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IRAQI MILITIAS USED AS A STRATEGIC ASSET THE SEQUENCE OF EVENTS AT THE TURN OF 2019-2020

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ABSTRACT

During the fall of 2019, major demonstrations broke out in the largest Iraqi cities, challenging both the Iraqi government and Iran. Meanwhile, several militias strove to counter the popular movement by heightening tensions against American interests. They conducted a wide range of operations: show of force, repression campaign, harassment of US military camps, etc. They proved extensive irregular warfare capabilities. Gradually, their actions scaled up and ended up prompting a massive reaction from Washington (elimination of General Soleimani). Against any odds, the assassination had favorable consequences for Iran: demonstrations lost their popular support and weakened, while Western military forces started pulling out. This huge strategic benefit may be a hint that these militias have been activated to carry out a sophisticated operation plan. Eventually, they engineered considerable outcomes from a rather weak initial investment. As such, they appear as a powerful tool of strategic leverage that can be activated remotely.

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INTRODUCTION

On January 3, 2020, the American administration conducted an audacious operation to assassinate General Soleimani as he visited Baghdad.¹ The American public opinion perceived this operation as both a vigorous response to the show of force that had been directed at the American embassy in Iraq, but also as another step in a continuum of actions conducted by the American administration against Iran (sanctions, embargo, naval operations in the Ormuz Straits and so on).

In turn, this American operation had important consequences in Iraq. In the days that followed, the popular protests that had been directed at Iran, among others, subsided. Meanwhile, the parliament voted a motion to call for the departure of foreign forces operating in the country.² On the ground, Iranian “proxies” intensified their attacks against military camps of the coalition, up to a level never seen before.³ Three months later, several nations decided to bring their troops back from Iraq, as the United States reduced its military presence and abandoned several bases.⁴

All these events have been branded as successes for Iran, according to several experts. Many think that the American decision to eliminate General Soleimani has in fact reinforced Teheran’s positions in the Middle East. William Burns wrote that Soleimani exacted “his own final act of revenge against the United States.”⁵

This perceived Iranian success led us to investigate the possibility of a plan that pushed the American administration into making a mistake to ultimately rebalance the strategic equilibrium to Teheran’s advantage. You may analyze the Iraqi protests denouncing Iranian interferences that occurred during the last trimester of 2019 under that light. Militias operating in Iraq may have been tasked to implement this plan. In fact, they gradually intensified their operations targeting American interests until they led to the death of a contractor⁶ and the US embassy being surrounded by an angry crowd.

1. The General Qassim Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, was killed on January 3, outside of Baghdad Airport, by a strike conducted with a MQ-9 drone.

2. On January 5, the Iraqi parliament, meeting in an extraordinary session, voted a resolution asking the government to “put an end to the preserve of foreign troops in Iraq.” The resolution was non-binding however.

3. At least 15 attacks were listed by Kyra Rauschenbach between January 3 and March 20, see: “[US-Iran Escalation Timeline Update](#),” *Critical Threats Project*, Institute for the Study of War, March 2020.

4. If Covid-19 was the officially invoked as the reason behind the drawback, the change in the strategic context also played in the decision. “If the government wishes us to leave, I don’t really see how we could stay,” Michel Goya explained in *Marianne* on January 8, 2020. Spain, the United States, France, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the Czech Republic announced a partial or complete drawback of their troops.

5. William Burns, Jake Sullivan, “Soleimani’s Ultimate Revenge,” *The Atlantic*, January 6, 2020. According to Pierre Razoux, “the elimination of Qassim Soleimani was beneficial to the Iranian regime” (*Le Point*, January 9, 2020). Myriam Benraad believes that the recent escalation of violence led to a “generalization of the anti-American sentiment” (interviewed by *La Croix*, March 13, 2020). Maria Fantappie and Sam Heller explained that “the dynamic of escalation is a losing bet for the Americans” (Maria Fantappie, Sam Heller, In Iraq, “Restraint is America’s best option,” *War on the Rocks*, March 30, 2020).

6. On December 27, a paramilitary group fired 30 rockets at the K1 Base, causing the death of an American civilian belonging to the Department of Defense. Americans attributed the attack to Kataib Hezbollah.

The apparent simplicity of these actions is in a sharp contrast with the magnitude of their political and military consequences. How were these operations designed and conducted to produce such strategic effects? Can we highlight Iran's intent in these militias accomplishments?

THE INTERFERENCE OF PRO-IRANIAN MILITIAS AT THE END OF 2019

Who are the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq?

According to Kalyvas, a militia is a non-state group actively involved in the security or governance of a state.⁷ To Jones, it is primarily aiming at controlling the population, especially in the rural regions most refractory to central authorities.⁸ The researcher has compiled the activities of militias on 130 theaters since 1945. These armed groups conducted a wide array of military activities (protection of sites or persons, offensive operations, intelligence gathering, reconnaissance and surveillance) but also non-military missions (providing public services in the place of the state, for instance).

The militias are deeply rooted in the Iraqi culture.⁹ This local phenomenon remained contained during the Saddam regime but then spread out the American intervention in 2003, which led to "the constitution of Shiite militias hostile to the foreign military presence."¹⁰ This evolution has grown even more important after June 2014, when the Great Ayatollah Sistani called on the population to fight the Islamic State (IS).¹¹ Following this *fatwa*, the government decided to create the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMFs) to oversee and control this popular movement. This legitimization provoked the proliferation of militias financed by Iraq but also by Iran.¹²

The public call and the legitimization propelled the creation of dozens of militias, all affiliated to PMFs despite their important differences. Six years after its creation, PMFs supposedly employed 150,000 fighters.¹³ They are made of a hundred groups that differ in size, specialty, equipment, authority (centralized or localized control, by parties, religious

7. Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 106-107; Steven Metz, *Rethinking Insurgency*, Carlisle, PA, U.S. Army War College, June 2007, p. 15-37.

8. Seth G. Jones, *The Strategic Logic of Militia*, Rand National Defense Research Institute, January 2012, p. 21.

9. Tribal forces during the 1930s, under King Faysal; Kurdish and Arab militias used by Saddam Hussein to fight insurgencies during the 1980s and 1990s. See: Omar al-Nidawi and Michael Knights, [Militias in Iraq's Security Forces: Historical Context and US Options](#), The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 22, 2018).

10. Flavien Bourrat and Alexandre d'Espinose de Lacaillerie, "[Shiite militias and the state in Iraq](#)," Research Paper 68, IRSEM, January 25, 2019.

11. On June 13, 2014, just after the fall of Mosul in the hand of ISIS, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani called on the Iraqi nation to take arms against the "terrorists."

12. Iran's financial support reached one billion dollars, from 150 millions before (Morgan Paglia and Vincent Tourret, *L'Iran et ses proxys au Moyen-Orient*, Étude de l'IFRI, Strategic Focus 95, March 2020, p. 20).

13. The 2019 budget authorized 135,000 fighters. That said, several thousand militiamen are apparently not officially counted. According to Knights, their number is probably closer to 159,000 (Knights, Malik, Tamimi, "Honored, not Contained, the Future of Iraq's PMF," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus 163, March 2020, p. 61).

institutions and so on). Some of them have a narrow regional focus and act as local security forces for the protection of religious sites, of party headquarters, the securitization of Shiite pilgrimage, mine clearance, etc.

Furthermore, the larger militias have swallowed up entire administrations and public services, which allows them to capture resources and, more importantly, to extend their power well into the executive sphere (police, border guards) and to provide clientelist social services.¹⁴ Also, these large militias are genuine military units: their members wear uniforms, they carry war equipment and take part to military operations instead of – or as a supplement to – the regular army. They played a central role in fighting IS and retaking the Iraqi territory. Hence, their contribution to the liberation of Mosul (between October 2016 and July 2017) was decisive, despite the difficult coordination of their activities with that of the regular forces and the foreign coalition.¹⁵

These military successes have imposed PMFs as a key player in political conflicts. The government has tried to take control of them, pushing for legislative changes to get the groups integrated into the Iraqi army.¹⁶ But these attempts fell through, and they have endowed PMFs with an official recognition. In 2019, the Iraqi parliament voted a 2.16-billion budget for the militias.¹⁷ With that political recognition, the militias have largely occupied the political and social arenas.

Iran-affiliated militias are a minority within PMFs (approximately 40 groups) but they represent its core strength. Knights showed that the Kataib Hezbollah has been its nervous system.¹⁸ Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis headed the group until its elimination during the air strikes that killed Soleimani. He had been considered an “Iranian proxy,” by other militia chiefs notably.¹⁹ Overall, the different PMF groups can be categorized according to their links to Iran. This is what the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) did in a recent report. And these links can be manifold: operational, ideological, political or opportunistic.²⁰

The political parties close to Iran have their own militias. The Fatah Alliance, with its 48 members of parliament, is linked to several militias, including Badr, Asaib, and Kataib Hezbollah. But this isn't a unique case. Large Iraqi political parties, including Kurdish ones, have relied on militias as well. They allow them to show their force, hire those indebted to them, and to set up a system to capture financial resources. Controlling a militia grants a political leader with the ability to be a strong player on the field, usually illegal ones harmful to his rivals. As such, the rivalries between the largest militias reflect the rivalries

14. As they control hospitals and universities, certain militias create a clientele of people indebted to them (interview with Loulouwa Rachid).

15. Jessa Rose Dury-Agri, Omer Kassim, Patrick Martin, *Iraqi Security Forces and Popular Mobilization*, Institute for the Study of War, December 2017. Also: Adel al-Gabouri, *The Role of the Popular Mobilization Forces in the Iraqi Political Process*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 1, 2018.

16. In November 2016, an “executive order” recognized PMFs as a component of the Iraqi armed forces. On July 1, 2019, the Prime Minister declared that PMFs had to join the armed forces.

17. The detailed budget is available here: <http://www.bayancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/4529.pdf>.

18. Michael Knights, “Iran’s Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups,” *CTC Sentinel*, 12:7, 2019.

19. In a declassified document from the CENTCOM, the militia leader Qais al-Khazali told American authorities in 2008, while he was in captivity, that al-Muhandis was linked to the Iranian Pasdarans. <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Enclosure-TAB-A-Documents-for-Release-49-66.pdf>.

20. *Iran’s Networks of Influence in the Middle East, Chapter Four: Iraq*, IISS, November 2019, p. 121-158.

between the most important political groups. And these tensions have been exacerbated during the 2018 general elections, most predominantly between the supporters of Moqtada al-Sadr and those of the Badr movement. Having this in mind is essential to understand the sequence of events that occurred in Iraq at the end of 2019.

The last trimester of 2019: the street challenge

The end of 2019 was marked by an important movement of popular protests in Iraq, but also in Lebanon and in Iran.²¹ It was primarily built on socio-economic demands, but later broadened its reach to include political demands – hence evoking the Arab Springs of the 2010s. The protestors were usually young individuals not affiliated with any party or particular community, and they attacked the state for its corruption and inability to provide basic social services. Contrary to the Arab Springs, the protestors also denounced the “multiform control of Teheran on Iraqi institutions, especially through the militias affiliated to PMFs.”²² They hoped to end the omnipotence of paramilitary groups – which had captured public resources and swallowed the administration without any resistance from public authorities. This embezzlement has been documented by numerous researchers. Among many others, Knights uses the example of the payroll system for Iraqi civil servants, which has been infiltrated by militias. They have apparently extracted dozens of millions of dollars each year there alone.²³ In Lebanon, a similar penetration of public structures by the Hezbollah has been denounced by popular demonstrations at the end of 2019.²⁴

In Iraq, the wave of anger has spread throughout the South of the country. Notable buildings, such as town halls, political parties headquarters and Iranian consulates, have been burned down in the main Shiite cities (Basra, Kerbela, Najaf, Nasiriya...). Parts of the Iraqi political class saw these protests as a real threat to their power. As a result, the networks close to Iran – which were among the most worried – elaborated an articulated response to the protests. After their initial astonishment, it looks like they designed a veritable operation plan to prevent the contagion. The militias are the central asset to get this plan implemented in the first place.

Militias: a privileged instrument in implementing the operation plan

As soon as during the second or third day of demonstrations in Baghdad, the militias were activated by their political principals, yet in a disorganized fashion: some were asked to stir up unrest others to repress the demonstrations brutally. Then, progressively, and while the operation plan shaped up, a majority of PMF groups followed a more articulated approach. Day after day, the strategy appeared more clearly: on the social field, the militias

21. Demonstrations started on October 17 in Lebanon and November 15 in Iran.

22. Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Chiïtes contre chiïtes en Irak et au Liban*, blog “Un si Proche Orient,” November 10, 2019.

23. Michael Knights, “Soleimani Is Dead: The Road Ahead for Iranian-Backed Militias in Iraq,” *CTC Sentinel*, January 2020.

24. Michael Young, *Hezbollah Has Trapped Itself*, Carnegie Middle East Center, November 28, 2019.

were demonstrating their power and stifling the demonstrations. On the military field, they tried to provoke an American response. Referring to planning process methods, you would say that this plan was elaborated along two lines of operations, and that it was pursuing a clear End state: American troops have withdrawn from Iraq. The specialization of the militias made it possible to assign them specific missions in regard to their respective skills.²⁵

- *An urban demonstration of strength*

Most militias focused on all-out repression. Yet, some of them took advantage of the chaotic atmosphere to attack public authorities and attempt to hijack the popular demonstrations. It should be reminded that urban show of force is a traditional course of action used by all militias affiliated to large political parties in Iraq. In this regard, militias are viewed as force suppliers. As such, they are often used by political and religious leaders to create the illusion of an important mobilization during meetings, especially as electoral deadlines grow closer. Such show of force is also used to intimidate rivals, or to exert leverage over representative of the state or a local leader. Sometimes, militias close to the ruling authorities deploy their supporters near a foreign embassy to influence the Iraqi policy toward this state. In other cases, the Iraqi state also instrumentalizes these militias.

At the start of the movement in October, the Shiite leader Moqtada Sadr called his supporters to challenge the authorities from the streets, but also to protect the protestors.²⁶ The Sadr militias were then put to the service of the popular demonstrations and they adopted the anti-corruption and anti-Iran slogans of the demonstrations. This posture was coherent with the traditional rhetoric of a movement that has often branded itself as national and revolutionary. Furthermore, there might have been a pragmatic calculation behind Moqtada's decision: he probably hoped to hijack the popular dynamic to increase his political capital.²⁷ Yet, this support from Sadr supporters stopped in January 2020, after the elimination of Soleimani (see the second part of the paper).

Similarly, the Kataib Hezbollah hoped to brand itself as a popular organization, at least superficially, as it endorsed the demonstrations. In November 2019, they wrote on their website that they endorsed the "real demands of the demonstrators." "We are on your side in your effort to oversee the performances of the government and of parliament."²⁸ Sometime before that, the Kataib directed their security forces to protect the "young people exercising their right to protest," but also to differentiate between the "legitimate protestors" and those aligned with a Saudi-American axis, which they accused of propagating chaos and violence.²⁹

25. Certain militias, such as Kataib Hezbollah and al-Nujaba have remote strike capabilities.

26. In a preach delivered on October 21, Moqtada al-Sadr called on his supporters to protest against a "corrupted political regime" by rallying the demonstrations of October 25. A similar declaration was published in an interview to *Al-Khaleej Online* on October 20, 2019.

27. Interview with Loulouwa Rachid.

28. Statement released on November 29 on the website of the militia. <http://www.kataibhezbollah.com/news/3032>.

29. Statement released on October 2 on the website of the militia. <http://www.kataibhezbollah.com/statment/3024>.

The main PMF components took advantage of the chaos to reorientate the protests against the American presence in the country. Progressively, this campaign of disparagement found a deeper anchoring as the military tensions escalated between the United States and Iran on the Iraqi territory. Hence, PMFs conducted kinetic operations (attacks against American troops which led to strikes against the bases of the Kataib Hezbollah) to create more video contents to feed informational actions (denunciations of the same strikes as a proof of the overall American interference in the affairs of the country).

The informational maneuver culminated on December 31, during a demonstration of several hundred protestors, mostly PMF members, in front of the American embassy. This show of force was calibrated to provoke Americans but to remain below the threshold of armed aggression.

- *A suppression of the protests*

The militias have been the main tool of the brutal repression that killed 504 protestors between October 1 and January 23.³⁰ This violence was documented by several reports written by the UN and NGOs present in Iraq.³¹ These organizations have listed particularly violent operating modes: intimidations, extra-legal arrests, shootings aiming at protestors, and even targeted killings.

In fact, the repression occurred in two steps. During the first phase, which started during the early days of the protests, the operations were conducted where the demonstrations were. In a brutal and disorganized fashion, several militias used radical means to directly target demonstrators: attacks with a knife, firing at the crowd, and other forms of violence. It was an immediate and simplistic response to a phenomenon that took the Iraqi political leadership by surprise. A more sophisticated response was then deployed during the second phase, which debuted in December/January. It probably resulted from a rushed-through anti-demonstration plan. More subtle and pernicious, this later reaction was conducted outside of the demonstrations, out of sight from the cameras and the media. A veritable targeting plan was meticulously designed to intimidate: leaders of the protests were identified, localized, and dealt with. Thousands of individuals were arrested by policemen and men wearing civilian clothes without any legal procedure. Some were released in exchange of a formal promise not to get involved in the demonstrations again. Others were less lucky and disappeared. They were probably eliminated.³²

This repression campaign was jointly conducted by the police and militias, according to a complex and opaque labor division. Schematically, the police forces were used to contain and repress the demonstrations using their official – or “claimable” – methods. Militias completed the interventions, using irregular and illegal methods that are detailed in the second and third parts. That said, the labor division between the regular and special units

30. Special report of Iraq’s High Commission on Human Rights (*Demonstrations in Iraq*), December 18, 2019 – January 23, 2020, p. 3.

31. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, UNAMI and the HCR have published periodic reports on human rights infringements in Iraq.

32. Interviews with Iraqis. The disappearance of opponents has also been reported by the UNAMI; Report on the implementation of the resolution 2470, released on February 21, 2020, p. 10; Special report of Iraq’s High Commission on Human Rights (*Demonstrations in Iraq*), p. 21.

wasn't always respected. For example, several reports document soldiers wearing their uniforms and firing at the crowds,³³ as well as massive arrests by security forces.³⁴

This absence of apparent logic can be explained by the rivalries that exist between the numerous militias, by the complexity of the chain of command, but also by the usurpation of military uniforms by militiamen.³⁵ If they were violent, these operations of repression weren't sufficient to limit the protests, which went on until the end of 2019.

The counter-demonstration operations received an heaven-sent opportunity after January 3. The elimination of Soleimani (because it took place in Iraq) shocked the public opinion. It also reinforced groups hostile to the United States and Western countries, which made the repression easier afterward. Moqtada Sadr, who had been supporting the protests until then, switched sides. He called for "a demonstration of a million" – ultimately several hundred thousand demonstrators denouncing the American military presence on January 24. The momentum was then in the pro-Iran camp, a collateral effect of the American operation. A young Iraqi student explained that "the assassination created problems for the protestors, and it fragmented the movement."

Within a few months, PMF militias demonstrated their ability to stifle a protest movement that had enjoyed strong popular support. Comparatively, the 2011 Arab Springs – including some that never reached the same level of popular mobilization – led to the resignation of leaders in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen. And the use of militias by central authorities isn't a new phenomenon. In Afghanistan, for instance, political leaders have used them all through the 20th century to impose order, as they deemed regular forces unable to achieve it.³⁶

- *Harassment against American bases*

All through 2019, several military bases of the coalition, and especially the ones where American troops were stationed, were targeted with projectiles sent by indirect fires: al-As-sad, Balad, Kirkuk, Mosul, Qayyarah and Taji – not counting the American quarterings in Baghdad's Green Zone. These operations were conducted by small groups equipped with mortars and rocket launchers.

The advantage of mortar is that it is easily deployed, and then easily hidden after it has fired; besides, it may fire from dug-in positions and later buried. Because the trajectory of the shell is almost vertical, it can reach the center of buildings. A few fighters can deploy it in the courtyard of a farm, or in a disaffected factory. They need to come as close as possible from the targeted base to conduct dangerous attacks, which means they are familiar with the environment that enables them to conduct such attacks.³⁷ In Baghdad, mortars are frequently used against the American embassy.

33. Special report of Iraq's High Commission on Human Rights (*Demonstrations in Iraq*).

34. UNAMI. Report on the implementation of the resolution 2470, Militiamen have probably donned police uniforms, as developed in the second part of the research paper.

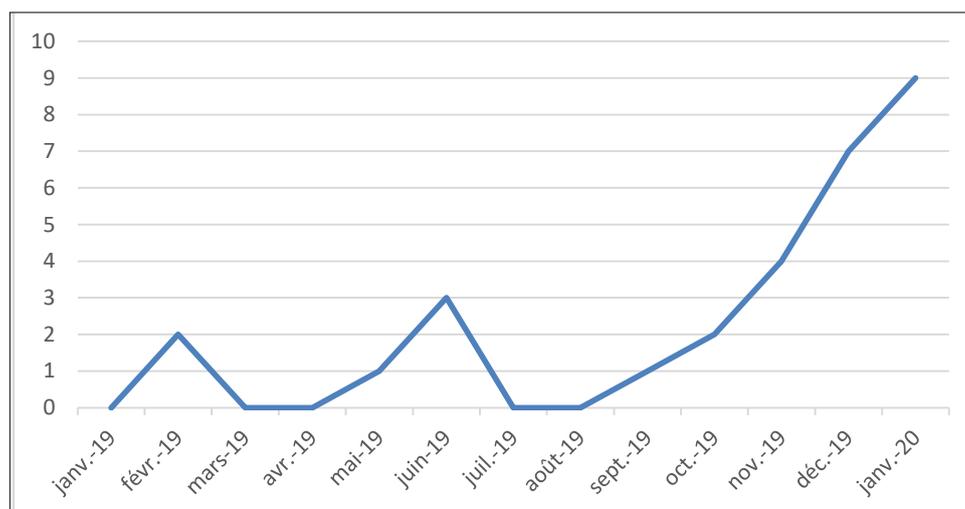
35. Interviews with Iraqis.

36. Seth G. Jones, *The Strategic Logic of Militia*, p. 21.

37. Several hundred meters at best, several kilometers to avoid taking risks. This type of hit and run actions doesn't allow the gunner of mortar to make an adjustment before firing a second burst.

The Katyusha rockets are more deadly weapons due to their explosive charge (several kilos for 107 mm rockets, several dozen kilos for the 220 mm ones). Their range allows the groups to operate from a distance (several kilometers at least, and up to 30 depending on the caliber) and to dissimulate, or even destroy, the equipment after firing. The militias have an extensive knowledge of the terrain (firing positions, roads, possible shelters) and of the population (support to the American presence, links to the Iraqi security forces), which allow them to operate while minimizing the risks. Besides, they intimidate local population to reduce potential witnesses to silence.³⁸

Evolution of the number of attacks with indirect fire against American military bases in Iraq, between January 2019 and January 2020³⁹



They rely on networks of informers, including some having direct access to the bases. This intelligence make them able to precisely adjust the firings at their objectives. Until September 2019, these attacks made no casualties among Americans. The attackers targeted imprecisely or deliberately used low-lethal ammunitions.⁴⁰ This looks like evidence that the militias deliberately opted for a low-intensity harassment, trying not to provoke a chain reaction from Washington.⁴¹ Starting in October, but more notably in November, the militias increased the number of attacks and their intensity. On November 7, the Qayyarah-West base was targeted with 17 rockets. On December 9 and 11, 240 mm rockets (a caliber beyond what had been used until that point) were fired at a camp of the coalition in Baghdad.⁴² On December 27, a salvo of 30 rockets against the K1 base (in Kirkuk) led to the death of an American contractor, without leaving the slightest doubt on the ultimate goal of the attack.⁴³

38. Interview with an inhabitant of Mosul.

39. The data comes from Iraqi (INA, Rudaw), American (The Defense Post, Musings) sources and other press agencies. One attack may involve one or more rocket or mortar firings. Some attacks list up to 30 shots fired.

40. Michael Knights, "Soleimani Is Dead: The Road Ahead for Iranian-Backed Militias in Iraq."

41. Interview with an American officer who had previously been deployed in Iraq. The concept of an American casualty as a "red line" was discussed and spoken about all through 2019.

42. Michael Knights, "Soleimani Is Dead: The Road Ahead for Iranian-Backed Militias in Iraq," p. 4.

43. General Milley, Chairman of the American Joint Chief of Staff, indicated being 100% certain that the attack was meant to kill and that Soleimani had approved it (declaration to the press, January 4, 2020, quoted by Elizabeth McLaughlin, ABC News).

WHY HAVE MILITIAS BEEN THE IDEAL ASSET TO IMPLEMENT THIS PLAN?

Rocket attacks, urban show of force, suppression of the protests: militias were assigned to implement the operation plan in concrete steps because they are most efficient than the regular armed forces, especially when conducting special and illegal missions. These operations were successful as they were at the same time simple, ostentatious, controlled, and ambiguous.

The strength of irregular warfare

Militias conduct a form of irregular warfare that Gérard Chaliand describes as “harassment [and] attrition of the opponent, based on mobility, without direct confrontation.”⁴⁴ In the manner of a swarm, the members gather close to the objective to carry out their action, and spread out once it has been accomplished. This is made possible by basic courses of actions and light equipment.

Attacks against American forces are conducted by small groups handling mostly rudimentary equipment (rockets, mortars, small weapons). Their operations are typically asymmetric, and they are nearly costless to the attackers compared to the cost of protecting the Americans.⁴⁵ Besides, the groups enjoy a considerable freedom of action to reach the objectives set by their mentors. Unlike the regular forces, they aren’t constrained by the rules of engagement.

Likewise, during crackdown operations, paramilitary soldiers have the ability to appear where they are not expected and to act in a covert manner. In town, technology doesn’t make a difference: their ability to quickly mobilize highly determined individuals do. This bias toward simplicity and informality, which make their actions unpredictable and difficult to attribute, is a key to their success. Let us imagine, on the other hand, that a sophisticated military operation had been planned against the American embassy, rather than a seemingly spontaneous manifestation: it would have led to an immediate and brutal military reaction from the United States, and one that could have been blessed internationally and by the country’s public opinion.

Even when they act clandestinely, militiamen claim some popular legitimacy. They conduct attacks against American military bases in the name of the Iraqi nation. And their attacks on the field are accompanied by an active communication on social networks. Power taken over by the people, a rejection of foreign forces, the defense of the Muslim faith, and social justice are some of the mottos regularly promoted on the website of Kataib Hezbollah.⁴⁶

44. Adrien Jahier, interview with Gérard Chaliand, “La violence n’est pas un concept,” *Sens public*, November 11, 2017.

45. “The asymmetric campaign paramilitaries are waging is low cost and sustainable” (Maria Fantappie, Sam Heller, In Iraq, “Restraint is America’s best option”).

46. <http://www.kataibhezbollah.com/>.



► Kataib Hezbollah (source : official site)

Militiamen cast themselves as partisans, following the model developed by Carl Smith, “designating an enemy, either a foreign one or the authorities [...] and calling to fight them with weapons in hand.”⁴⁷ Advertising their political conscience as such, they want to embody their operations. During urban show of force, militia operations give the impression of a spontaneous burst of anger – thanks to their extremely determined mili-

tant bases. The December 31 demonstration in front of the American embassy, livestreamed on satellite TV channels, produced an image of popular legitimacy even though it was a complete illegal action. Similar courses of actions are used by Hezbollah in Lebanon. When UNIFIL teams patrol in areas where they are not welcome, villagers pop up and block the convoys. Such individuals in civilian clothes don’t need to use weapons to impose themselves against an armed force. Even when they are few in number, they give the impression that they incarnate the popular will. They can rely on a field they know well, and on the local population, to leave no room for their adversaries. In Iraq, like in Lebanon, if regular police forces were taking actions in the place of these angry civilians, they would embody a police state and not an angry people. In addition, men in uniform would hold the government accountable for their actions.⁴⁸

Command and control: effective parallel chains

Jones studied the level of control exercised by the state over militias, particularly during repression operations. According to this researcher, paramilitary groups are often unreliable. They are driven by their own interests, and not by those of the government. Furthermore, they are often accused of predation and excessive violence unrelated to the missions they are assigned.⁴⁹ Such accusations are frequently targeting PMF groups in Iraq. If these militias behave in predatory manners, it may imply that they have freed themselves from their chains of command. And yet, the operations conducted at the end of 2019 give the impression of a good level of control compared to their missions (as they may be understood by an outsider).

The chain of command of paramilitary groups is both complex and opaque. Officially, PMF groups are controlled by the Iraqi government which provides funding. They are under the authority of a central committee theoretically supervised by the Prime Minister. In practice, the Iraqi government exercises a tenuous control over them. During the military campaign against IS, which brought together all national forces, many cases of insubordination were observed. Militias often refused to execute the orders given by the chiefs of staff

47. David Cumin, “[La théorie du partisan de Carl Schmitt](#),” *Stratégie*, 93-94-95-96, 2009/1-2-3-4, p. 31-71.

48. This point has been developed in the paragraph “Dissimulation and ambiguities.”

49. Seth G. Jones, *The Strategic Logic of Militia*, p. 9-11.

in Baghdad, especially when they were tasked with conducting a mission in coordination with American forces.⁵⁰ These “mutinies” are analyzed by some researchers as evidence of a chain of command parallel to that of the Ministry of Defense, or of several chains linked to political parties, religious entities, or the Iranian Quds Force.⁵¹ These leaders behave as if they are part of Iraqi Deep State with the ability to activate certain militias through parallel chains of command.⁵²

The efficacy of these parallel chains lies in a direct link between a leader at the strategic level and a tactical commander who is locally endowed with a great freedom of action in his area of operations.⁵³ The level of control appears to be effective if we consider compliance with the rules of engagement applied to indirect fire against American bases. Until October 2019, the salvos were quick and imprecise. Starting in November, the attacks grew more frequent, and the projectiles used demonstrated a willingness to hurt or kill.⁵⁴ This evolution of the posture could be observed concomitantly in several regions, which lead us to think that directives had been elaborated in a centralized manner and sent to several PMF groups throughout the Iraqi territory.⁵⁵ A similar fire discipline was observed during the campaign against IS: militiamen never conducted any attack against the American military forces between 2014 and 2017. The presence of Iranian advisers in the units may also explain the efficient enforcement of guidelines.⁵⁶

With regard to the popular demonstrations at the end of 2019, the level of violence used was very uneven. During the show of force against the American embassy, on December 31, rules of engagement seemed to have been enforced and respected. No weapon was used, or even displayed by the militiamen. They limited themselves to causing material damage, throwing projectiles, including Molotov cocktails. The presence of the main PMF leaders certainly contributed to containing the violence under a threshold set beforehand.⁵⁷ This is not the only sequence in which violence has been kept under control. Yet, on several occasions, popular demonstrations were severely repressed by hordes of militiamen. This disparity in the level of violence can be explained by the diversity of militias mobilized, themselves guided by several parallel chains of command, in a context of political rivalries.⁵⁸ This confusion is certainly detrimental to the proper execution of the mission given

50. Interview with a soldier who had been deployed in Iraq during the fight against IS.

51. *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East, Chapter Four: Iraq*, p. 121-158.

52. Several authors have noted the existence of a “Deep State” in Iraq. For Robert Sprinborg, it relies on Shiite political and military organizations connected to Iran: *Deep States in MENA*, Vol. XXV, Middle East Policy Council, Spring 2018. For Jessa Rose Dury-Agri, Omer Kassim, Patrick Martin, PMFs are the creation of the Iraqi Deep State (*Iraqi Security Forces and Popular Mobilization*, p. 30).

53. Interview with a former Iraqi soldier.

54. According to Knights, during the 32 attacks that occurred in the first ten months of 2019, the bursts counted two or three strikes. They caused no American victim. In November and December, the bursts often reached more than twenty strikes (Michael Knights, “Soleimani Is Dead: The Road Ahead for Iranian-Backed Militias in Iraq,” p. 30).

55. Several militias presumably have the capacity to conduct indirect fire attacks: Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Badr, Kataib al-Shuhada, Kataib Hezbollah (non-exhaustive list).

56. *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East, Chapter Four: Iraq*, p. 121-158.

57. Falah al-Fayyad (national security advisor), Abu al-Muhandis (leader of the Kataib Hezbollah), Qais Khazali (leader of the Asaib Ahl al-Haq), Hadi al-Ameri (leader of Badr) were present, among others. <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2020/01/pro-iran-groups-take-next-step-to-expel.html>.

58. Interview with a former Iraqi soldier.

by the leaders, but it has the advantage of covering up their tracks, as will be developed in the following paragraph.

Indeed, control is also dependent on the level of equipment of the militias. Harassing and repressing the crowds do not require sophisticated tools. Once the operation (or the campaign) has ended, a militia can be committed to another task, or even demobilized. It is more cost-efficient to rely on such militias than on heavily armed groups which require specific training and regular financial resources. A commander who stops paying a group with sophisticated equipment risks seeing it grow more autonomous.⁵⁹ According to Paglia and Tourret, Iran strictly controls the “proxies” that conduct high-intensity operations and require sophisticated technology to that end. On the contrary, operations of lower intensity are more decentralized.⁶⁰ The use of a regular soldier for similar actions wouldn’t be efficient. A military would certainly be naturally disciplined, but he needs to be tasked to conduct military operations. And he is also less fanatic than a militiaman. During the crowd-control operations, some Iraqi soldiers refused to carry out the orders given.⁶¹ Numerous cases of desertions were also observed.⁶² On the contrary, the militiamen do not have the same prejudices. And, to avoid refusals to obey, only “those who will do the job” are called in.⁶³

Command and control over a militia is also based on various forms of loyalty. The most frequent is probably ideology, which is perpetuated by a mobilizing narrative, and often coupled with a religious discourse. A young Shiite often gets involved in causes he considers almost sacred: to defend the Iraqi nation against IS (following the call to arms by Ayatollah Sistani in 2014), protect Shiite sacred places, or push back against foreign interventions in Iraq (mostly the American military presence there). These ideological motivations are more marked inside the militias that adhere to the principle of *Velayat-e Faqih* (“judge’s government”) linked to the Iranian revolution: this may be observed within militias like Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Badr, Kataib Hezbollah, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada – the members of which call themselves “the faithful” (*Wala-i’oun*).⁶⁴ Evidently, sources of motivation vary largely from one militia to another. Generally speaking, it is rather prestigious to serve in a militia affiliated with the Quds Force. Besides, joining PMFs bring a substantial salary, almost twice the Iraqi median wage.⁶⁵ Since militiamen receive their pay directly from their commanders, they are placed in a position of obligation toward them. In addition, they can be rewarded with benefits in kind if they are appreciated by the hierarchy: trips to Lebanon, to Iran, or even marriage.⁶⁶

59. Interview with a former member of the Free Syrian Army. According to him, the commandment of a well-equipped and well-trained *katibat* tends to change principal, because it needs financing to maintain its operational level and keep its men.

60. Morgan Paglia and Vincent Tourret, *L'Iran et ses proxys au Moyen-Orient*, p. 36.

61. Many cases of disobedience were observed when they were asked to shoot at the protestors with tear gas grenades at close range (risk of death or serious injury). It was the case, for instance, in Baghdad on November 16. <https://almadapaper.net/view.php?cat=222727>.

62. Interview with an Iraqi.

63. Interview with a former Iraqi officer.

64. *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East, Chapter Four: Iraq*, p. 121-158. The analysis was confirmed by Ahmed Rami, an Iraqi journalist.

65. The minimal salary for a soldier is 150,000 dinars, or about 800 dollars each month. Depending on the grade and qualification, it can become higher. The average salary in Iraq is 500 dollars.

66. Interview a former Iraqi officer.

That said, political and religious motivations have weakened during the past few years. And the militia system has produced frustration, especially among those who were demobilized after fighting IS. Many of them returned to civilian life because they were not longer paid, or because they were disillusioned by their assigned missions. Hence, many former militiamen from the south of Iraq could be found among the protestors in 2019.⁶⁷

Operations combining dissimulation and ambiguity

In Iraq, many militiamen are members of political parties for which they act clandestinely. Ambiguity is integral to how the system works. The Iraqis often evoke the intervention of a “third party” to characterize a militia-led action: not controlled by the government but without the spontaneous character of a movement that could come from civil society. It is moved by a third party that people don’t want to name, but whose contours are known.⁶⁸ “When something [evil] occurs in the Diyala province, everyone knows it’s Badr, but no one tells.”⁶⁹ Certain regions are fiefdoms for particular militias. But areas of operation overlap in most of the provinces, according to the balance of power between paramilitary groups. This interweaving maintains ambiguity as to the responsibilities of one or the other. Besides, the militias use it to protect the security of their operations. And this caution is sometimes pushed to the extreme, in a context marked by the risk of an American strike. Since the end of 2019, Kataib Hezbollah has banned all interactions with outsiders of the movement, as it fears being spied on.⁷⁰ Its leaders are traditionally cautious, and they have become almost paranoid since the military strikes of January 3. They now maintain the greatest secrecy about their meeting places and their travels.

It is as difficult to predict than to attribute military actions conducted by militias. PMF groups rarely claim responsibility for their actions. Their communications are often discordant and ambiguous. Sometimes, responsibility is claimed by a group specifically created for the occasion. After the March 11, 2020 attack against an American base, which caused the death of two American soldiers and a British one, a hooded man with a transformed voice announced that the “Revolutionary League” – a group unknown until that point – was responsible for the deadly attack. He also threatened to kill more American soldiers.⁷¹ Having a puppet group make a claim can muddy the waters, but it allows them to carry a very specific message through. On its part, the Kataib Hezbollah – to whom the American central commandment (CENTCOM) attributed the attack⁷² – denied being responsible for the March 11 attack. Yet, they congratulated the presumed authors on their Twitter account and Internet website.⁷³ Simultaneously, several MPs from parties linked to Kataib

67. Interview with Loulouwa Rachid.

68. This expression (in Arabic, *at-Taraf al-thalith*), is used by Iraqi people and in the press.

69. Interview with a NGO member.

70. Interview with Loulouwa Rachid.

71. Video of the statement: <https://twitter.com/i/status/1240112961231831040>.

72. *Declaration made by General Mackenzie*, CENTCOM commandant, press conference at the Pentagon, March 13, 2020.

73. <http://www.kataibhezbollah.com/statment/3076>.

affirmed that the attack should be attributed to IS.⁷⁴ Oftentimes, the entire PMF leadership denies responsibility, such as after the December 29 attack (which provoked the death of an American contractor in Kirkuk).⁷⁵ Such a unanimous desire for concealment is explained by the fear of American strikes: they retaliate against militia cantonments after each attack they suffer.

Secrecy is also applied to the preparation of the operations. The nature of the mission and the instructions (place and time of the demonstration, outfits, equipment, rules of engagement) are not publicized on social networks, but directly voiced to the participants. A unit commander can mobilize a hundred men for a targeted action overnight to conduct an operation. He first communicates with his two main deputies, who will then make sure that the orders are transmitted orally within a few hours to all the members of the group.⁷⁶ Because militias are anchored in specific neighborhoods, it facilitates swift communications between members which, in turn, guarantee discretion and security.⁷⁷ Additionally, during rocket attacks against American military bases, knowledge of the field is a condition of success. The operational teams target the bases situated in their region. They can move to the sites where the rockets will be launched without revealing weak signals before carrying the action. Furthermore, the implementation and exfiltration are usually carried out nightly.⁷⁸ And the equipment used isn't different from the one used by other armed groups (local self-defense militias, jihadist organizations). Consequently, it makes it challenging to identify the group in charge.

As for the protests and other popular show of force, the instructions are shared through social networks (Facebook, Twitter) and instant messaging apps (WhatsApp, Telegram). The militias take advantage of these tools when they want to mobilize beyond their base for legal activities.⁷⁹

The repression of anti-regime demonstrations by paramilitary groups is difficult to attribute to governmental actions. The operators didn't portray themselves as militiamen. They sometimes acted in civilian clothes, such as the men armed with knives and sticks who attacked men seated in a tent during a political meeting on January 3, on Tahrir Square (Baghdad).⁸⁰ In other cases, they wear police uniforms to act with impunity. The fear of the uniformed police officer is a powerful incentive to use the authority of the uniform to impose themselves on real police officers. Many cases of shooting in crowds of demonstrators could be explained by this usurpation of official clothing.⁸¹ This process allows the militias to exonerate their responsibility, while at the same time making the Iraqi state assume responsibility for the repression. Most of the reports published by international

74. Interview with Ahmed Rami, Iraqi journalist.

75. SNGU Report on the implementation of the resolution 2470, released on February 21, 2020, p. 5.

76. Interview with an inhabitant of Mosul.

77. Urban militias rely on poor residential neighborhoods. The more "military" militias are usually set up in barracks in their areas of operation.

78. Interview with a former Iraqi soldier, February 2020.

79. Interview with Ahmed Rami, Iraqi journalist.

80. Special report of Iraq's High Commission on Human Rights (*Demonstrations in Iraq*), p. 10.

81. Interview with Ahmed Rami, Iraqi journalist.

organizations and NGOs condemn the activities of anti-riot forces, thus charging the authorities. Rarer NGO reports have focused on the activities of armed civilians.⁸²

The leaders of paramilitary groups take advantage of the ambiguity linked to the complex and disparate nature of PMFs. Its component groups are numerous and often rivals. And the posture of a given militia changes depending on the political power relationships at any given time. Hence, the Saraya al-Salam (a Sadr-aligned militia) endorsed the anti-regime demonstrations between October and December 2019, especially in its Najaf fiefdom. The militiamen were then identified by protestors as protectors. But, starting in January, they switched to the repression camp. On February 5, they even killed more than 20 protestors during a pacific sit-in in Najaf.⁸³

Intelligence is key to hybridity

The militias have the ability to conduct simultaneous actions in different places: military operations (campaign against IS), police activities (repression of demonstrations), and special and clandestine operations (giving a hand to other groups in hostile territory, eliminating opponents, informational attacks). They are capable of “combining advanced conventional capabilities, traditionally associated with regular warfare, with non-linear tactics, a characteristic of some form of irregularity,” to quote Tenenbaum’s definition. The militiamen are conducting a hybrid war.⁸⁴ Under the direct orders of a political leader, a militia is capable of infiltrating a non-permissive zone, firing rockets at U.S. military personnel, while remaining off the radar. This ability is beyond the reach of a regular military unit.

Singularly, this hybridity is based on a very effective intelligence apparatus. Contrary to regular units that have to issue requests moving up the chain of command, with no guarantee of obtaining the information they need, militias have a wide range of direct channels. These pipes are connected to state structures and the society at large. PMFs had infiltrated all Iraqi administrations, which are under its surveillance or sometimes even under its control. This is, for example, the case of public transportations, as the ministry is in the hands of Sadr.⁸⁵ This group controls Baghdad Airport and thus has access to passenger data. This is also the case of most of Baghdad’s video surveillance installations.⁸⁶ PMFs have also imposed liaison officers in all the security structures that operate in the Iraqi capital. This layout allows PMF to “see everything and know everything” whereas, at the same time, militiamen are not overseen by policemen.⁸⁷ And access to intelligence is not limited to the strategic level. The largest paramilitary groups have a very strong hold in certain regions. They gather intelligence nonstop thanks to networks of individuals indebted to them, even in the Sunni regions. Many local leaders have no choice but to pledge allegiance to them

82. [Report published by Amnesty International on the use of tear gas grenades](#), December 13, 2019.

83. France 24, The Observers, February 10, 2020: <https://observers.france24.com/en/20200210-how-iraq%E2%80%99-blue-hat-militiamen-went-protecting-killing-protesters>.

84. Élie Tenenbaum, *Le piège de la guerre hybride*, IFRI, October 2015, p. 24.

85. Gilles Chenève, *Panorama de l'Irak contemporain*, Cygne Edition, 2017.

86. Interview with Loulouwa Rachid.

87. Interview with Ahmed Rami.

if they want to live safely and continue to do business there.⁸⁸ Through intimidation and remuneration, depending on the case, the militias own a network of information providers. To illustrate this latter point, we can note that the Kataib Hezbollah has the ability to prohibit traffic on the roads that pass near their bases by activating checkpoints at all surrounding crossroads.⁸⁹

IS THERE IRAN'S IMPRINT ON THESE PARAMILITARY OPERATIONS?

Because operations conducted on the field are stealthy and covert, establishing the responsibility of militias is difficult. As for determining the identity of the real leaders, the chain of command would have to be traced back by means of interception. Yet only intelligence assets would be capable of doing it. Even with this ability, tracing the communication networks probably wouldn't lead us to Tehran. The decisional processes at the tactical level are established between actors that are in Iraq.⁹⁰ Furthermore, attributing to Tehran attacks on the field simply because they serve Iranian interests (to answer the question "who benefits from the crime?") would be less than rigorous. What we can do is attempting to identify analogies in the equipment and methods used based on the Iranian model. Since 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has never hidden its ambition to export the revolution beyond its frontiers. It is by virtue of this principle that Tehran has promoted the dissemination of operational know-how to groups belonging to an "Axis of Resistance," focusing on techniques tested in Iran most specifically.⁹¹ Hence, some methods have spread to Iraq and several other countries in the Middle East.

Tested repression methods

In Iran, the Pasdaran land forces have sometimes led counter-insurgency operations in the Baluchistan region.⁹² But in terms of internal repression, Basij is the model unit. This organization, halfway between the party and the militia, is composed of trained young men operating both in civilian and army clothes to counter protest movements. In June 2009, Basij was mobilized against the "Green Movement" that emerged during the elections. This repression campaign was both brutal and conducted in plain sight. Afterward, the militia experimented less visible techniques and have used them regularly since, during outbursts of

88. Interview with Loulouwa Rachid.

89. Interview with a NGO responsible. The Kataib controls the frontier region with Syria for example, around al-Qaim and the city of Jurf al-Sakhr, 40 kms south of Baghdad.

90. All the individuals we interviewed share this analysis.

91. Morgan Paglia and Vincent Tourret, *L'Iran et ses proxys au Moyen-Orient*, p. 26-30.

92. San-Augustin evokes the use of local tribes for these operations ("*Évolutions des doctrines iraniennes*," *Cahiers du RETEX*, CDEC, July 2017, p. 28).

anger from parts of the population, usually as a reaction to economic difficulties. Some Basij methods seem to have been carefully imitated in Iraq.⁹³

- *Infiltrating protest movements*

A now well-established Iranian technique consists in having Basij members infiltrate the procession of demonstrators. By mixing with the crowd, they pretend to be demonstrators in order to spoil and discredit the movement. In some gatherings, they throw projectiles at the police forces, destroy urban furniture and even assault other protesters. Hence, they transform a pacific demonstration into a violent protest, eventually provoking a reaction from the anti-riot units. Present in the crowd, they take advantage of this opportunity to take photos and videos to identify the leaders. Sometimes they switch sides during the skirmishes and use violence to clampdown the protesters. Finally, fake profiles are created on social networks to identify the protesters and gather intelligence.

These courses of action modes were reproduced in Iraqi streets at the end of 2019. Starting in November, and reaching a peak in December, several demonstrations against the regime were infiltrated by young men belonging to PMFs. On December 6, several hundreds of them (wearing civilian clothes) spread on Tahrir Square (Baghdad) in a demonstration against the regime. Some pretended to protect the protesters. Then, after a period of observation, the militiamen attacked the demonstrators with knives or their bare hands as they chanted slogans glorifying the pro-Shiite leaders.⁹⁴

- *Intimidations and eliminations*

Both repressive approaches mentioned above (in and out of the demonstrations) are commonly used in Iran. During the demonstrations of November 2019, at least 208 persons were killed in five days. We know that Basij members fired at the crowd from the top of adjacent buildings.⁹⁵ And thousands of activists were arrested without any legal procedure.⁹⁶

As it was elaborated in the first part, similar courses of action were recently implemented by Iraqi militias: armed men shooting at the crowd from the top of nearby buildings, intimidation campaigns targeting protest leaders and journalists. Journalists were also threatened, and sometimes arrested, beyond all legal boundaries. On December 7, 11 demonstrators were kidnapped in the Karbala province.⁹⁷ The assassination of many journalists has been documented by the Iraqi Commission on Human Rights.⁹⁸ On December 12, the Iraqi government established a committee to investigate the alleged assassinations and disappearances. And yet, its conclusions were never publicized.⁹⁹ It is tempting to see in this repression the application of Iranian techniques, which may have also been adopted by the

93. Interview with an expert on Iran. That said, many other authoritarian regimes mobilize similar repression methods (no Iranian “copyright”).

94. Interview with an inhabitant of Baghdad.

95. [Statement released by the High Commissioner on Human Rights](#), Geneva, December 6, 2019.

96. On January 28, 2010, the newspaper *The Guardian* published data on 1,259 persons arrested following the demonstrations of June 2009. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2010/jan/28/iran-dead-detained-protests-elections-spreadsheet#data>.

97. Interview with a French executive working in the security sector.

98. Special report of Iraq’s High Commission on Human Rights (*Demonstrations in Iraq*).

99. Report on the implementation of the resolution 2470, released on February 21, 2020, p. 10.

Syrian regime in 2011.¹⁰⁰ That said, similar methods of repression (intimidation, torture, live ammunition shots etc.) have been observed by NGOs on all continents.¹⁰¹ They cannot be branded “Iranian specialties.”

- *Digital ban*

In Iran, the authorities were destabilized by the massive use of the Internet during the Green Movement in 2009. By 2014 they started to deploy digital infrastructure that allowed security agencies to monitor the networks network, getting inspiration from the Chinese model. This approach was meant to maintain flows of (authorized) data even in the midst of a crisis. That said, the government is likely to totally interrupt Internet during mass demonstrations. Diverse applications dedicated to communication, or social networks, are also cut during these periods, along with phone networks.¹⁰²

In Iraq, we observed a reduction of Internet speed which was inversely correlated to the intensity of the demonstrations. As soon as October 2, the Internet network faced severe speed reductions, and it was even totally interrupted for periods of several days. Social networks such as Facebook and Twitter were inaccessible. The instant messaging applications WhatsApp and Telegram didn’t work either.¹⁰³ Without social networks and Internet, the leaders of the protests couldn’t deliver their messages, recruit, or spread instructions about the demonstrations. The “counter-demonstrators” were able to cope better with the internet being switched off, because they relied on informal communication networks.

These operations of digital ban are often conducted by authoritarian regimes everywhere in the world. Here again, it is difficult to establish an Iranian model that was reproduced in Iraq.

- *Specific equipment*

A large number of guerrilla movements around the world use rockets to attack fixed targets (bases, airports), which does not make it possible to highlight a lead to Iran. That said, several types of rockets are predominantly used among Iraqi militias – but also by the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Hezbollah in Lebanon.¹⁰⁴ These groups favor the 107 and 122 mm Katyusha rockets, which balance well firepower and ease of use.¹⁰⁵ These ammunitions are also the most common in the Iranian forces.¹⁰⁶ According to Schroeder, the majority of 107 mm rockets of the Fajr 1 type that have circulated in Iraq since 2003 have been

100. According to a former Syrian politician, still in position in 2011, Iranian advisors arrived in the largest cities at the start of the demonstrations. These advisors were present during the meetings that dealt with matters of security.

101. Amnesty International Report 2017/2018, *The State of the World’s Human Rights*; Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2020*.

102. Interview with a former inhabitant of Tehran. Precise data on Internet and mobile service cuts are available on the website netblocks.org.

103. Interviews with Iraqi citizens. Some of them used VPNs to exchange on social networks when Internet speed was too slow.

104. The commercial ship *Francop*, boarded and searched by Israel in November 2009, was carrying a lot of equipment (107 and 122 mm rockets notably). The *Francop* was presumably sent by Iran (Steven O’Hern, *The Threat that Grows while America Sleeps*, Potomac Books, October 2012, p. 73).

105. Shaan Shaikh, *Iranian missiles in Iraq*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 11, 2019.

106. Non-classified report by the American Secretary of Defense to Congress on Iranian military capabilities, April 2010.

produced in Iranian workshops.¹⁰⁷ But a precise tracing of these ammunitions would be difficult to conduct.

Furthermore, Iran-made anti-riot equipment was observed during repressive operations in Iraq. Boxes of ammunition bearing the inscription “Ministry of Sepah” were allegedly found in al-Khalani Square in Baghdad the day 19 protestors were shot and 70 others injured (December 9, 2019).¹⁰⁸ Smoke and tear gas grenades of Iranian origin were also used.¹⁰⁹

The Quds Force, vector of the dissemination of military expertise

The diffusion of operating modes dedicated to the repression of internal elements or the harassment of external groups was made possible by the activities of the Quds Force. Acting as the foreign service of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Quds Force bring a financial, material, moral and technical support to armed groups belonging to the “Axis of Resistance.” According to M. San-Augustin, the Quds work as a major unit of special forces bringing operational military assistance, sometimes even conducting clandestine operations.¹¹⁰ Pagliat and Turret believe that Tehran exercises a “tight control” over the capabilities of Iraqi militias in the field of high intensity combat.¹¹¹ Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis personally admitted, during a TV interview, that hundreds of Iranian and Lebanese (Hezbollah) instructors were present in Iraq in 2014.¹¹² The Iranian leadership worked to build up supplies of military expertise within Shiite groups loyal to the country.¹¹³ That said, once the Iranian primary instructors have taught their technical and tactical skills to experts, the latter subsequently pass them on without any intervention from the Quds Force.¹¹⁴ This operational decentralization is efficient and it allows Iran to deny any implication (“plausible denial”).¹¹⁵

That said, the Quds Force doesn’t appear to be capable – at this time – to finance the Shiite militias. Even if H el ene Sallon believes that “these groups have been armed by Iran,”¹¹⁶ most of the persons interviewed believe that the militias are funded by the subsidies they receive from the Iraqi government, in addition to of all the economic misappropriation already mentioned.¹¹⁷

107. Matt Schroeder, Rogue Rocketeers, “Artillery Rockets and Armed Groups,” *Small Arms Survey*, July 2014, p. 27.

108. Aram Shabanian, December 7, 2019. <https://twitter.com/AramShabanian/status/1203215943024824320>.

109. M651 Tear gas grenades and M713 smoke grenades, according to the organization Bellingcat, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2019/11/12/iraqi-protesters-are-being-killed-by-less-lethal-tear-gas-rounds/>. These observations have been corroborated by Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/iraq-gruesome-string-of-fatalities-as-new-tear-gas-grenades-pierce-protesters-skulls/>.

110. “ Evolution des doctrines iraniennes,” *Cahiers du RETEX*, Centre de doctrine et d’enseignement du commandement, July 2017.

111. Morgan Paglia and Vincent Turret, *L’Iran et ses proxys au Moyen-Orient*, p. 37.

112. *Interview of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis*, *Afaq TV*, June 2017, 47:15-48:15.

113. *Iran’s Networks of Influence in the Middle East, Chapter Four: Iraq*, p. 121-158.

114. Interviews with Iraqi citizens.

115. Morgan Paglia and Vincent Turret, *L’Iran et ses proxys au Moyen-Orient*, p. 26.

116. H el ene Sallon, “Apr es la mort du g en eral Soleimani, les milices pro-iraniennes veulent parfaire leur mainmise sur l’Irak,” *Le Monde*, January 7, 2020.

117. This is the case of Loulouwa Rachid, who believes that PMFs haven’t received Iranian funding.

CONCLUSION

In Iraq, militias have shown their ability to carry out multidimensional operation plans (military, political, informational) in controlled and often dissimulated manner. The sequence of events that occurred at the end of 2019 illustrates their multiplier effect: for a relatively small amount of energy invested, the political and military benefits have been considerable. If we admit that this lever was activated by the Iranians, they have demonstrated the relevance of the model. Indeed, they activated “proxies” with an optimal level of control and without exposing their national territory, while limiting the risk of a military escalation. Incidentally, they have also interacted with Washington, even though the diplomatic channels were closed.

It cannot be ruled out that several attacks against American barracks were decided locally. A local militia leader contesting the foreign presence in Iraq may conduct such operations without requesting support from a third party. In the case of urban show of force and of repression operations, the occurrence of a local initiative is not an option. These operations require political support and large-scale planning. They were driven from a higher level, either by Iranian officials or by the representatives of an Iraqi Deep State with clear freedom of action.

According to Paglia and Tourret, the actions of the militias were piloted from a distance. They were part of an “indirect and subversive strategy.”¹¹⁸ In the end, this is a new form of proxy war – or an alternative to the traditional forms of projection of power – and this approach isn’t too far from the one adopted by larger military powers. The West, but also China, Gulf monarchies, Russia and Turkey are increasingly using subcontractors (partner armies and private military companies), instead of their own forces, to conduct combat missions, hence limiting their footprint. For that reason, in the age of subcontracting, aren’t militias likely to become a convenient and cost-effective asset to implement indirect strategies?

(Translation by Maxime Chervoaux)

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118. Morgan Paglia and Vincent Tourret, *L'Iran et ses proxys au Moyen-Orient*, p. 10.