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THE CONFLICT AMONG MILITIAS AND IRAN'S CLOUT IN IRAQ

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Abstract

This study sheds light on the outbreak of divisions among the militias pledging allegiance to the Qom Marjaya at a time when the popularity of the militias is declining while Iran is facing Iraqi popular discontent in Iraq's Shiite-majority provinces. The study reviews the credibility of the claims Iran has been promoting for years about cohesion and unity among the militias pledging allegiance to Wilayat al-Faqih as one entity. This is in addition to the consequences of the militias' divisions on Iran's influence in Iraq and the entire region — given that Iraq is the most important node for establishing the corridor connecting Tehran to the Mediterranean Sea. The study discusses the motives and dimensions of the dispute among the pro-Iran militias in the spheres of influence, Iran's strategy to address the dispute, and the consequences of this dispute for Iran's influence.

Keywords: Wilayat al-Faqih, militias, Qom Marjaya, and Iran's influence

Introduction

Militarization is considered an advanced stage within the critical stages of Iran's transboundary project. It has been one of the main characteristics of Iran's foreign policy since the revolutionary government managed to cement its pillars in the early 1980s. Armed militias sprung up and turned into one of the most important Iranian tools to implement Tehran's sectarian project in its various vital spheres. Iranian decision-makers heavily depend on militias to implement Iran's expansionist sectarian schemes in its vital spheres of influence — especially in Iraq. Iran has established, strengthened, and supported militias with money, weapons and fighters — making them a backbone and effective military wings that execute the Iranian project, not only in Iraq but also across the region. Militias have become a powerful tool in Iran's hands and have been used against consecutive Iraqi governments, securing its gains and executing its expansionist schemes.

The divisions apparent among Iraqi militias and among others in different Iranian spheres of influence reveal the dilemma Tehran is now facing in Iraq and across the region. This Iranian dilemma has heightened not only because of divisions among militias loyal to the Qom Marjaya and those loyal to Najaf— a matter that has been reviewed by other studies previously — but also because of divisions among militias that are loyal to Qom — the subject of our study. This comes at a time when popular support for Iranian militias is eroding and Tehran is facing Iraqi popular discontent in the heart of the Shi'ite-majority provinces. This new development has pushed Iran to try to heal the rifts existing between its militias to safeguard its gains and limit the losses in the period following the killing of former Quds Force Commander General Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the former deputy head of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).

The study analyzes the credibility of Iran, particularly in light of its endless claims over the years regarding the unity and cohesion of its militias, and also analyzes the impact of current divisions on Iranian influence in Iraq and the entire region — given the fact that Iraq is a critical country in Tehran's corridor to the Mediterranean. Divisions among Iranian militias have reached their peak, with heated competition over securing the top posts in the Iran-backed PMF as well as competition over controlling areas of influence, and securing the largest share of the spoils of war. The people residing in the Iranian spheres of influence want Tehran-backed militias driven out. Yet, there is a regional and international demand to settle the outstanding issues with Iran, particularly the issue of militias that enable Tehran to establish a firm grip over its spheres of influence and represent a tool which Tehran uses against its foes when a dispute arises — at the expense of Arab security and stability. We should not be heedless of the dangerous role of militias in toppling sitting governments and contributing to the creation of failed nations in the region.

1. The Significance of Iraqi Militias in Iran's Strategy

Iran's armed militias represent the most important Iranian lever in Iraq and are a powerful arm for implementing Tehran's expansionist schemes across the Arab world. Through these militias, Iran has managed to control the Iraqi landscape and prevent the country from returning to its natural Arab sphere. In addition, these militias have kept Iraq within Iran's sphere of influence, with militias loyal to the Qom Marjaya having extensive clout and influence within the Iraqi equation. A host of factors have contributed to this situation:

1.1 The Militias' Relative Weight

The militias that are loyal to the Qom Marjaya constitute the majority of militias in the PMF. They make up nearly 65 percent (44 militias) out of 67 Shiite militias in the PMF. The PMF consists of 119 militias, including 43 Sunni militias, and nine militias representing minorities in southern Kurdistan, according to a study prepared by the late Iraqi expert Hisham al-Hashemi, published in July 2020.⁽¹⁾ In addition, nearly 10 new Shiite militias emerged following the killing of Qassem Soleimani, and most of them pledged their allegiance to the Qom Marjaya. They included the following militias: Rab'allah (God's Fellows), Saraya al-Muntaqim (the Avenger Regiments), Osbat al-Thaeryn (Rebel League), Liwa Thar Muhandis (LTM/ Revenge of Muhandis Brigade), Ashab al-Kahf (Companions of the Cave), Qabdat al-Mahdi (al-Mahdi's Fist), al-Ghashya, Zulfaqr and Ahdullah. The aim is to create militias more loyal to Iran and its autocratic ruling system. They are directly linked to Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force and implement its orders.⁽²⁾ Iran created these 10 militias to curb the divisions that surfaced amongst its militias following the death of Soleimani and Muhandis and the subsequent ramifications.

1.2 The Geostrategic Deployment of Militias

Iranian militias are deployed across Iraq's oil-rich provinces and within Shiite-majority provinces in the south. They are also deployed across the main highways and crossings linking Iraq with neighboring countries such as those with Iran, Syria, Jordan, Kuwait, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.⁽³⁾ This provides Iran levers against the Iraqi government on the one hand, and gives it a bargaining chip against disputing regional and international powers in Iraq on the other. This deployment also enables Iran to carry out its broader schemes, including, for example, connecting Tehran to the Mediterranean.

1.3 Loyalty and the Scope of Relations With Iran

Militia commanders and fighters believe in Wilayat al-Faqih and also believe that they have an ideological role to pave the way for the reappearance of Imam Mahdi who will establish a global government that will spread justice to all corners of the world. At the political level, they believe in the Iranian

transboundary revolutionary principles. Hence, they are involved in Iran's expansionist schemes and play a critical role in exporting the 1979 revolution, expanding it, and spreading it. In this transnational project Iran is the center and Iraq is just one part of it. Iran seeks to weaken the Najaf Marjaya in favor of Qom. The emergence of militias such as Kata'ib Hezbollah is helping in the propagation of Twelver Shiite thought, especially the theory of Wilayat al-Faqih.^[4]

The aforesaid indicates that Iranian militias in Iraq, loyal to the guardian jurist, are proxies working to secure Iranian objectives — whether tactical represented in controlling each vital sphere of influence, or strategic represented in the total control over Tehran's spheres of influence and linking them together. The ultimate objective of the theory of Wilayat al-Faqih is to establish an international Iranian order led by the guardian jurist in Iran. This ultimate objective explains Tehran's exertions to tackle the divisions amongst Iranian militias in its spheres of influence, given the dangerous ramifications these divisions have for Iran's supreme objectives if they are allowed to linger on and deepen.

2. The Factors Contributing to Divisions Within Militia Ranks

The divisions among Iranian militias that are loyal to the guardian jurist are because of several factors:

2.1 Soleimani's Absence and Qaani's Lack of Experience

The absence of Qassem Soleimani from the scene in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon — following his assassination via a US drone strike near Baghdad International Airport in January 2020 — is the most significant factor that has fueled divisions amongst Iranian militias. This is because of:

2.1.1 Soleimani's Position Within Iran's Power Structure and His Influence Over Its Foreign Policies

Soleimani was the second most powerful man behind Khamenei — not in terms of position in the ruling system's top-down set-up but in terms of overall clout and influence. This helped him secure the much-needed political and financial support to manage Iran's battles in its spheres of influence after Khamenei's nod of approval. His successor does not have such a privilege as he does not carry Soleimani's clout and influence in the Iranian ruling system.

The extent of Soleimani's influence inside the ruling system was revealed in a leaked video tape in March 2021. In this tape, former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said, "Each time I intended to start negotiations; Soleimani presented his demands for me to raise during the negotiations."

Zarif added, "I always headed to the negotiations to accomplish 'field missions.' But when I for example asked him not to use Iran Air aircraft operating

between Iran and Syria, he did not agree. So, we have sacrificed diplomacy for the battlefield.”⁽⁵⁾

2.1.2 A Charismatic and Popular Figure

Soleimani was popular among the commanders and rank-and-file members of Iranian militias operating in Tehran's spheres of influence. The assassinated commander established a wide network from a range of militias and fighters. He also wielded direct control over a number of militias as he not only symbolized but was also a key architect of the transboundary Iranian project. Soleimani was also able to ideologically mobilize fighters on the battlefield. His humble demeanor and fluency in Arabic allowed him to establish a good bond with the fighters and communicate with them easily. Due to the aforementioned factors, he earned the trust of local commanders and militias, allowing him to expand his network and support base for Iran.

2.1.3 His Geopolitical Vision and Battlefield Experience

Soleimani was extremely skillful when it came to military planning and managing live battles, skills which local commanders lacked. This was due to his expertise and extensive experience which he gathered while climbing the IRGC ladder and commanding an array of battles in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere in the region.

2.1.4 The Insignificant Influence of Qaani Compared to Soleimani

The killing of Soleimani undoubtedly led to a leadership vacuum, prompting militia commanders to vie for top leadership positions or at least to have a say in decisions. This vacuum led to disharmony and disunity among militias, particularly when it came to critical issues such as the formation of the government and directing domestic and foreign policies. This is in addition to the onset of confusion during the battles in Iran's spheres of influence. Qaani lacks the expertise, experience, and the wide network of militias that Soleimani was able to build. In addition, he lacks fluency in Arabic and is uncharismatic. One source described Qaani as “an official who is only concerned with conveying messages and instructions.” His efforts are limited to breaking the ice with militia commanders only. His trips to Iraq are usually brief and focus on practical matters. Some militias such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), for example, are no longer submitting to his dictates.⁽⁶⁾

2.2 The Decline in Iranian Financial Support

Iran was compelled to reduce its financial support for its militias in Iraq and the countries where it wields influence due to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic which overwhelmed the Iranian economy. This is in addition to the economic sanctions imposed by the United States on Iran. Exports of Iranian oil declined to below 150,000 barrels per day in 2019, down from a daily

average of 2.5 million barrels before the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal and the reimposition of sanctions on the country in August 2018. The Iranian government was also forced to embrace financial austerity and borrow from local banks to address the country's budget deficit. The Iranian economy also posted a significant recession in 2020 which was considered among the highest rates of recession globally according to various estimates. Amid living conditions deteriorating at home, financially supporting militias has caused the ruling system's legitimacy to erode.⁽⁷⁾

Parviz Fattah, the head of Iran's Mostazafan Foundation and former director of the IRGC Cooperative Foundation (Bonyad Taavon Sepah), explained the depth of the crisis. He said, "Soleimani was facing a shortage in the financial funds designated to militias, and he once asked for help to pay the stipends of militias...He said that the IRGC was no longer able to pay the wages of militias." In an interview he gave in April 2020, Fattah also spoke to media agencies about Qaani presenting silver rings to militia fighters during his visit to Iraq instead of cash.⁽⁸⁾ In light of this financial predicament, Iran informed its militias that they should look for alternative means to finance their activities "to ensure the continuation of Iranian escalation in the face of US pressure."⁽⁹⁾

The decline in Iranian support contributed to its militias facing a tight financial squeeze. The militias now need to secure alternative sources of finance to cover expenditures for their day-to-day activities, combat operations, and to provide compensation and financial assistance to the families of those killed in battle. In addition, they need finances to cover the expenses of commanders and to ensure their protection. To address this dilemma, Iranian militias have only two paths: reduce the level of expansionist operations and cut the number of fighters or switch to commercial activities as well and employ their clout on the ground to generate financial profits from trade.

As part of entering the commercial sphere, Iranian militias have established tourism companies in the overland and air transportation sectors, hotels as well as companies working in the agriculture and real estate sectors in Baghdad, Mosul and the southern Iraqi provinces. They have also established companies to ship petroleum items to neighboring countries in order to re-export them to the world. The militias have also used their wide-ranging political and military influence to secure preferential loans and permits to carry out their commercial projects. Moreover, Iranian militias seized control of vast tracts of agricultural lands during the fight against ISIS. These lands were not given back to their owners under the pretext of their alleged collaboration with ISIS.

The conflict of interests between militias was apparent during their rush to secure finances and their competition to control resources in Iran's spheres of influence. In this context, we should point to the fighters whose contracts were terminated by the PMF. According to the Iraqi researcher Mahdi al-Jana-

bi, this led to 35,000 job vacancies in the Iraqi state with the Iraqi budget covering their salaries. This encouraged other militias and parties to compete for the available vacancies. The existing differences continue to mount among militias as the gains made by these groups have not been equally distributed.⁽¹⁰⁾ This lack of balance is an additional factor contributing to differences between the militias embracing the theory of Wilayat al-Faqih.

This crisis in Iran's financial relations with its militias spilled over into its other spheres of influence. In Syria, reports mentioned that hundreds of fighters left Syria for Iraq due to low wages. Military and strategic expert Colonel Adib Eliwi mentioned that Iran-aligned fighters exiting from Syria due to a lack of Iranian finances is not unprecedented. He said that there were two main reasons which led to sectarian militias to initially enter Syria. The first was the high salaries over the past period that surpassed \$1,500. The second was the sectarian mobilization and the Iranian propaganda that spoke of protecting Shiite shrines in Syria. He added that the wages Iran designated to foreign fighters have significantly dwindled over the past two years. For his part, Syrian media activist Mahran al-Furati mentioned that the wages of foreign fighters amount to \$700, which validates the reports that suggest Iran has cut the wages of fighters by more than half.⁽¹¹⁾

3. The Differences and Contentious Issues Among Iranian Militias

The Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, in December 2020 admitted that there were differences among Iranian militias.⁽¹²⁾ One militia commander emphasized that Iranian policymakers had noticed the divisions among militia commanders due to personal interests and competition over influence. Another commander mentioned that meetings and contact with Iranian officials had decreased and they no longer held regular meetings neither were they invited to Iran.⁽¹³⁾ The contentious issues among Iranian militias include the following:

3.1 Disagreements Over Senior Positions in the PMF

Major rifts developed among militia commanders and within the ranks of Iranian militias following the end of Soleimani's presence on the regional landscape. Iraq witnessed bitter divisions between the two most powerful militias that are Iran-affiliated and loyal to Wilayat al-Faqih: Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) led by Qais al-Khazali and Kata'ib Hezbollah. These divisions are in light of the two militias vying to secure positions to manage the affairs of militias and overtake key positions in the PMF after the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis. The divisions between the two militias deepened, with the two embracing a policy of attempting to attract the other militias to maximize their respective capabilities and move towards exercising further influence in strategic Iraqi cities and provinces — as they are a tremendous source of securing wealth.

The gap between the two militias wielding huge influence in the Iraqi equation widened due to the geopolitical and economic significance of the spheres of influence and deployment. The gap widened further after the appointment of the former Secretary General of Kata'ib Hezbollah Abdul-Aziz al-Mahmadawi,* known as Abu Fadak, in May 2020 as chief of staff of the PMF to replace the IRGC's number one loyalist in Iraq, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis who was killed along with Soleimani in a US drone strike in 2020. The appointment of Abu Fadak sparked the concerns of AAH, given his heavy influence in changing the rules of engagement by creating missile attack units.⁽¹⁴⁾ His appointment intended to entrench the clout of Kata'ib Hezbollah within the PMF and expand its leadership role — in light of its strength, vast network of spies, death squads, influential media outlets and economic dominance over the PMF.

The rift between the two heavyweight militias deepened due to Khazali's anger at Mahmadaawi for turning down his request not to reduce the finances designated to AAH,⁽¹⁵⁾ a move intended to thwart its ambitions and curtail its growing clout within the PMF. Furthermore, Mahmadaawi appointed Abdul-Rahman Goma'a Enad Saadoun, the Iraqi defense minister's son, as commander of the Fourth Regiment of the PMF's 51st Brigade. Jawad al-Taibawi, an AAH leader, considered the appointment a reward for those who oppose the PMF⁽¹⁶⁾ in reference to the Iraqi defense minister, who had previously stated that the PMF's role in liberating Iraq from ISIS was secondary.

Yet, there is an ongoing spat between AAH and Harakat al-Nujaba. The Shi'ite leaders say that Khazali is the one who should be commanding the armed resistance given that he is more effective and influential than Akram al-Kaabi, the leader of Harakat al-Nujaba. But the Iranians do not prefer to hand the leadership over to Khazali since they are convinced that he is more of a politician than a military commander.⁽¹⁷⁾ This explains the reason behind the deep rift between AAH and Iran, compared to relations between Tehran and other militias.

3.2 The Dispute Over Resources and the Spoils of War

The rift between the two most powerful Iranian militias in Iraq and Syria— AAH and Kata'ib Hezbollah — was not only over who should take the leading positions within the PMF after Soleimani's killing. But the divisions widened to include the spoils of war and the collection of revenues — rifts that amounted to armed clashes between the two militias in Syria after AAH blocked the road leading to the Qa'im-Bukamal crossing by setting up checkpoints and barricades at al-Hari village in the city of Qaim in Syria, hence preventing trucks affiliated with Kata'ib Hezbollah from crossing. This happened on two occasions in 2020, in June and September.⁽¹⁸⁾ The two militias seized control over the drug smuggling operations and the cross-border trade between Iraq and Syria by tightening control over Syria's Bukamal and Iraq's Qaim, both located on the Iraq-Syria border.

However, four armed clashes took place between Iraq's Kata'ib Hezbollah and the National Defense Forces (NDF) * in a number of towns in Syria's Qalamun region near the Syria-Lebanon border in 2019, which left several fighters dead and wounded. The clashes broke out over a dispute over the distribution of revenues secured from drug smuggling operations via the border between Syria and Lebanon and the money Hezbollah generated from smuggling dissidents wanted by the Syrian regime in return for \$3,000 to \$4,500 for each person to illegally bring them to Lebanon.⁽¹⁹⁾

The NDF militia discovered that Kata'ib Hezbollah had transformed Qalamun, where they both shared dominance and clout, into a corridor for drug shipments coming from Lebanon and was using vast swathes of land for cultivating drugs to sell in Syria,⁽²⁰⁾ a direct threat to the areas where the NDF exercises control and clout.

Several disagreements broke out, which could have led to armed clashes between AAH and Saraya al-Khurasani which remained close to the IRGC throughout 2020 in its spheres of influence scattered across several Iraqi provinces. The clashes broke out when AAH fighters tried to levy tariffs on the trucks belonging to Saraya al-Khurasani coming from Syria to secure finances to cover fighter costs in light of the harsh economic conditions which Iranian militias have been facing following the decline in Iranian financial support. According to an Iraqi Shiite politician close to Iranian militias in Iraq, the differences between the two most powerful factions within the Iran-backed PMF are over finances and weapons. Each side accuses the other of seizing PMF resources and depriving the other of their rights.

He added, "Khazali wants to play a leading role inside the PMF and doesn't want Kata'ib Hezbollah to seize all the spoils,"⁽²¹⁾ in reference to AAH's desire to seize the spheres of influence where it has control, clout and dominance over resources.

Deep rifts had surfaced in 2018 and 2019 between AAH and the Brigade of Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas led by Aws al-Khafaji over finances and with Harakat al-Nujaba, led by Akram al-Kaabi, over the smuggling of oil and the collection of revenues in central and southern Iraq.⁽²²⁾ Iraqi security sources in February 2020 revealed that unidentified gunmen had shot and killed Mohammad Rahim al-Shammari, an AAH commander, in al-Shuala district using guns with silencers following disputes over wresting control, exercising influence and seizing resources. AAH has accused rival militias — which it stopped short of naming — of killing Shammari. According to Muhannad al-Janabi, targeted killings are always carried out against opponents of Iranian influence, emphasizing that multiple similar incidents had taken place previously.⁽²³⁾

Iraqi researcher Raad Hashem argues that the killing of an AAH commander in Baghdad or using an IED to take out elements from Kata'ib Hezbollah in

Jurf Sakhar are part of the physical liquidation policy targeting militia fighters. He added that deep rifts have emerged in the militias' areas of influence, where they compete for levying fees, collecting revenues and smuggling and dealing in drugs.⁽²⁴⁾

3.3 The Disagreement Over the Attacks on Foreign Troops

The Iranian militias differed about the priority and the timing of launching attacks against US targets (the embassy, consulate, military bases, military convoys) in Iraq in 2020. This operation of launching attacks is led by Iran with the aim of prompting the United States to withdraw its forces from Iraq and to keep Baghdad within its sphere of influence — due to considerations related to the centrality of Iraq in the Iranian strategy and its geopolitical, economic and security importance for Iran. Iraq represents one of the key Iranian lines of defense against the United States and its regional allies.

On many occasions, Kata'ib Hezbollah rejected AAH's use of force against US targets to submit to Iranian orders during Rouhani's government. Kata'ib Hezbollah sought to be in line with the Iranian calculation back then that there should be no military escalation — which would have increased Trump's chances in the 2020 presidential elections. Further, it aimed to support Iran's position on the nuclear talks in Vienna in order for the US sanctions to be lifted on Tehran. In this context, Kata'ib Hezbollah has strongly opposed AAH's violation of the tacit truce between the Iran-backed proxy militias in Iraq and the United States — stating that it will not be hitting US targets — by launching attacks on US targets on two occasions in November and December 2020 without any coordination with the commanders of other militias or Iranian officials. A Kata'ib Hezbollah official revealed, "We have been surprised by Khazali's breach of the truce, especially after the visit of General Esmail Qaani, chief of the Quds Force, and his meeting with a number of the commanders on November 24, 2020, to reiterate the importance of not provoking Trump during this sensitive period. This was construed as a sign of AAH breaking ranks with the PMF." The same official indicated that "the new groups claiming responsibility for the attacks against US forces such as Ahl al-Kahf, an AAH-affiliate, work under its supervision, without referring to us or even discussing the matter with us."⁽²⁵⁾

This prompted the Iraqi security forces on December 23, 2020 to arrest Hosam al-Azarjawi, an AAH commander and a rocket engineer, after finding conclusive proof that he was involved in attacks against US targets. Videos on social media platforms showed AAH militants threatening to strike Iraqi forces on orders from Khazali, which was strongly rejected by Kata'ib Hezbollah.

AAH's response was proof of the divisions among the pro-Iran militias that are loyal to Wilayat al-Faqih and the strongest indication of the militia abandoning Iran's ideology. This is consistent with a report published by the British

website Middle East Eye⁽²⁶⁾ which stated that during Qaani's visit to Baghdad on November 24, 2020, to urge Iranian militias to abide by the ceasefire, Khazali publicly denounced his visit, and argued that resisting the US presence was an Iraqi national project and there was no need for Iranian involvement.⁽²⁷⁾ Moreover, a senior AAH commander said, "AAH rejects Iran's custodianship since expelling US forces from Iraq is an internal issue that only concerns Iraqis. Neither Tehran nor the Iranians have a right to interfere in this issue." He added, "The Iranians want to extend the truce with the United States in order not to provoke it, hoping Biden will agree to rejoin the nuclear deal. We want to drive the occupiers out of our country. We are free, Iraqis and patriots. We do what we deem suitable for us and for our country."⁽²⁸⁾ This indicates that AAH is embracing a new approximation to reset its political discourse to increase its chances of winning in the parliamentary elections. AAH realized that distancing itself from Iranian influence amid the parliamentary elections would serve its objective.

In February 2019, the PMF arrested the commander of the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, Aws al-Khafaji, and shut down the militia's headquarters. He, according to the PMF, had splintered from the group. The PMF arrested him over his criticism of Iran, its influence and Iranian military operations against US targets in Iraq.⁽²⁹⁾ Hence, the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade defected from the PMF after revealing information about the attacks carried out by Iran and its allied militias in Iraq. This was unprecedented and confirmed the reports indicating severe differences between Iran and its militias in Iraq. Some militias have been working to defect from Iran's orbit after regional and international pressures have dramatically increased on the ruling system of Wilayat al-Faqih.

By the end of July 2021, a new disagreement emerged between the Sayyed al-Shuhada Brigades, Harakat al-Nujaba, AAH and the Iran-backed Fatah Alliance, which is considered to be the political representative of all the factions loyal to the Qom Marjaya over the US-Iraq joint statement on the withdrawal of US troops by the end of December 2021. While the Sayyed al-Shuhada Brigades and Harakat al-Nujaba rejected the statement, citing a lack of confidence in Washington abiding by the terms of the statement and keeping US forces in Iraq for merely an advisory role, the AAH questioned the move. The Fatah Alliance welcomed the statement, considering it a positive step towards achieving Iraq's full sovereignty.⁽³⁰⁾

The assassination of Abu Sadiq al-Khashkhashi, the 9th Brigade's commander in the PMF, in August 2021 in Babel Governorate sparked the debate about whether Iraq has turned into an arena for settling accounts among militias. The aforementioned assassination was followed by further assassinations across all spheres of influence.⁽³¹⁾

3.4 The Differences Over Naming Prime Ministers

Under Soleimani, militia commanders in Iran's spheres of influence in Iraq were following his instructions — backed by the decision-makers in Iran. His instructions ensured that Iran had great influence in the domestic equations, particularly in regard to naming the prime minister. But after his killing, differences between militias surfaced over the naming of prime ministers in Iran's spheres of influence. For example, differences emerged in Iraq between AAH and the Badr Organization on the one hand and the Hezbollah Brigades and Harakat al-Nujaba on the other over the naming of Kadhimi as prime minister of Iraq in April 2020. The AAH and the Badr Organization declared support for naming Kadhimi as Iraq's prime minister while Kata'ib Hezbollah, whose influence has been dwindling since the killing of its head Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis according to *Foreign Policy* magazine,⁽³²⁾ and Harakat al-Nujaba opposed his nomination. They accused him of being involved in the assassination of Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, an accusation that AAH has denied.⁽³³⁾ It seems that there were other factors behind Kata'ib Hezbollah's — which has close ties to the IRGC — and Harakat al-Nujaba's opposition to Kadhimi, related to the latter's desire to curb Iranian clout in Iraq through ensuring Iraq's transition to full statehood based on independence and sovereignty and reestablishing Iraq's regional role and balancing its foreign relations.

The contentious issues between Iranian militias on the Iraqi arena — loyal to the Qom Marjaya — indicate that they are extensive and of an escalating nature. They are critical issues related to disputes over spheres of influence, and the collection of revenues to cover costs in light of Iran reducing its financial support. It is unlikely that the United States will lift the sanctions imposed on Iran in the foreseeable future given Tehran's inflexibility when it comes to returning to the nuclear negotiations and addressing the outstanding issues. This inflexibility will prolong the negotiations, delay the lifting of sanctions and hinder Tehran's financial support for its militias. Furthermore, Iranian militias differ over leadership positions and the financial resources provided to the major Iran-affiliated militias — given their armament strength, organization and extensive influence in several Iraqi and Syrian provinces, especially in strategic provinces and at several border points and crossings. Such contentious issues are very evident and critical in Iraq, given its geopolitical, economic and security significance for Iran— as well as its military, political and economic importance for its proxies.

4. Iranian Efforts to Tackle the Divisions Among Its Militias

Due to the bitter divisions amongst major pro-Iran militias in Iraq and Iran's concern about the disunity among them, Tehran has laid out policies to

limit the negative impact (of such divisions) on its influence in Iraq, and to safeguard its gains. These policies will also allow Iran to and move forward in implementing the rest of its expansionist schemes, via the following:

4.1 Forming New Militias More Loyal to Iran

Iran resorted to forming new smaller and more loyal armed militias in Iraq to camouflage its involvement in attacks against US interests in Iraq and to heal the divisions between its militias. Iran has adopted a new approach which will reduce its dependence on its old militias, recruiting dozens of fighters who are unwaveringly loyal and devoutly believe in Wilayat al-Faqih. Through these fighters, Iran has formed smaller militias which are more loyal and submissive to the IRGC. Throughout 2020, IRGC military advisors as well as some from Hezbollah in Lebanon trained these fighters to use drones and plant bombs to hit rivals in Iraq in order to change the rules of engagement in Iran's favor. Iran believes that these new smaller militias have a strategic advantage as they are less likely to be infiltrated.⁽³⁴⁾ The most important newer militias in Iraq are: Rab'allah (God's Fellows), Saraya al-Muntaqim (the Avenger Regiments), Osbat al-Thaeryn (Rebel League), Liwa Thar Muhandis (LTM) (Revenge of Muhandis Brigade), Ashab al-Kahf, Qabdat Al Mahdi, al-Ghashya, Zulfaqar and Ahdullah.

4.2 Dismantling Small Militias

Citing Iraqi political and military sources, Middle East Eye reported on January 2, 2021, that Iran set a new vision based on maintaining its large militias loyal to Wilayat al-Faqih while dissolving smaller (older) militias — a policy known as “removing outcrops” such as Saraya al-Khorasani in return for supporting any Iraqi government that accepts a two-headed armed militia — with the PMF being one head, and the other being an armed resistance force consisting of two or three large factions.⁽³⁵⁾ It seems that the PMF's security apparatus arrested nearly 30 elements of Saraya al-Khorasani, including senior commanders. It also raided its headquarters and seized some of its property by the end of December 2020. This is indicative of the start of the implementation of Iran's scheme on the Iraqi arena in particular. Apparently, Iran fully realizes the critical situation its militias are facing in Iraq following the demise of Soleimani and the poor performance of Qaani, who could not unite militias and their leaders as Soleimani did.

4.3 Distributing Responsibility for Iraq's File to Several Iranian Officials

Iran has designated several officials to be in charge of the Iraqi file. They include: Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani, who has made multiple visits to Iraq to tackle the divisions; Iran's Ambassador to Baghdad Iraj Masjedi who has been under US sanctions since November

2020 and former Iranian Ambassador to Iraq Hassan Danai-Far. Qaani will be in charge of the military proxies only.⁽³⁶⁾ Qaani has made multiple surprise visits to Iraq since he took over as chief of the Quds Force to meet with militia commanders to unify their visions for the new phase following the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis.⁽³⁷⁾ These appointments indicate Iran's awareness regarding Qaani's inability to run the Iraqi file unlike Soleimani. Hence, Qaani is solely responsible for the military file in Iraq, whereas the other files have been designated to the aforementioned officials.

4.4 An Iranian Green Light for the Lebanese Hezbollah to Intervene

The divisions between pro-Iran militias in Iraq prompted Tehran to ask the Lebanese Hezbollah to intervene in order to curb the negative impact of these divisions on Iran's influence in Iraq. Hezbollah's representative to Iraq, Mohammad Hussein Kawtharan, held meetings with militia commanders to converge their points of view and heal the rifts between them.

Overall, Iranian exertions did not bear fruit and it was impossible to unite all militias under one cohesive umbrella. Multiple fronts have emerged as well as with new divergent orientations making it difficult to address critical issues related to the PMF's restructuring following the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis. The conflicts over the collection of revenues, management of border crossings and smuggling operations continue. They are expected to drag on to reach a crucial cutthroat phase, with the possibility of Iran's influence being curbed in Iraq, especially after the emergence of new power vacuums which militias could compete over to dominate following the US withdrawal from Iraq by the end of December 2021.

5. The Consequences of the Disputes Between Militias on Iran's Clout in Iraq

The aforesaid factors reveal sharp divisions among militias loyal to the Qom Marjaya. These divisions among militias pose an additional challenge to Iranian clout in Iraq as they involve the most powerful pro-Iran militias such as AAH and Kata'ib Hezbollah and they have emerged in the most important sphere of influence in Iran's strategy: the Iraqi arena. These divisions raise Iran's concerns because pro-Tehran militias play a big role in tightening Iran's grip over Iraq. Iran depends on these militias to advance its regional project.

These divisions negatively impact the Iranian project throughout the region. The major conclusions of the study regarding the divisions among Iranian militias can be summarized as follows:

5.1 Calling Into Question Iranian Claims About the Cohesion of Its Militias

Soleimani exercised tremendous power and influence that helped him achieve harmony among Iranian militias in Tehran's spheres of influence.

However, following Soleimani's killing and with Qaani taking over as chief of the Quds Force, the cohesion of the pro-Wilayat al-Faqih militias decreased. This development calls into question the claims of Iranian media outlets over the past years regarding the solidarity of Iranian militias. At face value, Iranian militias seem united and harmonious. But on the ground, they are no longer one bloc. Tensions have been rising among Iranian militias particularly between those exerting huge influence in Iran's spheres of influence since the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis. Tensions and divergences have surfaced between militias loyal to the Qom Marjaya and militias loyal to the Najaf Marjaya, particularly over Iraqi internal affairs, ways to address internal crises, and achieving security and stability. Thus, militias are operating under a new equation in Iraq and therefore Iran's claims that they are operating as one cohesive bloc is no longer accurate. Thus, Iran seems deeply concerned about the divisions among its most important proxies as they will impede its expansionist strategy in its spheres of influence.

5.2 The Declining Influence of Militias: Iran's Most Powerful Tool

A series of divisions have emerged among Iranian militias that exert tremendous influence within the PMF such as AAH, Kata'ib Hezbollah and Harakat al-Nujaba, Tehran's most powerful allies. These divisions are due to their control over sensitive positions in Iraq, their number of fighters, their control over strategic areas of influence — as well as their control over border crossings, strategic areas and international highways that connect their spheres of influence. On the other hand, the divisions seems to be over strategic issues open to escalation at any time; such as the divergence over who dominates the critical positions within the PMF — command and control over the PMF is entrenched in the minds of militia commanders. This is in addition to the divisions over controlling resources and the collection of revenues in light of Iran's inability to provide financial support to its militias. These divisions pose a principal challenge to Iran's influence, weaken its clout and reflect a decline in its influence in its most important sphere of influence overseas. It is expected that these challenges will persist in light of Qaani's scant experience compared to Soleimani when it comes to advancing Iran's influence in Iraq and Iran's inability to provide financial support because US sanctions have not been lifted yet as the nuclear talks in Vienna have stalled.

5.3 Militias Rebelling Against the Guardian Jurist

The study revealed the phenomenon of militias rebelling against their Iranian sponsor, especially the most powerful militias who had pledged allegiance to Iran and Wilayat al-Faqih such as AAH. Khazali announced plainly his rejection of Iran's custodianship and his decision to stop striking US targets before the end of Trump's tenure. He asserted that resisting the US presence

was an Iraqi national project in which Iran does not need to play a role. This indicates that the AAH became aware of the challenges facing Iran's expansionist project. The AAH, therefore, outlined a new approach to present itself to the Iraqi people as a nationalist movement that works for Iraq to win over voters in the October 2021 elections. Accordingly, some militias rebelled against Iran and pursued their own personal interests, which in turn indicated the fragile ideological relationship between these militias and Wilayat al-Faqih. The reality, therefore, seems contrary to Iran's claims that its militias are overwhelmingly driven by ideological loyalty to the guardian jurist.

5.4 Inciting Chaos in Iraq and Iran's Diminishing Image

The disputes among pro-Iran militias embracing Wilayat al-Faqih have become very tense in Iraq, affecting Iraq's stability and security. The militias are deployed across southern oil-rich regions, maintaining a grip over networks for smuggling Iran's crude oil and its derivatives by tankers into Syria and Lebanon via the Syria-Iraq borders. These militias also carry out illegal trade dealings by smuggling oil via Iraqi territory to generate money, secure royalties from foreign oil companies in return for releasing oil machinery and equipment — given their control over the cargo-handling at Iraqi ports. Former Iraqi Petroleum Minister Ihsan Abdul-Jabbar at the parliamentary session on July 4, 2021, admitted that investments and security had declined in the country. This forced global petroleum companies to reassess their positions. In a report by Al-Monitor, Salam Zidane, an Iraqi journalist, said that Western petroleum companies began to withdraw after their sites suffered attacks and they faced blackmailing by militias. The role of militias and their disputes played a part in the Iraqi street rejecting Iran and its proxy groups. Undoubtedly, the wave of popular protests contributed to the Iraqi government resolutely focusing on transitioning Iraq to full statehood and limiting weapons to the state. The protest wave also coincided with regional and international efforts to curb Iran's clout in the Iraqi arena.

Conclusion

Iran is facing an additional complexity in Iraq as disputes are breaking out not only between Iranian militias loyal to the Qom Marjaya and those loyal to the Najaf Marjaya, but also among the pro-Qom militias themselves. These divisions pose great danger to Iran's influence in Iraq as its militias are the most important tool and the most powerful and credible allies to implement its expansionist project; given their Wilayat al-Faqih orientations. Thus, these divisions among Iranian militias means paralyzing Iran's most powerful overseas arms for advancing its expansionist schemes, which explains Tehran's employment of new approaches in Iraq such as forming new militias under new commanders who are more loyal, ideologically motivated and more willing to advance Iranian schemes.

The divisions between militias widen with every step they take to maximize their stature, strength and clout in Iraq. These disagreements are not over marginal issues that can be overlooked or bypassed but are related to their core work in the country. They have disputes over critical leadership positions in the Iran-backed PMF, and over who controls strategic locations such as the oil-rich areas in the south, and crossings and international roads that are crucial to the collection of revenues. This is in addition to the fact that Qaani lacks Soleimani's qualities, including a charismatic personality, an ability to build relationships with militia commanders and win their confidence. If he had such qualities, he would have been able to settle the divisions swiftly to uphold their unity and cohesion. Further, the disputes have deepened with the militias loyal to the Najaf Marjaya and the latter stopped supporting Iranian militias loyal to the Qom Marjaya, and several major militias announced their withdrawal from the PMF. The Najaf Marjaya, the highest religious authority in Iraq, withdrew the religious legitimacy it granted to militias pledging allegiance to Wilayat al-Faqih since Ali al-Sistani's Fatwa of Sufficient Jihad justifying militias to fight ISIS in Iraq. It is expected that the divisions among militias loyal to Wilayat al-Faqih will become sharper after the US withdrawal from Iraq and the ending of the combat mission of the remaining US forces in Iraq by the end of December 2021. One of the scenarios at play following the withdrawal of US forces is deeper divisions among militias if tensions over who controls the US areas of influence — after the withdrawal of US troops — escalate and Iran's inability to fund its militias in the short run diminishes further. The aforementioned scenario may develop against the backdrop of the uncertain position of Iran on the nuclear talks in Vienna and the stance taken by Ebrahim Raisi; Iran's new "hardline" president who has already called for escalation to counter the US pressure to push the nuclear deal back to its status before 2018 (when the United States withdrew from it) without any amendments to it. Iran is aware that US deterrence has declined and Washington has shifted its foreign policy priorities.

Apparently, Iran has been facing unprecedented complexities in Iraq that have reduced its chances of sustaining its expansionist project in the way it desires. These complexities concern the outbreak of squabbles and feuds between Iranian militias that might turn into armed clashes. The militias are the most important and most powerful arm which Iran relies on to advance its expansionist project. The second biggest challenge and the most dangerous complexity Iran is facing in Iraq: The growing awareness of young Iraqis who reject Iran, its proxies, and expansionist schemes. The Iraqi people have made clear their rejection of Iran's interventions; this was clearly seen in the unprecedented loss of its proxies in the 2021 parliamentary elections. Iraqi voters refused to support the major Iran-backed alliances. This indicates the

tremendous challenges facing Iran's project in Iraq, reflecting the failure of Tehran's soft power project in creating a popular support base and popular incubators to advance its project. This is in addition to the divisions among militias, which slow down the pace of implementing Iran's project, amidst several indications forecasting that Iraq is heading towards state sovereignty on a civilian basis rather than a sectarian one.

All the aforementioned factors and developments in Iraq will curb Iran's strength in its spheres of influence. It will reduce Iran's chances and weaken its project and its viability — giving an opportunity for Iraq and other countries to recover and strengthen their institutions in a way that prioritizes the independence of internal and external decision-making and the transition from the phase of non-state control to total state control over all spheres.

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