

THE SHIA ARMED GROUPS AND THE FUTURE OF IRAQ

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Abstract

In this article, we try to identify the impact of the Shia militias in Iraq on the future of this country. We maintain that these armed groups will be a destabilising factor for Iraq and its neighbours, and they will worsen and deepen the sectarian division in the Middle East. We assess these different groups from different perspectives, for example, using the Weberian theory that the state is the only entity that has a monopoly of violence, Ariel Ahram's model of state-sponsored and government-sponsored militias, and finally the devolution of violence to these armed groups.

Keywords: Iraq, Shia armed groups, Sectarian division, ISIS and New Middle East

Introduction

In this paper, we will introduce the political situation in Iraq since the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) took over the second most populated city, Mosul, in 2014. It is important to highlight that the main purpose of this paper is to

investigate the impact of the Shia militias on the formation of the future of Iraq and peaceful coexistence within Iraqi society.

Following the collapse of the Iraqi regime in 2003, the American and British forces faced multiple problems, such as security issues, gaps in the system, and a lack of fundamental services such as water and electricity. The White House decided to send their strongman Paul Bremer as their military representative to serve as the leader of the coalition in Iraq, Bremer's role was to create a new Iraqi regime based on the American perspective. The main idea of Bremer's plan was to reform a new Iraq under the concept of "ethnic power sharing". From this point on, Iraq has been divided into three main sects: Kurds, Sunni, and Shia. The re-creation process of the new Iraqi political system has resulted in the sectarianism found in Iraqi society since 2003.

The first step in this direction started with the so-called Iraqi governing council (Majlis Alhukem) replacing Saddam Hussein's government. Majles Hukem consisted of representatives from the main Iraqi ethnic groups, and the intention was to create a roadmap for a new constitution and the formation of a new government. Ironically, many members of the Majles Hukm had only returned to Iraq with the American and British forces and were unpopular with the majority of Iraqi society. Through the Majlis Hukm, Shia politicians could impose their conditions on the others. In the beginning, they were able to achieve an agreement with the Kurds regarding the senior positions in the Iraqi government. For example, the Shias should be given the prime minister's position because they were/are the majority, but the Kurds could receive the president's position. The division of the highly important positions between the two groups left the Sunnis feeling excluded from the political process. Therefore, the majority of the Sunnis chose to support the rebel groups against the coalition forces and the Iraqi government. The development of sectarianism in Iraqi society became the basis for the reconstruction of state institutions, and this had been reflected in all the state apparatus. For example, the new Iraqi military and the intelligence agency were under the control of the Shia, and the country's foreign affairs were in the hands of the Kurds.

The turning point for Iraqi society was June 10, 2014, when ISIS took control of the second largest city in Iraq, Mosul. The Iraqi government lost the majority of its Sunni cities and population to ISIS. Moreover, the Iraqi military lost its

willingness to fight in many Sunni areas because the population did not consider the Shia soldiers to be a national army. This new phase of political turbulence and the expansion of violence started when the Iraqi army lost its morale in the battle against ISIS fighters. This resulted in calling for the organisation of the Shia people into the so-called People's Mobilisation Forces (PMF), in Arabic the Hashed Shabi, against ISIS.

Problem statement

According to Weberian theory, the monopoly of violence is held by the state, but what if the state is unable to protect itself from an internal threat? Since 2014, the Iraqi state has been defined as a state that is unable to fight and control the threat that from ISIS. It opened the door for the creation and spread of militias in order to fight the ISIS hazard. These armed groups are now acting as state representatives, and to a great extent, they challenge Prime Minister Haider Abdi's cabinet administratively and militarily.

Research Questions

The research questions will be designed theoretically:

1. What is the impact of religious militias, such as Hashed Shabi in Iraq, on the future form of the state?
2. Will the Shia armed groups be a destabilising factor for Iraq and its neighbours?

Purpose of the Study

In this study, we will focus on the implications of the Shia armed groups for the political situation in the Middle East, especially in Iraq. There is a relationship between non-state armed groups, violent conflict and political stability. To prove

this triangular relationship, we will look at the political situation in Iraq after ISIS. The rise of Shia groups during the last three years made the political situation in Iraq more complicated and unpredictable. The last three years have proven that these Shia armed groups have an overwhelming impact on socio-political stability, not only for Iraq but also for its neighbours such as Syria. Therefore, the main focus here will be on the future of the political system in Iraq in light of these armed groups' activities and operations around the country.

Research methods

The methodology of this research project is theoretical. This research will adopt a theory of violence devolution and a theory of state/government militias. This will enable the researcher to explore what role or how much impact PMF will have in the process of state rebuilding in Iraq in the post-ISIS era.

The reason for the existence of the militias

According to Richard Jackson, insecurity in a weak state is one of the reasons for the creation of militias. The majority of Middle East states were defined as weak states, and the common characteristic among them is the insecurity challenge. Buzan claims that there are three elements central to the existence of a strong state:

1. the idea of the state;
2. institutional capacity;
3. a physical base.

For Buzan, the idea of the state is essential to having a peaceful society, and he claims that society will reach a consensus regarding the state and identify with it. In the case of Iraq, it is difficult to find a broad and appropriate social consensus regarding the Iraqi state. For example, after the collapse of Saddam's regime, the majority of the Sunni boycotted the political process under the observation of the

US. This led to resistance against both the Iraqi state and the US presence and finally led to the creation of Sunni insurgents.

A measurement and identification of the insecurity in weak states is that they are to a high degree more vulnerable to internal threats than to external threats. The Sunni insurgents and their disagreement with the Iraqi state exemplify the most difficult internal threat against the Iraqi state. Another perspective regarding the creation of the militias is from Max Weber. The Weberian theory is based on the assumption that the state is the only entity that has a monopoly of violence:

Weberian concept of the state, which views the state as a monolithic entity and as the only beholder of the monopoly of violence (Balcells 2012, pp. 406-411).

When the Iraqi state's establishments were unable to protect its internal and external security, then the existence of the militia became a natural consequence:

Weberian accounts of militias as constitutive of state failure (Carey Mitchell & Lowe 2013, pp. 4-5).

For example, consider Lebanon when it became classified as a failed state. Consequently, militias such as the Hezbollah acted as a state and presented themselves as an alternative to the state. In so doing, they addressed many issues such as providing jobs by investing their money in small industries and offering free healthcare for poor people. The real cause of the existence of militias in Middle Eastern societies is the states' weakness and lack of legitimacy.

Post-Saddam Era and the Shia revival

After the collapse of the Iraqi regime in 2003, the Americans decided to recreate a new regime on the basis of so-called "ethnic power sharing":

Establishing a governmental system that can accommodate Iraq's different ethnic and religious groups (Brancati 2004, p. 7).

This meant that the Kurds, the Sunnis, and the Shias should participate in ruling the country. The Iraqi governing council (IGC), which was established three months after the occupation of Baghdad, was based on this principle. The

IGC consisted of 25 members, and its ethnic and religious breakdown included 13 Shias, five Sunnis, five Kurds (also Sunnis), one Turkman and an Assyrian (Evans 2003). On June 1, 2004, the IGC dissolved after the creation of the new Iraq interim government (IIG) as a caretaker government to govern Iraq until the drafting of the new constitution. The Iraqi transitional government replaced the IIG from May 3, 2005, until May 20, 2006, and it arranged an election to choose the national assembly on January 30, 2005. This assembly drafted a permanent constitution, which was then submitted for approval by the Iraqi people in a general referendum. The new constitution was approved, and the Iraqi legislative authority was vested in two bodies: the Council of Representatives and the Council of Union. The post-Saddam period may be described as a rising of the Shia sect in Iraq and, at the same time, the exclusion of the Sunnis. The turning point for the Shia revival began with Said Ali Al-Sistani's (the most influential and famous Shia cleric) call for the Shias' active participation in the first parliamentary election in 2005. The majority of the Shia political parties combined themselves into a block to participate in that election with the aim of winning as many seats as possible – which they succeeded in doing (Cockburn 2005). Even the majority of the Iraqi transnational government were Shias, and its prime minister was Ibrahim Jafari (a Shia politician), though this did not mean a return to stability for Iraq. This was because the majority of the Sunnis felt excluded and blamed for Saddam's brutal policy in Iraq, and this pushed the Sunnis to cooperate with terrorist groups such as Al-Qaida to fight against both the Americans in Iraq and the Iraqi government. Iraqi society under Jafari's cabinet faced a terrible period, and there was high level of sectarian conflict. The instability in Iraq continued until an unknown Shia politician (Nouri Al-Maliki) came to power. In an article published in the Washington Post in 2014, Ali Khedery, an American Special Assistant to the US Ambassador and a Senior Adviser in Iraq (2003-2009), explained the process of choosing Al-Maliki for the role of replacement for Jafari. According to Khedery, Al-Maliki was unknown to the former American Ambassador (Zalmay Khalilzad) and to most Iraqi people, but Khalilzad, after recommendations from Khedery and Jeffrey Beals, a former American diplomat, succeeded in garnering support among Iraqi leaders for giving Al-Maliki the position of prime minister (Khedery 2014). On May 20, 2006, Al-Maliki became prime minister for Iraq and stayed in power until 2014. In the next part of this article, I will highlight the sectarian policy that was used by Al-Maliki during his eight years as prime minister against the majority of Sunnis in cities such as Anbar, Salahadin, Tikrit, and Mosul.

Al-Maliki's sectarian policy as a root cause of ISIS

Nouri Al-Maliki could, with support from the US, Kurds, Sistani, and Iran, have returned stability to the majority of Iraq. It was part of his political programme to disarm Sunni and Shia militias in Baghdad, which he succeeded in doing.

Al-Maliki said Iraqi society must be cleansed of terrorism, the government must be rid of 'administrative corruption' and factional militias must be disarmed. "We must also address the issue of government centrality and the centrality of the armed forces and that weapons must only be in the hands of the government and the people must be disarmed," he said.

He said that "no militia in Iraq can share authority with the government's armed forces" (Tures 2014).

During his first term (2006-2010), Prime Minister Al-Maliki centralised power into his own hands and succeeded in transforming Iraq to single-party rule, and the majority of Shias supported his policy against the Sunnis. Ultimately, this resulted in the ethnic cleansing of Sunnis, especially in Baghdad, for example:

Baghdad went from some 45% Sunni in 2003 to only 25% Sunni by the end of 2007. Al-Maliki's sectarianism led to the transformation of Baghdad into a largely Shiite city (Cole 2014).

The Shia monopoly corrupted the police, military, and court institutions. These institutions only admitted candidates adhering to Shia principles and, especially during the Al-Maliki period, these candidates had to also be loyal to his party. Consequently, Sunnis were excluded from these establishments. In Sunni-dominated cities such as Al-Anbar, Al-Salahadin, and Mosul, people considered the police and court institutions to be a tool in the hands of Shias to eliminate Sunnis. This was the main cause of the dramatic seizure of power of these cities by ISIS, and the Sunnis saw their chance to get rid of the Shia tyranny. At this point, Iraq entered a new phase in which large parts of Sunni cities were under ISIS control, and the police and army were powerless to fight back.

One of the most important tasks of the nation-state from its beginnings was to protect its internal and external security. The same idea exists in the new modern nation-state:

The differentiation between internal and external security, and between police and military, has been a core principle of the modern nation-state (Lutterbeck 2004, pp. 45-46).

Internal security is the responsibility of the police, but external security is a task for the military. This does not, however, mean that the state should only protect its external security using its own military. Many countries today do not protect their external security with a national military, and, instead, they tend to outsource it. The idea of outsourcing national security has attracted democratic states such as the USA and the UK. The US government has contracted with many private American military companies and security consulting firms, such as Blackwater, to provide security for their representatives in foreign countries (Hamilton 2011).

Considering Iraq's internal and external security, it was difficult to see who was responsible for protecting the country's internal security due to the misuse of the security institutions. Under the former Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki, both the police and army were controlled by his Shia party, and all top positions in the defence system were directly affiliated with Al-Maliki.

The criteria for militias (PMF as a militia)

In this section, the so-called Hashed-Alshabi and the proposal for a National Guard are evaluated according to militia criteria.

It can describe anything between a dozen individuals armed with hunting rifles, to a force of millions equipped as well as a professional army (Hawn 2013).

The above definition is one of the broadest explanations of the militia and, to some extent, it is difficult to use it to identify Hashed Al-shabi. Therefore, I think it is necessary to have another and more limited definition of militia. For an academic approach, Saeid Golkar's identification is used (Golkar 2015, pp. 5-10):

1. Maintaining local defence.
2. Upholding law and order.
3. Violating human rights and fostering insecurity.
4. Controlling security in weak states.
5. Recruiting members from local communities.

The Shia militias can be identified by all these criteria. After the sudden collapse of Iraqi security in 2014, many cities of Iraq were in need of protection. Therefore, young men with access to guns organised themselves and took control of their communities. The militias in Iraq not only protected their cities but also began to attack other cities in revenge. For example, Shia groups such as the League of the Righteous, after they conquered the city of Tikrit, began to loot and kill the survivors. In addition, it is crucial to categorise these Iraqi militias in order to reveal to which militia type they belong. According to Ariel Ahram's book (Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State-Sponsored Militias, Balcells 2012, p. 405-409), there are five types of militias, and they have a deep impact on the peaceful coexistence of society (see Table 1).

Militia-Types
Quasi-Official Militias
State-Sponsored Militias
Paramilitaries
Warlords
Pro-Government Militias

Table 1. Types of militias, and they have a deep impact on the peaceful coexistence of society (adapted from Carey et al. 2013, pp. 4-6)

The Shia militias in Iraq can be seen as pro-government. This is because groups, such as Bader, League of the Righteous, Hezbollah in Iraq, and Sadr, were financed by the central government in Baghdad, show their loyalty to the central government, and coordinate their actions with the government. The coordination with the Iraqi government came about following a push from the US, as the leader of coalition forces against ISIS in Iraq. The coalition forces were concerned about the Shia militias' activities in the Sunni areas and their behaviour toward the Sunni population. In addition to this, the US showed their concern with Iranian involvement and Iran's influence on these militias.

Finally, this argument underlines that the groups (Bader, League of the Righteous, Hezbollah in Iraq, Sadr) could be identified as pro-government with reference to the classification below by Sabine Carey, Neil Mitchell and Will Lowe:

a) is identified as pro-government or sponsored by the government (national or subnational),

- b) is identified as not being part of the regular security forces,
- c) is armed,
- d) has some level of organisation (Carey *et al.* 2013, pp. 5-6).

The Iraqi state as a hybrid state

According to many political scientists, such as Joakim Ekman, Jean-François Gagné, and Leonardo Morlino, the hybrid state is a phenomenon where the state is trapped between two structures: one is a non-democratic framework and the second is democratic (Morlino 2009, pp. 273-296). The state's institutions have difficulty adopting democratic behaviour because of their authoritarian background. The legitimacy of the state is not wholly lacking; rather, its legitimacy is acquired and exploited in dubious ways and often remains contested (Hague & Harrop 2010, pp. 83-99). This is one of the most important drivers of the creation of militias in many Middle Eastern countries, including Iraq, Syria, Libya, Lebanon, and Yemen. According to Joakim Ekman, who states that fitting the hybrid regime profile can be identified based on the following characteristics (Ekman 2009, pp. 7-31):

1. Elections that are not too flawed and that have the potential to make a difference;
2. Significant levels of corruption, particularly in the judicial and electoral areas;
3. A lack of vital components of democratic quality, such as checks and balances and government accountability;
4. A problematic press freedom situation, typically including incumbents' desire to control the media, particularly television;
5. A poor civil liberties situation, including limits on the freedom of expression and the freedom to form organisations and trade unions; and
6. A problematic rule of law situation, including a lack of judicial independence.

In addition, Amin Massoud, a Tunisian researcher, emphasises four components that result in a hybrid state (Massoud 2015):

1. The militias replace the military system.
2. Central government consists of sectarian cantons.
3. The legislative system is more than customary laws and less than constitutional provisions.

4. The political class (in power and the opposition alike) is made up of more than the advocates of communities and less than modern state builders and owners of institutional reform projects.

Iraq has transformed into a hybrid state because the central government in Baghdad was dominated by the Shia party. This means that the majority of Sunnis and Kurds did not see the central government as a cohesive national government, and many parts of this government's institutions such as the police, courts and the military therefore lacked legitimacy. When citizens lose their trust in the integrity of state institutions, they try to find alternatives. The Kurds have their own almost independent state, and they do not have strong ties to Baghdad. The Sunnis had already organised their tribal committee, which worked as a microgovernment in their areas before ISIS appeared in Mosul and Al-Anbar. The process of dividing Iraq is as likely to occur today as it has in the past. The catalyst behind this process is the Shia militias that fight against ISIS. These militias have a legitimate right to use force against those they identify as Sunni, or at least the Sunni majority. In the following section, the focus will be on the criteria for creating a militia and evaluating the Shia's militia as a threat to peaceful coexistence.

The war for geographical expansion

According to an article from the Al-Rawabet Center for Research and Strategic Studies located in Amman, Jordan, there are approximately 67 armed Shia groups, and they operate in different regions of Iraq and in Syria. Each has its own name, leader, territory and religious marja (authority).

As we can see from table 2 (for the rest of this table, see the supplement), these Iraqi Shia militias have been used in the regional conflict and are now fighting to gain as much territory as possible. For example, groups such as the League of Righteous People (Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq), also known as the Khazali network, have their field of operation in the city of Duz (also spelled Tuz Khurma and Tuz Khormato or just Khurmatu) which is the central city of Tooz District in Saladin Province, Iraq, located 55 miles south of Kirkuk and the majority of its population are Kurds (Sunnis) and the minority are Turkmen (Shia). This group has been involved in heavy fighting against the Peshmerga (Kurdish fighters) and many from both sides

have been killed. The presence of the Khazali group in Duz was not to fight ISIS, since the city was protected by Peshmerga and ISIS was not present. Instead, the overall aim of the Khazali group was (and still is) to dominate more areas. Their different fields of operation provide significant evidence of their struggles for more land and more control. Another aspect of these groups is that the majority of them have the current Iranian supreme leader and Muslim cleric Ayatollah Khamenei as their religious authority, meaning that they are unconditionally loyal to him. In other words, they are part of the Iranian policy in the Middle East, and they are now part of the proxy war in the region (Middle East Eye Staff 2015). They have been supported by external regimes such as Iran, which means they are directly under the influence of Iranian policies, and they will be working in favour of Iran's betterment. Finally, Shia fighters have been part of the war in Syria, and some of them have been killed. The intervention of the Shiite militias in the Syrian conflict is considered to be the most dangerous transformation. During this transformation process, these groups have evolved from being local militias to being a regional militia and finally to being mercenaries, which means they can be used in any conflict in the Islamic world, such as in Syria, Yemen and, most likely, in Bahrain.

	The name	Leader	Working yard	Religious Marja (authority)
1	Saraya Al-salam/Sadrist	Kazem Hussein Al-Issawi	Iraq/Samarra sector - Qayyarah	Iraq: Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, Iran: Ayatollah Khamenei
2	Badr-Corps-military wing the Badr Organization	Hadi al-Ameri	Iraq - Salahuddin sector, Diyala, Syria	Iran: Ayatollah Khamenei
3	Kata'ib Iraqi Hezbollah –	Jaafar al-Ghanemi	Iraq - Sector of Anbar, Salah al-Din/Nukhayib	Iran: Ayatollah Khamenei
4	Asa'ib Ahl- Haq	Qais al-Khazali	Iraq - Sector of Salah al-Din/ Nukhayib, Syria	Iran: Ayatollah Khamenei
5	Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada	Hashim Banyan ul-Awliya: Abu Alaa	Iraq - Sector Baghdad belt, Salah al-Din	Iran: Ayatollah Khamenei
6	Kata'ib Hezbollah Al- Nujaba	Akram Abbas, al-Kaabi	Iraq - Sector of Baghdad belt, Syria	Iran: Ayatollah Khamenei

Table 2. Fractions of The People's Mobilization Forces in Iraq and Syria (adapted from Rawabet Research and Strategic Studies Center, 2016)

Conclusions

The sectarian policy of the Shia politicians has been supported by the majority of the Shia and by religious clerics such as Al-Sistani. This policy is believed to be the root of the creation of ISIS in the Sunni cities and is why the Sunni supported ISIS against the central government in Bagdad. The future of Iraq is still unclear, and the political process is moving toward a division of the country into three parts, which will be one of the best options. The Shia political parties are not willing to share power with the Sunnis and Kurds, and the Shia still insist on their unconditional right to rule as they want. The Iraqi population is facing two choices; one choice is to have approximately 40% of Iraq's territory controlled by ISIS, and the second choice is to accept the existence of Shia militias. The concept and feeling of a unified national government have almost vanished. The Shia militias are now acting as the legitimate institution, and their capability to run the government is limited due to their lack of legitimacy. However, after the defeat of ISIS by the people's mobilisation force in Mosul and the change in the control of this city, these Shia armed groups will not accept any power that tries to push them out of the Iraqi political system. According to al-monitor, a series of secret meetings have been held between the people's mobilisation force's representative and a diplomatic delegation from the West attempting to better understand these armed groups and their plan for the future of Iraq (Aziz, 2016). These groups have already started reorganising themselves into a political party with the aim of participating in the next election, which will be in 2018.

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