

## Reconsidering the Role of Militias in Iraq

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MANY DIFFERENT ORGANIZATIONS have resisted coalition forces passively and actively since the beginning of the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2003. Some of these organizations, such as al-Qa`ida and Ansar al-Sunna, have an unwavering commitment to the destruction of the Iraqi government and the U.S.-led coalition. Other militias have much more complex strategies. Sometimes they cooperate with the Iraqi government and coalition forces, at other times challenge them politically, and at still other times resist them violently. Moreover, political factions supported by militias are currently participating in the Iraqi government. These unclear and mixed signals have left coalition forces in a quandary about how to respond effectively.

Coalition policy on Shi`a militias has varied from kinetic military action to voluntary disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, to indirect support for Iraqi government policies to abolish them legally. Since post-invasion operations began in Iraq, the United States has emphasized a strategy of non-engagement toward militias with the ultimate hope of eliminating them in favor of the newly formed Iraqi security forces. This article will argue that while military defeat of militias is tactically feasible, it is unlikely to lead to strategic success because militias have established popular legitimacy, and military attacks by an occupying power are only likely to increase their domestic support. Militias have demonstrated an ability to protect their neighborhoods and provide basic services; this mutual dependence is unlikely to be overcome in the short-term. Therefore, a U.S. policy of accommodation is likely to increase the likelihood of military success and political stability.<sup>1</sup>

This article uses two case studies to investigate good policies for security, stability, transition and reconstruction

<sup>1</sup> This is not a fundamental shift in U.S. policy. Strategies of engagement are used with the Kurdish peshmerga in northern Iraq and with Sunni Arab militias in western Iraq.

operations in Iraq. The first case study analyzes U.S. engagement strategies vis-à-vis the Kurdish peshmerga in northern Iraq since 2003, the defeat and engagement strategies vis-à-vis the Sunni militias in western and central Iraq, and the defeat strategies vis-à-vis the Shi`a militias in Baghdad and southern Iraq. The second case study analyzes British strategies of passive acceptance (engagement and defeat) vis-à-vis Jewish militias in Palestine.

### Diverging Engagement Strategies

Closer examination of the U.S. relationship with Kurdish, Sunni and Shi`a militias reveals a biased approach toward engagement. The United States employed a strategy of engagement with the Kurdish peshmerga even prior to the invasion in 2003. This led to stability and the transformation of the militia into an effective security force. U.S. strategy vis-à-vis Sunni militias in Anbar Province suddenly changed from

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defeat to engagement in 2006. Sunni Arab militias now perform local security responsibilities alongside U.S. and Iraqi security forces. These two engagements led to an improved police force due to an increase in recruits whom the locals trusted.

The United States, however, remains committed to a non-engagement strategy with respective Shi`a militias, often failing to distinguish Shi`a militias from insurgents. This suggests that isolation of Shi`a militias will continue to create greater instability for two reasons. First, during the last three years, U.S. military tactics aimed at defeating Shi`a militias through targeted raids against militia commanders have caused the unintended consequence of creating a power vacuum. This has been filled by

criminals intent upon making a personal profit regardless of whether it will impact the community negatively. Local communities suffer the consequences of reduced security because the nascent Iraqi security forces are still in the developmental stage and have yet to assume an independent role as a trusted security provider. Therefore, U.S. forces have been required to fill this role. This strategy has the potential to create another power vacuum if Iraqi security forces have not demonstrated the ability to assume an independent role as sole security provider before the United States draws down its troops.

The second problem is the lack of oversight of the militias. This has allowed an uninterrupted line of communication with external actors. Iran gladly accepted the oversight role, co-opting as many Shi`a militias as possible and providing them with training, funding, and equipment, which has been used to lethally disrupt U.S. military operations in Iraq. The likelihood of Shi`a militias turning to Iran and then attacking U.S. forces would have been lower if U.S. policymakers adopted a much more aggressive strategy toward engaging moderate militia members and including them into the overall security plan after the cease-fire in October 2004. Recent experience in Anbar Province, however, suggests that it is still not too late to change course. Moqtada al-Sadr's efforts to rehabilitate the Mahdi militia during a six month cessation of attacks beginning in August 2007 and General Petraeus' encouraging response in December 2007 to al-Sadr's decision also suggests that Shi`a militias would be willing to cooperate with the United States. The likelihood of Shi`a militias turning away from their Iranian sponsors will be greater if the incentives offered by the U.S. and Iraqi governments were right for an alliance of convenience.

### Lessons from the British Experience in Palestine

The U.S. strategy toward militias in Iraq has been similar to the British strategy toward Jewish militias in Palestine from 1920-1947. Similar to the current approach in Iraq, the British government and military also disagreed regarding the best strategy for dealing with militias in Palestine. The British government recognized the futility of

employing a violent military solution to a political problem, whereas the military felt the use of overwhelming firepower was justified and necessary to defeat intransigent Jewish militias conducting guerrilla style attacks. Furthermore, an Arab insurgency that began to foment in 1936 led military officials to pursue a strategy of engagement with militias through the establishment of constabulary forces

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known as the Jewish Settlement Police. Serving alongside British security forces, the Jewish Settlement Police were critical to the restoration of order by 1939 without the need for additional British military forces. Although the White Paper of 1939—which limited Jewish immigration, land ownership and the right to call Palestine a national homeland—could have destroyed their symbiotic relationship, the onslaught of World War II that same year led moderate Jewish militia leaders to continue to support British military forces. This greatly benefited the British less than a year later when Palestine was faced with the threat of invasion by Axis powers. They turned to the Haganah militia.<sup>2</sup> The British were subsequently able to acquire Haganah cooperation and assistance in a joint-campaign against more radical militias. During these periods of engagement with the British, the Haganah developed

<sup>2</sup> The Haganah created a special commando unit known as the Palmach. The Palmach were involved in a multitude of operations ranging from sabotage of enemy infrastructure, serving as navigators for allied forces in neighboring Syria and Lebanon, to repelling invading forces long enough to allow British security forces to retreat from Palestine safely while leaving the Jewish militias there to fend for themselves.

professionally, which was imperative for their transition from a militia to a professionally recognized force after the British departed.

The Labour Party’s 1945 decision to uphold the MacDonald White Paper of 1939, however, mortally wounded the British relationship with the Haganah, ultimately requiring a major influx of British troops to maintain order.<sup>3</sup> Not only did the Haganah finally reject the British engagement strategy, but it formed an alliance with the radical militias that had been hunted only months earlier. As a result, the security situation became so untenable that the British government was forced to turn the Palestine Mandate back over to the United Nations. This suggests that a 28-year occupation dissolved within two years of the British adoption of a political position that alienated the Jewish population, and a military policy of non-engagement with the Jewish militias.

Furthermore, a stable Israeli state was ultimately built upon the foundation of the militias anyway. Following the unexpected handover of the Palestine Mandate by the British, the United Nations adopted a policy of engagement that would encourage the use of militias by both Arabs and Jews. The United Nations did not possess the capability to provide administration, governance and security, which was desperately needed in the transition period. Therefore, it engaged the Haganah. Within six months the state of Israel was born, and the Haganah were transformed from an unofficial local militia to a professional standing army, which remains a formidable defense force 60 years later. The Haganah could serve as a potential model in Iraq of how the United States could employ militias as a provincial defense force that could play a greater role in maintaining stability while reducing the current unsustainable troop levels. Although Jewish militias were geographically concentrated, the method can still apply to Iraqi militias through a local and regional integration

<sup>3</sup> As the security situation deteriorated, the British continually increased troop levels until they reached 100,000, one-tenth of their military. This was unsustainable, and the British were never able to reopen lines of communication with the Haganah or any other Jewish militia.

process with police and military forces in Iraq’s three concentrated regions. If the U.S. strategy should involve the transition of security to a militia force, then engagement needs to include different types of joint operations to evaluate and assess training, equipment and discipline standards—a process that took a decade in Palestine.

Unlike Iraq, however, Palestine was not invaded by a foreign military to change its government. Palestine was recognized as a British Trusteeship by the League of Nations after World War I, and British policy supported the World Zionist Organization’s goal of a Jewish state in Palestine. Moreover, the occupation forces initially faced a more permissive environment in Palestine. Nevertheless, after 1936 the situation in Palestine came to resemble the current situation in Iraq. The Arab-Palestinian insurgency against the politically dominant Jewish community and the British occupation force presented many of the same challenges the United States has faced in Iraq. For the Jewish community of Palestine, as for the Shi`a community of Iraq, local security became an overriding concern, and that security came quickly to depend upon local Jewish militia forces as it became clear that the occupying military force was unable to provide security in the face of a growing Arab insurgency. While the failure to provide a political solution that served the interests of the Palestinians as well as the Jews created a situation of permanent conflict in the greater Middle East region, the British occupation nevertheless left a strong state in its wake.

### Conclusion

The evidence presented suggests that a military strategy of engagement with Shi`a militias is likely to be an efficacious option for maintaining stability while reducing U.S. troop levels in Iraq. The British military strategy of engaging local militia forces to work in conjunction with the occupying military between 1936 and 1945 ultimately produced security forces to which British forces could hand responsibility for local and national security. This allowed the occupying military to reduce its footprint as the local militia forces gained in strength and responsibility.

In Iraq, engagement with the Kurdish peshmerga led to stability and the transformation of the militias into an effective security force. In Anbar Province, which senior military officials previously considered the most contentious area of Iraq, U.S. military forces adopted a similar strategy that by 2007 made the province one of the safest areas in the country. Militias are likely to continue to play a political and security role. Iraqi politics has long been based on central government negotiation with local strongmen, which results in a greater emphasis on services rendered at the local level by organized groups such as militias.

Although defeating conventional military forces in a traditional combat scenario is impossible for militias, they can, however, switch back and forth between conducting military operations and assuming the role of victim to gain popular political support. As Bradley Tatar notes, whereas “armed civilians are people without long-term political goals who seek only to free themselves from a foreign oppressor...militias like al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army [are] operated by militants who are committed to the political goals of the group.”<sup>4</sup> This is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, and therefore working with moderate elements of Shi`a militias is key to maintaining security reflective of the region’s environment while reducing the U.S. military presence.

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<sup>4</sup> Bradley Tatar, “Emergence of Nationalist Identity in Armed Insurrections: A Comparison of Iraq and Nicaragua,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 78:1 (2005): p. 183.