Willful ignorance hurts Christian militia in Iraq

Dr Christina Lin

January 2020

Abstract

The prevailing American narrative is that the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq are an arm of Tehran, but that misses the bigger picture. The PMF is a tapestry of Iraq’s multi-ethnic and multi-religious population that are mostly Shiite Muslim groups, but also includes Sunni Muslims, Christians and Yazidis, and were the major forces that defeated ISIS in Iraq. However, with the current U.S. military escalation against PMF that includes Christian militia, this would likely empower ISIS once more and expel the remaining Christians from Iraq.

About ISPSW

The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) is a private institute for research and consultancy. The ISPSW is an objective, task-oriented and politically non-partisan institute.

In the ever more complex international environment of globalized economic processes and worldwide political, ecological, social and cultural change, which occasions both major opportunities and risks, decision-makers in the economic and political arena depend more than ever before on the advice of highly qualified experts.

ISPSW offers a range of services, including strategic analyses, security consultancy, executive coaching and intercultural competency. ISPSW publications examine a wide range of topics connected with politics, the economy, international relations, and security/defense. ISPSW network experts have worked – in some cases for decades – in executive positions and have at their disposal a wide range of experience in their respective fields of expertise.

About the Author of this Issue

Dr. Christina Lin is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Center for Global Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of California, Irvine. She is the author of "The New Silk Road: China’s Energy Strategy in the Greater Middle East" (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy), and a former director for China policy at the U.S. Department of Defense.
Analysis

On December 27, a rocket attack on a base in Kirkuk, Iraq, killed a US civilian contractor and wounded four service members and two Iraqi personnel. It was not clear who carried out the attack, but a source told Military Times “We think the attack was carried out by... Popular Mobilization Forces.”

The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), also known as the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), is an Iraqi state-sponsored umbrella organization composed of some 40 militias that are mostly Shiite Muslim groups, but also includes Sunni Muslims, Christians and Yazidis as well. The PMF was formed in 2014 after the fall of Mosul to Islamic State, and has fought nearly every major battle against ISIS.

As a reprisal for the rocket attacks, Washington, without coordinating with the Iraqi government, retaliated two days later by launching air strikes against positions of Iran-backed Kataeb Hezbollah – one of the militias in the PMF. The air strikes killed 25 people and wounded 51 others, prompting thousands of Iraqi protesters to take to the streets and break into the US embassy compound in Baghdad.

Despite US media referring to the PMF as Iranian Shiite militia or Kataeb Hezbollah’s close ties with Iran, many Iraqis see them as an Iraqi force, and are outraged by the attack from an outside power and the violation of Iraqi sovereignty. Maria Fantappie, the senior adviser on Iraq for the International Crisis Group, said: “We are talking about a foreign force attacking an Iraqi force.”

According to Elijah Magnier, chief international and war correspondent for Jordan’s Al Ra’i, US air strikes only killed nine members of Brigades 45 and 46 of Kataeb Hezbollah, and the others killed were part of the Iraqi Army and the Iraqi federal police.

The leader of the Babylon Brigade, a Christian militia within the PMF, tweeted a strong condemnation against US air strikes: “Mr Trump, we are standing here. We did not come from Iran. We are Iraqis and the sons and brothers of the martyrs who were killed. This is the widespread rage of Iraqis.”

---

5 https://twitter.com/nejmalrai/status/1211962947330805766
6 https://twitter.com/ChaldeanRyan/status/1212003212212998145

© Institut für Strategie- Politik- Sicherheits- und Wirtschaftsberatung ISPSW
A 2016 British Broadcasting Corporation article actually featured the leader Rayan al-Kildani and the Christian Babylon Brigade militia on the frontlines fighting ISIS, but most Americans remain ignorant about the existence of Christians in Iraq and Syria. Some of the militias in the PMF were built locally from volunteers who emerged from Nineveh’s Christian and Shabak communities (the Shabak are an ethno-religious group, primarily Shiite, long resident in northern Iraq) and helped liberate Christian villages and towns from ISIS.

As Daniel Larison of The American Conservative observed, US President Donald Trump and his advisers have a tendency to oversimplify every regional issue and lump all things only in terms of Iran’s “malign activities.” He chastised that they refuse to see other countries in the region on their own terms and local actors as having their own agency and legitimate interests, and as a result this leads to misguided policies based on misperception, miscalculation, and unintended escalation of military conflicts.

Indeed, this inability of the Washington establishment to put themselves in other people’s shoes, and try to understand other actors’ perspectives, has been a perennial problem in the conduct of US foreign policy, especially in the Middle East. The unintended consequences have been disastrous failed states, rising terrorism and Wahhabi fanaticism, mass-scale deaths and human suffering, exodus of Iraqi and Syrian Christians, and the perpetuation of poverty and underdevelopment in the region.

As David Gardner in the Financial Times argued, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 almost emptied it of Christians, caught in the crossfire of ethno-sectarian warfare between Shiite and Sunni Muslims. Their numbers plummeted from about 1.5 million to around 35,000. When ISIS captured Mosul in June 2014, the city lost most of its last Christians as the jihadis marked Christian homes with the letter “N” for Nazarenes, similar to the Nazis marking Jewish homes with the yellow star.

In Syria, Christians faced similar persecution from US-backed jihadis. The perception of American cynicism toward their plight was further reinforced in 2014, when Syrian Christian leaders met and pleaded with US officials to stop arming al-Qaeda-linked rebels, and the late senator John McCain responded by yelling and storming out of the room, while Senator Lindsay Graham tried to apologize on his behalf.

As former Singaporean diplomat Kishore Mahbubani noted in his book Has the West Lost It?, Washington seems incapable or unwilling to learn the cause and effect of its militarized foreign policy toward the Middle East. Mahbubani argued that whether it is the Central Intelligence Agency’s creation of al-Qaeda to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan, which reaped the attacks of September 11, 2001, or a senior US official confirming the Barack Obama administration was transporting ISIS fighters from Afghanistan to Syria to fight President Bashar

---

7 “The exodus of Christians is a loss for all of Middle East”, Financial Times, https://www.ft.com/content/305afc40-2912-11e7-9ec8-168383da43b7
al-Assad’s government, US military entanglements continue to reap disastrous consequences that further destabilize the region, empower America’s enemies, and hurt many innocent people in the process.

Shortly after the US airstrikes, Secretary Pompeo called and consulted with Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Saudi Arabia’s Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, and United Arab Emirates Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. A few days later the US assassinated Iran’s General Qassim Suleimani in Baghdad. Suleimani was once an ally who fought alongside the US against the Taliban in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks by the Saudi hijackers, and also led the campaign against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Now, with US military escalation against the very same PMF that finally suppressed ISIS by the end of 2017, Iraq is at risk of becoming a theater of war between Washington and Tehran that will likely empower ISIS once more. And, it seems the last remnant of Iraqi Christians and the Christian militia may be making its final exodus from the Middle East – ironically spurred by their co-religionists in Washington, DC.

***

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

An earlier version of the article first appeared in Asia Times on January 2, 2020.

---


