PWP Conflict Studies

Proxy War in Iraq

Ranj Alaaldin

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The Proxy Wars Project (PWP) aims to develop new insights for resolving the wars that beset the Arab world. While the conflicts in Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Iraq have internal roots, the US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and others have all provided military and economic support to various belligerents. PWP Conflict Studies are papers written by recognized area experts that are designed to elucidate the complex relationship between internal proxies and external sponsors. PWP is jointly directed by Ariel Ahram (Virginia Tech) and Ranj Alaaldin (Brookings Doha Center) and funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Ranj Alaaldin is a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution's Doha Center. He was previously a visiting scholar at Columbia University and specializes in intrastate conflict, governance, and human security issues in the Middle East and North Africa region. His previous research focused on social movements and subnational identities, with an emphasis on Iraq's Shiite community and the religious establishment in Najaf. He currently focuses on postconflict reconstruction, proxy warfare, security sector reform, and peace-building amid conflict. He led election-monitoring and fact-finding teams in Iraq between 2009 and 2014, as well as in Libya during the 2011 uprising. Alaaldin has conducted interviews with members of Shiite militias, ISIS prisoners detained in Iraq, and political and clerical figures in the Arab and Islamic world. He is writing a book on Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria and has published extensively with peer-reviewed journals and in popular media like the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Foreign Affairs*, and *Foreign Policy*. Alaaldin holds a PhD from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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Cover illustration: Iraqi army check point in Qayyara, Mosul District, Northern Iraq, 10 November 2016. Photo by Mstyslav Chernov. This photo is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

Introduction

Armed groups have enjoyed unprecedented regional ascendancy and prominence since the cataclysm of the 2011 Arab uprisings. A combination of factors has driven these groups' emergence, including religious, ethnic, and socioeconomic grievances and the breakdown of statehood and state institutions. At the same time, many armed groups are oriented toward predation, seeking the opportunity to seize resources and spoils.

But what has caught international attention only in the last decade has been a defining feature of Iraq's political landscape since 2003. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein's Ba'th regime and the destruction of state infrastructure under US occupation left the Iraqi state without a reliable and respected conventional military that could monopolize the use of force. Over the course of the 2000s, the Iraqi state became increasingly reliant on militias to supplement relatively weak army and police forces. The constitutionally mandated Kurdish Peshmerga, who operate as an Iraqi regional guard according to the Iraqi constitution, are also still divided along partisan lines and lack a unified central command. Numbering over one hundred thousand, these units had probably the closest ties to the US of any Iraqi group.[1] More recently, the 120,000-man Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) emerged from Shiite-dominated areas during the 2014 ISIS crisis and has slowly been deputized by the state. Alongside these forces, who sit somewhere in the middle between state and nonstate forces, are informal and often ragtag groups, typically tied to specific tribes and religious institutions. These informal groups are found especially in the Arab Sunni region hit hardest by the mid-2000 insurgency and the 2014 ISIS crisis. Reliance on nonstate actors across the board has helped curtail jihadi terrorist groups in certain circumstances but has also hurt the prospects of the emergence of a single, unified Iraqi military.

In many ways, Iraq served as the epicenter in the emergence of armed nonstate actors that eventually transcended state borders and touched the entire region. This is most evident in the case of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Upon capturing Mosul in 2014, ISIS declared its "Caliphate" and set out to obliterate the territorial borders demarcating Syria and Iraq. Moreover, ISIS called on Muslims worldwide to follow them in jihad. Paralleling this trajectory, Iraq's Shiite militias associated with the PMF mobilized with support from Iran to counter ISIS. Iraqi militias have played a prominent role in the civil war in Syria, linking up with fighters from Lebanese Hizbollah to create a truly pan-Shiite armed movement. These militias have a complicated and contentious relationship with the Iraqi state, as well as with their Iranian sponsors. Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga, integrated as the official regional forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), also pushed for changes to Iraq's internal and international borders.

Examining these armed groups in Iraq presents an opportunity to analyze and compare how different forms of armed groups construct different forms of alternative authorities. These groups can include ethnic or regional movements that seek national or international legitimacy and aspire to establish their own autonomous regions or sovereign states; localized groups that have extensive interactions and overlap with the state but seek a new political-economic order within existing territorial boundaries; and sectarian groups who seek new bases for transnational identities. It also provides an opportunity to consider how outside sponsors interact with these groups and how such sponsor-proxy relationships affect peace and stability.

The Popular Mobilization Forces and the Realignment of Shiite Militias

The PMF emerged in 2014 in response to an edict (fatwa) by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the senior-most Shiite cleric in Iraq and one of the most widely respected religious figures in the world.[2] With ISIS forces verging on the outskirts of Samara and Baghdad and the Iraqi security forces in disarray, Sistani urged civilians to mobilize to help protect Iraq. Sistani repeatedly called for this mobilization to occur within the framework of Iraqi sovereignty and law. He envisioned the PMF militias as temporary volunteer auxiliaries that would dissolve when the emergency ended. What in fact occurred, though, was a significant realignment of various Shiite militia factions already operating within Iraq. With few options, the Iraqi government has tried to regularize the PMF, bringing them into the fold of the state. Still, these efforts were uneven, and

many elements within the PMF remained autonomous. Iran, particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), was closely involved in the formation and mobilization of the PMF.

The Shiite militias in Iraq involved with the PMF can broadly be categorized along three generational lines. Specific calamities in Iraq's contemporary history define these generations, and these originating experiences have constrained the ways militias relate to the Iraqi state, the political elite, and outside actors. The first category of militias includes those that formed in the 1980s and 1990s as the armed wings of exiled opposition groups. The most important of these militias is the Badr Brigade. The Badr Brigade formed during the Iran-Iraq war as the armed wing of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), established at the time with the support of the IRGC. Badr fighters fought with Iranian troops to overthrow the Ba'th regime and bring about an Iranian-style regime to Iraq but failed.[3]

Today the Badr Brigade is probably Iraq's largest and most powerful militia. Badr head Hadi al-Ameri and other Badr Brigade commanders have held multiple ministerial portfolios. When Saddam's regime fell in 2003, SCIRI joined the US-led coalition government, redubbing itself the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). ISCI's head, the prominent cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim, was considered a major political figure in Iraq until his assassination in 2003. Since then, the Badr Brigade has controlled and dominated Iraq's interior ministry and the federal police force, making the party-militia and the state organs often appear indistinguishable. During the civil war from 2006 to 2008, Badr Brigade militias, along with other Shiite militia groups, such as the Jaysh al-Mahdi (Mahdi Army), were involved in the sectarian conflicts and accused of committing atrocities.

The Badr Brigade retains close ideological, political, and military ties to the IRGC. At the same time, it has become entrenched in the Iraqi state and has not been averse to working with the US and other Western countries when their interests align. The Badr Brigade thus has multiple identities. It is simultaneously a party-militia, a semiofficial organ of the state, and a branch of a larger Iranian-backed Shiite movement. Despite its strong institutional stance, from 2009 onwards Badr Brigade and ISCI steadily lost popular support in Iraq. Many Iraqis saw them as being too closely aligned to Iran, prompting ISCI to reinforce and redefine its Iraqi nationalist credentials and develop its grassroots support base. Badr split from the organization and now functions as a political party in its own right. ISCI has evolved into the Hikma party and retains its own militia known as the Ashura Brigades. In the 2018 parliamentary elections Hadi al-Ameri ran as the head of the Fatih (Conquest) Alliance along with other Iran-aligned militia factions involved in the PMF. The Fatih Alliance ultimately won 48 of 329 seats and came in an impressive second on its electoral debut.

The second category of militias includes those that originated in the chaos of the post-2003 era. For the most part these militias drew in younger, less educated Shiites from poorer areas of Baghdad and other southern cities. This was a generation shaped by the devastation and degradation of the 1990s sanctions regime, when Saddam's regime became more brutal and overtly anti-Shiite and the country overall became markedly poorer. During this period, clerics like Mohammed Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr built a following among the Shiite underclass, preaching a fierce Iraqi nationalism that was hostile both to Iran and the West. As a consequence, this generation was disassociated from and suspicious of both the Iraqi exiles and the US.[4]

When the regime fell in 2003 and the Iraqi army and police seemed to dissolve, young men who had been teenagers or youngsters in the 1990s launched a new militia. At the center of this generation was Muqtada Sadr, the youngest son of Sadeq al-Sadr. Sadr announced the formation of Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) to provide protection, services, and leadership to Shiites who felt excluded from the new political elite. Building on the cultural sentiments which Sadr's father had cultivated, JAM refused to cooperate with the new Iraqi elite or the US occupation. JAM established offices, local patrols, and social and religious services in areas like Sadr City, the vast slum of eastern Baghdad. JAM's ranks swelled as it built a grassroots base of support. JAM militias attacked US forces as well as ISCI and other Shiite groups that it deemed collaborators. In recent years, Sadr has tried to make overtures toward Arab Sunni factions that opposed the occupation, claiming

to represent a broader sense of ecumenical Iraqi nationalism and national cohesion. These efforts, though, did not bear fruit. Ultimately, Sadr found new ways to reconcile with the Iraqi political elite and joined the ruling coalition, although he remained highly critical of both Iran and the US.

Despite its broad populist support, the Sadrist movement was ill-prepared for the responsibility that came with political power. It remained highly decentralized and often lacked organizational capacity. Some JAM militias were little more than criminal gangs taking advantage of the breakdown of security to extort and smuggle. Sadr eventually redubbed JAM as the Peace Brigade and promised to stand it down once stronger state institutions formed. As a consequence of JAM's organizational structure, factionalism, and personality clashes, several militant factions broke away from the organization.[5]

One of the most significant of the JAM splinter groups is Asaib Ahl al-Haqq (AAH), led by Qais Khazali. Breaking with Sadr, AAH began working more closely with Iran in attacking Western targets in Iraq through the 2000s. Yet its position steadily dwindled toward the end of the decade, in large part as a result of a more assertive response

from the US-backed Iraqi government and the US military surge, which saw Shiite militias sidelined and in some cases forced to flee to Iran. However, the rise of ISIS, the collapse of the Iraqi army, and the call for the formation of the PMF re-energized AAH to reconstitution with the "blessing" of Iraq's political establishment. Paralleling the Sadrist movement, AAH has launched its own extensive welfare and religious activities, including medical centers and clinics in Baghdad and the Shiite south. It has sought out support from members of Iraq's clerical leadership, producing publications that reach out to different sections of the Shiite population.[6]

Other smaller groups that were closely tied to Iran also joined the PMF. These groups include the Hizbollah Brigades and the Sayyid al-Shuhada Brigades. They, too, claim to be popular Shiite sociocultural movements. Yet their official discourse is harshly sectarian, stoking intercommunal suspicion and fears. They have a long record of human rights abuses and violence. At the same time, these groups are positioning themselves as providers of services and security to the destitute and desperate, which could enable a pathway to greater legitimacy and popular support in the years ahead.

The final category of militias involved with the PMF includes genuinely novel institutions that formed at the behest of Ayatollah Sistani in 2014. The so-called "Sistani militias"—such as the Imam Ali Brigade, Ali al-Akhbar Brigade, and Abbas Division—are connected to Sistani's network of social welfare and educational programs operating through the Shiite religious shrines. These institutions not only attend to security but also participate in broad humanitarian relief. On Sistani's instructions, they are broadly ecumenical and provide sanctuary to internally displaced people, including Arab Sunnis and Iraq's different ethnic and religious minorities. Sistani repeatedly criticized armed groups that operated outside "the framework of the state" or abused civilians. The fighters of these groups oppose Iranian encroachment into Iraqi affairs. Their commanders meet with Iranian officials and advisers only when there are other Iraqi officials present and have refused direct Iranian military support.[7] Both the Ashura Brigades militias and Peace Brigade militias have daily interactions and coordinate closely with the religious establishment militias.[8]

Overall, during the course of the war on ISIS, Shiite militias in Iraq ascended, becoming institutionalized and officially integrated into the Iraqi armed forces at the end of 2016. The Iraqi legislature and government approved a $1 billion budget that has further empowered its Iran-aligned leadership. The March 2018 parliamentary elections then saw the PMF come second on its electoral debut, behind Muqtada al-Sadr and ahead of the US-backed former prime minister, Haidar al-Abadi. Al-Sadr's victory was a complication for both the US and Iran, but for the latter it was mitigated by the PMF's strong showing, whose leadership—much like their Iranian sponsors—enjoy strong support and relations across Iraq's ethnic and religious spectrum. In 2019 Iraq's national budget allocated $2.16 billion for the PMF, three times that of the Counter Terrorism Service.[9]

Sunni Insurgents

Compared to the Kurdish and Shiite factions that gained power in 2003, Iraq's Arab Sunnis lacked a centralized system of religious authority and jurisprudence or political parties that could represent Sunni interests in the new political arena. Moreover, they perceived the US occupation and the new political elite as generally hostile to their interests, particularly with the dissolution of the Iraqi army and the purging of Ba'th party officials. As a result, Sunni Arab political energies were channeled into armed insurrection against the occupation and its allies.

The Sunni Iraqi insurgency involved a mixture of disparate groups with contrasting ideologies and political visions, including ex-Ba'thists, Wahhabi and Salafi Islamists, as well as opportunists and petty criminals. Often these ideologies overlay discrete tribal, familial, and religious networks. The insurgency had no one overarching authority and was divided amongst multiple factions, including the Islamic Army in Iraq, the Army of Mohammed, the Mujahadeen Army, and Ansar al-Sunna. Especially in the first years of the occupation, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries allowed private funds to reach the insurgents, who they saw as constituting an important counterweight to the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad. Syria also provided a kind of tacit support for the insurgents, allowing groups to use Syrian territory as sanctuary.[10]

Gradually, Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) came to dominate other insurgent groups and even take over areas of the Sunni center and north, including Fallujah. AQI did not see itself as a specifically Iraqi group. Rather, it sought to use Iraq as a staging ground for a larger war against Shiite heretics. Iraqi Sunni tribes themselves chafed at AQI's abuse of power and imposition of its ultraconservative brand of Islamic law. By 2006 and 2007 the US had found a new rapprochement with tribal leaders like Ahmed Abu Risha in Anbar. The US struck a new bargain with selected tribal leaders. In return for a partnership aimed at suppressing AQI and other jihadists, the US provided jobs, salaries, and weapons to tribal militias and assured them of self-governance and immunity from Iraq's Shiite-dominated armed forces. Financial and intelligence support from neighboring regional states, principally Jordan and Saudi Arabia, was crucial. By the end of 2007, between 65,000 and 80,000 people across northern Iraq enrolled in what was broadly called the Sunni Awakening movement.[11]

The Sunni Awakening, coupled with the surge of US troops, was astoundingly successful at bringing stability to the most violent areas of Iraq. It provided an example of how discontented and disenfranchised communities can be reintegrated into the state by way of a patron-client relationship and integration into security structures, constraining the space for extremism and militant groups in the process. At the same time, it also illustrated the pitfalls that come with empowering substate actors to stabilize conflict-ridden countries. Once the US withdrew from Iraq, the government of Nouri al-Maliki moved to dismantle the Sunni militias, which included arresting many tribal leaders. This was part of Maliki's wider strategy of capitalizing on Shiite resentment and marginalizing Sunni opposition. Following the 2010 election, Maliki maneuvered to block the Iraqiyya parliamentary list, which had won a large amount of Sunni support and a slim plurality, from taking power. He launched a violent crackdown on Sunni leadership as well as protesters, which further confirmed Sunni disaffection from the regime and state.[12]

By the early 2010s, ISIS was effectively rekindling the insurgency. The core of ISIS was Iraqi veterans from AQI. It also drew in western tribes and shadowy networks of ex-Ba'thists associated with the the Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order, headed by former Iraqi vice president Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri. As in the previous incarnation of AQI, ISIS saw itself as part of a global campaign. The civil war in neighboring Syria provided an opportunity to expand territorially. ISIS leaders dispatched a contingent that would later form Jabhat al-Nusra.

Iraq's Shiite political elite have been wary of creating a separate Sunni force. Although Maliki's successor, Haidar al-Abadi, was more conciliatory toward Sunni grievances, he could not establish a national guard force modeled on the Awakening Movement of 2006, in which Arab Sunni fighters and tribes took responsibility for defending their local areas. This plan, which the US supported, met strong resistance from Iraqi Shiite leaders.

Eventually, a limited number of Sunni Arab militias were inducted into the PMF in northern Iraq. Ironically, many of those who joined the PMF had previously been part of the US-backed Awakening Movement. Former Awakening tribal leaders affiliated with the PMF and partnered with the PMF-dominated Fatih coalition in the 2018 elections. In the post-ISIS era, Arab Sunni factions did attempt to capitalize on divisions between Erbil and Baghdad by positioning themselves as potential kingmakers and partners in an otherwise fragmented political environment. Iraq's Arab Sunni leadership have extensive ties to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar. Their push to contest the elections more effectively than they had in the past was also helped by GCC outreach and promises of reconstruction and development funds in the run-up to the elections.[13]

Kurdish Separatists

Unlike the militias in Arab Iraq, Kurdish forces have oriented toward attaining international recognition for Kurdish autonomy and separatism. Accordingly, the Peshmerga have aligned with the West and the international order more generally in the hopes of attaining international support for independence. This means, however, that Kurdish Peshmerga forces have not had as far-reaching effects as other armed nonstate actors in Iraq with regards to destabilization and humanitarian issues.

Since the inception of the Iraqi state, Iraq's Kurds have contested its territorial boarders in the face of brutal repression. The survival of the Kurdish national liberation movement often depended on Kurds finding opportunities for external patronage. The leaders of Iraq's two largest Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), cultivated personal and institutional ties with the US and Russia and with regional powers who host their own sizeable Kurdish communities, such as Turkey, Iran, and Syria. Yet these foreign backers repeatedly failed at crucial moments, most vividly in 1974, when the US dropped support for the Kurds, allowing Saddam to initiate an onslaught in Kurdistan.

This changed with the aftermath of the 1990–91 Gulf War and the success of the March 1991 uprisings in the Kurdish north. With the help of the US no-fly zone, Kurdish leaders were able to gain de facto autonomy within the Kurdistan region. The KDP and PUK established a unified government. Kurdish guerrilla fighters (Peshmerga) were incorporated as a regular armed force under Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) authority. Still, the Peshmerga forces remained divided along partisan lines and answered to party leaders. Throughout the 1990s there was periodic internecine fighting between the PUK and KDP, often involving support either from Baghdad, Ankara, or Tehran. In 1998 the US brokered a peace agreement, but failed to reconcile the political parties. The KDP and PUK each set up its own government and administration in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah and operated its own security, intelligence, and counterterrorism units. Despite these divisions, Kurdish state-building proved to be resilient. If anything, the emergence of two separate administrations bolstered Kurdish capacity-building efforts, since the two parties controlled and administered territory and resources without the disruption of personal and party-based rivalries. It fostered and crystalized a robust coexistence that was conducive to their efforts to provide services and develop a functioning economy.

Yet this did not reduce Kurdish dependency on foreign powers for material support and patronage. In addition to improving relations with Iran and Turkey, the US became a key strategic ally to the KRG. In 2003 the Kurds emerged as the most reliable and capable US partner in the anti-Saddam coalition. Unlike the exile parties, the Kurds had not only more mature political institutions but also experience in governance and power-sharing. Joining the post-2003 government, the Kurds received special constitutional dispensation that legalized the status of the KRG as a federal unit with substantial fiscal, political, and administrative autonomy. Kurdish leaders also assumed prominent positions in the federal government in Baghdad, including portfolios in finance and foreign affairs, as well as the presidency of the republic. This legal change also altered the status of the Peshmerga. The Peshmerga became not just part of the KRG's security apparatus but also part of Iraq's constitutionally mandated federal forces. Still, some Peshmerga forces remained creatures of either the PUK or KDP. In 2009 the KRG established a single ministry of Peshmerga affairs, which then created integrated Peshmerga brigades. Recruitment for the integrated brigades is not conditional on party membership. However, there is still jockeying over resources and power, as well as public dissatisfaction over services, corruption, bureaucracy, and nepotism. The failure to remedy divisions has exacerbated social discontent and polarization, resulting in widespread protests against the KRG government.[14]

The KRG continued to carry out its own foreign and economic policies. Iran has been a strong partner of the KRG. Turkey, seeking a counterbalance against the PKK and Iran, became a major trading partner. Ankara retained military bases it established inside KRG territory in the 1990s, and over five hundred Turkish companies operate in the KRG. Turkey encouraged the KRG to develop its oil infrastructure and connect to pipelines in Turkey, bypassing Baghdad.

When ISIS seized Mosul in June 2014 and the Iraqi army collapsed, the Peshmerga filled the resulting vacuum in major strategic provinces, including the disputed territory of Kirkuk. Areas of Kurdish control expanded by nearly 40 percent. With control over larger oil resources, the KRG openly sought international tenders for export. KRG forces were backed by US airpower and shared intelligence with the US and other Western countries, as well as liaising closely with Iran's IRGC. Over 11,500 Kurdish Peshmerga fighters were killed or injured in the war against

ISIS, according to KRG officials. Yet the KDP and PUK forces effectively fought their own wars against ISIS. Intelligence sharing and coordination between the two Kurdish factions were limited and the Peshmerga Ministry had limited oversight. Most operations tended to be handled exclusively by either PUK or KDP.[15]

After the triumph over ISIS, however, came a nadir in the KRG's relationship with outside powers. Kurdistan Region president Masoud Barzani pushed for a referendum on Kurdish independence to initiate a framework and discussions on the future of Kurdistan in Iraq, which would have concurrently bolstered KRG bargaining and negotiating power in relation to the status of Kirkuk and other disputed territories. By October 2017 the US, Iran, and Turkey were all siding with Baghdad to suppress the Kurdish bid for independence. The PUK allegedly struck a separate deal with Iran to withdraw its Peshmerga forces from Kirkuk, leaving the KDP-aligned forces in an untenable position. Kurdish Peshmerga was forced to flee as Iraqi tanks and PMF units entered Kirkuk and other Kurdish-dominated areas in northern Iraq. The Peshmerga fell back to its pre-2014 borders. Fears of another civil war gripped the Kurdish population after the debacle, resulting in a period of immense political instability. This instability increased the prospects of a return to 1990s-era strife and the creation of two separately administered Kurdish zones.[16] However, since the May 2018 Iraqi national elections and the September 2018 Kurdistan Region parliamentary elections, the KRG has stabilized and tensions between the two ruling parties have calmed.

From Proxies to Statesmen: Militias in Iraqi Politics

Iraq's armed nonstate actors have made a remarkable transition over the last fifteen years. Militias have become a feature in Iraqi electoral politics, operating either independently or in alliance with other groups. The military prowess of these groups and popular support among average Iraqis makes them attractive political partners for political parties. For example, in 2018, ahead of parliamentary elections, Prime Minister Haidar Al-Abadi moved to partner with the PMF in order to secure another term in office. Al-Abadi's outreach to PMF elevated the status of an organization that was making its electoral debut. This is a common phenomenon of the Iraqi political environment. Established political organizations have co-opted militias in order to garner popular support while the militias bandwagon to gain greater legitimacy. This has helped normalize armed groups within Iraqi politics and has transformed them into full-fledged stakeholders of the Iraqi political process.

The Kurdish Peshmerga force similarly straddles the line as a constitutionally mandated Iraqi force and a national liberation movement. But many Peshmerga units operate within the ambit of the main Kurdish political parties. This hampers their political unity and fighting effectiveness. The lack of a central command is a strategic liability. It makes it more difficult for the Kurdish forces to garner international recognition as a separate entity. It also prevents any attempts to integrate the Peshmerga as a unified central command that answers to the federal government in Baghdad.

Rather than replacing or defying the state, major armed groups in Iraq are engaged in defining the state. It is now probably near impossible to eliminate the PMF and other militias' substantial presence within Iraqi society and the country's administrative structures. From a purely public administration perspective, these groups command salaries and resources from state coffers. Still, different militia groups have yet to determine how they will engage with civilians in the territories they hold, how to relate to democratic norms and practices, and what type of relationship to pursue with outside powers and sponsors. It is in some respects typical of armed groups to emerge from the cataclysm of revolutionary turmoil.

The dilemma for policymakers is whether such engagement with the state can yield an environment that is conducive to stability and democratic norms. There is some evidence that militias' access to political power has actually improved receptivity to rule of law and transitional justice mechanisms. For example, the leaders of some militia groups that had attacked Western forces in the 2000s now regularly meet with Western emissaries. This shows how the leaders of armed groups can transition into statesmen. Such transitions, though, should be treated as merely providing openings for accountability and transitional

justice in an environment where the rule of law is still weak. To that point, armed groups in Iraq are neither the problem nor the solution today, but a reflection of a new and often disconcerting political reality that requires a comprehensive, multifaceted, and long-term strategy focused on addressing Iraq's shortcomings in security, poor governance, and weak institutions.

Conclusion

Outside powers have long engaged Iraq as a battlefield for regional dominance and proxy conflict. Saddam Hussein and his predecessors regularly accused the Shiite and Kurdish opposition of being a "fifth column" for Iran or other meddling powers. This tendency reached new heights after 2003, when the Iraqi state was forced to rely on various armed nonstate actors to fight insurgents and other challengers. Regional sectarian geopolitics raised the stakes. King Abdullah of Jordan and other Sunni leaders warned of a "Shiite crescent" stretching from Damascus to Baghdad and Tehran.[17] At the same time, the installment of a Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad, with the support of the US, seemed an unwitting gift to Iran. Shiite Islamist factions, who had sought refuge in Iran during the Ba'th era and in some cases were directly established by Iran, were far better positioned to mobilize after Saddam Hussein's fall. Their supremacy and the demographic dominance of Iraq's Shiite community also meant that Iran, by default, would emerge as the stronger of the outside powers, bar the US and its sizeable military presence in the country.

While armed groups may become integrated components of the local political environment and system, outside powers can acquire a competitive advantage over their rivals and establish a wide-ranging infrastructure. This infrastructure can help outside powers establish and maintain their influence over the landscape, particularly where sovereignty is diminished or where viable institutions have yet to emerge. Outside powers invested substantial resources in Iraq, either to mobilize insurgents and jihadi groups or to embolden Shiite militias.

The US withdrawal in 2011 left Iran's position in Iraq largely uncontested. Iran positioned itself as an indispensable patron willing to invest considerable resources in willing proxies and as a capable arbiter of a dispute-ridden political environment. The Iranian strategy for Iraq is multifaceted and is certainly derived from Shiite religious and sociocultural ties that bind Iran and Iraq together. But the strategy is complex and constitutes an elusive web of interpersonal and interorganizational links, including Iranian-funded charitable and educational institutions in the Shiite-dominated south. Looking at Iran's support for Iraq's Kurdish movement, there is no single faction or type of faction that Iran supports; Iran has historically provided arms and material support to the PUK and KDP and has even provided refuge to Kurdish jihadi Islamists responsible for terrorist attacks in the Kurdistan region. The PUK has developed closer political ties to Tehran than its rival, the KDP, in large part because the latter has increasingly aligned itself with Turkey over the course of the past decade. But matters of geography also influenced these alignments, since Iran is adjacent to those areas the PUK dominates, while KDP-dominated areas are adjacent to Turkey.

During the ISIS crisis, Iran deployed considerable resources, including advisers and special forces, to defend the Baghdad government. Unlike the rotating cast of American officials and military leaders, Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the IRGC's elite Quds Force, and his men have great autonomy and long engagement in the region. General Soleimani has run the Quds Force since 1998 and, along with his deputies, has invested decades of time and energy into developing relations with armed groups and political parties of all stripes in Iraq. He and his deputies speak Farsi, Arabic, and Kurdish. For militias and parties alike, that makes Iran an attractive (and feared) patron and partner.

Yet outside powers face constraints in Iraq. Shiite Islamist parties and militias are also beholden to the sentiments of the broader Iraqi population, whose anti-Iran rhetoric and posturing limits their capacity and willingness to adhere to Iran's orders. Arab Sunni insurgents have also frustrated outside efforts to either curtail their insurrection against the Iraqi state and the Americans or to unify them into a single fighting force, despite the resources expended by the Gulf. Iraq's Kurds have enjoyed longstanding relations with the US, Turkey, and Iran, but this could not dissuade Kurdish leaders from pursuing the independence referendum. While that may have resulted in the

loss of strategic towns and cities, the KDP and PUK are in the process of restoring their political dominance following successful showings at Iraqi and Kurdish parliamentary elections in 2018. Their ongoing divisions notwithstanding, they are even normalizing relations with Ankara and Tehran. This suggests a relationship of interdependence between Iraq's factions and the outside powers attempting to assert their influence.

Politics and conflict in Iraq illuminate the implications of diminished sovereignty and reliance on substate actors for the provisioning of essential services like security. All three of the major armed groups or movements that dominate Iraq have multiple identities and multiple, at times conflicted, alliances with outside partners. This has enabled them to have a resiliency and dynamism amid abundant resources, allowing for autonomy and agency but also the cultivation of ties with outside powers and willing patrons. What the Iraq case study shows is that outside powers can be constrained when attempting to control groups that would normally be considered proxies or subordinates, particularly when the prospects of reconciliation increase and when stability engulfs the country, as the 2009–2011 period shows. However, in an environment of weak institutions—which includes a plethora of party-affiliated armed groups, ongoing disputes over power and resources, or ethnoreligious conflicts—opportunity structures emerge for outside powers to assert their influence and shape the political landscape.

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