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Masarat

A report on recent developments in the Middle East and the Muslim world.

The Militiarization of Iraqi Politics

- -The Syrian incubator and accelerator
- -Repatriation and empowerment
- -The current militia landscape
- -Iran's alternative to state-building?

17

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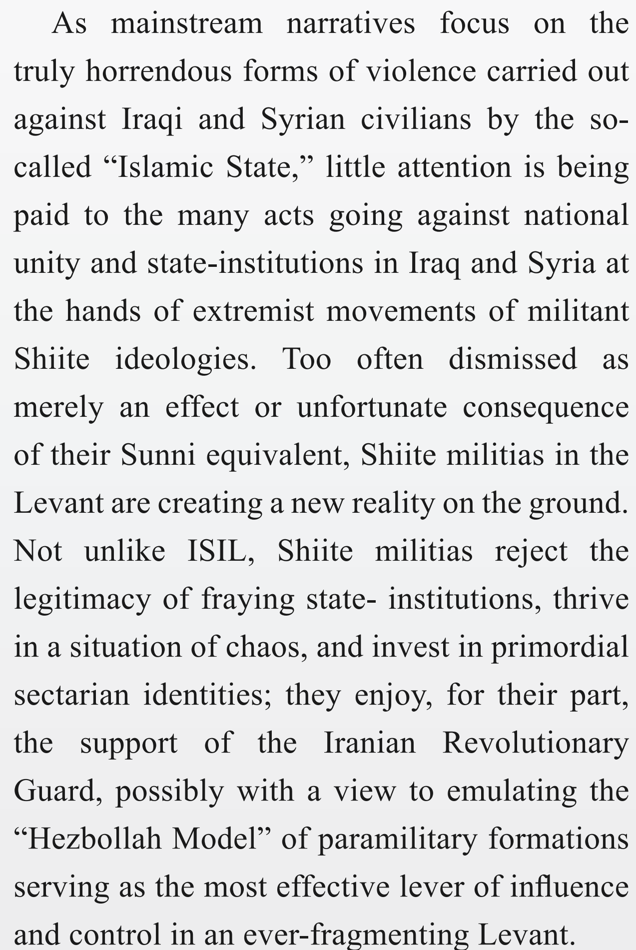

As mainstream narratives focus on the truly horrendous forms of violence carried out against Iraqi and Syrian civilians by the so-called "Islamic State," little attention is being paid to the many acts going against national unity and state-institutions in Iraq and Syria at the hands of extremist movements of militant Shiite ideologies. Too often dismissed as merely an effect or unfortunate consequence of their Sunni equivalent, Shiite militias in the Levant are creating a new reality on the ground. Not unlike ISIL, Shiite militias reject the legitimacy of fraying state- institutions, thrive in a situation of chaos, and invest in primordial sectarian identities; they enjoy, for their part, the support of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, possibly with a view to emulating the "Hezbollah Model" of paramilitary formations serving as the most effective lever of influence and control in an ever-fragmenting Levant.

Introduction

Iraq's state-building process has produced remarkably weak and dysfunctional institutions, but it has generated a relatively robust "state-building narrative" that continues to shape the way the country tends to be discussed. "Inclusive politics," "national unity," "security sector reform," and "strengthening the army" are oft-repeated concepts driving the narrative of Iraqi officials and their foreign counterparts, not least the American ones, in particular as they claim to address the threat posed by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, a Sunni extremist movement otherwise known under the acronym ISIL or its Arabic equivalent Daesh. The horrendous crimes repeatedly committed and barefacedly publicized by ISIL have also captured the media's attention, contributing to a policy discussion that centers on reinforcing the state in the face of this challenge.

Meanwhile, the pervasive presence of Shiite militias, whose size and sway arguably are greater than those of ISIL, is either overlooked entirely or treated as a lesser evil – a less problematic development that doesn't call for quite the same urgency, will hopefully subside naturally, and generally can be understood as an unfortunate consequence of the rise of Sunni extremists, thus providing a further reason to focus primarily on the latter. However, Shiite militias are not an epiphenomenon. They have become an integral part of Iraqi politics, in the sense that they are both enmeshed within the political system and part and parcel of the systemic radicalization at work within Iraqi society. Their growing weight speaks as much as ISIL does to the failure of the state-building process and represents another, critical threat to any prospect of reviving it. For now at least, the war on ISIL has translated less into shoring up central authorities than into consolidating various militias in a decentralized, communal struggle, typically at the expense of cannibalized state institutions and in ways that deepen existing fault lines within Iraqi society. Although these dynamics are not restricted to Shiite militias and also involve Kurdish factions, ad hoc vigilantes set up by smaller minorities, and modest attempts at creating Sunni Arab proxies, this particular report will focus on the former, given the predominant role they play within the country's center of gravity.

The most potent and prominent militias operating in Iraq took root during the post-2003 US occupation of Iraq, which officially ended in late 2011. Some had previously been nurtured in Iran as leverage against the regime of Saddam Hussein and were simply repatriated to Iraq, where they settled into state structures (notably the ministry of interior) without disbanding or genuinely revisiting their worldview;[1] others grew out of a more indigenous movement of resistance to the United States, with or without Iranian assistance. Their role increased as sectarian tensions deepened, sparking large-scale confessional strife peaking between 2006 and 2008. In subsequent years, as violence subsided following the defeat or cooptation of Sunni Arab armed groups, these Shiite militias opted for a form of "normalization:" they

1-A rare and partial exception is to be found in the remaking of SCIRI/ISCI, whose armed wing, the Badr militia commanded by Hadi al-Ameri, split from the more conventional political leadership represented by Ammar al-Hakim.

scaled down their paramilitary operations, joined more actively the political process, acquired a veneer of respectability, and became part of Iraq's political business-as-usual. But they never reformed as such, and they transformed the political system at least as much as they were transformed by it: even when they developed an ability to compete in electoral contests and assume executive powers, they merely sought the resources and the cover provided by the state, therefore contributing to its fragmentation.

For a while they were eclipsed, nevertheless, by the larger-than-life figure of Prime Minister Nuri Maliki, who until his sudden fall from power, caused by ISIL's surge in northern Iraq in 2014, projected the image of a decisive leader rebuilding a centralized, authoritarian regime. In reality, during his eight years in office (2006–2014), Maliki drifted toward consolidating his personal power at the cost of undermining the cohesiveness of state institutions, eroding his political and popular base of support, and allowing the revival of militia activity – a process that was partially veiled by the fact that his original claim to fame rested on doing the opposite, notably by confronting Shiite militias running rampant in the southern city of Basrah in 2008. The conflict that erupted in neighboring Syria in 2011 played a key role as a catalyst for the worst.

The Syrian incubator and accelerator

Maliki's personal approach to the Syrian uprising served as the enabler for the reactivation of dormant Shiite militias in Iraq. As popular protests were repressed next door, leading to a vicious circle of escalating violence, he expressed support for the regime,[2] presumably out of a fear of contagion and because the victory of a majority Sunni Arab opposition in Syria could change the balance of forces in Iraq itself – a perception certainly reinforced by the onset of protests in Iraq's predominantly Sunni Arab areas in late 2012.[3] Over time he aligned himself with a pro-Iranian axis determined to prevent the toppling of his Syrian counterpart, Bashar Assad; instituted policies that could only radicalize his own Sunni opposition; emulated some of the Syrian regime's tactics in doing so; and shifted from a nationalistic narrative to promoting a Shiite popular sentiment of entitlement and anxiety.[4] Authorizing and facilitating the journey of Shiite Jihadis to Syria would grow out of this mix: starting in 2012, months before Maliki faced a genuine challenge posed by Sunni Arab discontent at home,

2- See "Iraqi Leader Backs Syria, With a Nudge From Iran," New York Times, August 12, 2011.

3- See "Iraq Sunni Protests in Anbar against Nouri al-Maliki," BBC, December 28, 2012. Protests in western Iraq snowballed into a broad, peaceful popular movement that encompassed most predominantly Sunni Arab areas and staged regular sit-ins throughout 2013.

4- Maliki's last electoral campaign, in the run-up to the April 2014 parliamentary polls, rested primarily on sectarian identity politics; for backgruvvound, see, for instance, Ahmed Ali, Iraq's 2014 National Elections, Middle East Security Report 20 (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2014), http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AhmedAliIraqElections.pdf.

these Jihadis were allowed to use government-controlled border points to join the increasingly sectarian struggle – a trickle of volunteers at first, but one that would turn into a torrent by 2013.[5]

The course of action chosen by the Syrian regime in repressing popular dissent made the presence of alien Shiite militias on its territory possible: it successfully reframed its opposition as representing an existential threat to minorities, including small Shiite pockets around the country; it invested in homegrown militias and proxies as a core instrument to deal with the unrest, undermining already weak security institutions and any sense of state dignity; it gradually lost control over large portions of its territory (which it ultimately came to treat as foreign land, using military tactics few if any government has ever used against its own people); early on, it turned to external allies such as Iran and Russia for ever more help, essentially relinquishing its claim to sovereignty; and it generally portrayed itself as willing to stop at nothing to ensure its survival.[6] Calling upon foreign fighters to lend a hand sat well with such trends.

While the Assad regime mobilized Syrian Shiite constituencies, among others, in the name of self-defense but also in support of repression,[7] it opened the door to Iraq's Shiite militias to funnel fighters into an expanding patchwork of Syrian offshoots, initially under the pretext of protecting shrines, notably that of Sayyida Zaynab in southeastern Damascus.[8] The Lebanese armed group Hizbollah used a similar entry point and narrative of justification, long denying more ambitious activities and goals in Syria. In practice, however, the line between defensive and offensive operations soon became blurred, with Shiite Jihadis fighting on the frontlines in areas far removed from Shiite constituencies and religious symbols under threat.[9]

These dynamics allowed Iraq's Shiite militias to remobilize and reorganize following a period of inactivity in the aftermath of the American withdrawal, providing them with a new raison d'être. Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hizbollah, and the Badr organization, arguably Iran's strongest proxies in Iraq, announced their own Syrian franchises in mid-2013 after months spent channeling fighters into other Syria-based umbrella groups, notably Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas. Syria generally provided fertile ground for veteran Iraqi militia figures to reassert their leadership status – easier done in a military struggle than in a political context. To that effect, lesser figures sometimes set up entirely new groups that bring them into the limelight, in a form of "militia entrepreneurship."[10]

5- See "Iraqi Sects Join Battle in Syria on Both Sides," New York Times, October 27, 2012.

6- For background, see International Crisis Group, "Syria's Mutating Conflict," August 1, 2012.

7- See, in particular, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0uQdOgyFW8 and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIclhtKEuAY.

8- This process appeared to begin as early as fall 2012 with the emergence of Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas, a Damascus-based group largely comprising fighters from Iraq's Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hizbollah.

9- Hizbollah's overt role in the spring 2013 battle for Qusayr was a turning point in that respect, but by then Shiite foreign fighters had already started to stray from their shrine-centric narrative and were soon to be involved in frontlines as remote as Aleppo. See, e.g., http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_e1ds1wG6Q.

10- The most notable example is Akram al-Kaabi, a former Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq leader who has emerged as secretary-general of the Syria-based Harakat Hizbollah al-Nujaba.

As these militias reemerged and proliferated in Syria, Iraqi Shiite Jihadis took the opportunity to rally around and propagate their own particular flavor of sectarianism – a millenarian, vengeful, assertive narrative of victory over Sunni domination, backed by a vibrant popular folklore deeply rooted within parts of Iraqi society. This body of cultural productions quickly spread among Alawites and Lebanese Shiites caught up in the conflict, although it ran counter to the traditional, mainstream, self-indulgent narratives of communal harmony and non-sectarian motives pushed by the regime, Hizbollah, and Iran.[11] By mid-2014, distinctly Shiite political and religious paraphernalia had come to be part of the landscape in Damascus, featured at checkpoints, in the streets, and even on military uniforms, in the form of slogans such as "labbayki ya Zaynab" or portraits of Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, which in places are more prominent still than portraits of Assad.

All in all, Iraqi militias found in the Syrian arena a space where they could expand militarily, demonstrate their prowess, articulate a rallying narrative, and grow their base of recruits and profile, generally, all the while refraining from blatantly challenging the status quo in Iraq itself. It always was clear, however, that their ultimate return to the homeland would prove problematic.

Repatriation and empowerment

Indeed, these militias' increasingly active role in Syria set the stage for a major resurgence on the Iraqi scene in response to the spectacular gains of the so-called "Islamic State" (a misnomer for a Jihadi movement whose claims to statehood and Islamic credentials are debatable at best). The latter's surge in western and northern Iraq – which had gained steam for months before culminating in the June 2014 seizure of Mosul, the country's second- or third-largest city – offered ideal circumstances for Shiite militias to make their comeback: popular fears were peaking; the formal security apparatus was crumbling; the political establishment was discredited and paralyzed by its own flagrant failure; the prime minister, in particular, had become eminently weak; the outside world appeared confused and inclined to find expedient ways to address the menace; and the exclusive focus on the Islamic State provided adequate cover for Shiite militias to surge themselves.

The Mosul takeover didn't trigger their repatriation as much as it catalyzed and justified a preexisting trend toward redeployment from Syria to Iraq.[12] Emblematic of this repatriation process were the April parliamentary polls, which saw the

11- See, for example, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-4E9NVDbAc; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hv5BzovaaHo; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixDRBvydp0I; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CfhnAo0vmDA; and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gqow8Hvg9ns.

12- See, for instance, Phillip Smyth, "Iranian Proxies Step Up Their Role in Syria," Washington Institute, June 13, 2014.

election of individuals such as Faleh al-Khazali, an Iraqi militia leader who boasts of having lost an eye defending Sayyida Zaynab in Syria.[13]

Against this backdrop, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani's June 2014 call for general mobilization could readily be interpreted as legitimizing the growth, multiplication, and normalization of militias on Iraqi soil. As a matter of principle, Sistani, who had previously voiced his opposition to Iraqi Shiites fighting in Syria, had argued for joining the formal security apparatus.[14] In practice, however, his plea was used as a cue for the domestic empowerment of Iranian-sponsored formations that had taken the lead in Syria; for the full-fledged reactivation of the "Mahdi Army," a dormant paramilitary formation that had been established in 2003 by firebrand cleric Muqtada Sadr, had overall refrained from projecting abroad, and was now repackaged and reenergized as the "Peace Brigades"; and for a whole new generation of militia entrepreneurs jumping in to the fray, seeking material resources and political aggrandizement.

The army's decaying state, loss of status, and lack of leadership placed it in a submissive posture vis-à-vis the militias, whose succor, it was generally accepted, it needed. This transfer of credibility and authority had started as early as autumn 2013, as militias empowered in Syria grew stronger and bolder at home, and the process simply accelerated dramatically in the run-up to parliamentary elections and in the aftermath of ISIL's June victory in Mosul.[15] No wonder then, that militias essentially took over, assuming combat missions while using dilapidated military structures as training facilities, for logistical support, and as a source of political cover. This process amounted to the cannibalization of the army, which was undermined by the operational roles and symbolic sway assumed by the militias far more than it was assisted, let alone empowered, by them. Open violence pitting militia fighters against Iraqi security forces attempting to rein in their criminal activity in the capital underscored the extent to which central authority is being challenged by militia rule.[16] If there is any semblance of normalcy on the streets of Baghdad today, it is mostly because militias are entirely caught up in the fight against ISIL – which typically devolves into sectarian cleansing – and have therefore largely vacated the area.[17] The picture no doubt will be different when the chickens come home to roost, likely causing an uptick in criminal activity, political killings, sectarian violence, and "morally" based bullying.

The empowerment of militias naturally carries over into politics, where militia leadership figures gained weight as their presence was emphasized, legitimized, normalized, and even celebrated. The starkest example of this infiltration is Badr leader and former transportation minister Hadi al-Ameri, who currently directs operations in the field in heavily contested Diyala province while

13- "Ex-Syria Fighter Running for Parliament in Iraq," AFP, April 22, 2014.

14- See http://www.shiatv.net/video/419841353&sa=U&ei=gpXdVMmQNMSO7AbaiIGoBg&ved=0CCQQFjAD&sig2=1bVEGdO9YuCwWnSArflIEg&usg=AFQjCNHFkiTsnROMBxs3N667E1Sdoo0oTA.

15- See "Overt Shi'a Mobilization in Mixed Areas," Institute for the Study of War, April 17, 2014. Nuri Maliki hinted at this devolution of authority in April, telling Shiite politicians that he had formed groups of "mujahideen" who were "better than the army [at] guerrilla warfare." Ned Parker, Ahmed Rasheed, and Raheem Salman, "Before Iraq Election, Shi'ite Militias Unleashed in War on Sunni Insurgents," Reuters, April 27, 2014.

16- "Baghdad Shootout Highlights Growing Threat of Shiite Militias," AFP, 21 October 2014.

17- "As a Curfew Is Lifted, Baghdad Is at Long Last Partying Again," Washington Post, February 5, 2015.

reportedly pulling the strings in Iraq's interior ministry, ostensibly headed by second-tier Badr politician Mohammad al-Ghabban. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis has been appointed vice-president of the popular mobilization forces, a shallow umbrella organization providing political cover to militias – making for the bizarre spectacle of a US-designated terrorist with a long-standing relationship with Iran giving an official press conference on behalf of the government, in the Green Zone, while still using his nom de guerre.[18] Other militias, including Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, have gained representation in parliament and played major roles in negotiating the formation of Haydar Abadi's cabinet, reflecting the degree to which militias are today embedded at the heart of the political system itself while representing a worldview – violent, arbitrary, exclusionary, and millenarian – that is the very negation of the values presumably borne by the state.[19]

The current militia landscape

As a symptom of this tension, Iraq's military and political topography has been defined, over the past six months, by two parallel, seemingly contradictory trends. On the one hand, the spate of new militia formations and an accelerated devolution of authority to existing groups has given rise to an increasingly empowered and kaleidoscopic array of armed factions. On the other hand, this fragmentation has been accompanied by concerted efforts by the Iraqi government and the militias themselves to cast the process as a non-sectarian, nationalist response to the threat posed by ISIL.

The number of militias currently active in Iraq runs to the dozens. Unsurprisingly, these factions vary dramatically in professionalization and military relevance. Some – like the longstanding Iranian proxies Badr, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Kata'ib Hizbollah – boast a level of military competence and discipline far exceeding that of the foundering Iraqi security forces and have played a leading role in all major anti-ISIL operations. Others are far less professional, operate primarily at the local level, and appear to have little, if any, consequence in the fight against ISIL. Some such groups appear little more than ventures launched by Shiite politicians and religious figures to adjust to and capitalize on Iraq's rapid descent into warlordism.[20] The landscape is dominated by the following:

18- See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pRkrVlvixQw. In 2009 the US Department of the Treasury designated him a terrorist for being "a threat to the peace and stability of Iraq" and an advisor to Iranian spymaster Qassem Suleimani. See http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg195.aspx.

19- Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq also interacts and coordinates openly with Iraqi ministries on civilian issues. See, e.g., http://ahlualhaq.com/index.php/permalink/3854.html.

20- This phenomenon is exemplified by a group of five militias loosely affiliated with a pro-Iran political party, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). These groups, led by individuals ranging from ISCI head Ammar al-Hakim to more marginal political figures including Hassan al-Sari and Dagher al-Mousawi, have done little to demonstrate their military relevance, and their media arms are primarily focused on glorifying their respective leadership figures.

Badr Organization:

The original Iranian proxy in Iraq, Badr was established by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps in 1982 to serve as Iran's military arm in Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War. Since 2003 Badr has become thoroughly integrated into the Iraqi government and security apparatus, gaining functional control over the country's interior ministry and, in recent parliamentary elections, 22 out of 328 seats. The group was notorious for running sectarian death squads at the height of the 2003–2008 civil war, notably while Badr commander Bayan Jabr served as the interior minister. (He is currently the minister of transport.)

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq:

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq emerged with IRGC training and equipment in 2006. The group, whose numbers are estimated in the low thousands,[21] was at the forefront of anti-coalition militia violence until the US withdrawal in 2011, after which it began to recast itself as a political entity. Asa'ib reemerged militarily as the leading supplier of Iraqi Shiite fighters in Syria's civil war, and since late 2013 it has – with Baghdad's blessing – taken on a central role in anti-ISIL fighting throughout Iraq. Accusations of sectarian killings by the group have begun to resurface since mid-2014.[22]

Kata'ib Hizbollah:

The IRGC established Kata'ib Hizbollah in 2007 as an elite, highly secretive force through which Tehran could deploy its most sophisticated training and equipment in Iraq. Like Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hizbollah has sent hundreds of fighters to Syria and has lately stepped up its operations in Iraq, working to secure Baghdad and deploying to key fronts around the country. The group's most high-profile leadership role came in the battle for Amerli, where it reportedly operated government helicopters and US-made tanks.[23]

Saraya al-Salam:

Following Sistani's fatwa in June, Muqtada Sadr announced the revival of his disbanded Mahdi Army under the moniker Saraya al-Salam – the "Peace Brigades" – and staged an armed demonstration whose attendance was estimated in the tens of thousands in Baghdad's Sadr City. The group's name change reflects a broader effort by Sadr to distance Saraya al-Salam from its predecessor's reputation for sectarian brutality. It has deployed alongside Iraqi forces and other militias to flashpoints including Samarra, Amerli, Diyala, and Jurf al-Sakhar.

Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas:

Mostly comprising fighters from Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hizbollah, Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas was the first Iraqi-staffed Shia militia to declare its role in Syria. The group has publicized operations around the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in southeastern Damascus since fall 2012, and in early 2014 it began redeploying fighters to Iraq.[24]

21- See, e.g., "Shiite Militias in Iraq Begin to Remobilize," Washington Post, February 9, 2014.

22- "Iraq: Pro-Government Militias' Trail of Death," Human Rights Watch, July 31, 2014.

23- "All the Ayatollah's Men," Foreign Policy, September 18, 2014.

24- See Phillip Smyth, "Iranian Proxies Step Up Their Role in Iraq," Washington Institute, June 13, 2014.

Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada:

Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada emerged in Syria in early 2013 and since December 2013 has publicized its expanded operations in Iraq.[25] The group is vociferously Khomeinist and is believed to be led, at least in part, by Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani, a longtime Badr commander with close IRGC ties.[26]

Harakat Hizbollah al-Nujaba:

Harakat Hizbollah al-Nujaba has been active in Syria since June 2013 under the leadership of former Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq commander Akram al-Kaabi and began publicizing operations in Iraq following Sistani's fatwa. Like Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Harakat Hizbollah al-Nujaba is highly vocal in its allegiance to Tehran.

Saraya Tali'a al-Khorasani:

Another Iraqi-staffed, Khomeinist militia, Saraya Tali'a al-Khorasani has been active in Syria since fall 2013[27] and began advertising its operations in Iraq – specifically in Amerli – in August 2014.[28] The group's relationships to other Iraqi militias remain unclear, but it is explicit about its ties to the IRGC, including adopting a modified version of the IRGC's banner.

Harakat Ansar Allah al-Awfiyeh:

Harakat Ansar Allah al-Awfiyeh emerged in August 2014 under the leadership of Haydar al-Gharawi, a Shiite sheikh based in Iraq's southern Maysan province. The militia's media arms point to a Khomeinist ideology and military activities concentrated in the shrine city of Samarra.[29]

Saraya Ashoura:

One of five new militias affiliated with the pro-Tehran Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), Saraya Ashoura emerged in June 2014 under the leadership of ISCI President Ammar al-Hakim and has advertised deployments in Baghdad, Samarra, Fallujah, and Jurf al-Sakhar.

Hizbollah al-Abrar:

Since it began publicizing operations in September 2014, Hizbollah al-Abrar claims to have deployed fighters to Baghdad, Diyala, Amerli, and Jurf al-Sakhar. The group is headed by Sheikh Fadel al-Khazali and publicizes its ties to Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq.[30]

In the immediate aftermath of ISIL's breakthrough in Mosul, this patchwork of militias largely coalesced around a narrative of sectarian self-defense and focused on neutralizing the threat to Shiite populations in the mixed Sunni-Shiite provinces of Baghdad and Diyala,[31] securing the Shiite shrine in the city of Samarra, and breaking the ISIL siege of the Shiite-majority town of Amerli north of the capital.

This overtly sectarian, defense-centric narrative evolved as ISIL's progress stalled

25- Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada website, http://saidshuhada.com/index.php/bayanat/3071.html.

26- See, e.g., http://www.herak.info/10690.

27- See, e.g., http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkeracL7fTA

28- See, e.g., http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BSeGC3I0h1g

29- See, e.g., https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=731721456899350&id=724025787668917.

30- Phillip Smyth, "Hizballah al-Abrar: The Latest Hizballah Franchise in Iraq," Jihadology, November 4, 2014.

31- In the view of some militiamen, this meant purging Diyala of its Sunni presence, establishing a buffer zone with the predominantly Sunni Anbar province to the west, and surrounding and scrutinizing Sunni pockets in the capital itself, perceived as hotbeds of dormant Islamic State support.

and the US Air Force, Shiite militias, Kurdish factions, remnants of the Iraqi army, and Iranian Revolutionary Guard elements went on the offensive in both mixed and majority Sunni Arab areas. This uncomfortable, motley assortment of troops pursuing generally divergent agendas has found solace in a joint narrative describing the struggle as one pitting the Iraqi state and people against an alien, common enemy. In particular, the Iraqi government, the Shiite religious establishment, and the militias themselves have assiduously sought to project an aura of non-sectarian nationalism and of cooperation – rather than competition – between militias and the conventional security apparatus.

These efforts were on full display when, in early November, Sistani seized on ISIL's massacre of members of the Sunni Albu Nimr tribe in Anbar province to drive home the point that the Sunni extremist movement was not a Shiite problem, but an Iraqi one.[32] Still more striking were the shows of solidarity from Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Saraya al-Salam – two militias with a history of sectarian atrocities.[33] Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq issued a public statement declaring its "complete readiness to support the sons of the Albu Nimr tribe,"[34] while Iraqi media reported that Saraya al-Salam had dispatched some 3,000 men to fight alongside it.[35]

Nationalist posturing has been accompanied by efforts to rein in, or at least play down, once highly publicized sectarian practices such as indiscriminately executing prisoners and torching property in areas that militias have taken over from ISIL control. Sistani has publicly called on Shiite fighters to protect "innocents." Militias have made ostentatious displays of handing over "liberated" territory to the regular security forces.[36] Groups have likewise sought to distance themselves from criminal activities in which they once engaged openly; Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq thus issued a statement in November 2014 disavowing any ties to 53 individuals who, it claimed, were carrying out "kidnapping and extortion" in its name.[37] A prevalent attitude, indeed, has been to blame undefined "gangs" for carrying out crimes in the guise of registered militias,[38] if not to dismiss such occurrences entirely as ISIL propaganda.

Perhaps the clearest and most wide-ranging effort to present a united, nationalist front has been the concept of the "popular mobilization forces," an amorphous, catchall designation for irregular fighters including members of established militias and unaffiliated volunteers. The denomination – increasingly adopted by the Iraqi government and intermittently by the militias themselves – ties together a number

32- At a Friday sermon in the Shiite holy city of Karbala, Sistani declared: "We offer our condolences to the families of the dear innocent victims and we show our compassion for them. . . . The salvation of Iraq from [ISIL] is not possible unless the efforts of all its sons are united." AFP, November 1, 2014.

33- The group's name, together with its logo – which features a dove flying in front of an Iraqi flag – reflects Sadr's effort to distance this new iteration from the Mahdi Army's tradition of brutal violence against both Sunnis and the Iraqi central government.

34- See, e.g., http://www.alalam.ir/news/1645308.

35- See, e.g., http://www.sotaliraq.com/iraq-news.php?id=174290#axzz3ISLm4Ec3.

36- See, e.g., https://www.facebook.com/saraya.alsalam/photos/a.1458175037756266.1073741828.1458166264423810/1520646631509106//?type=1.

37- See, e.g., http://rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/0111201416.

38- See https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=845365972188293.

of implicit, positive connotations: a sense of unity and order belying the multiplication of and competition among militias; a broad-based popular movement approximating Sistani's original appeal; a merely supportive role vis-à-vis the army; and a temporary nature.

Despite these efforts to separate today's militia dynamics from those that prevailed during the darkest years of the American occupation, there can be no denying the dangers posed by the proliferation and increasing autonomy of armed groups ranging from highly experienced sectarian diehards to undisciplined Shiite volunteers. Reports of house burnings, assassinations, torture, kidnappings, and forced displacement of Sunni Arabs remain on the rise; these include credible accusations leveled against members of the popular mobilization forces as well as supposedly more disciplined groups such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Saraya al-Salam that have paid diligent lip service to the importance of a unified, non-sectarian Iraq. Even if these groups' leaders were sincerely committed to halting such criminal activity – a point open to debate – there is little cause to believe that they will be able to effectively control their ranks, particularly as these fighters penetrate deeper into Sunni Arab majority areas. Moreover, the death penalty issued against prominent Sunni Arab figure Ahmad Alwani, whose initial arrest spurred spiraling unrest in Anbar, is testimony to the influence within the Iraqi polity of a strong, spiteful strand that openly prioritizes revenge over reconciliation.[39]

Iran's alternative to state-building?

There is a striking resemblance between this phenomenon – the tension between a dignified, nationalistic, state-centric narrative and a pragmatic, sectarian, militia-driven dynamic on the ground – and its equivalent in Syria, where the "national defense forces" serve the same purpose as the "popular mobilization forces" do in Iraq. Indeed, the national defense forces constitute a half-successful attempt to structure, systematize, rein in, and build on the plurality of local vigilantes and proxies that initially came to be known under the generic label "shabbiha," in reference to a long-gone precedent of the early Hafez Assad era.

In early 2011, a variety of players within Syria drew on an equally broad array of labor to support themselves or the regime in confronting the uprising. Some military or security officials would, on their own initiative, hire and direct henchmen to help put down demonstrators; the Baath Party used popular organizations to do as much; the regime resorted to well-known criminal networks (in some Palestinian camps around Damascus and in Aleppo, for instance) to supplement formal troops; crony businessmen called upon their workforce; in

39- For background, see https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde142014/019//en/.

universities student leagues served as proxies; in Alawite areas individuals who had gained prominence through association with the regime set up their own local vigilantes, which often took on a criminal bent; and the list goes on. This proliferation caused confusion and painted a shameful picture even in the eyes of loyalists. More importantly, it generated friction, as many of these empowered thugs preyed upon the regime's own popular base – hence the attempt to turn this complex movement into something more legitimate and manageable. Although hard evidence to that effect is virtually impossible to come by, Iran likely has been instrumental in conceptualizing and implementing this effort.[40]

Just as the national defense forces have remained, at core, a collection of loosely coordinated vigilantes cloaked in the narrative of a homeland guard, the popular mobilization forces serve above all a purpose of legitimization – eclipsing the reality of a dangerously eroding state.

More generally, the apparent mismatch in attention and resources dedicated by Iran to shoring up militias compared to state institutions may say something about Tehran's intent or limitations. There is virtually no tangible indication of Iranian pressure being applied to Maliki or Assad in order to change their military tactics or to shift their political calculations. Maliki was removed only after being allowed, over a period of years, to pursue the most destructive policies. Assad has had a free hand in using the full scope of weapons at his disposal, including ballistic missiles and, allegedly, chemical weapons, even when they had marginal military value and considerable political costs;[41] he enjoyed as much leeway in staging farcical presidential elections in 2014, in a profoundly polarized society in dire need of political inclusiveness and compromise. There is ample evidence, by contrast, of Iran's hands-on investment in building, equipping, professionalizing, and coordinating militias – and possibly working to rein in bad behavior on that level, when it appeared counterproductive.

Such discrepancies may have several explanations. First, Iran has considerable, successful prior experience in proxy warfare, with Hizbollah standing as its biggest foreign policy achievement, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad expanding its role, and a track record of effective guerilla tactics against the US occupation in Iraq. Second, Iran, which has relied heavily on paramilitary formations at home, arguably has neither the confidence nor the know-how, the resources, or the inclination to engage in strengthening state institutions abroad. Third, it is likely Iran doesn't see its interest in doing so, as functioning states in Iraq and Syria would prove less susceptible to its influence and possibly at some stage pose a threat. Finally, the professional and ideological background of Iranian officials taking the lead in this effort goes back to the '80s – an age of revolutionary inspiration, existential struggle, popular mobilization, and frontline comradeship that still seems to shape their ethos today.

As a result, Iran's role, whether conceptualized

40- See, e.g., "With Assad's Troops Stretched, Fighters Join NDF for Salary and Stability," Syria Deeply, October 8, 2014; "Iran Transformed Syria's Army into a Militia that Will Help Assad Survive," Medium, December 17, 2014.

41- Although Iranian officials claim to have played a role in convincing the regime to renounce its chemical weapons, they took up this task only after the extensive use of such weapons threatened their ally's very survival.

as such or not, appears to be a catalyst for the erosion of state institutions and the "militiarization" of politics, trends that provide Iran with dependable vectors of leverage, exacerbate the sectarian connotations of its posture (as a result of the sectarian makeup and proclivities of its proxies), provide compelling rallying material to its Sunni Arab opponents, increase the general level of instability as radicalization in one camp feeds into extremism in the other in a self-reinforcing loop, and diminish the prospects of an outcome in which the "state" triumphs over ISIL.

Conclusion

This dynamic, however, enjoys little recognition within the context of the US strategy for defeating the Islamic State. US officials are loath to even mention the issue of militias. Instead, Nuri Maliki's successor, Prime Minister Haydar Abadi, is praised for his more inclusive politics. In public discourse at least, US military aid in central Iraq is said to be channeled exclusively through Iraqi authorities, expected to serve as the lynchpin of the anti-ISIL campaign. Military operations are depicted as if the Iraqi army and police were the only parties involved. Meanwhile, Shiite militias allegedly have co-located with US advisers at certain bases – ironically, given that several of these formations were until recently considered lethal enemies by the United States and continue to sport a virulently anti-American worldview.[42]

Symptomatically, the Iranian spymaster Qassem Suleimani, who is credited with orchestrating various attacks against US and Israeli interests in Iraq, the region, and beyond, has felt emboldened and safe enough to come out into the open in several public appearances alongside Shiite militia leaders – a risk he certainly would not take if he believed that the United States viewed him as a deadly adversary.[43] Washington offered air support, for instance, toward the defeat of ISIL at the hands of paramilitary forces in Amerli, in a battle reportedly coordinated by Suleimani in person.[44] What exactly is the United States trying to achieve in attempting to shore up the state while condoning the spread of militias? If its track record in Iraq over the past ten years is anything to go by, one can expect continuation of a well-established practice on the part of Washington: professing loyalty to its state-building endeavors as a matter of strategic principle while preferring political and military expediency at the tactical level, with a view to keeping its engagement at a minimum. This tension, unsurprisingly, lies at the core of the Iraqi edifice; for now at least, it appears that the ISIL threat will not suffice to fundamentally address it.

42- For examples of anti-US rhetoric, notably blaming the United States for being aligned with ISIL, see, e.g., http://www.kataibhizbollah.com/ar/pages/news.php?nid=498; http://ahlualhaq.com/index.php/permalink/3779.html.

43- The pattern started in autumn 2014. See, e.g., http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/201406/10//Iran-s-mysterious-elite-general-Qassem-Suleimani-in-rare-Iraq-picture.html. Several other pictures followed, showing Suleimani being affectionate with and visibly enjoying himself in the company of militia leaders on the frontlines.

44- See, e.g., http://observers.france24.com/content/20140904-amerli-iraq-soleimani-video-iran-isis.

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