Relaying on Militias to Counter Insurgency and Provide Security for Local Communities: the Case of the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq
الاعتماد على الميليشيات لمواجهة التمرد المسلح وتوفير الحماية للسكان المحليين:

دراسة حالة قوات الحشد الشعبي في العراق

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Abstract:

A large number of governments around the world have been increasingly relying on militias to counter insurgency, defend political regimes, and provide security for local communities, particularly in remote areas. This research paper attempts to explore the dynamics that drive governments to collaborate with this type of irregular forces and incorporate them into their counter-insurgency campaigns, it examines the different aspects of this phenomenon, and assesses the effectiveness of these armed groups in countering rebellions and preserving political status quo in countries plagued by internal violent conflicts.

Moreover, this paper relies on the case of the Popular Mobilization Forces, which the Iraqi government has collaborated with to defeat the Islamic State terrorist organization, degrade its capabilities and eliminate its subversive role in Iraq following its military advance and seizure of large swaths of territory since 2014, amidst a collapse of the Iraqi security forces.

Keywords: militias, Iraq, counter-insurgency, Popular Mobilization Forces, security.

ملخص:

لجأت الكثير من الحكومات حول العالم إلى الاستعانة بميليشيات مسلحة من أجل مواجهة الحركات التمردية، بمختلف أشكالها، والدفاع عن أنظمة الحكم، وتوفير الحماية للسكان المحليين، خاصة في المناطق البعيدة التي قد لا تصلها القوات المسلحة النظامية. وخير مثال على ذلك اعتماد الحكومة العراقية على تكتل من الميليشيات عرف بقوات الحشد الشعبي، وذلك من أجل محاربة تنظيم الدولة الإسلامية (داعش)، واستعادة المناطق التي سيطر عليها التنظيم الإرهابي منذ سنة 2014.

تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى إظهار أهم الديناميكيات التي تدفع الحكومات إلى التعاون مع قوات مسلحة غير نظامية، وتفويضها لأداء مهام أمنية ودفاعية في أوقات السلم أو النزاعات المسلحة الداخلية، كما تستقصي الدراسة أبعاد ذلك التعاون وفعاليته في مواجهة حملات التمرد المسلح وحماية السكان المحليين. وتنطلق الدراسة من فرضية أساسية مفادها أنه كلما زاد العجز الوظيفي للقوات المسلحة النظامية، كلما زاد اعتماد الحكومات على قوات شبه عسكرية من أجل تأدية مهام أمنية ودفاعية معينة. ومن خلال الاعتماد على منهج دراسة الحالة تظهر الدراسة في الأخير أهم ميزات ومخاطر التعاون بين الحكومات الوطنية والميليشيات.

كلمات مفتاحية: الميليشيات، مكافحة التمرد، العراق، الأمن، الحشد الشعبي.

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I.   Introduction:

The presence of militias have shaped intrastate conflicts since the Second World War in 1945, either as a deliberate government strategy or as a by-product of "internal anarchy" or state dysfunction. These irregular actors, which have taken various forms, ideological backgrounds, size, and political goals; have critically influenced the dynamics, duration and outcomes of those conflicts. Although the defensive character of these irregular forces, many militias, particularly in Africa and the Middle East; have played offensively and developed insurgent agendas against the state, within which they operated.

In the Middle East, the delegation of security tasks to paramilitary forces have increased in importance as many ruling regimes, from Libya to Syria and Iraq have been collaborating with these forces to preserve the survival of their regimes and protect local communities against the attacks of insurgent groups. Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, the Alaweet self-defense forces in Syria, and tribal militias in Libya are prominent examples of this type of violent non-State actors. For instance, the Iraqi government have collaborated with a combination of militias known as "the Popular Mobilization Forces" (al-Hashd-al-Shaabi is the Arabic acronym) to fight the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), degrade its capabilities, and eliminate its role in Iraq. A terrorist organization that witnessed a rise in the Iraqi security landscape since 2014 amid a disgraceful decline of the Iraqi security forces in front few hundreds of ISIS' fighters in Mosul in June 2014.

Research question:

This research paper attempts to answer the following question:
What are the dynamics that drive governments to collaborate with irregular forces to counter-insurgency and provide security and protection for local communities? And to what extent has this strategy of delegation of security tasks been effective in preserving the status quo within the state against the insurgent campaigns pursuing a substantial political change?

Hypotheses:

This research paper revolves around two main assumptions, which are:
• The more the irregular armed forces of the state suffer from dysfunctional weakness, the more this prompt the national governments to collaborate with irregular forces to compensate that weakness.
• Despite the strategic values that militias provide for the state during intrastate conflicts, many serious security risks are entailed.

Structure of the Paper:

This paper is initiated with a theoretical framework to understand militias and distinguish them from other types of violent non-state actors. Then, it discusses the different aspects of state collaboration with militias, and investigates the dynamics that lead to that collaboration. The last part of this paper examines the Iraqi government's collaboration with the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) to fight ISIS since 2014. It discusses the drivers or that cooperation and assesses its strategic effectiveness in maintaining the status quo in Iraq.

II.   Militias: a theoretical framework

Militias have been key actors in numerous civil wars and other types of intrastate conflicts around the world since the end of the Second World War in 1945. They have shaped the dynamics and outcomes of these violent conflicts, and they have influenced post-conflict transitional periods as well. Thus, a full understanding of this phenomenon is crucial to understand the contemporary armed conflicts.

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This section attempts to answer the following questions: What do we mean by militias? What are their types? What is behind their emergence and proliferation in weak and failing states? What kind of role this type of armed non-state actors play in intrastate conflicts? What motivates these actors?, And how their relationships with national governments and broader societies within which they operate is characterized?

1. Definition of militias:

Fundamentally, militias represent one significant type of non-state armed groups (also known as non-state violent actors) that include also insurgent groups, terrorist groups, and transnational criminal organizations. Various terms have been often used to refer to the same meaning as militias, such as self-defense forces, paramilitaries, civil guards, vigilante groups, and civil defense forces. However, substantial differences distinguish between these terms and militia that is more comprehensive and accurate concept.

Historically, militias referred to a reserve body of citizens enrolled for military duty and called upon only in an emergency. (Chris Alden, Monika Thakur, Matthew Arnold, 2011) They were trained as soldiers, but not part of a regular army, and were regarded as a supplementary force organized by the state or government. Their existence as auxiliary forces reflected the cooperation of the mass of population. In the contemporary era, however, militias have been mobilized for different tasks and in different contexts. Thus, they are defined as "non-state armed groups that utilize violence to protect the established order rather than overthrow it." While others use the term to refer to *"anti- rebel armed groups- such as death squads, self-defense forces, village guards- that use violence against anti-state irregular forces."* (Barter, 2012)

Professor Ulrich Schneckener defined militias as *"irregular, paramilitary combat units that aim at protecting and defending the interests of the government and/or certain segments of the society. They usually act on behalf of/or are at least tolerated by, the political establishment."* (Schneckener, 2009)

Corinna Jentzish, in turn, refers to militias as *"armed groups that operate alongside regular security forces or work independently of the state to shield the local population from insurgents."* (Corinna Jentzsch, Stathis N. Kalyvas, Livia Isabella Schubiger, 2017)

All these aforementioned definitions imply several aspects that differentiate militias from other types of armed groups, which can be outlined as follow:

• Militias are defensive in nature: Militias are created for defensive purposes in a hostile environment, including defending the existing political regimes against rebel groups or terrorist movements, protecting local communities in remote or rural areas, performing law enforcement roles in villages and towns, and doing security or military missions on behalf of the government (such as assassination, demographic change, war crimes… etc.)

• State dysfunction: the presence of militias within a society implies a state inability to fulfill its security task of providing protection and security for all its citizens living within its national borders due to the weakness of its regular security and military forces.

• Delegation of violence: Because of the weakness of its regular forces, governments tend to delegate part of its security tasks to irregular forces, with which they collaborate to face common threat embodied by insurgent or terrorist groups. This act of delegation of violence represents a clear violation to Max Weber's ideal of *"the monopoly of the legitimate use of force within a given territory"*.

• Loose linkages with governments: militias are loosely controlled or co-opted by the government or its military command. Although it provides for them training, arms, equipment, funds, and intelligence, militias retain its character of being non-State actors as they enjoy a sort of autonomy at the operational and tactical levels, and are not constituent units of the regular security forces. Thus, they are incorporated into the state counter-insurgency campaign as semi-autonomous actors. Moreover, militias can shift their interests and develop agendas that are at odds with those of the state. For example, the Civil Defense Forces in Sierra Leon was initially formed to protect the local population against the attacks conducted by the Revolutionary United Front rebels; they have subsequently became preying on civilians, and committing atrocities.

Militias have been present in almost all types of intrastate conflicts around the world since 1945, with significant impacts on their dynamics, duration, patterns of fighting, and outcomes. The Hashed-al-Shaabi and the Awakening councils in Iraq, the Comités de Autodefensa in Peru, the Civilian Joint Task Forces in Nigeria, the Kamajors in Sierra Leon, the Christian self-defense forces in Syria, and the self-defense forces fighting Russian-backed separatist armed groups in Eastern Ukraine, all constitute prominent examples of this type of violent non-State actors.

Overall, militias are autonomous violent actors, despite their linkages with the state, and they use violence for defensive reasons, either on behalf of the state or on behalf of local communities during period of war or peace. In a way or another, militias are set up as a response to a threat to the political status quo in a country.

2. Types of militias:
Corrina's definition indicates that two types of militias exist based on patterns of formation and relation with the state, including pro-government militias and informal militias.

a. Pro-government militias (paramilitary groups):
This category covers those paramilitary formations that are mobilized by the government, directly or by its inducement, with the aim of defending the political regime or the status quo within a country in periods of peace or crises. (Chris Alden, Monika Thakur, Matthew Arnold, 2011) While wartime militias, organized, equipped, and funded by the political/military leadership of a state to counter insurgency, defend the political regime, or provide security for local communities; peacetime pro-government militias are mobilized to target political oppositions, oppress protests, or carrying out "dirty jobs" on behalf of the ruling regime.

Pro-government militias are identified by the following elements:

• A level of organization: each militias should have at least an identifiable leader, a pattern of organization, a name, and a geographical, political or ethnic base.

• A crucial government support: this category of militias usually receive almost all its resources from the state within which they operate, including, funds, training, weapons, logistics, intelligence in order to face a common enemy. (Sabine Carey, Neil Mitchelle , 2013)

• A specific security or defense agenda: states that delegate violence to paramilitary groups usually identify a specific defense agenda for these formations to fight for, such as protecting a town against rebel attacks, fighting alongside regular military forces in major offensive operations, or conducting law enforcement tasks in large cities or rural areas.

• Time duration: most pro-government militias are mobilized for specific missions. Thus, their existence ends when the conditions that led to their formation fade. For instance, a success of a counter-terrorism campaign make pro-government militias that have fought alongside regular forces a subject of a Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration program (DDR program), voluntarily or coercively by the state. However, some strategically effective militias may survive and sustain their operations in post-conflict periods due to the significant roles they can play during these precarious periods. Furthermore, militias associated with government figures or political parties usually have unidentified time framework, as they are coercive tools to exert further political influence or counter political adversaries.

b. Informal militias:

This category includes those armed formations created simultaneously by local initiatives of strong warlords, local figures or tribes leaders to provide security for and defend a local population, mainly an ethnic or a confessional group; in a hostile environment due to the weakness or collapse of central authority or its unwillingness to perform its security tasks. (Chris Alden, Monika Thakur, Matthew Arnold, 2011)

Professor Barry Posen described this situation in more details in his 1993 article *"The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict"*. He pointed out that the collapse of state power leaves ethnic and other local communities in a condition resembling international anarchy, without any guarantee that their rights will be protected as they were under a strong centralized state. Consequently, those communities turn to build up militias for protection and defense in such hostile environment. (Posen, 1993)

The Iraqi case constitutes a prominent example, as the collapse of the central government in Baghdad due to the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, had led to the emergence of numerous militias such as Badr brigade and Jaish al-Mahdi, which have been key actors in the sectarian strife that plagued Iraq during the years of 2006 and 2007. Each militia represented certain political, ethnic or sectarian grievances and sought to preserve its community's rights in the new precarious Iraqi political and security landscape.

While some of this type of militias might get state's support or fight by the side of government against insurgent groups, others take advantage of the state weakness to develop their own agendas and seek to achieve political, economic or ideological ends. Therefore, they

may turn against regular forces to prevent the central authority from consolidating its power and restoring its monopoly over the legitimate use of force, as chaos and "internal anarchy" best serve their narrow interests.

Apparently, all types of militias vary in terms of size, organizational patterns, ideological background, level of professionalism, and their relationship with the government and the broader society within which they operate. While some militias fight in small local unites, others evolve into mobile quasi-armies with trained and more disciplined soldiers using professional equipment such as Colombia's paramilitaries.

Furthermore, although they are primarily mobilized for defensive purposes, militias' relationships with local communities differ distinctively. Some militias often provide political goods for their constituencies, including protection, governance, and sorts of welfare, as was the case of the Iraqi Jaish al-Mahdi militia, which had provided security, health care, religious education, and shelters for the poor population in the Shiite-majority province of Al-Basra in Southern Iraq. (Williams, 2009) However, they may later engage in predatory behaviors against civilians, whether through coercive recruitment or illicit criminal acts like kidnapping, extortion, rape, and torture. In addition, governments may use militias to repress a particular segment of the society, be it an ethnic, religious group, or political opposition. (Corinna Jentzsch, Stathis N. Kalyvas, Livia Isabella Schubiger, 2017)

III.   Relying on militias: pros and cons

Using militias and paramilitary forces to counter insurgency has a long history. Currently, many elements of counter-insurgency strategies call for the use of local militias to extend armed presence and consolidate state's military and security efforts. A large number of governments worldwide have been relying on militias in their armed struggle against internal or external enemies. For instance, in recent time, the U.S. relied on "Al-Sahawat councils" (also known as the Sons of Iraq) to combat Al-Qaeda in Iraq during the years of 2007 and 2008. Ukraine has also been relying on pro-Ukraine militias to fight Russian-backed armed separatists in the Donbas region in the east of the country as well.

1.   Strategic advantages of relying on militias to counter-insurgency

In the historical literature on strategy, many scholars and military commanders endorsed the option of forming popular militias to enhance the regular forces' defensive and offensive capabilities. Niccolo Machiavelli, for example, recommended the formation of loyal citizen's militias for protecting the Italian cities instead of relying on mercenaries. (Schneckener, Militias and the Politics of Legitimacy, 2017) The Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz, as well, advocated the use of popular groups-which he called landWehr-as auxiliary forces to support the regular army fighting an enemy both in an *"offensive capacity on foreign soil and defensively in case of foreign invasion."* (Clausewitz, 1997)

This is despite the fact that delegating violence to irregular forces contradicts Max Weber's ideal of the state monopoly over the legitimate use of violence, which constitutes a key feature of sovereignty and a cornerstone for the continuation of the state as a united and coherent entity and its ability to fulfill its security functions as well.   *"Without such a*

monopoly and the degree of centralization that it entails, the state cannot play its role as enforcer of law and order, let alone provide public services, encourage and regulate economic activities. When the state fails to achieve almost any political centralization, society sooner or later descends into chaos, as did Somalia" Professor James A. Robinson argued. (Daron Acemoglu, James Robinson, 2012) Therefore, the modern state has consolidated itself by a progressive disarming of the citizenry and confined instruments of force in its regular forces. Nevertheless, some states like the United States have deviated from this Westphalian ideal, and constitutionally retaining the right of its citizens to bear arms and of its component states to retain their own militias as a defense against the hegemony of the federal government. (Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, Jaap de Wild, 1998)

Accordingly, an inquiry about the dynamics that have been driving a wide range of states around the world to align with irregular forces is crucially significant. This section outlines some important factors that may explain such state collaboration with militias instead of strengthening its regular security forces that are likely to be more trained and disciplined.

• **State weakness/failure:**
Many international and strategic studies analysts believe the state's weakness embodied in its inability to fulfill its security tasks due to the lack of resources or the ineffectiveness of its security forces leads the ruling elites to collaborate with irregular forces to consolidate their positions and preserve the existing structure of power. Professor Paul Williams argue, in this sense, that: *"militias are outside the formal security sector and central government command, and outside the law because they often came into existence to provide security where the central government- for whatever reason- has failed to do so. However, militias are often considered legitimate entities filling the gap resulting from the absence of effective, provisional, or local security institutions."* (Williams, Violent non-State Actors and National and International Security, 2008)

As an evident example, the collapse of the Iraqi security forces in front of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) led the Iraqi government to account on myriad Shiite militias to block the expansion of that terrorist group, and to liberate the territories that have been fall under its rule since June 2014.

However, the state weakness argument cannot fully explain the states' reliance on militias, as many developed and powerful countries have recruited militias to tackle some critical security problems. For instance, the United States, which possesses the most powerful army on earth, have collaborated with tribal militias in Western Iraq, called "the Awakening movements" in order to combat Al-Qaeda in Iraq despite the enormous military strength and capabilities that have deployed in Iraq since 2003.Thus, the state growing collaboration with irregular forces is attributed to other incentives and factors.

• **Militias as a cheap and flexible option:**
The mobilization, equipment, and deployment of these armed irregular forces are less costly than equipping regular forces, as they require little training and light arms in contrast to regular forces that need professional training and heavy armament, which require enormous financial resources that may not be available in times of civil wars and internal strives.

(Sabine Carey, Neil Mitchel, 2009) Moreover, the operational flexibility that characterizes this type of armed groups attract military leaders, as militias can be deployed quickly without a need to work within a strict chain of command as it is required within national armies. In addition, this flexibility can be observed in their rapid defensive reactions to local conflict dynamics and events, like anticipating rebel assaults.

• **Access to local knowledge and intelligence:**

Local knowledge and intelligence are critical elements for a successful counter-insurgency strategy and are often difficult for regular forces to obtain, as they are unfamiliar with local contexts. (Pro-Government Militias: Human Rights Abuses and the Ambiguous Role of Foreign Aid, 2016) Thus, relying on militias is an option that may enable government forces to have access to such valuable elements, as they knowledge about local grievances, history, cultures, social dynamics, traditions, as well as information about locations and identity of insurgent groups- especially if members of those militias were former rebels. Moreover, militia men are familiar with topographical characteristics of their areas of operations, including mountains, deserts, and forests, an advantage that may allow them to be more operationally effective than regular forces.

• **Consolidation of legitimacy of counter-insurgency campaigns:**

Militias can bolster the legitimacy of governments' campaigns against insurgent groups, as they represent local or ethnic support for its cause. (Hughes Geraint, Tripodi Christian, 2009) The local support is crucial for successful counter-insurgency efforts, here is why governments, particularly foreign powers usually engages in "hearts-and minds campaigns," which seek to undermine the insurgent's cause, and legitimize government's coercive or even repressive measures against insurgents and their passive supporters.

The United States, for example, has supported the Sunni Tribal militias to fight Al-Qaeda affiliate in Iraq in the years of 2007 and 2008, and pushed towards the incorporation of Sunni militias into the military campaign against the Islamic State since 2014 in order to preserve its military efforts from being labeled as "anti-Sunni", as many voices in the Middle East have blamed the United States for role in undermining and weakening the Sunni populations in Iraq and the region as whole.

• **Plausible deniability:**

Militias may engage in human rights abuses and perpetrate ferocities against civilians, minorities or political opposition groups such as, ethnic cleansing, assassinations, torture, and kidnapping on behalf of the government. (Sabine Carey, Neil Mitchel, 2009) Therefore, "dirty jobs" are a good incentive for governments to delegate violence to such militias either to maintain the reputation of its national security forces or to avoid international condemnation, prosecution, and pressure to conform to human rights standards. And this is one of the significant reasons that led "Israel" to support the Lebanese Christian Phalange militias in Beirut during the civil war in 1982.

2. Risks of relying on militias to counter-insurgency

All the aforementioned strategic and operational advantages that militias bring to governments' security strategy around the world, make them an appealing or even an

indispensable strategic and defensive option during periods of internal conflicts, including civil wars, anti-terrorism campaigns, or counter-insurgencies. However, these advantages should not be taken for granted as the presence of these undisciplined forces entails serious risks and threats to national and human security.

From the human security perspective, the presence of pro-government militias have been associated with human rights abuses and war crimes in many academic literature and media reports, as numerous atrocities, genocides and other violations have been perpetrated by local paramilitaries since the end of the Second World War in 1945. The sectarian cleansing that had taken place in Iraq during the sectarian civil war in 2006-2007 was carried out by various Shiite militias, particularly the Bard Brigade and Jaish- al- Mahdi. A two pro-government militias that have enhanced their presence in the Iraqi security landscape in the aftermath of the U.S.-led invasion of 2003. Moreover, militias may engage in criminal activities and predatory behaviors against local populations-and perhaps with an impunity from the state-either to maximize their private economic profits or to fund their military operations amid the scarce resources that governments provide during crises. Jaish-al-Mahdi in Iraq had engaged in criminal activities in their areas of operations, including smuggling, extortion, kidnapping, and robbery. (Williams, Criminals, Militias, and Insurgents: Organized Crime in Iraq , 2009) And all these types of crimes represent a sever violation to human security.

In addition, the presence of militias may challenge the national security of states and accelerate the process of state failure. (Aliyev, 2017) First, because chaos and the dynamics of "internal anarchy" best serve militias' private interests, they often tend to persist their operations beyond the conflict period, particularly if they have already acquired enough military strength and economic resources that enable them to defy the state by developing political or military agendas that are at odds with that of the state within which they operate. Eventually, these irregular forces work to prevent the state from restoring its legitimate monopoly over the use of force through undermining or spoiling any peace process or achieved ceasefire agreement. (Christoph V. Steinert, Janina Steinert, 2016) Moreover, militias tend to resist any program of DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration) initiated by the state when the purpose of their formation disappear, and this tendency make post-conflict periods more volatile and increases the risks of conflict recurrence due to the proliferation of weapons within the society. Second, many scholars totally disapprove such state collaboration with irregular forces under any circumstances because, after all, militias remain undisciplined, undertrained and underequipped forces that are more likely to commit mistakes in the battlefield, regardless of the limited advantages they may bring to the government.

IV. The Iraqi government Reliance on "The Popular Mobilization Forces" to counter terrorism since 2014

This section highlights the Iraqi government reliance on a combination of militias called "the Popular Mobilization Forces" (al-Hashed al-Shaabi is the Arabic acronym) since the rise of the Islamic State, a notorious terrorist organization that seized control of large swaths of

territory in both Iraq and Syria, and was behind the death of tens of thousands of people. It also investigates the dynamics that led the Iraqi government to collaborate with these irregular forces, and finally it tests their operational effectiveness.

1. The security landscape in Iraq since 2003: the predominant role of armed groups

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 that led to the collapse of the central government in Baghdad, coupled with the disastrous policies of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) led by the U.S. Ambassador Paul Bremer, including the disintegration of the Iraqi army and its affiliate security agencies, and the "de-Baathification" policy created a security vacuum and a state of chaos, which have been exploited by a myriad of armed groups to grow up and thrive. Consequently, Iraq witnessed a rise and proliferation of various types of violent non-state actors, including insurgents, militias, terrorist groups, and criminal organizations, which have been affecting the stability, security and prosperity of Iraq.

The prevalence of numerous armed groups shaped the new security and political landscape of post-2003 Iraq. They played a critical role in the local dynamics and were key actors in the sectarian civil war that plagued the country during the years of 2006 and 2007, after the destruction of the Golden Dom mosque in Samarra by Al-Qaeda in Iraq's operatives in February 22, 2006. (Damluji, 2010) Brutal acts of violence and communal strife based on sectarian affiliations erupted between Shiite militias, including the Badr Brigade and Jaysh-al-Mahdi, and Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) led by Abu-Mosab al-Zarqawi. The different warring parties committed war crimes and were behind many ferocities against innocent civilians of the other sect, as each party claimed to be "the protector" or "the guardian" of its confessional identity in the new hostile environment.

Unlike AQI, the Shiite militias operated in collaboration with the Iraqi security forces, particularly the Iraqi Police, which was infiltrated by members of the Badr Brigade. The police service, subsequently, provided those militias with uniforms, impunity and logistical support that enabled them to act without fear of prosecution and punishment. As the 2007 Baker-Hamelton report put it *"Iraqi police routinely engage in sectarian violence, including the unnecessary detention, torture and targeted execution of Sunni civilian. The police is organized under the ministry of interior, which is confronted by corruption and militia infiltration."* (James Baker, Lee Hamelton, 2007)

Furthermore, these Shiite militias have served as Iran's proxies in Iraq and beyond, as they were trained, equipped, supported, and funded by Iran's IRGC' Quds force in order to serve its strategic interests and allow Iran to shape and influence the trajectory and outcomes of the recurrent conflicts in Iraq.

Since 2008, the sectarian violence sharply mitigated as a result of the U.S. "Surge Strategy" that consisted both a considerable increase of the U.S. troops in Iraq and supporting the Sunni tribal "awakening councils" in the Anbar province to fight AQI and halt its terrorist attacks. (Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge, 2008) This strategy fortunately succeeded in ending the hostilities between the warring parties because it inflicted a severe damage and losses on AQI's military capabilities. Ultimately, the subversive rise of these

violent non-State actors witnessed a radical decline ushering an era of "unstable peace" that lasted until 2012.

2. The rise of ISIS in Iraq since 2014:

The outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 have had a spillover effects on Syria's neighbors, particularly Iraq, including refugees, the proliferation of arms and fighters, and the spread of ethnic and sectarian narratives beyond national borders. The Iraqi Shiite leaders like Hadi al-Ameri, Moqtada al-Sadr, Abo-Mahdi al-Mohandis, and Akram al-Kaabi have mobilized their militias to fight on the Assad regime side against the western-backed Syrian rebels and what they called the "Takfiris and Wahhabis" in order "to protect sacred Shiite shrines" in Damascus and other Syrian cities. (Smith, 2015) The deployment of Iraqi Shiite militias in Syria was in collaboration with Iran's Quds force and Lebanese Hezbollah, which trained new volunteers and coordinated their violent activities. Their involvement in the Syrian civil war enabled them to expand their military capabilities and benefited them with new fighting skills as they have participated in many defensive and offensive operations in coordination with other Shiite militias and the Syrian regular forces. (Cigar, 2015)

The Syrian civil war accompanied a growing internal Sunni resentment in Iraq engendered by the former Prime Minister Malki's attempts to consolidate his grip on power immediately after the U.S. withdrawal in December 2011. Maliki had embraced several oppressive and sectarian policies against the Sunni segment of the Iraqi society, which include the targeting of major Sunni political figures like the former vice president Tarik al-Hachemi; corruption, the exclusion of the Sunni "Awakening movements", the appointment of his loyalties at the head of several civilian and security institutions, including the central bank, judiciary, and the integrity commission; and the creation of extra-constitutional security bodies and informal chain of command, made up of special operations units and provincial-level operations commands directly run from his office in order to bypass the interior and defense ministries. (Sulivan, 2013)

Such exclusionary policies instigated a broad protest movement that have flowed the Sunni provinces, including al-Anbar, Salah-el-din, Dyala, and Ninawa. The protesters that took the street since early 2012 called for the release of prisoners, the end of sectarian and marginalization policies, the equal distribution of wealth and power, and the repeal of the terrorism law that was mainly directed towards the Sunni population. However, the Maliki's government was not responsive to the protesters' demands, indeed, it described the protest movement as a "soap bubble" and "a fertile ground for terrorism". The subsequent oppression of the Iraqi security forces (ISF) to those protesters, particularly in "Al-Haweeja camp" in April 2013; had escalated tensions between the Iraqi Shia-led government and the Sunni community that turned to local self-defense forces to defend their cities and towns against ISF's repression. The Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) that was operating in Syria since 2012, took advantage of the Sunni resentment and espoused their grievances to build their narrative and establish a stronghold in the Sunni territories in Iraq. Thereafter, ISIS led by Abou-Bakr el-Baghdadi launched offensive attacks against Iraqi government's targets, and were able to seize control of several critical Iraqi cities, including Ramadi, Tikrit and Mosul- the second

largest city in Iraq- amidst a disgraceful Iraqi army collapse in front of few hundreds of ISIS militants.

By mid-June 2014, ISIS was controlling an area between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers equal to one third of Iraq's territory, upon which it established its self-proclaimed "Caliphate", a "state" governed in accordance with its narrow interpretation of the Islamic law (Sharia is the Arabic acronym). (Jessica Stern, John Berger, 2015) The terrorist organization declared Abou-Bakr al-Baghdadi to be its "Khalifa" and called for all Muslims around the world to immigrate (to make hejra) to the territories under its control and swear allegiance to the New Muslim Ameer (prince).

ISIS had allegedly claimed that its presence paves the way for the restoration of "God's Rule on Earth" and its role was to defend the Muslim populations against the near and far "apostate" enemies, referring to the Arab political regimes, Rawafeed (Shiite groups) and Western Powers. It became notorious for its brutality against civilians and ethnic and religious minorities, particularly the Yazidis that were a subject of its mass killing in Northern Iraq in summer of 2014. A crimes that shortly after prompted a U.S.-led international coalition to launch an air campaign against ISIS' positions in both Iraq and Syria by August 2014.

3. The Rise of the "Popular Mobilization Forces" in Iraq since 2014:

The advance of ISIS in Iraq and its seizure of large swaths of territory amidst the fall of the Iraqi army had generated furious local, regional and global reactions. It prompted major Shiite leaders to rehabilitate the military wings of their political movements, including Badr organization and the Sadrist movement that remobilized Jaysh- al-Mahdi militia under a new banner called" Saraya el-Salam" (Peace Brigades). Additionally, new militias have emerged, particularly after the call of Ayatollah Ali Sistani for the Iraqi people to volunteer and mobilize in the Iraqi security forces to fight terrorism and defend holy Shiite shrines. Irregular forces like Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl haaq, Saraya Salaam, Badr forces and dozens of other militias have been playing a critical role in the new Iraqi security landscape willing to fight ISIS, block its expansion, and liberate the areas under its control.

The disgraceful collapse of several units of the Iraqi army in front of ISIS has undermined the credibility and legitimacy of the Iraqi government as it failed to protect its citizens and fulfill its security functions. Consequently, the Iraqi Shiite leadership had turned to Shiite militias to compensate ISF weakness and consolidate its efforts to fight ISIS, degrade its power, and eliminate its subversive role.

Days after the collapse of Mosul under ISIS control, Prime Minister Maliki issued a decree to establish the Popular Mobilization Committee as an umbrella organization consisting of a wide range of militias, to manage their administrative, financial and operational affairs, and coordinate their activities in order to attain a decisive victory against that brutal terrorist organization. (Patrik Martin, Omer Kasim, 2017)

4. Who are the "Popular Mobilization Forces"?

The popular mobilization forces are the by-product of both the Sistani's Fatwa of Holy Jihad and the political decision of former Prime Minister Nori al-Maliki. (Renad Mansour,

Faleh Jaber, 2017) Although the former had called the Iraqi young population to volunteer in the Iraqi Security Forces to fight the "Takfiri terrorism" and defend the holy Shiite shrines, Shiite militias' leaders reoriented the call to recruit volunteers within their ranks rather than within the regular forces. On the other hand, the latter provided the political cover and the legal framework for the presence of those irregular forces as the Iraqi Constitution prohibits in its article 9 *"the formation of any irregular forces or militias outside the framework of the Iraqi Armed Forces."*

The Popular Mobilization is not a homogeneous organization or a unified militia solely formed to fight ISIS. However, it is made up of different categories of forces with varying political and ideological leanings.

• **The pro-Khamanei militias:** They are the most powerful militias under the Popular Mobilization Committee as they have strong ties with Tehran that provided all types of support to these proxies, which include funds, training, intelligence, logistics, and arms. These militias, including the Badr forces, Kataib Hizbollah, Asayab Ahl-al-Haq, Kataib-Sayyad-al-Shohadaa, Kataib Abou-Fadl-al-Abbas, and many others; (Cigar, 2015) were formed before ISIS' rise, and most of them have been military wings of political movements. Their credibility has been always questioned because of their loyalty to Wilayat-al-Faqih (the Guardianship of the Jurists), particularly since they have been prioritizing Iran's interests over Iraqi's one. These militias, which comprise more than 80.000 fighters, had participated in almost all military operations against ISIS, and have fought in the Syrian civil war on the side of al-Assad regime.

• **The pro-Sistani militias:** This category covers those apolitical militias directly associated with the religious establishment in Najef, led by Ali al-Sistani, whose 2014 Fatwa of holy Jihad was the primary driver for their mobilization. Saraya-al-Ataba-al-Husseineya, Saraya-al-Ataba-al-Abasseya, Saraya-al-Ataba-al-Alaweya, and Liwa Ali-al-Akbar are the four major militias included in this category organized and financed by Najaf to protect the Shiite holy sites in Karbalaa, Najaf, and Kadhemeya. (Renad Mansour, Faleh Jaber, 2017) The total number of these militias is around 20.000 lightly armed volunteers, mostly came from the Southern Shi-majority provinces. (Abbas, 2017)

• **The Sadrist militias:** The infamous popular Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr remobilized Jaish al-Mahdi under a new brand called Saraya-al-Salam (Peace Brigade) right after the June 2014 Camp Speicher massacre. (Renad Mansour, Faleh Jaber, 2017) The remobilization process was easily as the Jaish al-Mahdi's social network remained intact after years of inactivity. Its manpower capacity range from 10.000 to 20.000 fighters, and the movement stated that lack of resources prevented them from mobilizing more fighters. The Sadrist movement espoused nationalism displayed in its leaders' rhetoric against the presence of foreign troops on the Iraqi soil, and the growing Iranian influence. In addition, the group had many disagreements and struggles with pro-Khamanei militias-which they described it in many occasions as "the imprudent militias"- over various political and financial issues, including the growing role of Iran in Iraq, the unequal allocation of PMF's budget, Prime Minister al-Abadi policies, intervention in Syria, and the future of PMF after the demise of ISIS…etc.

• **The Minorities' militias:** Outside the mainstream, other relatively smaller and weaker militias exist, which are those associated with religious and ethnic minorities, including the Sunnis, Kurds, Turkmans, Yazidis, and Christians. All of which have established their own local militias to defend themselves against ISIS attacks, and contribute to the broader campaign against the terrorist organization. This includes Ninawa Guards, Kataib-Aissa-ibn-Maryam (Jesus Brigades), and Babelyoon Brigade. (Dylan O'Driscoll, Dave van Zoonen, 2017)

The total number of all these militias ranges from 100.000 to 140.000 fighters, who have received rudimentary training from the Iraqi federal police and teams from Iran's Quds forces and Lebanese Hezbollah that trained the new volunteers to operate alongside the Iraqi security forces and the most powerful Shiite militias like Badr forces and Asayab-Ahl-al-Haq. (Renad Mansour, Faleh Jaber, 2017) These irregular forces have received a financial allocation from the Iraqi government, ranged from 1 billion dollar in 2015 to around 2 billion dollar in 2017. And many militias within "al-Hashed" have complained about the unfair distribution of resources among the militias, a situation that they attributed it to the predomination of Pro-Khamanei Shiite leaders like Abou-Mahdi-al-Muhandis and Haddi-al-Ameri over the "Hashed Committee".

Iran played decisive role in mobilizing these militias. They provided funds, equipment, weapons, logistics, intelligence, and training for the large number of volunteers that responded to the Sistani's call. (Heras, 2017) Haddi al-Amiri, the leader of Badr organization described Iran's support as follow: *"If it was not for Iran's support, Iraq would have fallen at the hands of ISIS. We had a real issue with weapons, preparations. When the battle started, the army and the police did not have ammunition. They volunteered for us to defend Iraq."* Furthermore, the Iranian general "Hajj Qacem Sulaimani" -the former leader of the Quds Forces- had supervised military operations against ISIS in several times, and its Quds force coordinated militias' activities and have participated directly in some operations through its advisers and operatives operating in Iraq.

5. **The military roles of the "Popular Mobilization Forces" in the fight against ISIS:**
Popular Mobilization Forces were a security asset in the struggle against the Islamic State organization in Iraq. They were integrated into the counter-terrorism campaign to fight ISIS and restore Iraq's sovereignty over its entire territory. Their contribution to the military victory against ISIS was indispensable, therefore, it was hailed by many senior Iraqi officials and commanders, including Prime Minister Haydar al-Abadi who praised, in the victory speech; the major role that the Hashed militias had played in the fighting against ISIS, labelling it as "priceless" and described the PMF as "the backbone of the Iraqi Security Forces".

PMF played various military and operational roles within the military campaign, ranging from defensive to offensive roles. Defensively, many PMF units remained in their home areas-mainly in the South, including Karbala, Najaf, Baghdad, and Basra-to prevent the expansion of ISIS into their cities, towns or villages. They were patrolling familiar terrains continuously to prevent any ISIS infiltration or attacks, and conducting check points at the main roads leading to their areas. Moreover, other Shiite militias were responsible for the

security and protection of specific religious events, including the Ashouraa' festival and the 40th day of Hussein's martyrdom.

Offensively, PMF had taken part of almost every offensive military operation to liberate the cities under ISIS control since June 2014, starting from breaking the besieged Amerli to liberating Mosul in late 2017. In October 2014, a joint forces of Iraqi army and al-Hashed militias succeeded in relieving the besiege town of Amerli, and this was the first victory after a set of humiliating defeats by ISIS. (Cigar, 2015) Other successful operations followed Amerli operation, including the clearing of Diyala province, al-Mokdadeya, Bakouba, Tekrit, Ramadi and Jurf-al-Sakhr, in all of which PMF militias played central roles. Mosul, the last stronghold of ISIS in Iraq; was the last province to be liberated by an operation started in late 2016 and lasted till December 2017, was conducted by a combination of forces, including PMF militias that played a key role in besieging the city to intercept any potential support to ISIS and foil attempts of escaping to Syria by ISIS fighters. (Flawlen Bourrat, Alexander De Lacaillerie, 2019)

Following the liberation of cities from ISIS, PMF have taken the responsibility to clear the areas from ISIS dormant cells, IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices), and Tunnels in order to prevent ISIS from retaking the areas. (Mohamed, 2016) In addition, PMF have performed law enforcement roles in those liberated areas to ensure public order and fight criminal groups and neighborhood gangs that have exploited the security vacuum left by the demise of ISIS.

Therefore, it has been widely believed that PMF militias have provided a valuable complement to the Iraqi Security Forces' conventional capabilities. As driven by religious zeal and a desire for revenge, many militias displayed a strong willingness to fight and undergo hardships, and eventually outperformed the Iraqi army and police tactically and operationally.

All the aforementioned PMF roles have been crucially backed by the Shiite religious establishment that was a source of spiritual support, cohesion as well as legitimacy. Occasionally, senior Shiite clerics had been visiting PMF training compounds as well as their camps on the frontlines to encourage them to fight with ferocity for the sake of al-Hussein (the grandson of Prophet Muhammad PBUH) against the Takfiri terrorism.

Ultimately, these PMF roles made a large segment of the Iraqi population, mainly Shiites in the South; to believe that without the sacrifices of PMF fighters, Iraq would have been an ISIS version of "Islamic Caliphate" run by Abu-Bakr-al-Baghdadi, (Renad Mansour, Faleh Jaber, 2017) therefore, al-Hashed-al-Shaabi was popularly described as "al-Hashed-al-Muqadas" or "The Sacred Mobilization Forces" and their killed fighters as Martyrs.

6. The negative consequences of the Iraqi government's collaboration with PMF:

Although PMF had immensely contributed to the liberation of many Iraqi cities and towns from ISIS grip, their presence have been questioned by various local, regional and global actors. Many reports and official declarations in the Middle East and beyond have condemned PMF ruthless, sectarian and criminal behaviors, including the targeting of foreign

interests in Iraq, human right violations, the involvement in criminal activities, and their pursuit for political influence.

• PMF sectarianism and human rights violations:

Popular mobilization forces became notorious for their sectarian nature and brutality against Sunni populations in Iraq as they have committed human rights abuses, including extra-judicial killing, indiscriminate arrests, torture, ill-treatment and many other abuses against innocent Sunni civilians. For years, Shiite militias in Iraq have been accused for war crimes, by various human rights organizations including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Geneva Humanitarian Call, and the United Nations, all of which have been reporting sectarian abuses and violations primarily against the Sunni Arab population.

Amnesty International, for instance, stated in one of its reports that: *"Against the current backdrop of lawlessness and sectarian violence, Shi'a militias have been abducting and killing Sunni civilians with almost total impunity. Unidentified bodies have been discovered, handcuffed with gunshot wounds to the head, indicating a pattern of execution-style killings. The Iraqi government often supports and arms these militias – making them largely responsible for war crimes and serious human rights abuses."* (Iraq: The Rise of Militias, 2018) Such Human rights violations have instigated sectarian tensions, and contributed to the polarization of the Iraqi society over confessional fault-lines.

The majority of the Sunni population views the PMF as a Shiite force seeking to expand Shia influence in Iraq and exclude the Sunnis from any political and economic roles in the country. The wisdom behind that lies in the sectarian nature of those paramilitary groups, demonstrated in their names, flags, banners, religious speeches, and declarations of their leaders, all of which contain Shiite symbols and connotations, such as "Labayk-ya-Hussein" (For the sake of Hussein), "Kataib-Abu-Fadl al-Abbas" (Brigades of Abu-Fadl-al-Abbas), and posters of Grand Iranian Jurist "Ali Khamenei" and other senior Shiite clerics.

• PMF involvement in crime:

Many reports pointed out that various Shiite militias have engaged in criminal activities and preyed on civilians as a source of private gains. Looting, kidnapping for ransoms, and smuggling are common illicit acts prevalent in areas under PMF militias' control. Members of those militias took advantage of the security vacuum left by the war against ISIS and the impunity they gained from the government to enrich themselves through crime. And this may explain why many militiamen preferred the state of chaos to persist as it well serves their private economic interests. Nevertheless, Shiite militias' leaders had rejected the accusation, and consider it as a way to discredit the PMF. However, they did not deny the possibility of some rare criminal acts, and they vowed to prosecute any member of their ranks that fall down in the trap of crime as crime may disgrace the reputation of PMF and "the sacrifices of their martyrs".

• PMF pursuit of a political leverage:

Shiite militias' leaders have been attempting to transform PMF military victories against ISIS into a political influence as it was obviously demonstrated in their participation in the 2018 Parliamentary election under the Fateh coalition, which have won 46 seats in the Iraqi

parliament. Then they engaged in coalition with other political parties to form the majority political block in the parliament that allows them to form the government. (Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: the Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State, 2018) The newly-acquired political influence allows them to expand their military and economic advantages, and block any DDR program or efforts to disintegrate Shiite militias and eliminate their role from the security and political landscape in Iraq.

Many state and non-state actors in the region have been concerned about the growing political influence of PMF in Iraq as it may polarize the political life in the country, and enhance sectarianism as a method of statecraft due to the sectarian nature of those groups and their close ties with Iran. Therefore, they have pressured the Iraqi government to take appropriate measures to undermine any PMF's political role.

• **PMF Impact on Iraq's foreign relations:**
Many PMF acts have been a source of tensions between Iraq and its neighbors, particularly Turkey and the Gulf States. For years, Shiite militias in Iraq have been threatening to target the interests of certain neighboring states in Iraq, and conduct attacks in their territories as their policies are at odds with Shiite agendas in Iraq and beyond. For instance, Qais-al-Khaza'ali, the leader of "Asaib-Ahl-al-Haqq", vowed in an interview that his militia's response will be "unexpectedly decisive" against a perceived Saudi interference in Iraq. In 2016, "Kataib-Sayed-al-Shuhadaa" vowed as well to "burn and destruct everything related to Saudi Arabia if it will not refrain from executing the Shiite cleric Nemr-al-nemr". Similar threats have been made by leaders of those militias against Turkey, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United States.

Furthermore, some militias have fulfilled their vows by targeting foreign interests and facilities in Iraq, for example, in November 2018, the U.S. Consulate in Basra was targeted by a militia rocket, the event that led the U.S. administration to temporarily close the consulate. And in June 19, 2019, an oil facility in Remila field in Basra was targeted by militia' rockets. And many other similar events have taken place since 2016. (Rasheed, 2019) All these reckless behaviors have prompt external powers to warn the Iraqi government to take its full responsibility to protect foreign interests, personnel, and facilities within its borders, and put an end to such recklessness showed by those undisciplined paramilitary groups.

V.   Conclusion:
Since 1945, numerous governments around the world have been delegating violence to different types of militias in times of peace and war in order to counter insurgency (including counter terrorism), preserve the political status quo, protect local communities, target political opponents, or commit "dirty jobs" such as assassination, ethnic cleansing, or mass killing on behalf of the ruling elite. The wisdom behind this delegation of security tasks lies in the strategic advantages that militias provide for the state and its security apparatus, including compensating weaknesses of the regular forces, enhancing the legitimacy of counter-insurgency campaigns, accessing to local knowledge and intelligence, and benefiting from the operational resilience of those irregular forces as well. However, collaborating with those actors entail serious risks as most militias operating in intrastate conflicts around the world

lack discipline, accountability and plausible level of training. Therefore, they very often engage in criminal activities and human rights violations, taking advantage of the state of chaos and security vacuum engendered by armed struggling between the state and insurgent groups. Moreover, as history shows, many pro-government militias have developed their own agendas that contradicts state's interests, and worked to prevent the state from restoring its monopoly over the use of force because chaos best serves their private economic agendas.

Iraq present a prominent example of how delegating violence to militias may generate strategic benefits for the state, particularly during civil strives. Although their sectarian nature, perpetation of human rights abuses, and close ties with Iran, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) that have officially emerged in 2014 as a by-product of the political decision of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and Fatwa (a religious call) of Grand Ayatollah-Ali-al-Sistani; played a central role in the military campaign against the Islamic State terrorist group. A campaign that started in 2014 and lasted till 2018 led to the demise of ISIS in Iraq after months of tide and ebb. Driven by religious zeal and desire for revenge, PMF militias contributed enormously to the military victories against ISIS as they participated in almost every defensive and offensive operations since 2014.

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