

Full Length Research Paper

The internal and external roles of Iraqi popular mobilization forces

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This paper empirically examines the internal and external roles of the popular mobilization forces (PMF) or al-Hashd al-Shaabi. First, the paper examines the PMF's role in the fight against the Islamic State/Daesh and governance in Iraq. Second, it highlights the PMF's external links with Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps and Lebanon's Hezbollah. The question of whether the PMF is a tool of expanding Iran's influence and interventionism across the region is thoroughly scrutinized. The paper examines the role of the PMF in increasing the level of sectarianism and paves the way for protracted social conflict in the region. Rising sectarianism offers a fertile breeding ground for Sunni extremism and radicalism, and lethal anti-Shiaism; feeding into a vicious cycle of sectarian violence. These conditions may shape the genesis of protracted regional social conflict between the two main branches of Islam.

Key words: Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), Islam, conflict.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the internal and external roles of the predominately Shia¹ Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)/*al-Hashd al-Shaabi* in Iraqi and regional politics. In order to do so, the paper draws on the literature concerned with the role of sub-state actors in world politics. Sub-state actors are establishing themselves at domestic as well as international levels. There is a growing body of literature that addresses the engagement of sub-state actors in the international arena (McGrew 2011; Jian, 2005; Peter, 2011).

In order to address the research question, the paper is structured into three sections. The author, first, explains how the PMF was established and describes its structure. Second, the PMF's role in the fight against the Islamic

State/*Daesh* (IS) is examined and evaluated. From internal to external level, the researcher considers different possible threats posed by the PMF to the individual and collective security of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states². At present, regional security of the Middle East in general seems to be influenced, either positively or negatively, by non-state actors, including sub-state actors, at unprecedented level.

Significance of the study

This topic is relatively controversial because there is academic and political debate on assessing the role of

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PMF in the counter-IS war. In addition, the PMF plays an important role in the game of competing camps in the Middle East. More important, studying the PMF would facilitate the revisit of other related phenomena, including extremism, radicalization, sectarianism and terrorism. With the comparison between the experience of the PMF and the experiences of Hezbollah in Lebanon and that of the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and first-hand information through in-depth interviews, this study may contribute to understanding the role of PMF in the making of a new Iraq and perhaps a new regional political order.

METHODOLOGY

The paper deploys a range of methods. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with Emirati diplomats, including Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation for Security and Military Affairs, and ambassadors to Iraq and Iran. Similar interviews were conducted with foreign diplomats in Abu Dhabi, including the American and Iraqi ambassadors, Russian and Lebanese deputy chiefs of mission in the United Arab Emirates. The rationale for choosing foreign diplomats as interviewees was to explore the research problem from different perspectives of various interested regional and international parties. Second, the comparative method was used to compare between the Hezbollah experience in Lebanon and that of the PMF in Iraq. The comparison was not, however, applied only to the two cases, but it also covered the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to develop a better comprehension of the threats posed by the PMF to GCC states.

DISCUSSION

Popular mobilization forces (PMF)

Establishment and structure

After the Islamic State (IS) swept westwards through Syria and took Mosul in June, 2014, the Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, the senior Shia cleric of Iraq, issued a fatwa calling on Iraqis to fight against IS. He declared the fight “a sacred defense” (Tollast, 2016). The effect was to spur a flood of Shia volunteers into the militia forces rather than the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF)³. As a result, many of the Shia militias were reinvigorated, and Shia volunteers in particular responded to Al-Sistani’s call. This is how the PMF was formed in the summer of 2014 (Al Zaabi, personal communication, January 16, 2017)⁴. According to the Iraqi ambassador in Abu Dhabi, Raad Al-Alusi (personal communication, February 28, 2017), the bottom line is that the PMF appeared because of the inability of ISF to counter the IS offensive.

The Iraqi government created the Popular Mobilization Directorate to organize, fund, and arm these disparate paramilitary (militia and volunteer) forces. After the appointment of current Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, the body was renamed the Popular Mobilization Committee, affiliated to the Ministry of Interior (Robinson, 2016). The idea of the PMF is not new. During the Iraq-Iran war

(1980-1988), the IRGC established the Badr Corps/Organization, perhaps the most prominent Iranian proxy, and other PMF Iraqi militia to fight Saddam Hussain’s regime⁵. The PMF is composed of several core militias or units, almost exclusively Shia (The Economist, 2015). Particularly, they comprise four elements: (1) the Shia volunteers, who responded to Al-Sistani’s call to defend the country; (2) a collection of newer Shia militias such as Kata’ib al-Imam Ali [the Imam Ali Battalions] and Firqat al-Abbas al-Qataliya [the Al-Abbas Combat Division]; (3) the long-standing Shia groups, including Badr Organization, Kata’ib Hizballah (KH) or Hezbollah Brigades, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) or League of Righteous People, and Saraya al-Salam (SAS) or Peace Brigades, previously the Mahdi Army led by cleric Muqtada al-Sadr (Robinson, 2016), and (4) a nascent Sunni tribal force. There are different estimates of the Sunni element in the PMF, which vary from 15,000 to 17,000 tribal fighters⁶. However, Knights, (2016) believes that the available combat forces seem to be under 6,000 fighters. The actual percentage of Sunni fighters in PMF ranks amounts to about 8% of the total force (Sattar, 2016).

Though the Iraqi government was committed to enlisting 30,000 Sunnis into the PMF, this never happened. In fact, the PMF is not a permanent vehicle for Sunni incorporation. After all, the Iraqi government remains ambivalent about arming Sunnis to fight against IS. And it seems that the Iraqi government did not embrace the idea that the government would be more secure with more Sunnis serving in the security forces (Tollast, 2016)⁷. Roughly half of the PMF units were formed from pre-existing Shia militias, some of which fought against Saddam Hussein’s regime during the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s and/or against the United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Almost 80% of the PMF military effort is conducted by four main factions, including SAS, Badr Organization, KH, and AAH (Rawabet Center for Research and Strategic Studies, 2016).

The leaders of the long-standing Shia militias are acting as PMF battlefield commanders. For example, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, KH commander, is the deputy chief of the Popular Mobilization Committee established in July, 2014 (Robinson, 2016; Knights, 2016). The rest of the PMF units are new formations, mobilized by religious and political leaders⁸. Most of the volunteers have ended up in new Shia formations, organized by and answerable to the Shia clerical authorities in Najaf and Karbala (Haddad, 2015).

Most sources put the number of PMF units at forty, while Al Zaabi estimates that there are around seventy-two PMF militias (personal communication, January 16, 2017). Other sources⁹ put the number at sixty-seven. The actual number of PMF is definitely more than forty units. However, Al-Alusi (personal communication, February 28, 2017) claimed that the number can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

Katzman and Humud (Katzman and Humud, 2015)

estimated the total strength of the PMF to be 100,000, while Robinson (2016) estimated the number between 80,000 and 100,000. Knights put the number at 120,000-strong army with at least 80,000 fighting under the banners of Iranian-backed militias (Knights, 2016). The actual number is likely to be around 110,000 fighters and is increasing in number. In any case, the PMF's size is more than the size of the ISF, whose strength is between 64,000 and 100,000. In Shia areas at least, the PMF is held in higher regard than the army. However, Al-Alusi (personal communication, Feb. 28, 2017), claimed that the size of the PMF is a few thousand.

In November, 2016, Iraq's parliament passed a law making the PMF an official component of ISF, subject to military law, with equal status to the army. Earlier that year, Prime Minister Hayder al Abadi issued an order that officially incorporated the PMF into the ISF and established it as a permanent military formation that is on par with the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service¹⁰.

Legalizing the PMF's status was necessary because Iraq's constitution of 2005 prohibits militias. In addition, a number of Iraqi political leaders have called for the integration of the PMF into the regular forces or their demobilization to avoid permanent militia dominance of the security and political landscapes. Ironically, there was persistent pressure from Iran and the US to incorporate the PMF into the ISF. Iran requested that the militia should take part in the battle of Mosul. The law passed by Iraq's parliament was greeted warmly in Iran Al Mazrouei, personal communication, January 29, 2017¹¹. The US requested that any PMF unit that wishes to receive air support must fall under the Iraqi military chain of command in order to receive such support (Future Center, 2017; Al Shehhi, personal communication, January 22, 2017)¹². In this regard, Pavel Rassadin, the Russian deputy chief of mission in Abu Dhabi, in an interview with author on March 1, 2017 mentioned that the PMF received air support from the global coalition against *Daesh* (the Islamic State).

The PMF chain of command is as follows: at the top of chain sits Prime Minister al-Abadi, Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, to whom the PMF must report. Faleh al-Fayad, Iraq's National Security Adviser, was appointed as the Chairman of Popular Mobilization Committee. He is officially in command of the PMF in charge of planning operations through negotiations with PMF commanders. His deputy is al-Muhandis, the head of KH (Tollast, 2016)¹³. Though a part of the ISF, the PMF is still an independent military formation, but maintain a semi-official relationship with the state. It will take a reasonable amount of time to build full integration. The prime minister's ability to command the PMF remains a source of disagreement and debate. However, Al-Alusi (personal communication, February 28, 2017) assured that the official chain of command of PMF is working perfectly. In practice, the PMF is run by the "Shura Council of the Islamic Resistance," headed by "Abu Mahdi Mohandes, and Hadi al-Amiri," and include in membership nine commanders of

the main Shia militias. Nevertheless, each PMF group has its own commander who reports directly to the top command of the formation, that is, Hadi al-Amiri, Qais al-Khazali and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (Future Center, 2016; Rawabet Center, 2016)¹⁴.

The primary problem with the PMF is one of disorganization. Even if its senior officials issue orders forbidding abuses, they find them hard to enforce among all militias that fall under their nominal command. According to Anderson, "the problem with [the PMF] is that it is not one organization, with one leadership". He added that there are "certain organizations that are very powerful, including the Badr Organization, but they are unable to control where other groups go or what they are doing" (Anderson, 2016). In an interview via e-mail with the author, on January 22, 2017, Hasan Al Shehhi (the United Arab Emirate (UAE) ambassador to Iraq) stated that each PMF faction has its organizational structure, leadership, area of influence, and terms of reference.

The Iraqi budget provides salaries for the PMF, with funding allotted in proportion to the provincial population. In the government budget adopted in December, 2015, 30% of the PMF would be raised from the provinces where the IS fight is occurring (Robinson, 2016).

PMF Shia volunteers and militias are motivated, organized, and well equipped. They are well trained and heavily armed, equipped with armored vehicles, IEDs, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), improvised rocket-assisted mortars, rockets, M1A1 Abrams tanks, armored HMMWVs, and M113 armored personnel vehicles. In addition, most Shia militias receive significant funds and arms from Iran, as will be illustrated later. On the contrary, Sunni volunteers incorporated into the PMF are ill-funded, ill-trained and poorly equipped (Robinson, 2016; Sattar, 2016).

The PMF's role in the fight against the Islamic State/Daesh

As earlier explained, the *raison d'être* of the PMF was to prevent IS sweeping into Baghdad and to fight against the terrorist organization elsewhere. In the beginning, the PMF managed to push IS back from the Iranian border, halted the IS advance on Baghdad in 2014 and cleared a cordon around the city (The Economist, 2016; Salem and Slim, 2016). The PMF played an important role in the counter-IS campaign. The coordinated assault between the PMF, ISF and the Kurdish Peshmerga scored significant successes in various parts of Diyala, Babil, and Salah al-Din provinces, including the recapture of Tikrit (the provincial capital) in March, 2015. The PMF, along with the ISF, launched a successful counter-assault on Ramadi that began in October, 2014 and came to a close in mid-May, 2015 (The Economist, 2016; Salem and Slim, 2016).

In separate interviews with the author on January, 18 and March 1, 2017, respectively, Barbara Leaf, the US

Ambassador to the UAE, and Pavel Rassadin, the Russian deputy chief of mission in Abu Dhabi, agreed that the PMF played an effective role in fighting Daesh, especially in Fallujah, Ramadi, and Baiji. For Beydoun and Zahawi, the PMF has contributed significantly in the liberation of Iraq and as such, remain a critical part of the peace and stability in the country (Beydoun and Zahawi 2016). The PMF forces have made a fundamental difference in the battle against IS. The ISF could not have fought these battles alone¹⁵.

The PMF forces are hailed as heroes in Iraq because they have reaped significant political benefit as saviors of the country in a time of national emergency. Not only have the PMF become popular; they have also become increasingly powerful. With the militia's successful operations against IS in many places in the capital city, and central Iraq, it has become abundantly clear that they are a force to be reckoned with (Robinson, 2016; Anderson, 2016). In spite of many Iraqi and international objections, the PMF took part in the battle for Mosul, the largest city under IS control, which began in mid-October, 2016, and the battle of Tal Afar, its last remaining stronghold in Iraq. However, the role of the Shia militias, dominant within the PMF, is problematic, as they have a record of committing abuses and implication in sectarian reprisal attacks against Sunnis. Many international human rights organizations, most notably Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have accused the Popular Mobilization Forces militia of committing war crimes and ethnic cleansing in Sunni areas of Iraq (Amnesty International, 2017).

In addition, the mere presence of these militias is viewed as an Iranian incursion into Iraq because of the existence of strong ties between both parties. The PMF militias are trying to use their military leverage over the Iraqi government, much like Hezbollah has been doing in Lebanon. The militias openly portray the Prime Minister of Iraq as a weak, ineffective puppet of the US (Kalian, 2016). Furthermore, there is a possibility that the PMF will be transferred into a formal, organized political structure, as its leaders have hinted. Two models are available for the PMF to follow; Hezbollah in Lebanon and the IRGC in Iran. Al-Rashed argues that the PMF project is similar to Hezbollah, which has practically controlled Lebanon without having to destroy the existing political institutions (Al-Rashed, 2017). Hadi Hashem, Lebanese deputy chief of mission in Abu Dhabi, in an interview with the author on January 25, 2017, denies the PMF as having political aspirations in Iraq. On the other hand, the Iranian IRGC (the PMF's mentor) has reinterpreted its *raison d'être* of guarding the revolution and has transformed over the course of decades into dominant military institutions with political, economic, and cultural influence.

PMF's threats to GCC states

The GCC states have taken a common stand regarding

the rise of IS/Daesh. They, particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar and Bahrain, have been active partners in the US-led coalition against IS/Daesh since its launch in September, 2014. In 2016, the UAE offered to strike Daesh's targets in Iraq¹⁶. Nevertheless, the incorporation of the predominantly-Shia PMF into the course of fighting IS/Daesh makes GCC states take a firm stance regarding the future impacts of this development. First of all, GCC states still hold the view of the need for legitimate state monopoly over violence, owing to the view that these mobilized units may later not be integrated into the security units (Beydoun & Zahawi, 2016). More importantly, the structure, discourse, behavior and external links of the PMF make GCC states suspicious of al-Hashd phenomenon. In fact, GCC decision makers are restructuring their policies toward the developments of Iraqi crisis because of the rise of the PMF. From a GCC strategic perspective, the militias pose threats to GCC security, collectively and individually. The GCC states consider the PMF as a destabilizing force in Iraq and the region (Roggio and Toumaj, 2016; Ardemagni, 2016; Ataman, 2016; Robinson, 2016).

Hence, the question arises, "What are the kinds of threats that the PMF poses to GCC security?" Or, "How does al-Hashd phenomenon pose threats to GCC states?"

PMF's external links

Most PMF factions are related officially and ideologically with Iran, and their leaders are aligned to Iranian interests in the region. Both share an ideological vision reinforced by long-term strategic interests such as protection of the Shia faith, Shia holy sites and Shia Muslims and resistance to the influence of the US and of Sunni states in the region. Another objective is the export of the Islamic Revolution to other countries. Key PMF leaders, who are beholden to Iran, are open about their ideology with its promotion of Iran's brand of Islamic identity. In fact, non-Iranian Shia groups across the Middle East began to declare their loyalty not to their national political leaderships, but to the Iranian religious authorities. Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei describes the PMF as "a great wealth, a major resource for today and the future of Iraq," which "should be supported and consolidated". Iranian support for PMF militias takes many forms, including the production and distribution of propaganda, training and advising, financial support, armaments, and diplomatic support. This active support is primarily handled by the IRGC Ardemagni, (2016)¹⁷.

More importantly, Tehran has been cultivating for a long time strong relations with Shia leaders, who are now in charge of PMF factions. For example, Hadi Al-Amiri fought alongside Iran during the Iran-Iraq War and is a close friend of Qassem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds Force, an elite branch of the IRGC responsible for asymmetric warfare beyond Iran's borders. He has been accused of overseeing flights of Iranian weapons

shipments headed to Syria. Qais Al-Khazali is notorious for supposedly backing Iran during the Iraq-Iran War. Mahdi Al-Muhandis, a former advisor to Iran's Quds Force, openly received training and funding from the Quds Force and Lebanese Hezbollah, and worked with the IRGC during the Iraq-Iran War (Kalian, 2016; Anderson, 2016).

The rationale behind Iran's support to PMF was to create an Iraqi version of the IRGC; a parallel military force with the Iraqi army that would help in projecting Iranian influence in Iraq and beyond¹⁸. In fact, leading Shia groups imagine the PMF as a permanent revolutionary guard, similar to the IRGC, protecting Shia dominance in the state against future threats¹⁹.

Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah military trainers are heavily engaged in training elements of PMF militias. Hezbollah has provided explosives experts to help train and advise local Shia militiamen. Iranian combat advisors often appear on the battlefield aiding the PMF. The PMF fighting against IS is being coordinated mainly by Iran, notably by Soleimani, who took a leading role in the battle for Tikrit in March, 2015. Iran has even launched airstrikes supporting the PMF militias fighting in northern Iraq (Knights, 2016; The Economist, 2015a).

Tehran appointed Eraj Masjedi, senior advisor to Soleimani, as its new ambassador to Iraq. Masjedi was heading the elite forces that fought in Iraq, and he was coordinator between IRGC and Iraqi opposition after the Iraq-Iran war. He once argued that the establishment of PMF is an extension of Iran's plan to export the revolution, which keeps war against Sunni extremists from reaching the country's borders. Masjedi serves as the communication link between the IRGC and the PMF²⁰.

The rise of the PMF unnervingly mimics multiple aspects of Hezbollah's rise in Lebanon. There are parallels between how Hezbollah and factions of the PMF use politics, foreign influence, and propaganda to increase their power. There are also strong parallels between how the Iraqi PMF imitates Hezbollah by sidelining any non-Iranian-backed Shiite groups or figures, as Hezbollah has done with the Amal movement. In effect, with the help of the former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, the PMF's greatest ally in government, the PMF accomplished in two years what Hezbollah took twenty years to achieve²¹. According to al-Rashed (2017), the concept of the PMF is similar to what Khomeini's followers did after the Iranian revolution of 1979 as they established the IRGC to position themselves in power and eliminate other Iranian groups, which were also part of the revolution (Al-Rashed, 2017).

There are many similarities between the PMF and Hezbollah. First, both of them are financed and supported by Iran. Second, they are levers for Iran to implement its regional agenda. They are also tools for Iran proxy war against neighboring countries²². Third, both organizations emerged when state authorities were weak and not considered able to handle security/military affairs in the countries. In addition, both the PMF and Hezbollah are loyal to Iran and its supreme leader. Furthermore, they have common ideological grounds and are very adept at

using nationalist pride and collective national sentiment in order to bolster their cause. For example, KH has a near exact copy of Hezbollah's logo on its flag. The Badr organization's insignia is similar to the flag of Hezbollah. In fact, members of the Badr organization discuss their sister Shia group with a mixture of envy and pride (Kalian, 2016). However, there are two main differences between the PMF and Hezbollah. First, the former is funded by the Iraqi government, while the latter depends on its own resources and donations from the Shia population. Second, the PMF is now part of the Iraqi military after the new law, while Hezbollah is not part of the Lebanese army. In addition, according to Hadi Hashem (personal communication), Hezbollah was created as a resistance organization, while the PMF was established to fight against Daesh and to help prevent the collapse of the Iraqi state into the hands of the terrorist organization.

The problem is that the PMF has similar political aspirations to Hezbollah and the IRGC (its mentors) to ascend to power in Iraq and to project its control across the country, as will be illustrated in the following:

Expanding Iran's influence across the region: Some Shia militias affiliated to PMF are active in politics, with end-goals not necessarily in line with those of the Iraqi government. Also crucial will be the possible emergence of political wings of armed groups that have not participated in politics thus far, such as al-Nujaba and Kataib al-Imam Ali²³. The PMF leaders may transform the militia into an organized political structure, following the model of Hezbollah in Lebanon or the IRGC in Iran.

Al-Rashed argues that the PMF project is compared with Hezbollah, which has practically controlled Lebanon without having to overturn political institutions as it has weakened the presidency, the cabinet and the parliament and made them incapable of governance (Al-Rashed, 2017). According to Toumaj, a research analyst at foundation for defense of democracies, the PMF has similar aspirations to its mentors (the IRGC and Hezbollah) to ascend to power in Iraq and to be transformed over time into dominant military institution(s) with political, economic, and cultural influence (Toumaj, 2016). For others, the Shia militias "want Iraq to become the Islamic Republic of Iraq, with leadership not from some senior clerics in Najaf but from Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran" (Kalian, 2016). In this view, the PMF is a proxy of Iran. And the PMF is used to impact Iran's political and military influence in Iraq. Iran would also use the Shi'a militia to control the region, and progress its agenda to have wider geographical influence.

Since the invasion of Iraq, Iran has utilized pan-Shiaism as an instrument of its regional expansionist policy. And with the advent of the Arab uprisings in 2011 onwards, Tehran has focused on all Shia-related groups and mobilized them for its foreign policy objectives (Ataman, 2016), including what is called "the Shia Crescent/Arc"²⁴. The Shia Crescent is a symbol for Iranian expansion and stretches from Lebanon on the Mediterranean Sea, across

Syria in the Middle East heartland, to Iraq and Bahrain on the Gulf, and to Yemen on the Red Sea. It is gathering in strength, cementing linkages that transcend political and linguistic borders and could lead to a new map of the Middle East. With its PMF proxies, Iran has developed a game plan to build an over land corridor from Iraq to Lebanon.

From the GCC perspective, the PMF is used by the Iranians as a tool to project its influence on other countries in the region. In fact, Iran's regional expansionist policy has been one of the most important factors influencing foreign policies in the Middle East and poses the most pressing national security threat confronting the GCC states. In this regard, Al Shehhi (personal communication) believes that the political and military role of the PMF is linked with the grand Iranian imperial project in the region.

A number of indicators were presented to support that perspective. In January, 2017, the PMF conducted a military exercise on the Iraqi-Saudi border. In an in-depth interview with Al Zaabi, he mentioned that this military exercise was a message from Iran to Saudi Arabia and other GCC states that Iran is sharing borders with through other countries. He also added that Hadi Alameri of the Bader organization has announced that Saudi Arabia is a legitimate target for the PMF. The militia, Sayyid al Shuhada, is led by a specially designated global terrorist who is directly tied to Iran's Qods Force and has announced that Saudi Arabia is a legitimate target for the PMF (Roggio, 2015). However, Al-Alusi (personal communication) assured the author that the mission was only to secure Iraq's borders and not to threaten its neighbors.

Recently, Harakat al Nujaba, a Shia militia affiliated to the PMF, has made threats to Kuwait and is seen as a destabilizing force along the Kuwaiti-Iraqi border. The militia challenges implementing the navigation agreement signed in 2012 between Iraq and Kuwait regarding Khour (inlet) Abdullah, claiming that it was a serious violation of Iraqi sovereignty (Al Khaldi, 2017). It seems that the next stage for the PMF is the Arabian Gulf, particularly the eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain. Furthermore, the PMF militias have condemned the war in Yemen and announced their willingness to aid the Houthis (Wehrey, 2016).

Clearly, one could argue that Iran helped nurture the PMF in Iraq as part of its efforts to extend its influence in the country and the region. Thanks to non-Persian militias and regional chaos, Iran is extending its political and military reach to what it considers its rightful sphere of influence: Mesopotamia and the areas of the Eastern Mediterranean and Arabian Peninsula with sizeable Shiite communities. In other words, Iran is committed to achieving control in the region, and that is what makes GCC states feel increasingly threatened (Osman, 2017; Goldman and Rapp-Hooper, 2013).

Sectarianism, protracted social conflict and instability in the region: Shiaism, Shia resistance theology, and

tashayyu²⁵ are essential components of the belief system of the PMF. To create a uniform belief system, the PMF units emphasize on Shiaism. To justify their actions, there is stress on Shia resistance theology, specifically the martyrdom of Hussein²⁶ and the protection of Shia shrines. Furthermore, Shia PMF militias are engaging in politically motivated *tashayyu* in Iraq and Syria and may extend their activities to the GCC states (Kalian, 2016; Knights, 2016; Ataman, 2016). According to Al Mazrouei (personal communication), the PMF's current strategy is based on fanning dangerous sectarian grievances. For example, al-Khazali, commander of AAH, once stated that the "Mosul battle is revenge against the descendants of the killers of Hussein" (Kalian, 2016). The PMF's sectarian orientation is more important because it embodies a form of militant sectarianism.

Many international human rights organizations, most notably Amnesty International, have accused the Shiite Popular Mobilization Forces of committing war crimes and deliberate ethnic cleansing in Sunni areas of Iraq. In fact, there have been several attacks on Sunni residents and refugees, who were not allowed to return to their homes in villages that were now under the control of the PMF (Amnesty International, 2017). Sometimes, the PMF would target entire Sunni villages with artillery fire. In a personal interview with the Iraqi ambassador in Abu Dhabi, Al-Alusi did not deny the abuses of the Shia militia, but he justified them as revenge for previous IS deadly attacks against the ISF. Ironically, Rassadin, Russian Deputy Chief of Mission in Abu Dhabi, did not see any abuses coming from the PMF (personal communication). Lebanese Deputy Chief of Mission in Abu Dhabi, Hadi Hashem, claimed that Lebanon's government is not sure of alleged abuses committed by the PMF against civilian Sunni in Iraq (personal communication).

The abuses and destruction wrought by PMF on the ground, particularly in Anbar and Fallujah, feed into sectarianism and Sunni anger. Rising sectarianism offers a fertile breeding ground for Sunni extremism and provides more ideological space for radical networks such as AlQaeda and *Daesh*, and lethal anti-Shiaism, feeding into a vicious cycle of sectarian violence. Like a poison, sectarianism has exacerbated confessional and ethnic rifts for the purposes of power politics (El-Dessouki, 2015). In other words, the PMF's actions antagonize Sunni Muslims, stir their fears of the region and inflame sectarianism not only in Iraq but also in the whole region. For some analysts, sectarian hatred, because of the practice of Shia militia, among other factors, has now reached a perilous new pitch in Iraq and the Arabian Gulf area. The region is actually experiencing an alarming surge in sectarianism (Osman, 2017; Wehrey, 2016). These conditions will create devastating future problems between Sunnis and Shias in Iraq and the region, not least shaping the genesis of protracted social conflict, as described by Edward Azar (Azar, 1990). Since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Shias possess political power and use it to maintain dominance over other identity groups in the society, particularly the

Sunnis. In addition, the Shias are unresponsive to the needs of these groups. Political elites, especially in the PMF, use sectarian language to legitimize authoritarian rule, consolidate power, and rally against internal and external foes. Crucially, there is a client relationship between the dominant Shia group and the Shia-dominated government on the one hand and Iran on the other hand. Iran has used the sectarian divide to further its ambitions in Iraq and the region.

According to the Economist, Shia militias are exacerbating violence across the region. Although a number of Shia militia affiliated to the PMF, such as Saraya Al-salam, the Badr organization, KH, AAH and the Al-Abbas Combat Division, has deployed forces in Syria, top commanders of the PMF have openly discussed their future plans to push further into the country (The Economist, 2015a). While Barbara Leaf (personal communication) stated that the US will not tolerate the fact of PMF encroaching into Syria, Rassadin affirmed that Russia would not mind if Al-Assad's government approved the PMF's participation in the Syrian conflict (personal communication). For his part, Al-Alusi (personal communication) ruled out the possibility of the PMF's engagement in the Syrian conflict.

The PMF and Shia militias in general give support to Shia minorities in the GCC states which is considered a direct interference in their domestic affairs (Al Zaabi, personal communication). Shia militias are embroiled in inciting sectarian unrest in Shia-majority Bahrain, as well as in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait believe that Iraqi Shia militias support subversive activities among their Shia minorities. GCC states fear Shia militias' capacity to use religious symbols to undermine their regimes' legitimacy and facilitate collective political action, especially among Saudi Arabia's already disaffected Shia minority (Alaaldin, 2016).

To conclude this section, Roggio drew an analogy between Hezbollah and the PMF in terms of being a regional security threat. He reflected that the Middle East has been witnessing the growth of Hezbollah over the last 40 years supported by Iran, until it became a threat to neighboring states and a destabilizing element in the Middle East outside Lebanese government control. Roggio then argues that the GCC states are facing the same dilemma with the PMF (Roggio, 2015). The potential threat, as Kalian puts it, is heightened by the cross-pollination of the PMF, the Quds Force, and Lebanese Hezbollah as it is seen more clearly in the Syrian theater of operations (Kalian, 2016).

Asymmetric threats: There is growing evidence that asymmetrical conflicts have become a strategy of choice among radical groups, and have evolved into a major national and international security threat. Asymmetrical conflict refers to armed conflict to achieve political objectives, and involves a wide disparity (in conventional power and formal status) between the parties. In other words, the extreme imbalance of military, economic and

technological power between the parties is supplemented and aggravated by status inequality. Unlike most conventional conflicts, asymmetrical ones are usually initiated by the weaker side. The most basic form of such conflict is a confrontation between a non-state actor and a state, or states (Stepanova, 2008; Long, 2008).

The argument here is that the rise of the PMF would increase asymmetrical threats to the GCC's security. GCC states have concerns that the incorporation of the PMF into the Iraqi army would only be a prelude to establishing this militia as a force resembling the IRGC, which employs unconventional, and asymmetric (naval swarms, terrorists, human-wave ...) tactics against these countries. In fact, the PMF places religious belief at the core of the Iranian concept of asymmetric conflict. This concept rests on three components: political and religious prudence and faith in the *velayat-e faqih* (clerical rule); motivation and resilience in the face of adversity; and the culture of jihad and martyrdom (Haghshenass, 2008). Some analysts have even gone so far as to suggest the equivalence between the IS and the PMF. The latter, just like the former, has sectarian orientation, deploys asymmetrical conflict tools and has unquestionably committed excesses war crimes, even including the kidnapping and murder of many Sunni people and the wholesale destruction of Sunni villages. In other words, Iraqi Shia militias present a regional terrorist threat in a way that is similar to IS and their ilk. This pattern of conflict seems likely to prevail for the foreseeable future. The militias' political and operational horizons are far more focused on Iraq and its immediate surroundings. For all their anti-Sunni, particularly anti-GCC saber rattling, their ideology and strategy would lead the likes of the Badr Organization or AAH to target cities and communities in GCC states with terrorist attacks (Haddad, 2015). Such attacks, if they happen, would create massive social, political and economic costs and inflict enormous casualties.

The opposite scenario is the increasing level of Sunni revenge acts. According to Amnesty International (Amnesty International, 2017), the PMF has been carrying out mass killings, torture and kidnappings against the Sunni population with the support of Iranian generals, thereby fueling a cycle of revenge killings and ethnic hatred in Iraq and the region. Such a scenario raises the nightmare prospect of prolonged bloody violence between Sunni and Shia populations operating outside the control of politicians and their security services. All in all, these conditions further heighten the risk of a fresh explosion of unrest calling for revenge among Sunni population in Iraq and the region. This will lead to increase in the level of violence and terrorism across the region.

Conclusion

This paper examined the roles of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) or *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*, as a sub-state actor, in Iraqi and regional politics. The main findings of the

paper can be summarized as follows: (1) The PMF has been playing an important role in the counter-Islamic State (IS)/*Daesh* fight. However, the PMF's actions in Iraq and Syria inflame sectarianism in Iraq and across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region. Protracted social conflict between Sunni and Shia is on the making in the Middle East because of the PMF and Iran actions. (2) Most PMF units are related with Iran, in terms of ideology, chain of command and support. In fact, Iran wants to create an Iraqi version of IRGC, which is on the making. (3) The PMF is linked to Hezbollah of Lebanon, in terms of training and advising. (4) With other sub-state actors, the PMF is a tool of expanding Iran's influence across the Middle East. (5) The PMF increases asymmetrical threats, including terrorist acts, sectarianism and radicalism, to GCC states.

In fact, recent political developments in Iraq prove the validity of the thesis presented in this paper, that is, the PMF became the dominant political force in Iraq. How have the GCC states responded to the PMF threats? And how should they respond to these threats? GCC states consider the PMF unlawful. They have often demanded not to allow the PMF to participate in military operations against the IS/*Daesh* (Al Mazrouei, personal communication). They are operating the policy that only the Iraqi Government must have monopoly over military force in Iraq and all paramilitary militia, including the PMF, should be disarming and demobilizing.

Iraq is pivotal to the GCC states in that the success of either of the factions engaging in the IS war would mean this group taking charge in Middle East region and the vast resources in that area. In order to counter the many troubling trends in Iraq, the GCC states need to engage Iraq. In an interview with the author, Al-Alusi stated that the GCC states abandoned Iraq after the US invasion in 2003, which served as a platform helping Iran to heighten its influence in Babylon. The first element in an engagement strategy is support for the Iraqi government of Haider al-Abadi and the Iraqi Armed Forces as they campaign to defeat IS. That would effectively counter-balance Iran's influence in Iraq. In this regard, the visit of the Saudi Foreign Minister to Baghdad in February, 2017, the first such trip since 1990, presages a new approach which needs to be sustained.

Every major Iraqi political actor, especially in Sunni areas, seeks external support, and many currently look to the GCC states. These states, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, must work on engaging with the Sunni tribes of Iraq, if they hope to influence the course of Iraqi political and security development. GCC states should support post-war reconstruction efforts in the liberated Sunni regions of Iraq.

Although Shia Arabs make up the largest demographic in Iraq, their political factions do not uniformly support Iran's influence according to Hadi Hashem in an interview with the researcher. Hence, it is important for GCC states not to ignore all Shia factions and try to engage the ones who do not favor Iranian influence in their homeland such as the Sadrist Movement. Equally important, the GCC

states should focus on cultivating good relations with Shia clerics in the Najaf Seminary, some of whom show independent stance from Iran. More importantly, the GCC states should successfully engage their Shia population as full citizens, respect their role in building these countries, and accept their leaders as actors in Saudi society and politics.

In the medium and long run, the GCC states would have to have strategic hedging toward Iraq (and Iran). Strategic hedging is a smart way for the GCC to achieve their objectives toward Iraq. Strategic hedging is a new theory in international relations. This theory attempts to explain the behavior of small states that seek to develop their military and economic capabilities, while at the same time avoiding direct confrontation with threat-source states. Strategic hedging is generally used by smaller states as a strategic option to maximize gains and avoid dependency on great powers at the regional or/and international levels. It compensates for smallness and lack of 'hard' means of pursuing policies. As previous studies demonstrate, strategic hedging is a mixed strategy of cooperation and conflict, relying on both soft and hard power tools. In practice, this means a small state deliberately cooperates with its rival to escape threats while at the same time embracing elements of hard balancing against it (Salman, and Geeraerts, 2015; Sherwood, 2006).

The impact of strategic hedging behavior on foreign policies of hedging states is promising. Hedging allows a smaller power to offset and reduce the scale of threats to it in relation to regional powers without confronting any of them. In addition, hedging is less costly and includes low risk compared to the confrontation strategy, and creates a kind of "a geopolitical insurance strategy". In fact, anarchic, uncertain environments like the Gulf are particularly ideal for hedging strategies²⁷.

Other measures that could be taken or significantly expanded in order to counter the Iran-affiliated PMF threats include using intelligence and influence to build relations with Ahwazi Arabs in Southern Iran in order to send a clear message to Iran on the importance of non-interference. The GCC governments may also cultivate good relations with the growing Iranian communities in their countries and/or the Iranian opposition groups abroad as a tool of pressuring the Iranian government to stop meddling in the affairs of the GCC states. More important, the GCC states should take advantage of the divisions along political loyalty among Shia militias affiliated to the PMF.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors has not declared any conflict of interests.

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¹ This paper uses the term "Shia" as a noun and adjective because it is the simplest and the closest to the Arabic origin of the word.

² Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states include six Middle Eastern countries—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman.

³ The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) include the traditional security forces such as the Iraqi Army, the Iraqi Air Force, the Iraqi Navy, the Counter-Terrorism Service, the Federal Police, the Iraqi Police Service, the Department of Border Enforcement and Coast Guard, the various Facilities Protection Service and Oilfield Police units, plus bodyguard forces for leadership sites. Also now part of the ISF is the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), as it will be illustrated later.

⁴ Saif Al Zaabi is the UAE Ambassador to Iran

⁵ Saif Al Zaabi, personal communication.

⁶ Robinson, Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign, 24; the Economist 2016

⁷ Robinson, Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign, 1, 24, 31

⁸ Tollast, Inside Iraq's.

⁹ Rawabet Center, Popular Crowd Forces.

¹⁰ Future Center Legalizing Sectarianism: Consequences of Incorporating the Popular Mobilization Forces into Iraq's Army. Policy Brief. No. 56, Aug 2016; B. Roggio, & Amir Toumaj (2016, December 17). Iraq's PMF is IRGC's "next step," senior Qods Force Commander says. FEDD'S Long War Journal. Retrieved from <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/10/popular-mobilization-committee-militia-threatens-to-strike-and-destroy-the-saudi-government.php>.

¹¹ Fares Al Mazrouei is the UAE Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation for Security and Military Affairs.

¹² Hasan Al Shehhi is the UAE Ambassador to Iraq.

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- ¹³ Tollast, Inside Iraq's.
- ¹⁴ Future Center, Legalizing Sectarianism; Rawabet Center, Popular Crowd Forces.
- ¹⁵ Al-Alusi, personal Communication.
- ¹⁶ However, the UAE's offer was rejected. The author learned that from Fares Al Mazrouei, UAE Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation for Security and Military Affairs, in an interview conducted on January 29, 2017.
- ¹⁷Roggio, & Toumaj, Iraq's PMF is IRGC's; Ataman, the impact of Iranian over-expansionism; Robinson, Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign, 39.
- ¹⁸ Al Mazrouei, personal Communication.
- ¹⁹ Knights, The Future of Iraq, 56.
- ²⁰ Al Zaabi, personal communication; Roggio, & Toumaj, Iraq's PMF.
- ²¹ Al Mazrouei, personal Communication; Kalian, Iran's Hezbollah.
- ²² Leaf, personal Communication.
- ²³ Roggio, & Toumaj, Iraq's PMF is IRGC's.
- ²⁴ The term was first used by King Abdullah II of Jordan in 2004 to warn against the expansion of Iranian influence in the Middle East after the toppling of Saddam Hussein in Iraq (The Economist 2015a).
- ²⁵ *tashayyu* means to convert someone to Shiaism.
- ²⁶ Imam Hussein, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, who was killed at Karbala in Iraq 1,323 years ago, and was thus denied the leadership of Muslims that Shias believe was his right. The Economist (2003, March 20). The Martyrdom of Hussein. Retrieved from <http://www.economist.com/node/1649403>.
- ²⁷ Salman & Geeraerts, Strategic Hedging, 104-105; Sherwood, Small States.