

Video: Repealing and Defeating the Islamic State, The Role of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units

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In June 2014, the so-called Islamic State (IS) occupied about one-third of Iraq's territory, including Iraq's second largest city, Mosul. It meant the radical islamists were close to capturing Baghdad and imposing its authority over all of Iraq. At that point the Iraqi government recognized the real danger of the situation and started forming militia units to liberate the country from IS. The Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) played a decisive role in that process.

The PMU (Al-HashdAl-Sha'abi) are pro-government forces operating under the formal leadership of the Iraqi military and consisting of about 70 factions. They were formed at the directive of Iraqi religious authorities after IS seized large swaths of territory in several provinces north of Baghdad in 2014.

Establishment history

One of the internal political factors which led to the PMU's appearance in Iraq was the failure of state capacity in the realm of national security, against the backdrop of the rise of IS influence. The fall of Mosul due to massive corruption and Iraqi army's inability to carry out its key functions meant then-PM Maliki lost faith in the armed forces. According to former Minister of Interior Mohammed Al-Ghabban,

"The PMU is a unique, successful and necessary experience that was produced by the period."

Having armed loyal Shia militias, in contrast to the doubtfully reliable multi-ethnic Iraq units, turned out to be a far more effective means of restoring order.

On June 15, 2014, the leader of Iraqi Shia Ayatollah Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani issued a fatwa calling for struggle against IS and establishing the PMU. One should note here that Sistani did not limit his fatwa to Iraqi Shia. He insisted on characterizing the national mobilization forces as a national institution with the participation of all ethnic, religious, and social groups.

Composition

The core of the PMU are such armed Iraqi Shia formation as the Badr Organization, Asaib ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Kata'ib

al-Imam Ali, and Kata'ib Jund al-Imam. These units collaborate with certain Sunni tribes in the Salaheddin, Niniveh, and Anbar provinces that were occupied by IS. In addition, PMU includes units consisting of Christians, Turkmen, Kurds, and Yazidis.

Badr Organization. This formation was created in 2003 from the Badr Brigades, the paramilitary organization of the Shia Islamist party "Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq" (ISCI). Its leader is Hadi Al-Amiri. At present it is not only a military organization but also a political party with 22 seats in Iraqi parliament. Its military units are 10 to 15 thousand troops strong. Its units were spotted in every PMU operation against IS.

Asaib ahl al-Haq (League of Righteous People). This group was formed in 2006 and is closely tied to Lebanese Hezbollah. Its ideology supports the official line of Iran's leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Its leader is Qais al-Khazali. As of 2016, it had about 10 thousand troops. Its subunit, called Haidar al-Karar Brigades, is operating on Syria's territory.

Kata'ib Hezbollah (Battalions of the Party of God). This organization was formed in 2003 in order to resist the US invasion of Iraq. Led by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and has up to 30 thousand troops. Its fighters also support government forces in Syria.

Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (Martyrs of Sayyid Battalions). Militarized Iraqi Shia militia. Formed in 2013 to defend "Shia holy sites around the world" and preserving the country's unity. Led by Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani who used to be a member of Iraq's Supreme Islamic Council. These units also fight in Syria in support of the government, mainly in Damascus province. No information on personnel strength.

Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (Movement of the Party of God's Nobles). Formed in 2013 in response to the drawn-out war in Syria and to disputes with Asaib ahl al-Haq leadership. The two groups still maintain close ties and often cooperate on the battlefield. Led by Sheikh Akram al-Kaabi whose ideology is consistent with that of Ayatollah Khamenei. No information on strength. These units also operate in Syria.

Kata'ib al-Imam Ali (Imam Ali Battalions). Armed wing of the Iraq Islamic Movement. Formed in June 2014 in response to IS aggression. Led by Shibl al-Zayd who earlier fought in the Mahdi Army under Moqtada al-Sadr. Its distinguishing feature is a unit formed from Christians, the Spirit of God Jesus Son of Mary Battalions. No data on strength. Its units participated in liberating Palmyra, battles for Tikrit, and the siege of Mosul.

Kata'ib Jund al-Imam (The Imam's Soldiers' Battalions). Its leader 'Abu Ja'afar' Ahmed al-Asadi is the PMU press secretary. Its ideology is consistent with that of Khamenei. No data on strength. Its units participated in the liberation of Baiji (2014-15).

By various estimates, the PMU today is 60-90 thousand strong. The national mobilization reserve on Iraq's territory is up to 3 million, including women. National mobilization forces also include support units (combat engineers, medical, logistics, media). Most PMU fighters have significant combat experience amassed during the US invasion of Iraq.



Falih al-Fayyadh, Head of PMU

The PMU is headed by Falih al-Fayyadh whose deputy and military commander is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, an engineer. In military respects the PMU are subordinate to the Iraqi army and executive authority. One should also add that the PMU has several HQs in Baghdad and Najaf.

Iraqi government is supporting the PMU both militarily and financially. Its budget is about 1.16 trillion Iraqi pounds. Iraq's population is making major financial contributions to the PMU. Weapons and munitions come mainly from neighboring Iran. The government of Iran, Hezbollah, and the Syrian Arab Army have sent their best-trained officers and junior commanders to the PMU units in order to increase their combat effectiveness.

Weapons and equipment

PMU have a large number of Soviet-made APCs provided by the Iraqi army, and also many repaired and overhauled armored vehicles. Armor provided by Iran (such as BMP-1s, as well as T-55 and T-72 tanks and their clones) is also found in PMU. Moreover, PMU has been observed using US-made armor (M1 Abrams, M113 APCs, Humvees, MRAPs). PMU manufactures and makes extensive use of improvised rockets and munitions, and also perform major engineering preparation of the battlefield, including river crossings, fortifications, and airfields.

Operations

Since the moment of its creation, PMU conducted many defensive and offensive ops against IS. The first major success is the lifting of the blockade off Amirli, in Salahaddin province in June-August 2014. Turkmen units and fighters from Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq particularly distinguished themselves in this fight. From October through December 2014, PMU liberated Dhulu'iya and Jurf Al Sakhar.

In November 2014 the operation to liberate Anbar province capital Ramade was launched, which resulted in a decisive victory of popular mobilization forces and the Iraqi army. Radical islamists brutally killed over 1200 inhabitants, whose bodies were found in the city

and its outskirts. This victory had a major psychological impact and revealed the true face of the adherents of the “one true Islam.”

The operation to liberate Baiji took place between December 2014 and October 2015. The city was home to a large oil refinery and also a construction materials factory. Participants in this battle included Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata’ibHezbollah, Badr Organization subunits, and others. The road connecting Baiji to Baghdad was seized by government forces which allowed them to use the city as a jumping off point for offensive on Mosul.

The battle for the capital of Salahaddin province, Tikrit, took place in March and April 2015, with PMU support. This operation saw the participation of Asaib ahl al-Haq, Kata’ib al-Imam Ali, Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, subunits of the Badr Organization, Turkmen formations (16-th Brigade) as well as Sunni militia, the Martyrs of Salahiddeen (up to 5,000 fighters).

In early March 2016, the Operation Imam Ali al-Hadi was initiated in order to liberate Samara in Salahaddin province. All PMU units participated in support of federal police and Iraqi army. This operation had several objectives: liberating Baghdad and Salahaddin provinces, ensuring access to the tombs of two imams, surrounding Anbar province, and liberating Samarra.

On May 23, 2016, Iraqi PM Haidar al-Abbadi announced Operation Destruction of Terrorism to liberate Falluja. This operation saw the participation of Iraqi army, federal police, the Golden Division, PMU units, and local militias. PMU participation was limited to fighting IS militants on the outskirts of Falluja and the Khaldiya island. The city was liberated on June 26.

It’s possible that the most important PMU achievement is its contribution to liberating Mosul, which began on October 17, 2016. PMU did not participate directly in the assault, but played an important role in besieging the city from direction of Tal-Afar. These operations cut off IS fighters’ retreat corridors toward Syria, and blocked possible reinforcements from Syria. The Mosul city itself was taken under control by government forces, but the operation is continuing since not all the militants have been eliminated.

Separately, the PMU also launched an effort aimed at reaching the border with Syria west of Tal Afar. PMU fighters liberated a large area from ISIS, including Al-Baaj, al-Qayrawan and Hatra, and reached the border with Syria. Controlling a part of the Syrian-Iraqi border, the PMU once again confirmed its important role in the ongoing anti-ISIS effort in Syria and Iraq and set a foothold for further operations in the border area.

In August 2017, the PMU participated alongside the Iraqi Army and Federal Police in a liberation of Tal Afar.

The PMU are also playing an important humanitarian role, using their volunteers to collect contributions, distribute humanitarian aid, and provide medical assistance to civilians forced to leave their homes by the fighting. The PMU dramatically transformed the battlefield since it is they who undermined IS ascendancy. They were able to rapidly concentrate a large number of troops in a given sector and deploy units without the need to coordinate with higher HQs. One should also note the media component of PMU operations, which use IS’ own weapon against it. Media were used to organize objective coverage of operations which took public criticism into account.

Role in future political life of Iraq

The liberation of Mosul, IS military defeats in Syria, and the announced death of its leader, have placed a new question on the agenda—who will govern Iraq.

Western media are circulating information that Iraq's Sunnis have begun to form a new insurgency. Tarikat Nakshbandi, Revolutionary Brigades of 1920, and Khavija City Baathists in the Kirkuk province have declared their intent to fight against the current Iraqi government after IS is destroyed.

Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order. The armed wing of the Tarikat Nakshbandi Sufi order. By some estimates, its size and influence are second only to the IS. It has some 5 thousand fighters. It waged guerrilla warfare against US forces and Iraqi government forces. Remarkably, in June 2014 they participated in the assault on Mosul alongside IS. Its leader, Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri was the Deputy Chairman of Iraq's Revolutionary Command Council between 1979 and 2003, and right now is one of the most US-sought high-ranking Saddam Hussein-era officials.

Therefore the defeat of IS will only be to their benefit, since it will eliminate the main competitor, and moreover after IS terror any other group looks more attractive to the Sunnis.

Moreover, with the defeat of IS Al-Qaeda could also reinvent itself, though it seems unlikely. IS collapse may show islamists of the whole world that Al-Qaeda's strategy to establish a khalifate only in the final stage of the jihad, when the entire population already unconditionally shares jihadist ideology, is more productive than a khalifate established by violence. However, al-Qaeda currently does not play the role in the world of radical Islam that it played 10-15 years ago.



One also shouldn't dismiss IS. The physical suppression of IS and Shia celebrations will hardly have a positive effect on Iraqi and Syrian Sunni dispositions. One can't rule out new Sunni terrorist groups. Since the start of the Mosul battle, IS militants were able to carry out several major and bloody terror attacks in various parts of Iraq, including Kirkuk, Tikrit, Samarra, and Baghdad. With IS transitioning to guerrilla war after military defeat in Iraq and Syria, one can expect more of them. And it will be more difficult to determine who, radical Sunnis or IS survivors, is behind them.

One may draw a conclusion from the Middle East chaos that US policies have totally failed. But that would be incorrect. US will continue to exert significant influence on political processes. If one were to leave everything as it is, Iran would fill the created vacuum using

Shia militias which exist to varying extent in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq. This will threaten the positions of such countries as Israel and Jordan.

The relations between Iraqi Kurds and the government are also complex. The Iraqi Kurdistan is a self-sufficient autonomous entity with own administration, economy, police, and army. Moreover, a referendum is planned for Sept. 25, 2017 on Iraqi Kurdistan independence, which can't help but create tensions with Iraq's federal government and with minorities who live on IK territory (Turkomen, Sunni Arabs, Shia Arabs). The Arab-Kurd relations are made worse by the memory of Saddam Hussein's repressions during the Iran-Iraq war, and the Kurds' active support of the US administration during its occupation of Iraq.

As far as PMU future is concerned, there are several nuances. PMU has no single political leader as it is a militarized entity. There are current and potential frictions within PMU due to competition for power among three factions: Khamenei's, Ali al-Sistani's, and Moqtada al-Sadr's.

The Khamenei faction includes several relatively small entities formed by Iran. Its leaders are proud of that affiliation, emphasizing their religious obedience to Khamenei. These groups include, for example, Saraya Khurasani and Kata'ib Abu Fadhl al-Abbas. This faction has the aim of furthering Iranian interests in Syria, and protecting Iran's border regions. These militarized formations are either fully formed political parties, or are becoming them in anticipation of planned 2018 provincial and parliamentary elections. These groups are close to former PM Maliki, who convinced them to join the Coalition for Rule of Law during the Iraq parliamentary elections in 2014. Though initially formed as military organizations, these formations have become genuine political parties under former PM's leadership.

The second PMU faction includes several military formations which swore allegiance to the supreme leader of Iraqi Shia, Ayatollah Sistani, and whose interests are non-political. They were formed exclusively by Sistani's fatwa to protect Iraqi Shia holy sites and literate territory from IS. In 2014, there was a real threat that IS could destroy Shia holy sites in Baghdad and other provinces. This faction's main formations are Saraya al-Ataba al-Abbasiya, Saraya al-Ataba al-Hussainiya, Saraya al-Ataba al-Alawiya, and Liwa 'Ali al-Akbar. Each of those names corresponds to one of the four sacred mosques in Kadhimi, Karbala, and Najaf. According to some of leaders and members of these groups, they will be disbanded as soon as IS threat dissipates. This view is based on Sistani's fatwa being issued in response to a specific threat and having a temporary character. Their key mission is protecting Shia zones and obeying Sistani's orders. It means this faction's groups could be disbanded or integrated into Iraqi military.

Peace regiments (Sarai al-Salam) were formed by radical Shia leader Moqtada al-Sadr right after the slaughter perpetrated by radical islamists in 2014 in Camp Speicher. This amounted to rebranding the Mahdi Army which was disbanded in 2008 but retained its core of commanders and specialists. They were easily remobilized, since Sadr had more experience working with militarized formations than other leaders. By some estimates Sarai al-Salam could quickly mobilize up to 100,000 men. According to faction leaders, its power is not limited by number of volunteers but by shortage of resources, particularly money and military equipment. That's because, unlike other factions, Moqtada al-Sadr's group is largely cut off from Iranian funding. The movement, and its semi-military character, is popular in Iraq due to its activities in Iraq prior to the US invasion in 2003. Unlike other parties and military groups, Sadrists were not part of the elite that returned to Iraq after US-led invasion. The movement was embedded with ordinary Iraqi citizens, not elites. Sadr has

charted his own course, to the disappointment of Iran's leaders who poured resources into Mahdi Army in 2003-10. Today Sadr and his militarized formations have a strong pro-national position, reject Khamenei's politics, and are against the presence of any foreign troops in Iraq. This stance has introduced confusion concerning the role Sarai al-Salam in PMU. From time to time, Sadr's supporters claim they are part of PMU, yet in other instances they claim they are not. This is partly the result of not recognizing Khamenei's faction as part of PMU, and an even greater rejection of Iranian influence and of former PM Maliki in Iraq. However, this faction finds it useful to declare itself part of PMU due to its popularity among Iraqis.

Matters of contention within the PMU

Involvement in Syrian affairs. Khamenei's faction remains close to Iran and favors aiding Assad's government. Many of those groups, particularly the core of seven militarized formations, still support the legitimate government of Syria and are ready to help defend Damascus. But Sistani's and Sadr's supporters were against getting involved in aiding Assad. Sadr even criticized Hassan Nasrallah and Hezbollah for its official involvement in Syria in 2014. He claimed that Shia movements and parties ought to observe their own jurisdictions and not complicate their politics by intervening in other countries' affairs. He also criticized Iraqi Shia militiamen for their presence in Syria. Moreover, many of Sistani's unit commanders are more concerned with protecting Shia territory and holy sites in Iraq than intervening in Syria.

Integrating PMU into the existing Iraqi security institutions is another contentious matter. Khamenei's faction is wary of being integrated into the Iraqi army or police, since they are still too weak post-2014. For their part, most groups tied to Sistani and Sadr voiced readiness to integrate into state institutions or even disband some of their military formations.

Whether PMU is integrated into existing armed forces or preserved as a separate branch of forces will have consequences not only for Iraq's security but for its politics. If the acting Prime Minister Abadi is able to effectively and painlessly integrate PMU into Iraqi military, it will be a convincing argument in favor of his leadership. But the fact that Abadi kept PMU from participating in assault on Mosul and send them to a secondary sector, even though Iraqi military showed weakness and PMU could have been used effectively along the main axis of advance, shows that PMU will continue to have a decisive influence on the political balance of power in Iraq. Thus next year PMU will inevitably become a political instrument used by all parties in their efforts to attain power in Iraq.

Conclusion

The PMU may be considered one of the biggest military and civilian organizations in the Middle East. They are the most likely and desirable center of political power in Iraq. The PMU unites numerous Sunni, Shia, Christian, Yazidi, Turkoman, and Kurdish armed formations, which means that the PMU, in spite of internal disagreements, is a platform for dialogue on military and political matters, and also a guarantee against the internal or external threat of radical Islam. Currently only the PMU has major experience of conducting military operations, working with local population on humanitarian matters, and ensuring objective media coverage. Most ordinary Iraqis believe the PMU should have a political future, because it is they who broke the back of ISIS in Iraq and are ready to aid neighboring Syria.

For Iraq to be able to address own problems, it should strengthen local and federal institutions in order to combat armed terrorists and reach mutual understanding among ethno-religious communities. Only then will Iraq be able to translate its current military victories into long-term political dividends and ensure peace and stability in the region.

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