediate response from volunteers were the immediate consequences of ISIS's existence in Iraq; the formation of the PMF followed.

Figure 2

Image showing the situation in Iraq and Syria in June 2014, from Loveday Morris; How the Islamic State is Carving Out a New Country; The Washington Post; 13 June 2014; Web; 03 Dec. 2018.



It was not only the untrained Shia Iraqis that responded to the fatwa - Christian, Sunni, Turkmen, and Yezidi Iraqis also volunteered to fight for the army (Khalil, 2017; US Department of State, 2017). These untrained groups were joined by approximately 40 Iraqi Shia militias and armed groups, most of whom were affiliated to Iran and Hezbollah, who also volunteered to fight against ISIS (Khalil, 2017). Together, these volunteers formed the PMF, a state-sponsored umbrella organization of roughly 60 armed groups from various ethnic, religious and tribal backgrounds in Iraq, with the purpose of fighting against ISIS (US Department of State, 2017). They have since “played an invaluable role in supplementing Iraq’s armed forces against ISIS” (Nada & Rowan, 2018), having participated in almost every liberation battle to some capacity. Some of their major feats include the assistance of more than 20,000 PMF members from various brigades in liberating Tikrit in 2015 (Allam, 2015), the participation of 4000 members in liberating Fallujah by mid2016 (Mamoun, 2016; Mohamedou, 2018, p. 215), and their participation, albeit limited to the outskirts, in the lengthy operation to liberate Mosul (Gaston, 2017). The PMF did all of this - in the face of significant provincial opposition to their participation - while simultaneously assisting the liberation of smaller cities, towns and villages. Their growth and strength have led some to claim that they are perhaps the most powerful military force in Iraq (Najjar, 2017). The PMF’s rise and growth represents one of the most significant consequences of the chaotic political environment that was created, in large part, by ISIS’s entry and existence in Iraq, which is itself the subject of a long geopolitical history that has been extensively studied (Abdulrazaq & Stansfield, 2016; Mohamedou, 2018). This is largely due to the threat that the PMF poses for the future of Iraq.

The PMF Threat

The prime identified threat posed by the PMF is that the numerous Shia militias that make up the organization can exercise sectarian violence against Sunni Muslims in liberated Iraqi cities, running the risk of recreating the political environment in which ISIS emerged in Iraq. Although the description of the PMF shows that the organization consists of volunteers who fight to defend and protect Iraq (Khalil, 2017, p. 38), the reality has played out differently. To understand how the reality has played out differently, one must simply investigate why certain provincial governments opposed the PMF’s participation in the liberation process (Saleh, 2016). The political backlash was due to concerns about the human rights violations committed by certain Shia militias in Iraq against Sunni Muslims (Al-Jazeera, 2014; Gaston, 2017). Some of PMF militias were accused of such misconduct after the liberation of Tikrit in 2015 (Raineri, 2015). There

are numerous videos and article available online showing the PMF (and the Iraqi army) arresting Sunni Iraqis after liberating a city, accusing them of being ISIS members without adequate or accurate evidence, and sending them to unspecified prison camps for interrogation without fair trials (PBS NewsHour, 2017; The Guardian, 2017). The photographic documentation of some prisons shows several dozens of prisoners assembled in one small room where they just have enough space sit upright. Some prisoners have obvious signs bruising on their arms and shoulders, suggesting that torture and violence is commonplace in the prisons. Additionally, even months after an individual's arrest, their family members often do not know where they are held or whether they are even alive.

Understandably, such issues prompted some provincial governments in Iraq such as that of the Nineveh province opposed the PMF's participation the liberation. This powerful military force has also been known to violate human rights. By targeting innocent and guilty Sunni Iraqis alike in such a militarized manner, the PMF is depriving a significant segment of the population of security and protection, and essentially exposing the targeted population to a political environment where they look to other actors for self-protection. Similar militarized approaches towards Sunni Iraqis was previously exercised by former Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al Maliki's government forces (Abdulrazaq & Stansfield, 2016), which in turn saw ISIS take advantage of the situation to offer protection to vulnerable populations and grow in Iraq in the process. Therefore, by targeting Sunni Iraqis after liberating cities, the PMF is essentially contributing to the threat of inviting yet another armed extremist group into Iraq by creating all the necessary conditions for them to capitalize on.

Research on pro-regime militias identify another major threat that the PMF poses to the future of Iraq's security. So far, this article has described the role of the PMF in the liberation efforts and discussed some of its dimensions and one threat. However, from this point on, it is important to note the present political situation in Iraq. As of 9th of December 2017, Iraq's Prime Minister, Haider Al Abadi, announced that ISIS no longer held any territory in Iraq, and that while the country was liberated; they were still at war with ISIS (Coker & Hassan, 2017). For the PMF, this meant that the objective that they were established for had been accomplished, meaning that there was no longer a desperate demand for this assistance. This issue risks sidelining the thousands of volunteer fighters in the numerous battalions that make up the organization, who, according to research on pro-regime militias, can pose a security threat in the future. In a recent research study about pro-regime militias, Huseyn Aliyev analyzes the outcomes of 229 conflicts between 1991 and 2015 and finds that "pro-regime militias

[generally] involved in intrastate conflicts tend to act as proponents of ‘no peace, no war’, favouring low-activity violence and ceasefires over other conflict outcomes” (2018, p. 1). This finding is particularly worrisome when applied to the context of Iraq, especially after it has been liberated from ISIS. This is because following the fall of their common enemy in major cities, namely ISIS, the various pro-regime militias that form the PMF and the government of Iraq have a real, yet slight chance of working together to create a situation of non-violence in places they control. However, the research suggests that the militias that make up the PMF are more likely to favour a low intensity conflict situation over complete non-violence. Therefore, despite fighting on the government’s side in the efforts against ISIS, it is unlikely that the PMF will work with the government to ensure that a situation of complete non-violence. Perhaps this is because the militias have a role to play in conflict situations, whereas non-violent situations essentially render almost 60,000 fighters from the different private-military-sized militias out-of-use, unemployed and ready to resort to violence in favour of another group.

The question of whether the PMF would be ‘employable’ for someone other than the Iraqi government leads to identifying the next threat. While the PMF are a state-sponsored organization, they do not necessarily take orders from the government. Instead, most of the Shia militias reportedly assisted the government forces as a “response” to a fatwa made by Iraq’s top Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani (Nada & Rowan, 2018). The participation of the Christians, Sunnis and Turkmen is more of a nationalist response. The fact is that these militias are only proregime in the fight against an entity like ISIS. Beyond this, these militias, especially the Shia militias, are actually loyal to different leaders. The different Shia brigades can be classified into the three following categories: “Some have pledged allegiance to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei [in Iran]. The second category includes militias loyal to Grand Ayatollah Sistani. A third category is represented by Saraya al Salam, or the Peace Brigades” (Nada & Rowan, 2018). Almost all of the Shia brigades have a direct and indirect connection to Iran rather than to the Iraqi government. The Badr Organization, for instance, is the oldest Iranian proxy in Iraq; then there is the Kataib Hezbollah, the brigades trained by the Lebanese armed group, Hezbollah, in Iran; and the third largest Shia militia, the Asaib Ahl al Haq (AAH), is also an Iranian proxy (Nada & Rowan, 2018). The list of brigades affiliated to Iran goes on. A video report by FRANCE 24 English reveals that even “the most renowned fighter in Iraq,” Abu Azrael, has pledged allegiance to the Iranian Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, claiming that he would immediately go to war on Khamenei’s command (2015). If these powerful brigades are left unemployed by the absence of conflict and are

ready to be mobilized on the command of foreign and non-state actors, they could rise against the state itself, or even the Kurdish groups, in order to create the low intensity violence scenario that favours their existence.

The combination of the threats posed by the PMF, if they are sidelined by the lack of conflict, also raises a major concern about group infighting. The possibility of group infighting between different brigades of the PMF is also cited by other sources (Najjar, 2017; US Department of State, 2017). Since the PMF consists of Iraqis from different ethnic and religious groups, and the different PMF brigades have pledged allegiance to different leaders who have different views, ideologies and objectives, there is a high possibility that this could lead to what Thompson refers to as coordination problems (Thompson, 2014). Moreover, the absence of intense conflict in post-ISIS Iraq could change this armed group over time (Thompson, 2014), and the multiple factions within the PMF could easily engage in group infighting in order to create a low intensity violence situation that justifies the continued existence of an irregular armed force. Evidently, if such a scenario is not prevented, a conflict of this type will take place in Iraq, threatening the security of the people yet again.

Having considered all of these points, this article assesses the threat posed by the PMF to be extremely high. It seems that as long as an entity like ISIS is kept out of the country, the Iraqi government does not fully require the services of an umbrella military organization like the PMF because the government forces can handle the country's security in the current situation. However, the threat analysis here shows that regardless of which angle the PMF is analyzed from, if there is no intense conflict in Iraq, the PMF are perhaps the biggest threat to local security in the future. According to London School of Economics (LSE) Professor Saad Jawad, speaking at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) on 24th October 2018, also reiterated the threat assessment presented here, and added that Iranian influence in the PMF should not be undermined because if the PMF becomes too big, it could allow Iran to slowly annex Iraq (Jawad, 2018). The Iranian influence threat is also underscored by Khalil (2017, p. 51). This also highlights the importance of having to manage and find the appropriate solution for the PMF immediately.

Future of the PMF

The threat analysis above emphasizes the need for the Iraqi government to find an appropriate solution to effectively manage the PMF. In September 2018, the Iraqi government took the first appropriate step towards effectively managing the

PMF for the long-term security of the country. The government decided to integrate the PMF into the national military, “giving them ranks and salaries equivalent to other branches of the Iraqi military” (O’Connor, 2018). There are several directions that the government can undertake next in order to further de-escalate the threat of the PMF. A DDR process might seem like the most obvious option. However, due to the complexity of this situation in Iraq and the unstable political conditions in the country, a DDR method for reducing the threat of PMF might not provide the best outcome. Banholzer suggests that DDR processes should be context-specific, and that failure to reintegrate fighters can be highly disruptive for a country’s peace process (2014, p. 30-31). She also adds that economic conditions of countries, the functionality of their government institutions, presence of institutionalised conflict-solving mechanisms, a comprehensive DDR strategy, and the presence of a third party in the country, among other factors, must all be accounted for when designing and implementing a successful DDR program (2014, p. 1).

A careful look at the current situation in Iraq suggests why DDR will fail. Firstly, some of the largest Shia militias, particularly the Iranian proxies like the Badr Organization and Asaib Ahl al Haq, and the Hezbollah Brigades, have been operating in Iraq for more than a decade each (Nada & Rowan, 2018). There is no indication that the members of these organizations have been weakened recently and are willing to put down their weapons to reintegrate into the system economically. In fact, it is precisely because of how powerful they are that they were integrated into the national military in the first place. Furthermore, they are given regular salaries in the army, meaning that they are already integrated into the formal economy without necessarily undergoing a DDR process. Moreover, Iraq is coming out of a period of total political and military chaos. Large cities, like Mosul, are severely damaged (Gaston, 2017), daily ISIS attacks still occur near the Syrian border regions targeting the Iraqi military¹, and there is a lack of finances and third-party non-military personnel present outside of Baghdad because of the years of ISIS occupation (Jawad, 2018), to even implement any kind of DDR program. Not only will a DDR program be unsuccessful in Iraq presently, but it is also impossible to initiate, enact, and enforce.

Additionally, another challenge for implementing a DDR process in Iraq is the limited territorial control of the Iraqi government. This challenge can be understood from the lessons learned from Afghanistan, a country that has

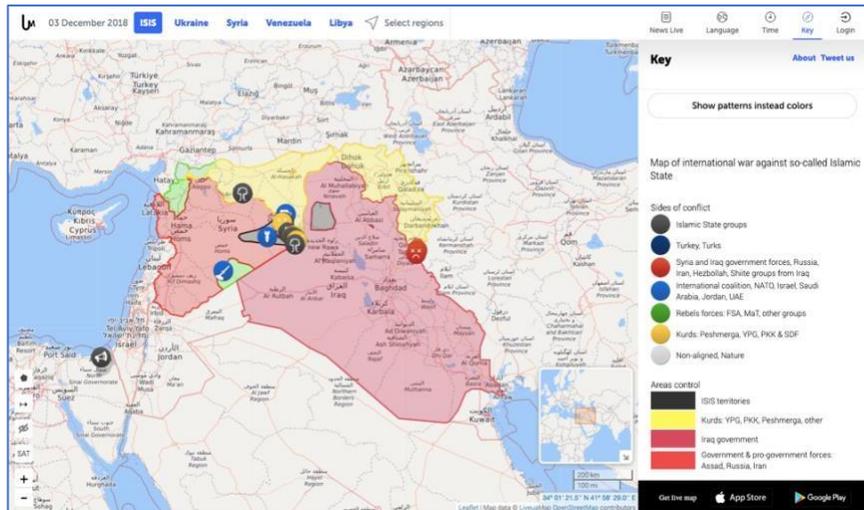
¹ See more under ISIS section in www.liveuamaps.com

experienced a similar recent political history as Iraq. According to the analysis of DDR processes in Afghanistan by US Air Force Major William B. Selber, the

Afghan government's limited territorial control was one of the reasons for why three different DDR programs that were enacted in Afghanistan between 2003 and 2016 by the government of Afghanistan, the International Security and Assistance Forces (ISAF) and the United Nations failed (2017). By comparison, the Iraqi government also does not fully control enough territory to run a successful DDR program. Figure 3 below, the most recent (3rd December 2018) image of the conflict taken from Live Universal Awareness Map (Liveuamap), illustrates this point. Focusing only on Iraq and not Syria, it is visible that vast amounts of territory in Northern Iraq is actually under Kurdish control (highlighted in yellow) rather than the Iraqi government's control (highlighted in red). Furthermore, while it was mentioned earlier that the Iraqi government did liberate Iraqi cities from ISIS, it was also mentioned that the government forces are still frequently attacked by ISIS near the border regions, meaning that the government is not in complete control of the country. Therefore, a DDR process in Iraq is practically impossible. Before they can implement a DDR program, the government manages to regain adequate control of Iraq's territory, while somehow convincing former combatants to put down their arms and managing to secure financial support for DDR experts to come to Iraq, plan the most comprehensive and inclusive DDR program, and enact it across the country. This is an impossible task given the current situation of the country and the state's capacity.

Figure 3

Liveuamap image highlighting the territorial control of different actors in Iraq and Syria as of 3rd December 2018, from Live Universal Awareness Map; ISIS; Liveuamap; 03 December 2018; Web; 03 Dec. 2018.



However, while a DDR process seems like an unlikely option given the context, it is important to address another possible option for handling the PMF in a manner that reduces the threat of the PMF even further. The Iraqi government should attempt to capitalize on the strengths of the PMF and build on what they have already done so far with regards to the PMF. Specifically, having integrated the PMF into the national army, the government has already established some form of “prime ministerial authority over the PMF” (US Department of State, 2017), which effectively means that the PMF will take, to some extent, commands from the state. Moving forward, however, the government should use the physical power of the tens of thousands of PMF members who are now in the national army to either directly rebuild infrastructure in war-impacted communities around Iraq or provide physical security in the cities to actors who will rebuild infrastructure. Essentially, I suggest that the government should use the notion and the principles of track one diplomacy - “government [using] good offices, mediation, and sticks and carrots to seek or force an outcome, typically along the win-lose or ‘bargaining’ line” (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall 2005) - to seek the suggested outcome in order to rebuild Iraq’s infrastructure that has been severely damaged by more than 15 years of constant conflict (for a detailed overview of the conflict in Iraq, please refer to: Mohamedou, 2018).

The rationale for focusing the energy of the newly integrated PMF units on infrastructure rebuilding rather than combat is multifold. First, and most importantly, sending the newly integrated PMF to the frontlines has its own set of problem. As discussed before, not every provincial council in Iraq was in favour of the PMF participating in the liberation efforts because of their controversial past. The decision to integrate them into the national army was made by the Prime Minister and the national government. It is evident that the PMF are not trusted by everyone in Iraq just yet, and so they could benefit from working in non-frontline domains for the moment until they gain enough approval from the provincial level to participate alongside the regular army in the frontlines. Moreover, as a newly integrated group who have training and experience in combat, they may disagree with certain military commands if sent to the frontlines, and decide to pursue independent concerns, putting their comrades in danger. Sometimes, the militia commanders might have more battle experience than military commanders, but they still have to take orders from the less experienced military commanders even though they disagree with their strategies. This can frustrate the more experienced militia commanders, who might break off formation to pursue action their own way. This natural human ego could kick in at any point in time on the battlefield and could put units in danger. To avoid this, the government would do well to give the newly integrated militias some time to synchronize with the Iraqi army before going into combat roles.

The second benefit of focusing the PMF's energy on rebuilding Iraq's damaged infrastructure rather than sending them to the frontlines can be described in terms of approval of both the government and the PMF itself. By capitalizing on the strengths of each group in a manner that improves the quality of life for residents of Iraqi cities, the government takes credits and gain approval of the people. Similarly, by rebuilding infrastructure or supporting such efforts will help to build the trust of the local in the PMF. Having the PMF engage in such efforts alongside nonmilitary actors will also help promote cohesion between the various ethnic and religious groups, which could, in the long term, prevent sectarian violence that gives rise to violent extremist groups.

The third benefit of having the PMF engage in infrastructure rebuilding, particularly as security providers, is that it allows humanitarian and development organizations to gain access to the people who need assistance. According to the USAID disaster assistance page on Iraq, approximately 11 million people in Iraq required humanitarian assistance in 2017 (USAID, 2018). It is noted that humanitarian organizations sometimes need to work together with security actors

in order to access vulnerable population to deliver humanitarian assistance to them (Allen, 2018). Iraq is an example of such a place. The country was already in need of humanitarian assistance and development since the 2003 US invasion, and it got worse in 2014 after three years under ISIS occupation. Humanitarian access to the local population has been difficult throughout this period. However, following the liberation of Iraq from ISIS, the government must try its utmost to ensure that local populations that are in need of humanitarian assistance can receive it. The government can utilize the newly integrated PMF units to provide military support for humanitarian operations. They can do this either directly – by accompanying the humanitarian actors – or indirectly – by ensuring that humanitarian actors have secure access (safe roads, remove explosives, etc...) to the people in need of assistance.

Once integrated into the armed forces, the PMF should then be used for productive and protective missions rather than offensive ones. After so many years of conflict and warfare in Iraq, it is important for the government to engage in rebuilding the cities. The newly integrated PMF should be used for such purposes. Militaries, all around the world, engage in infrastructure development and redevelopment projects - it is absolutely normal. In fact, infrastructural development and maintenance are some of the core tasks of the Swiss Army. The Iraqi government would do well to establish non-combat military practices. The various PMF units should be given the option to either help rebuild infrastructure in liberated and pillaged cities on behalf of the state or given a role to provide garrisoned military security for such projects in the cities. The state must do its utmost to monitor and prevent the PMF from engaging in violent offensive mission in Iraq or neighbouring countries, especially Syria, which has also experienced a similar situation to Iraq over the past few years.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to examine the future of the PMF after the fall of the ISIS in Iraq. To do this, this article begins with a brief description of some of ISIS's actions in Syria and (specifically) Iraq, in terms of harming religious infrastructures and cultural objects, that led to the formation and mobilization of the PMF. It then shows how the PMF were relied upon by the Iraqi government during the liberation of Iraqi cities, towns and villages from ISIS control in 2016 and 2017. However, since the PMF is comprised of many heavily armed non-state groups that possess varied motivations, ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs, this article argues that they pose an extremely high threat to the future of state-building in Iraq after the territorial fall of ISIS in Iraqi cities. The PMF's

mistreatment of Sunni Iraqi population, which, as argued, creates all the necessary conditions for extremist armed groups to capitalize on. Furthermore, research evidence on pro-regime militias shows that armed groups prefer a situation of low-intensity conflict over complete peace. This is a problem because without the presence of ISIS - the group that encouraged the formation of the PMF - in major Iraqi cities, the PMF militias are rendered useless as the government forces can handle the remaining ISIS fighters in the countryside and Syrian border region with the help of the international coalition against ISIS. As such, the militias might resort to violence either against the state or group infighting. Taking into consideration the armed strength of these groups, the fact that the militias are loyal to leaders other than the Iraqi government, such as Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Ayatollah Sistani, the PMF threat is assessed to be extremely high.

To prevent the worst consequences of an uncontrolled armed group's existence in newly liberated places, undergoing a DDR program is often considered. However, after examining previous cases of failed DDR programs that were implemented in Afghanistan between 2003 and 2016, this article proposes that instead DDR, the Iraqi government should integrate the PMF into the Iraqi armed forces to maintain some form of control over their actions. The Iraqi government has already undertaken this step. However, to ensure that the PMF do not resort to low-intensity violence, the government subsequently should use the PMF's armed strength in a productive and defensive manner during reconstruction of Iraqi cities, towns and villages - to rebuild infrastructure or provide physical protection and security for such projects - instead of for combat.

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