Iran Declares War on the US's Covert Influence in Iraq

When US officials visited Baghdad and met with the Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi, they had two requests: first, to close all commerce and financial exchanges with Iran to strangle the Iranian economy and bring it to its knees. The second was to neutralize the Iraqi groups (known as Hashd al-Shaabi) which sympathize with Iran and carry a similar ideology.

The Iraqi Premier is aware he is being pushed into the heart of two minefields, Iranian and American, and therefore he cannot just walk straight into these fields. He has decided to reject the first US demand because Iraq has religious, commercial and energy bonds with Iran. He is refusing to transform Iraq into a US-Iran battlefield where no winner can be expected to stay on his feet, including Iraq. He wants to force the US administration to back down and agree to provide Iraq with waivers to buy Iranian gas and keep commercial exchange flowing.

What were Abdel Mahdi's reasons for responding to US pressure? He did not want to have the Americans on his back or turn the country upside down. Therefore, though he refused to satisfy US officials in their first request, he did take account of the latter, seeking to avoid a potential coup d'état and a possible US maneuver to allow the return of the terrorist group "Islamic State" (ISIS). The Prime Minister issued Diwani Order (decree) no. 237 "to organize Hashd al-Shaabi, where all factions close their headquarters and have the option to either join the armed forces or engage in political activity (unarmed). Any faction acting secretly or publicly bypassing these instructions is forbidden. Compliance with the ultimatum is required by the 31 of July".

The US administration was satisfied with this move, but…

The agitated situation in the Middle East makes it difficult for Iraq to maintain a balanced position, especially since the belligerents are the US (with its military forces stationed in the country), and Iran (a neighbor). It seems there is little room for compromise. Iran understands Baghdad's desire to avoid Iraq becoming a war theatre, so long as the cannons can be kept inside the warehouses (because in the case of a military confrontation all limits will disappear); Iran wants to see

Iraq stable and prosper: nonetheless Iran will not remain idle in the face of any US hits, and will respond vigorously. The merger of Hashd al-Shaabi has its pros and cons: but Iran cannot turn a blind eye to this event and allow it to become a US victory.

The advantages related to the Prime Minister's decree 237 are principally the fact that members of Hashd will enjoy equal rights and services (indemnity, social protection, and medical care), just like any other members of the armed and security forces. The negative aspects are numerous.

Firstly, it is a US request and as such represents a blatant intrusion into Iraqi domestic affairs: it is the imposition of the US administration's policy on a sovereign country. However, the enemies of the US are not necessarily the enemies of Iraq.

There is a reason to believe that Hashd is being targeted precisely because of its essential contributions to Iraqi and regional security, made possible in part because many groups in Hashd are in harmony with Iran.

Many US and western analysts take it upon themselves to regularly and harshly criticize Hashd, ignoring the fact that it was Hashd that saved Iraq (and the rest of the Middle East) from ISIS when all other "security" forces were on the run. The US objective in imposing this reform was to cripple all Iranian friends and allies in Iraq and divide Mesopotamia into Kurdistan, Shiistan, and Sunnistan.

Hashd fought against ISIS effectively, and some groups supported Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and were partially responsible for the failure of the US-sponsored regime-change war in Syria.
Hashd members have firm ideological commitments (the Christian Babylon Hashd, the Sunni Hashd al-Ashaaer, and Shia Hashd al-Shaabi) and thus stand as a firewall between the government of Baghdad and the US lobby which influences many Iraqi politicians.
Finally, Hashd can stop any attempt at a coup d'état against Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi or any other Prime Minister ruling the country, if carried out by a military wing within the Iraqi Army.

Iraq never forgets how the US stood idle when ISIS occupied 40 percent of the country (all of Anbar, Nineveh, Salahuddin and parts of Diyala and Baghdad) and the US administration watched from afar, refusing to deliver weapons that had

already been paid for and scheduled. Kurdistan Leader Masoud Barzani, who welcomed the ISIS occupation of Mosul, was the first to praise Iran's intervention to arm Kurdistan (and Baghdad) when ISIS turned its guns against Kirkuk and Erbil.

In 2014, the Obama administration saw ISIS was stopped at the gates of Baghdad when the Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Sistani called for the creation of a "Popular Gathering", the translation of "Hashd al-Shaabi" from the Arabic language.

I witnessed how at this time Baghdad, Najaf and Karbala became empty with the population panicking, particularly when daily rumors of ISIS breaking into Baghdad were constant, demoralizing both the security forces and the population at large.

ISIS supporters in the Anbar tribes cruelly killed all Iraqi opponents while on a disorganized run from Mosul and other parts of Nineveh and Salahuddin provinces: over 1700 Shia cadets were slaughtered, and Sunni security forces were executed with a bullet in the head. Its vicious blood-thirsty reputation preceded its advance towards Iraqi cities, creating amplified fear and terror among Iraqis.

ISIS reached Abu Ghraib indeed and was shelling Baghdad airport from a close distance. Baghdad was almost empty, and ISIS could have occupied it in no time. Hashd, roughly armed, protected Baghdad.

I also witnessed how Saraya al-Salam (the Moqtada al-Sadr militia) took upon itself the protection of Samara along with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Lebanese Hezbollah. This was the moment when the US finally made the first move to have its share of the cake and started to train Army Counter Terrorism units and to provide the weapons already paid for by Iraq.

Inevitably, when embedded within a foreign army, US officers can quickly identify elements or officers willing to collaborate. The memory lingers of the Lebanese Colonel head of the Special Forces school Mansour Diab, who, during his training course in the US, was turned into an agent and then delivered to Israel as his handler–as he confessed when arrested. This is how the US wove its spider's web within the Iraqi military institution- to the point that Bret McGurk wanted to promote an Iraqi officer to lead the government when Iran imposed Adel Abdel Mahdi. McGurk identified a Shia group that might promote this Iraqi officer but

failed in his attempt. Therefore, it is not surprising to witness division within the Army since the Shia took power from the Sunni President Saddam Hussein.

However, the events of the last few days were not something that Iran could allow to pass without reacting. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo requested that Iraq dilute Hashd al-Shaabi within the security forces and that the Army eliminate its identity and existence. This move pushed Iran to declare a “silent war” on the US. It is an intelligence war, directly linked to the overwhelming tension between the two countries, and triggered by Trump’s unilateral decision to revoke the nuclear deal.

Iran decided to release one of its protected secrets, the presence of a technology shared with its allies in Iraq and Lebanon: monitoring, tapping and listening to WhatsApp.

During recent repeated visits to Iraq, I noticed top leaders of the country, in the political and military echelons, using WhatsApp freely. They believed messages could be monitored, and intelligence services could identify who is calling whom without having access to voice call content. However, they were unaware that this tapping technology was available to the Israelis, to the Americans and all European countries. Many Arab states prevent the use of WhatsApp in their countries for lack of access to all its features. All my attempts to convince them that their beliefs about tapping capabilities were incorrect failed.

The US seems unaware that Iran’s allies in Iraq have acquired this capability (similar to that of Hezbollah in Lebanon). Those Iraqi-US dual nationals who work with the US intelligence service in Iraq provided false security information to local agents who believed their communication system was protected.

This is how one of the leading US agents, Brigadier General Mahmoud al-Fallahi, commander of Anbar Army and responsible for the borders with Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, was caught while passing on sensitive and compromising information to the CIA in Iraq. Al-Fallahi has the names of many Iraqi officers who are willing to collaborate to overthrow the Iraqi government and eliminate Hashd al-Shaabi, the main obstacle to US plans in Iraq, according to sources within the Iraqi government.

The high-ranking Iraqi officer al-Fallahi delivered to the CIA agent all coordinates of the location of Hizballah-Iraq at al-Qaem, on the borders with Syria, the

locations and armament of “Kataeb Imam Ali”, the logistics, command and control positions, the weapons, food and gasoline supplies and the names of commanders of Nujabaa, Kataeb Sayyed al-Shuhada’ and Hezbollah-Iraq.

Last year, Israeli jets bombed Hashd al-Shaabi on the borders with Syria causing dozens of fatalities. Sources within the intelligence community believe the reason for hitting Hashd on the borders with Syria could be to help divert attention away from the movement of groups or troops in the area during the bombing.

The US officials who asked Abdel Mahdi to get-rid of Hashd forwarded “proof” that the drone which was responsible for targeting the Aramco pipeline in Saudi Arabia last month departed from Iraq, not Yemen as the Houthis claimed. This is how Pompeo forwarded his case to put pressure on the Iraqi Prime Minister.

However, the Iraqi Prime Minister disregarded the role of the Peshmerga in Kurdistan. The Kurdish Army receives instructions from Kurdistan province, not from the Iraqi political leadership in Baghdad. The Peshmerga attacked and killed members of the Iraqi Army while refusing to deliver Kirkuk and their positions on the borders with Turkey in order to protect hundreds of thousands of barrels of oil smuggled into Turkey daily. Baghdad pays the salary of the Peshmerga whose loyalty is far from being exclusive to Adel Abdel Mahdi. Moreover, the Peshmerga and Kurdistan enjoy the full support of US forces, unlike Hashd al-Shaabi. However, Abadi significantly failed to include the Peshmerga in his 237 Decree.

The Iraqi Prime Minister is forcing the wrong door by supposing he can dilute Hashd al-Shaabi. Abdel Mahdi does not have enough political support from the political parties to implement this US wish. Moreover, the Iraqi Prime Minister lacks the fortitude to start a domestic fight or trigger a storm, or even a partition within the security institutions.

However, he is showing weakness, faced by a US administration that is itself used to acting without caring about the consequences and which certainly does not mind seeing Iraq heading towards a dark tunnel. The US military presence in Iraq no longer holds the power it used to in 2003. Today Iraq is much stronger and organized, and can turn the US forces’ presence into a “hell on earth” situation.

The ex-prime Minister Haidar Abadi gave unlimited concessions to the US military in Iraq, providing them with legal authority that crippled Iraqi sovereignty and limited Iraqi capabilities. Abadi allowed trainers from the US (and other

Europeans and partners) widespread influence within the Iraqi military and security institutions.

However, Iraq is not willing to be under US control and is therefore ready to fight back against US influence as necessary. Sources within the Iraqi leadership said "the US is untrustworthy. Iran executed hundreds of high-ranking officers when the revolution took over because the British and the Americans had infiltrated the Army. Hashd, by exposing a major US asset within the Iraqi Army (Mahmoud al-Fallahi) is hitting the US lobby within the Army. There are many more US agents, and we have robust proof of their destructive role against their nationals".

"The US administration is considered the enemy of the people for many in the Middle East, including the Iraqi people. Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi must clean up the Army and the security forces. The list of traitors is long and will come to full daylight in due course", said the source.

It is a battle of brains and intelligence. A battle the US believed it was winning by hitting Iran in Iraq apparently above the belt. The US was unaware that Iran is ready and is already hitting back below the belt. This kind of war is a silent one- and the next episode is still to come!

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