



Executive Summary

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IRAQ'S SHIA WARLORDS AND THEIR MILITIAS: POLITICAL AND SECURITY CHALLENGES AND OPTIONS

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As America's de facto co-belligerents who often share the same battlespace in the fight against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the presence and activity of Iraq's Shia warlords and their militias have an impact on U.S. interests and policies at both the strategic and operational levels. The practical objective of this monograph is to provide a better understanding of the Shia militia phenomenon and to highlight the factors with which U.S. policymakers and U.S. Army planners and commanders will have to deal with respect to operations in Iraq.

The appearance and rapid advance in 2014 of ISIS, or the Islamic State as it calls itself, and the security crisis that resulted in Iraq also engendered a mushrooming in the size and role of the Shia militias in Iraq and has resulted in the unprecedented importance and status of the warlords who lead them. With the re-energizing of the pre-existing militias and the creation of new ones as part of a mass mobilization, this force has played a significant role in most of the campaigns, helping to stem and then turn the ISIS tide, thanks to its religious commitment, Iranian support, and previous experience gained by some fighters in Syria.

The militias are embedded in mainstream society, and the warlords who lead them are also political and often religious leaders and have emerged as powerbrokers in the country's political system in their own right. Not only have the militias had an impact on the battlefield, but the warlords have also shaped policies on such issues as the formation of a National

Guard in the Sunni areas, whether to target ISIS in urban areas, whether to rehabilitate the Baathists, and whether to establish detente with the Gulf States; they have also hindered reconciliation with the Sunni community, which is needed in order to weaken ISIS's appeal in that community.

As the U.S. Landpower footprint increases, planners and commanders must remain sensitive to the integrated position the warlords and the militias have in Iraq's security system and the fact that the militias are embedded in military operations with the Iraqi army and police. As such, their presence and influence must be considered in U.S. decisionmaking, and the appropriate conditions and limits on operational cooperation, intelligence sharing, and logistic support to the Iraqi forces must be determined. In particular, the warlords have often displayed hostility to U.S. interests and could represent a potential force protection concern to any U.S. ground presence. Given the militias' links with Iran, Iranian hostility to U.S. policies or a degradation in U.S.-Iranian relations could increase the risk to deployed personnel. Iraqis perceive a continuing need for the militias in the effort against ISIS for some time to come, given the need to rebuild the Army after its earlier poor showing against ISIS and its history of corruption, politicization, and neglect. Combined with this need, the recent rise in the warlords' popularity and legitimacy is likely to ensure an ongoing role for them in Iraq's security and political life for the foreseeable future.

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