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Iraq: Shia militias' troubling role and the Russian variable

Pro-Iranian Shia militias have become key actors of Iraqi politics. While this phenomenon has helped regular security forces to contain “Islamic State” in central regions of Iraq so far, it fosters two entrenched dynamics: the further privatization of violence, coupled with the “sectarianization” of security forces. These joined variables could generate a next wave of clashes in the country.

Iraqi Shia militias, rallied under the umbrella of the Hashid al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces - PMF), find their religious legitimacy in Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's fatwa on self-defense against the “caliphate”. They are directly equipped and trained by the al-Quds, the branch of the Iranian special forces devoted to foreign operations. On the ground, PMF are often guided by Iranian Revolutionary Guards commanders (Tikrit's battle), so circumventing Iraqi prime minister's rule.

The de facto institutionalization of informal security actors alongside the weakened army, or in replacement of it, undermines the legitimacy of regular security forces, so encouraging militias' proliferation along tribal and sectarian lines. This trend does not correspond to the Iraqi federal architecture envisaged by the Constitution, nor it contributes to really “federalise” security, since the capital should be lastly accountable

for defence matters in a federal system too. Moreover, the Shia belonging and the Iranian support to PMF confine their deployment in predominantly Sunni areas, where Shia militias, lacking in military professionalism, have been already involved in arbitrary detentions and extrajudicial killings, further provoking tribal retaliations.

In this Shia-monopolized security landscape, the Arab Sunni community feels more and more alienated by political-military decisions and patronage networks. This is the same reality which empowered “IS” (formerly was al-Qaeda in Iraq), allowing jihadism to root upon the Iraqi centre-periphery struggle for resources and autonomy.

The creation of the Iraqi National Guard (ING), aimed at enrolling Sunni militias on a regional basis, under a unified banner, still lies in the Parliament, blocked by multiple obstacles. The ruling Shia-led establishment does not want the Sunni ING could counterbalance PMF; on the other hand, Sunnis are reluctant to enrol, fearing revenges coming from Shiite and in particular from “IS”.

The ING project, supported by the United States, would replicate the exit of the Sahwa-Sons of Iraq experience in 2006-7, now involving Saudi, Emirati and Jordanian soldiers in training activities. However, times have changed: the initiative risks, if mismanaged, to enhance proxy confrontation (Iranian-supported PMF versus GCC-sustained ING).

Russia’s airstrikes in Syria (which really targeted “IS” after Paris’ terrorist attacks) add geopolitical complexity to the local puzzle: the Iraqi government announced a structure for intelligence sharing with Iran, the Syrian regime and Russia.

Russian growing support for the Shia front will likely strengthen the already powerful Shia militias. Differently, the United States are boosting arms transfer to Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish peshmerga, the only reliable fighters against “IS” in Sinjar and Kobane, promoting at the same time the ING Sunni-oriented project. These two paths do not go in the same direction, thus mirroring divergent interests and probable frictions among the USA, Russia, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

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