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IRAQ'S PARAMILITARY FORCES

Iraqi PM Haider al Abadi has recently signed a decree that grants the inclusion of the Iraqi paramilitary militias that fought against the Islamic State into the Armed Forces. Most of their members are Iraqi and non-Iraqi Shias, they were trained and supported by Iran and during the fight for the liberation of Tikrit and Mosul they were responsible for a series of abuses against the local Sunni population and Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's fighters.

The Iraqi Prime Minister's move is mainly political since these militias, widely known as Popular Mobilization Forces ("Al Hashd Al Sha'abi"), benefit from a wide Shia support and the upcoming election on May 12, 2018 induces the Iraqi government to seek consensus. After all, al Abadi is running with his own party ("Al Nasr", "The Victory") and is in direct competition with other Shia parties, mainly former PM Nouri al Maliki's that won the ballots in 2014 and Al Fatih Al Mubin ("Manifest Victory") that features a number of former Shia combatants with ties to Iran and is the most powerful and influential group within the Popular Mobilization Forces. The latter is a coalition headed by the chief of the al Badr militias, Hadi al Amiri.

The political confrontation

The rivalry between al Abadi and al Maliki was crucial in the Iraqi PM's decision. Al Maliki has always been a staunch supporter of Shia supremacy and of the marginalization of the Sunni minority, especially after they supported the rise of the Islamic State. However, the Popular Mobilization Forces were part of this divisive political approach.

Al Abadi instead seeks a greater integration with the Sunnis and social and religious pacification. He signed the decree mainly to mine his rival. The proposal puts the militias on the same level as the Armed Forces, both in terms of salaries and duties. In fact, they will now have to report to the Ministry of Defense and will become part of the regular army. By doing so, al Abadi has snatched from his political rivals a strong campaign theme and a source of consensus.

While the integration of the Shia militias into the Iraqi security apparatus legalizes their status, it also brings a series of armed factions that would have been tough to reign in and disarm under government control. At the same time, their inclusion provides a legal cover to the crimes they committed. While this doesn't help social reconciliation between Sunnis and Shia, it puts a stop to their abuses. When they were formed in 2014, the Shia militias were under the control of the Ministry of Interior, meaning they were also deployed in the streets to guarantee public order. Now their activities shall be confined to the military.

How many are they

There are no official figures on the size of these paramilitary forces. The Popular Mobilization Forces are divided into some 40 groups and each of them is de facto independent from the others. While the majority of their members are Shia, there are also Yezidis, Turkmen, Christians and even Sunnis. The latter mainly belong to tribes that were persecuted because they did not declare their allegiance to the Islamic State. Their common denominator is thus revenge.

Estimates put their numbers at 60-70 thousand members who will now be absorbed into the Iraqi army. Last year, the Iraqi army, that already supported and equipped these forces, trained some militias as part of their special forces. More equipment and training was provided by the Iranian Pasdaran.

If we take into account the fact that the Iraqi army has around 280 thousand soldiers, the former militia members will have a significant impact on the Iraqi Armed Forces. The militias were formed in 2014 after Ayatollah Ali al Sistani asked for their creation. In 2016 the cleric also asked for their integration into the army. Al Abadi's decision thus follows the requests of the Shia clergy.

International reactions

The incorporation of the militias will have an impact on Iraq's international relations. Firstly, the move will strengthen the relationship with Iran, since most of these militias were trained and supported by Tehran. The Shia military-strategic axis is now stronger than ever.

Clearly, Saudi Arabia does not appreciate the move, given their attempt to get closer to Baghdad. After a turbulent period in bilateral relations during Nouri al Maliki's tenure, in 2015 the Saudis decided to re-open their embassy in Iraq. Another positive development was the first visit in 27 years of a Saudi government official in Baghdad in February 2017. During those meetings a joint coordination organism was created.

The pretext for a rapprochement between the two countries was the International Conference for the Reconstruction of Iraq that was held in Kuwait City in February 2018. The Saudis and the other donors pledged 30 billion dollars in aid. What Riyadh wants in return for their money is a diminution in Iranian influence. And they will definitely not appreciate a decision to incorporate Shia militias in a fashion similar to the Iranian Pasdaran.

Saudi Arabia knows that Haider al Abadi is the only Shia political partner they can talk to. The other players in the Shia political spectrum, like al Maliki and al Amiri, have stronger ties to Iran. The United States also does not like al Abadi's move. During the battle against the Islamic State the US refused to collaborate with the Shia militias. In October 2017, former US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, asked for the militias to be disbanded.

The rise of the militias

Paramilitary forces are widespread in the Middle East. There are those who fight in Syria for Bashar al Assad – the well-known Shabiha and the Alawite Popular Committees – the

Shia Lebanese Hezbollah and the Kurdish Peshmerga; these are all militias that have become independent armies of their own. What they have in common is that they are religious or ethnic aggregators. Just like the Syrian Shabiha, these groups usually carry out the dirty work during a conflict. Their use on the battlefield is directly proportional to the impunity they are granted.

The Iraqi Shia militias have helped the government in Baghdad defeat Sunni terrorism. And the fact that they operated in Sunni-majority areas spread resentment. Al Abadi's decision will hence increase the sectarian violence that is plaguing Iraqi society.

An unsolved problem

There are other militias in Iraq. Moqtada al Sadr runs the "Saraya Salam", "The Peace Brigade", that was created after the Mahdi's Army was dissolved in 2008. The predominantly Shia militia is run by its leader, who is against Iranian influence in Iraqi affairs.

"Asa'ib Ahl Al Haqq", also known as the "Khazali Network" from the name of its founder Qais al Khazali, is another Shia militia that was founded in 2006 as a splinter group of the Mahdi's Army. This group counts on 10 thousand men, is pro-Iranian and has fought in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon committing a series of crimes and violations.

The Niniveh Guard

To water down the prevalence of Shia groups in the Popular Mobilization Forces, al Abadi has proposed the inclusion of a Sunni militia, the Niniveh Guard, previously known as the "National Mobilization Force" that was armed and trained by the Turks. Their inclusion pursues a double aim: decrease sectarianism and appease the Turkish who don't want Iraq to be too close to Iran.

One of the leaders of this group, Atheel Al Nujaifi, fled to Iraqi Kurdistan after he was accused of colluding with a foreign power, i.e. Turkey. This militia includes a number of soldiers and officials from Saddam Hussein's dissolved army. They are very professional and were prevented from fighting to liberate Mosul.

Future consequences

Unfortunately the civil war in Iraq, just like the one in neighboring Syria, has favored the proliferation of militias that, in some cases, have become lawless armed gangs. Authorities in Baghdad don't have the force to dismantle them and their inclusion into the regular army to legalize and disarm them is a necessary step.

The Iraqi army that was formed after Saddam Hussein's defeat was based on the exclusion of Sunni officials – who knew how to fight a war, see Iran – and replaced them with Shia ones – who had no clue on how to wage a war – who are mostly incompetent and, 15 years on, are still mediocre combatants and strategists. The inclusion of these well-trained militias could be a step forward for the Iraqi Armed Forces.

The downside is the negative impact on the pacification of Sunnis and Shia and an increase in sectarian violence. Since every militia or armed group is based on ethnic, tribal, religious and/or political goals, once they are integrated into the Armed Forces they will probably continue to pursue their original agenda. The outcome of this initiative and future peace in Iraq will largely depend on the outcome of May's Parliamentary elections.

NIGER'S DANGEROUS ISLAM

Out of a population of roughly 21 million, Niger's Muslims represent about 80%. It is a Sunni Islam (only about 5% is Shiite), which is generally moderate, widely influenced by the Sufi confraternities and still soaked with animist beliefs.

But as often happens in very poor countries (60% of Niger's population is below the poverty threshold and, according to the UN, it is the country with the lowest development rate in the world), in part due to a harsh lifestyle without expectations, there is room for undesirable social scourges like corruption, illegal traffics (70% of the migrants that land in Italy travel through Niger), criminality and, of course, Islamic terrorism.

The endemic droughts plague the population, 80% of which lives off of agriculture and herding. The majority of children are affected by malnutrition and the country has a very high mortality rate. Even democracy is a rare occurrence in a country where coup d'états are a recurring theme.

And there are ethnic feuds and the eternal fight between the nomadic Tebu and Tuareg populations and the nonmigratory Peul and Hausa. In addition to all this there are the refugee camps, where thousands of Malians live after escaping terrorism, just like the 15 thousand Nigerians in Diffa.

In the Sub-Saharan belt, Niger's case is not the exception but the rule. So apart from endogenous terrorism, born and developed from the widespread poverty, there is the exogenous one coming from nearby countries like Mali, Nigeria and Algeria.

Islamic terror cannot be defeated on the military level alone, where even the local government is struggling due to the lack of numbers and quality among its troops (that's why foreign armies were called in), it must be defeated on the social side, by a strict control over the Islamic organizations that can help keep a more moderate approach to religion.

Meanwhile, the country bans religiously-inspired parties, thereby trying to prevent radical Islam from getting a foothold into politics.

On the other hand, this ban has favored the founding of parties that are semi-clandestine. Among these there are the Islamic Alternative Party and the Islamic Ummah Front.

Alongside these formations that try to exploit religion politically, there is a strong presence in Niger of Islamic associations that operate legally and that allow for the spread of an often radical form of Islam; a sort of osmosis between the legal Islamic associations and the clandestine Islamic political parties.

Among these, the most important are:

the 'The Niger Association for appeal, unity and solidarity';
the 'Association for the spread of Islamic culture';
the 'Islamic Association of Niger'.

The three associations above are believed to be affiliated with the aforementioned Islamic Ummah Front and their political program includes:

the introduction of Islam as a State religion (despite the lay constitution);
the introduction of a religious appeal, in the first part of the Constitution, that says 'in the name of God merciful and forgiving';
the adoption of a religious education system to reaffirm the country's Islamic identity.

Niger's constitution and its laws

Niger's new constitution, approved in 2010, says in article 8 that all religions will be respected without preferences of the sort. The following article, 9, prohibits parties, unions or associations created on religious, ethnic or regional bases. A specific Ministry presides on the country's religious issues. The State recognizes both Muslim and Christian national holidays. Every religious group must register at the Interior Ministry, although the procedure is just a formality, and the construction of places of cult must receive the Ministry's authorization.

There exist no public funding or promotion for religious associations, although the Islamic Association of Niger (a government group) is authorized to broadcast one, weekly, program on the State television (the only TV station in the country).

The influence of radical Wahabi Islam

Despite these attempts to marginalize religion with respect to the political activities of the State and the fact that such activity is exercised within a specific legal framework, Niger has seen the spread of Islamic associations, the most dangerous of which are the Wahabi ones. They are dangerous not only because of the radical ideology that they promote but because they are supported by Saudi financiers – and in a poor country such as Niger is, money is more convincing than ideologies.

One of these associations is "Izala toul bida'a wa ikamatu essouna" (the Society of Removal of Innovation and Re-establishment of the Sunna), which was founded in 1978 in the Nigerian state of Jos and then spread to other countries of the Sahel, including Niger. The association carries out activities of proselytism and spreads the Islamic message, the "Dawa", and is connected with the "World Muslim League", a direct product of the Wahabi clergy.

The Izala is a sworn enemy of the Sufi confraternities like the Tijanyah and the Qadiryah, guilty of spreading a moderate version of Islam which is different from the religious precepts. It is a dogmatic clash. The Izala has attempted to form and finance paramilitary groups, especially in Niger.

When religious coexistence fails and terrorism jumps in

The combination of endemic poverty and diffusion of radical Islam has caused the emergence, in Niger, of both clashes between religious groups and of Islamic terror.

In Niger's past there is no trace of religious incidents save for the sporadic clashes in the years 1998-2000 with the baptist community in the city of Say. It must be noted that Say, like Kiota, Agadez and Madarounfa, are considered by Niger's Muslim communities to be "sacred" cities, so the presence of other religions in the area has never been smiled upon.

Niger's greatest social problem up to a few years ago was the coexistence between the Tuareg minority, of Arab origin, and the rest of the country, of African origin. This had caused an armed conflict that produced the peace talks between the Tuareg rebels of the "Revolutionary Armed Forces of Sahara" and the central government in 1995, which were followed by a cessation of the armed struggle, even on the part of the "Democratic Renewal Front". All things considered, the fight was more of an ethnic struggle rather than a religious one, being that both parties were Muslim.

Today, however, things have changed for the worse, going from a tolerant Islam to a radical one, thus rocking the peaceful coexistence of different religions.

In January 2015 there was a wave of violence against Christians during the days following the attack of the satirical publication Charlie Hebdo. 72 Christian churches were attacked and burned (about 80% of the country's Christian churches), the homes of Christians were vandalized and ransacked; there were tens of dead. The instigator of the attack has yet to be named but there are suspicions that the events could have been piloted by radical Islamic associations with the support of opposition parties. Christian religion has been stigmatized by its association with the French colonial period.

The next phase was characterized by the infiltration of terrorism, which had, to that day, been imported from abroad, as was exemplified by the numerous attempts to kidnap foreigners and the repeated attacks against the people of Diffa and Tillabéri. But Boko Haram in nearby Nigeria, AQIM (Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb) in Burkina Faso, Al Muorabitoun in South Algeria and North Mali, which made an alliance in March 2017 with Ansar Eddine of Mali (thus forming the "Jamaat Nusra al Islam wal Muslemin" - "Movement for the Support of Islam and of Muslims", recently affiliated with Al Qaida) pose an imminent threat for Niger, since there exist no border controls in the area and the terrorists are free to move undisturbed throughout the region.

Dangerous perspectives

Since Niger is a predominantly Muslim country, Islam has not been a decisive element so far in tracing the nation's political history, but rather a uniting and defining element.

The Tuareg nomads converted to Islam (although they kept their cult of spirits, called "djinn") around the eleventh century, just like the Hausa and, later, the Fulani. Yet Niger's Islam is now taking a different course.

The main problem is with the authority of Niamey, which cannot face the threat of Islamic terrorist on its own and has sought the help of the French and of the USA, with whom they signed military cooperation agreements.

Western powers are also convinced that Niger should not fall in the hands of Islamic terror and should instead be a stronghold against the phenomenon in the region. But waving aside geo-strategic talk, the fact that Niger is the world's fourth producer of uranium is probably not a marginal detail either.

For what it's worth, compared to neighboring countries, Niger is moderately secure as a nation. But it's getting worse. The region of Diffa, near the border with Nigeria and Chad, has been in a state of emergency since 2015, and there is a curfew since 2014. There have also been terrorist attacks in the areas. The same happens in the area around

Tillabéri. A number of humanitarian NGOs have begun to clear out of the region for security reasons. In the least serious of these cases, family members were evacuated. And another threat comes from the connection between traffickers, criminals and terrorists. Although, more often than not, the roles are interchangeable.

THE WAR OF SPIES

Whatever the reason, the physical elimination of the enemies of the State is a practice that countries either use regularly or in extreme cases. The so-called license to kill is granted to some intelligence agencies only. Mossad, CIA, SVR and FSB have it, and so do the French DGSE and the British MI6 from time to time. Other intelligence agencies, such as the Italian AISE or the German BND are not given this kind of “authorization”.

We’re talking about “democratic” countries, because authoritarian regimes don’t need to grant the permission to kill opponents. They just do it. Just look at what happened to Kim Jon-un’s half brother, Kim Jong-nam.

Who are the targets

Terrorist, opponents, enemies and, obviously, traitors are the targets. The latter are an all time favorite, especially if you’re a former KGB, because a double agent takes along with his persona a wealth of information, names and circumstances that he sells to please the country that is hosting him. The deserter reveals the networks of informants, takes entire spy rings down and his revelations often lead to the deaths of several people. Hence his punishment, even if the traitor has retired and has ceased to be a threat.

The traitors

The killing of Alexander Litvinenko in 2006 and the recent attempt to kill Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia fall within the category of the so-called “traitors to punish”. The use of chemical or radioactive substances to poison the victims is a classic of Eastern European, or former Soviet regimes. One of the most famous cases is the murder of Bulgarian dissident Georgi Ivanov Markov, killed in London in 1978 with a ricin-filled dart. This is more than a trademark.

We could point out the fact that such a blatant and recognizable mode of action easily leads to identifying both perpetrators and instigators. But this is precisely what they want you to know. These regimes want to make sure you know who’s behind a murder so that it is both a warning and a clear message to the traitors: sooner or later we will come after you because any betrayal shall bear (often deadly) consequences. Dioxin, poison, plutonium, nerve agents are the vehicles, if not the brand, that willingly identifies executors and instigators.

There are often also political reasons for an attack on a traitor, as is probably the case for Skripal. Vladimir Putin supported such an evident attempt to gain the consensus of the nationalist fringes in Russia just two weeks before the March 18 elections. Putin’s spokesman sarcastically thanked Theresa May for helping Putin win the vote.

The consequences

Any blatant act such as the attack on Skripal inevitably leads to diplomatic falls outs: expulsions, retaliations, echoes of Cold War and what not. However, we should not forget Vladimir Putin is a former KGB. The expulsion of diplomats can titillate public opinion, but

despite the political consequences, operations on the ground are not impacted. Once an intelligence agent that works/worked under cover in an embassy (a cover that did not prevent from being spotted by the local counterespionage) is expelled, another one will replace him. This is the case for both the Russians and the British.

There is also another less publicized rule. Hostile intelligence agencies that fight on the ground, as do the British MI6 and its Russian nemesis the SVR (and the military intelligence agency GRU), also need to communicate. Although they rarely cooperate, they still need to get messages across to the other side by bypassing the political channels. This is always the case. So, while both Russian and British agents are being expelled, others will replace them inside the embassies in the near future.

The British mistake

In the case of Sergei Skripal the MI5, the British domestic intelligence agency, committed a series of mistakes. Skripal is a former GRU Colonel and an MI6 informant who was identified and convicted to jail time in Russia. In 2010 he was swapped with 10 Russian agents that the UK had set free. However, Skripal was responsible for the dismantlement of the GRU spy network in the UK. His betrayal had serious consequences, hence the need to make him pay.

It would have been wise, and usually is a standard practice, that such an individual obtain a new identity and disappear from the public view so that he cannot be tracked down by his former partners. Instead, Sergei lived in Salisbury under his real name and without any form of protection. He was easy to find and to target.

Another imprudence was linked to the fact that his daughter Yulia often traveled between Russia, where she lives, and the United Kingdom. Also in her case, no precautions were taken, nor was she controlled when she landed in London. Had there been more controls, one could have noticed the lady carrying radioactive or poisonous substances. It was way too simple for the Russians to set up the assassination attempt.

Although Sergei Skripal's past is shrouded in mystery – his son, one of his brothers and an ex wife were all murdered – there is no reason to believe his former employers were not involved in his elimination. The paradox is that his own daughter was involved in the operation against her dad because she was the one who delivered the toxin in his home.

Who conducts the eliminations

GRU, SVC and FSB all have the know how to conduct dirty operations. It is likely that the intelligence agency where the betrayal took place will be the one carrying out the op. For Litvinenko it was probably the FSB, while for Skripal it could have been the GRU, in whose ranks we also find the Spetsnaz Special Forces.

The British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Boris Johnson, claims that Vladimir Putin was the one who gave out the order to eliminate Skripal. Indeed this could be the case, because any operation abroad can have political consequences, hence the need to involve the highest political levels.

The USA

The CIA also has a dedicated department to special operations, which include the physical elimination of terrorists. This structure was recently reinforced after the landing of Donald Trump at the White House and the appointment of Mike Pompeo as head of the CIA. Pompeo's recent move to the State Department, along with the promotion of Gina Haspel in Langley points to an increase in the CIA's dirty operations.

Under George W. Bush Jr. the CIA focused on illegal extraordinary renditions, that relied on black sites, interrogation centers in foreign countries where alleged terrorists or opponents to complacent regimes were abused and tortured. Barack Obama instead opted for killing terrorists with drones. Donald Trump has resurrected Rambo and wants to kill terrorists instead of arresting them.

Different Presidents have different ways to authorize the elimination of a terrorist. Obama watched as the SEALs killed Osama Bin Laden. Trump could grant the CIA a limitless license to kill. If this were the case, Gina Haspel would be the right woman in the right place. Haspel was involved in the management of the Black Sites and of the abuses that followed and would have no objections to act as she is told.

The CIA usually relies on the Navy SEALs for these kind of operations or on the operational and logistical support of the forces part of the Stay Behind network that included Italy before Gladio was unveiled.

Infinite spy wars

There are no exact figures on how many former spies or dissidents have been eliminated by the Russians. This is because the physical elimination of a person isn't necessarily linked to delivering a message to others in his same position. However, we can assume the Russians, more than anyone else, have a tendency to get rid of their enemies.

Under this respect, Russia and the United States behave in the same way. The only difference being their target: the CIA strikes terrorists, while the SVR, FSB and GRU have a much wider audience of potential targets. In both cases, human rights are not a constraint, as the US have shown in Guantanamo or in their clandestine interrogation centers or as the Russians treat opponents or traitors who are imprisoned, killed or made to vanish.

Some ethics

There is still some room for ethics in the dangerous and ruthless world of spies. There is no mercy if you betray. However, if you are caught by your enemy, the behavior is different. There is a certain degree of fair play among colleagues. An agent that spies on behalf of his government can be arrested and put in jail, but never eliminated. This is a form of respect for the fact that you are acting in the best interest of your country. And when the next prisoner swap comes along, you shall be exchanged in return of other enemy agents.

Sergei Skripal was indeed part of a prisoner swap, but he had betrayed his own country. He was used in the swap because he was still viewed as an asset (otherwise the Russians would have killed him instead of imprisoning him), but this did not extinguish his guilt.

In 2017 Russian counterespionage has identified or arrested around 500 spies. Vladimir Putin's public praise to his security services revealed the news. These are people without a face, whom we know nothing about: who they were, who they worked for, what they did and what they were interested in. Only those directly involved know. Nobody likes the hype around this type of news: the country that uncovers the spies realizes there has been a breach in its national security, while the country the spies worked for realizes that a mistake was committed by one of its informants or agents for them to be identified.