

July 10, 2019

## Belly Dancing in Baghdad

### **Information:**

On July 2, 2019, Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abd al-Mahdi, issued Decree 237.

Decree 237 makes the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) known as *Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*, part of the Iraqi army. Going forward they will be subject to Iraqi army orders and regulations and be under the command and control of the Army's Supreme Commander – the Iraqi Prime Minister. Accordingly, the PMU units will have formal Iraqi military titles (Brigade, Battalion, Division, etc.) and PMU personnel will have Iraqi military ranks.

Abd al-Mahdi declared that going forward it will be illegal for any armed faction to operate under the command of the PMU either openly or secretly.

Units that choose not to join the Iraqi armed forces will be permitted to carry weapons only for two purposes -protecting their offices and their leaders.

Decree 237 has been welcomed across the board both by Iraqi leaders who support Iran and those who resent Iranian intervention in Iraq. Notable anti-Iranian supporters include Senior [Shi'ite](#) Cleric and Iraqi political leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, head of the largest Iraqi political coalition – *Saeroun* (“Marching On”) and the leader of the paramilitary force, *Saraya al-Salam* (The Peace Companies). In addition, leaders of some of the most powerful Iranian-backed PMU militias, including *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (Band of the Righteous - AAH) and the *Badr Militia* support the Decree as well.

### **Analysis:**

#### **Evolution of the PMU**

Following the downfall of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003 - and particularly in the last decade, Iran has deepened its intervention and influence in Iraq.

On June 10, 2014, ISIS defeated the Iraqi army in Mosul - the 2nd largest city in Iraq. In response, Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani – the most powerful and influential Iraqi Cleric in Iraq, issued a *Fatwah* (a religious ordinance) - *Fatwah Fard Kifayah Jihad*. This *Fatwah* called upon everyone to make a collective effort to defeat ISIS. Al-Sistani's *Fatwah* urged every Iraqi capable of fighting to take up arms to defeat ISIS forces in Iraqi territory. Al-Sistani's *Fatwah* laid the foundation for the establishment of PMU.

In November 2016, the Iraqi Parliament (except for the Sunni delegates who did not attend the vote in protest) approved a law formally creating an Iraqi military force called *Al-Hashd Al-Sha'abi* - The Popular Mobilization Units (PMU). The law made *Al-Hashd Al-Sha'abi* (PMU) a legitimate and official military force, operating in parallel to the Iraqi armed forces, and under the control and command of the Iraqi government.

Today the PMU consists of some 70 Iraqi (mostly Shi'ite) paramilitary militias numbering between 40,000 and 160,000 militants. Some PMU militias are [Sunni](#), Kurdish, Turkmen, and Christian – yet their numbers are negligible.

Though not all of the Iraqi militias that make up the PMU completely align with Iran - Iran finances, trains, guides, and arms many of them.

The most powerful PMU militias are the ones that are either closely aligned with Iran or total Iranian proxies. *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (Band of the Righteous - AAH) and the *Badr Militia* –two of the strongest PMU militias - are aligned with Iran. However, they also take domestic considerations into account – and are, therefore, not blind followers of the Mullah regime.

Other PMU militias like *Kata'ib Hezbollah* (The Hezbollah Brigade), *Harakat al-Nujaba* (The Movement of the Noble Ones), *Kata'ib Abu al-Fadhl al-Abbas* (The Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade), and *Saraya al-Khorasan* (The Khorasan Companies) are Iranian proxies.

There is a difference between Iranian-aligned militias and Iranian-proxy militias. Proxies are an arm of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRG). The Iraqi government buys weapons from Iran and the Iraqi army arms the PMU with those weapons. So the proxies are expected to follow Iranian orders - no questions asked.

It is clear to see how the establishment of the PMU was a mechanism that enabled Iran to deepen its grip on Iraq.

### **Growing Opposition to Iranian Influence in Iraq**

Iran's increasing control over Iraq has resulted in growing resistance among the upper echelons of the Iraqi leadership. Today, some of the most influential Iraqi figures, publicly decry Iranian intervention in Iraq and in Iraqi affairs. Notable leaders who object, include Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani and Muqtada al Sadr. Sistani is the most admired Shi'ite Cleric - viewed by many as the most influential figure in Iraqi politics. Only a decade ago, Muqtada al-Sadr was Iran's most valuable subcontractor in Iraq. Under Iranian orders, his militia, then called *Jaish al-Mahdi* (the Messiah's Army) spearheaded attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq. In a change of events, in the 2018 elections, al-Sadr's party campaigned on limiting Iranian intervention in Iraq, fighting corruption, and disarming Iraqi militias (though he commands the largest militia). Today, he is the head of the largest Iraqi political coalition and leads the camp rejecting Iran intervention. (*For more on that power struggle, please read my articles below*).

### **Belly Dancing in Baghdad**

Al-Mahdi's Decree 237 is not "new news."

In February 2016, the former Iraqi Prime Minister (September 2014 – October 2018), Haider al-Abadi, issued a decree making PMU a permanent and a separate military entity, part of the Iraqi security forces, and under the control of the Iraqi Prime Minister.

In March 2018, al-Abadi issued another decree integrating the PMU into the country's security forces. As part of that Decree, PMU militants would be under the control of the Ministry of Defense and would have many of the same rights and responsibilities as members of the Iraqi military. They would receive the same salaries as the Iraqi military, and they could attend Military Institutes and Colleges. They would also be subject to the laws of military service and could not engage in any political activity.

Also, in July 2018, al-Abadi issued a very similar Decree - Decree 57.

Al-Mahdi's Decree 237 is like Al-Abadi's Decrees. It is a belly dance reflecting the ongoing power struggle between the two camps – the pro-Iranian camp and the anti-Iranian camp. The wall to wall acceptance of the Decree by all the major Iraqi players - those that support Iran to those that want to rid Iraq of Iranian intervention indicates that no one believes the Decree will make one bit of difference. Their acceptance is actually their indifference. They've all been here before...

### **So, the question is then - why did Al-Mahdi issue the Decree?**

In my analysis, the answer has to do with the growing tension in the Arab (Persian) Gulf.

Over the last month, Iranian-backed PMU units attacked U.S. military bases in Iraq, the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, and U.S. civilians working in Iraq. Reportedly, following the attacks, the U.S. demanded the Iraqi government restrain the PMU.

According to accumulating reports, the May 14 attack on oil facilities inside Saudi Arabia, which was attributed to Houthi tribes in Yemen, was actually launched from within Iraq. According to one report, the attack was carried out by the *Iraqi Kata'ib Hezbollah Militia* – an Iranian proxy.

In my estimation, Al-Mahdi's Decree is part of the Iraqi Prime Minister's attempt to appease the two most important players for Iraq – the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. By issuing the Decree, he is projecting Iraqi sovereignty and allegedly restricting Iran's influence. His attempt to convey that message to the U.S. and Saudi Arabia manifested itself in three actions that coincided with his issuance of the Decree:

On June 18, 2019, Al-Mahdi and the President of Iraq, Barham Salih, made a joint statement that all weapons must be solely and exclusively under the control of the state.

Decree 237 was issued shortly after the June 24 nomination of Maj. Gen (Ret.) Najah Hassan Ali al-Shammari, as Iraq's Minister of Defense. Al-Shammari - who is a Sunni Muslim, is a part of the Iraqi camp that rejects Iran's intervention in Iraq.

On July 2 - the same day Decree 237 was issued, Al-Mahdi had a phone conversation with the Saudi King to discuss "the security interests" of the two states.

### **Evaluation:**

Al-Mahdi's Decree is not a game-changer. Al-Mahdi is trying to belly dance to satisfy everyone.

The pro-Iranian camp, the Iran-affiliated militias, and the Iranian proxies claim the PMU being a part of the Iraqi armed forces further strengthens the PMU and benefits Iran. Reports that the next Iraqi Military Deputy Chief-of-Staff will be PMU leader Saleh al-Fayyad (who also currently serves as Iraq's National Security Advisor) support that argument. However, the flip side of that story is that reportedly, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's (IRG) plan was for Al-Fayyad to be the Iraqi Minister of Defense. However, Muqtada al-Sadr thwarted that plan.

The Iraqi camp that opposes Iranian intervention in Iraq argues that al-Mahdi's Decree strengthens Iraqi sovereignty. They claim that the Decree limits Iran's ability to continue to use Iraq to further their own hegemonic goals while ignoring Iraq's interests. For example – under Iranian orders, Iranian PMU proxies are fighting in Syria, while the Iraqi government wants to stay out of the war in Syria. The new Decree places the PMU under the command of the Iraqi armed forces; therefore, it must comply with Iraq's policy – not Iran's.

### **Prediction:**

The Mullah regime came to power in 1979. For forty years, they have been methodically and systematically building, cultivating, arming, financing, guiding, and training a global network of proxies and agents to further its hegemonic aspirations and expansionist vision. These agents and proxies serve as a Trojan Horse in the areas in which they are based. Lebanon is the ultimate example of the success of that strategy. In the early 1980s, Iran created Hezbollah. Slowly but surely, Hezbollah kidnapped Lebanon from within to the point where Iran - through Hezbollah, dictates Lebanon's domestic, foreign and security policy. Today Lebanon is an Iranian satellite. (*On Iran's Agent - Proxy model read my September 2017 article "[My Enemy is My Best Asset](#)"*).

A cornerstone of Iran's foreign policy is building and controlling a land corridor stretching from Iran through Iraq,

Syria, and Lebanon to the Mediterranean Sea. Iraq, which borders Iran to the west, is a critical component of the corridor. First, because of its location; without Iraq, there can be no corridor. Moreover, if Iran

controls Iraq, the Mullah regime will be able to expand further the parts of the land-bridge it has already established.

In Iran's bid to take over Iraq, its PMU proxies are a vital tool.

However, one should note that there are some significant differences between Lebanon and Iraq. First, although Hezbollah is part of the Lebanese government – Hezbollah's military force is neither sanctioned by Lebanese law, nor is it a part of the Lebanese army. Second, the Lebanese factors that oppose or challenge Iran's grip on Lebanon are weak and cannot rival Hezbollah's military might. In Iraq, however, the anti-Iranian camp is strong and can limit Iran's intervention. However, the reality today is that the power struggle between the two camps in Iraq will continue.

Iraq is one of eight active arenas of a massive power struggle between Iran and the Arab States. The other stages are the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, three Islands in the Gulf near the Strait of Hormuz, and the Iranian Nuclear Project. The outcome of the power struggle in Iraq between pro-Iranian and anti-Iranian forces is critical to the future of the Middle East – and exceeds the region.

Iran wants to gain control of the area from Iran to the Mediterranean Sea. The way they are attempting to do that is through flooding the area with militants and missiles. Controlling Iraq is critical to that end.

One of their goals is to create a massive military infrastructure that will – when Iran decides it's time – turn against Israel. Since March 2017 Iran's PMU proxies have repeatedly threatened to attack Israel. In March 2019, General Mohammad Ali Jafari (Commander of the IRG at the time) announced that Iran has 100,000 PMU militants in Syria. He added that they have enough Iranian forces in Iraq to train and qualify an additional 100,000.

One should not underestimate the seriousness of the Iranian threat.

In February 2018 Israel intercepted an Iranian attack drone infiltrating Israeli territory. The drone was controlled from and operated by an Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRG) military base in Syria. The significance of this attack was that this was the first time Iran militarily provoked Israel itself, as opposed to using its proxies.

On May 10, 2018, following Israeli attacks on its bases in Syria, IRG forces in Syria launched dozens of heavy rockets at Israel. Israel responded with "Operation House of Cards" - a two-hour attack targeting Iranian bases, rocket and missile launchers, Syrian anti-aerial batteries, ammunition bunkers, as well as radar and communication systems.

Israel accurately interprets the Mullah regime's strategy and goal and therefore works relentlessly - including militarily - to intercept that plan at all costs.

Israel's interest should be the world's interest.

Failing to prevent the completion of the Iranian land corridor will very likely lead to war and destruction on a massive scale. The ramifications of such a war will significantly exceed the region.

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On Iraq's inner power struggle read the following articles:

[Will Iran Deepen its Intervention in Iraq](#) (August 2018)

[Post-Election Iraq: A Spinning Whirlpool](#) (September 2018)

[Iran Can't Fulfil its Hope for a Shia Corridor Without Iraq](#) (October 2018)

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