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Dealing With Foreign-Backed Militias: The Local Agency Issue in Yemen and Iraq

On July 8, 2019, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) announced the partial withdrawal of its military forces from Yemen, with the purpose to shift from a “military-first” strategy to a “peace-first” one [*The Arab Weekly*, “UAE redeploying troops in Yemen”, July 9, 2019]. In Iraq, Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi issued a decree (1st of July) ordering the integration of the Hashd al-Shaabi/Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) within the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) [Mohammed Rwanduzy, “Hashd integration decree will reorganize Iraq’s security: PM”, *Rudaw*, July 3, 2019].

Since the most part of the Yemeni militias deployed in Southern regions of Yemen, as well as the majority of the Hashds in Iraq, are backed, respectively, by the UAE and Iran, these announces may open the path for a gradually diminishing reliance on foreign sponsors by such militias, restoring and/or enhancing their local agency dimension. But the reality is always more nuanced and complex than expected scenarios.

In Yemen, UAE’s militaries partial withdrawal means, first of all, redeployment on the territory, not the end of the Emirati geostrategic engagement in the country. In fact, Abu Dhabi withdrew from the Western coast (Hodeida, the focus of the UN-mediated Stockholm agreement, December 2018) and Aden, the provisional capital of the internationally-recognized government. But it remains present and can deploy now reinforcements in Eastern critical areas such as Shabwa and Hadhramawt (advancing in oil-fields zones to contain Muslim Brotherhood-tied forces); and in the off-war radar borderlands as Mahra (geopolitically contested between Saudis, Emiratis and Omanis) and the island of Socotra (object of an Emirati-Saudi indirect dispute). Moreover, about 90.000 Yemeni pro-secession soldiers have been trained, equipped and salaried in the South of Yemen by the Emiratis so far.

In Iraq, the recent integration decree orders by the 13th of July the shutdown of PMF’s led check-points and economic activities but does not ask for the dissolve the Hashds themselves. On the contrary, it depicts a top-down path towards their full incorporation in the ISF, thus formally creating a legislative

niche for this varied military galaxy, mostly Iranian-supported, within the Iraqi state. This represents a step beyond the 2016 institutionalization decree (which nominally put the PMF under the Prime Minister office), thus making possible a Hashds' capture of the Iraqi military system.

Therefore, the dialectic among external interference, transnational patronage and local agency represents one of the most decisive, medium-long term challenges in collapsed or contested states like Yemen and Iraq. The outcome of this uneasy balance will determine Sanaa's and Baghdad's level either of clever restraint or unlimited implication within regional unstable dynamics.

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