

Iraq's Militias: The True Threat to Coalition Success in Iraq¹

ANTHONY J. SCHWARZ

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In the last five years, the United States invaded two countries and overthrew two ruling parties. In Afghanistan and Iraq, the so-called “end of major combat operations” came swiftly and decisively. In their wakes emerged resistances far more resolute than predicted, forcing coalition military commanders to shift from a conventional warfare doctrine to one better suited for fighting long wars against asymmetric enemies with extremist ideologies. But while religious extremism may typify the average insurgent, the biggest threat to American policy is not posed by the jihadist, who in most cases, lacks the ability to organize, effectively train and recruit forces (other than suicide bombers), and has no long-term strategy for generating resources, garnering public support, or achieving realistic strategic goals. The real hazard to American objectives in Southwest Asia comes from armed and active militias who, unlike most insurgents, have served as career soldiers, seized the support of their populace, and, in many cases, infiltrated national government institutions.

Though a form of resistance, militiamen are far different in nature than insurgents or terrorists. In the long-term, militias are most damaging because they weaken government influence by providing unofficial (and effective) security in localized areas using illegal methods.² Due to the support they receive from their constituents and the resultant political power they wield, militias can only be neutralized through state-sponsored Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) initiatives. By understanding the similarities and differences between militias and insurgents, noting

the potential positives and negatives associated with militias, and applying lessons-learned from DDR-type programs recently employed in Afghanistan and Iraq, coalition forces can develop an effective counterstrategy for Iraq's militias. Such a strategy should be based on political will and international financing as part of a comprehensive approach inculcating political, economic, and military components.

Militias and Politics in Afghanistan and Iraq

The most prominent militia commander in Afghanistan, and a real threat to national stability and growth, is Abd-I-Rab Rasul Sayyaf, former mujahedin party leader and head of a militia founded in Wahhabism, an extremely conservative brand of Sunni Islam. Now the leader of the Upper House of Afghan Parliament, Sayyaf has openly refused to dismantle his militia. His Islamic orthodoxy coupled with his political participation has slowed the modernization of the Afghan judiciary and hindered the expansion of Western style freedoms in Afghanistan.³ Iraq's primary militias consist of the Badr Corps (a paramilitary wing of the politically powerful Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq), the Kurdish *Peshmerga* (essentially an authorized armed force supported by a legitimate Kurdish Regional Government), and Muqtada al-Sadr's *Jaysh al-Mahdi* (commonly referred to as the Mahdi Army or Militia). Of these, the Mahdi Militia is widely viewed as most dangerous. As of May 2006, it is the only militia known to have attacked both coalition and Iraqi Security Forces, and it was responsible for two major uprisings against coalition and Iraqi forces in 2004.⁴ Like Sayyaf's group, Sadr's Mahdi Militia claims to be religious based, possesses an extremely conservative and anti-Western ideology, openly enforces an extreme brand of Sharia law, and is now very politically active—not so much as government leaders, but more as political spoilers, undermining democratic initiatives whenever possible. Like Sayyaf, Sadr has openly refused to dismantle his militia. In recent months Sadr claimed to lose control over rogue elements of his organization, making it even more dangerous than it was two years ago.

Militias and politics are often inextricably linked. During the last five years, in both Afghanistan and Iraq, violence heightened during the

Lieutenant Anthony Schwarz, USN, a graduate of the US Naval Academy, the George Washington University, and the US Naval War College, is an active duty MH-53E helicopter pilot and has flown missions into Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. During the last two years he served in the Department of State's Office of Iraqi Affairs and the Iraq and Afghanistan Directorate at the National Security Council.

run-up to every election. Most analysts attribute these spikes in aggression to insurgent activity aimed at thwarting democratic reform. In part, those analyses are correct. What is often overlooked, however, is the destructive behavior of militias during these time frames. Political participation by militia commanders has wreaked havoc in both countries, where militias often flex their muscles on the margins of political events. In Afghanistan, militia activity rose dramatically just prior to the presidential elections in October 2004 and the parliamentary and provincial elections in September 2005.⁵ These forces were more visible than normal because they engaged insurgents who attacked politically active militia commanders. The militias were also used to coerce and threaten potential voters. For an example of a militia commander using muscle to advance his political agenda one need look no further than the nomination of Ibrahim Jafari as Prime Minister of Iraq in February 2006. Jafari served as Prime Minister of the Iraqi Transitional Government during the year prior to February's nomination. The fact that he was broadly ineffective in advancing government programs and promoting national growth did not stop him from gaining the initial 2006 nomination. Jafari had the support of Sadr, whose militia threatened to harm many voting members if Jafari was not nominated in 2006.

How Militias Compare to Other Forms of Resistance

The insurgency in Iraq is comprised of several components including terrorists, foreign fighters (non-indigenous terrorist-type elements), former regime elements (Saddam loyalists bent on restoring power to the outlawed Ba'ath Party), and rejectionists (largely Sunni Arabs who have not embraced the shift from Saddam's Iraq to a democratically governed state).⁶ Militias constitute yet another armed group outside the formal security sector and central government command.⁷ Like most insurgents, militiamen view combat as a personal and honorable calling. Members of both classifications undergo indoctrination procedures as part of a process meant to instill a sense of worth and duty. Militiamen, like insurgents, organize, train, and conduct covert activities outside the rule of law. Both groups are known to have targeted civilians. In extreme cases, like insurgents, certain militias act extrajudiciously via executions and political assassinations, and have been known to engage in purely criminal activity, including extortion and kidnapping.⁸ Both militias and insurgents swear allegiance to non-nationalistic entities, and both groups obtain resources illegally.

The aforementioned similarities notwithstanding, militias and insurgents are vastly different—especially in Iraq. Because they were originally formed to safeguard villages, tribes, or sectarian groups, militias are often con-

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sidered legitimate entities acting morally in the absence of effective national, provincial, or local security institutions. Insurgent behavior is generally reactionary (in direct response to coalition or national governmental efforts), employed to divide the populace, stunt localized economic growth, and retard societal advances. Militias, conversely, function to protect neighborhoods and meet the socio-economic needs of their limited constituency. Generally speaking, militias do not target occupying forces—though they have been known to target Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan and al Qaeda insurgents in Iraq. Militias usually operate as protective details. Because of their popular support, militias do not require elaborate media campaigns, coercion, or the presence of occupying forces to generate resources. In most cases, militiamen are better trained than insurgents, often having served as career soldiers. Unlike politically disenfranchised insurgents, militias are more inclined to engage in political processes—especially those within a newly formed national or local government. Many militias, such as those comprising the Afghan Military Forces designated during the December 2001 Bonn Conference,⁹ receive official recognition from the United States and the international community. This makes militias far more dangerous than insurgents since recognized militias are able to form political groups, infiltrate national and local legislatures, and corrupt government security forces. Because most militiamen are not required to go into hiding, they are afforded opportunities to live as productive members of society when not engaged in combat. This affords militias better opportunities to create effective command and control structures, providing them the ability to mobilize far more quickly than most insurgents. Finally, unlike insurgents, who often subscribe to an unsanctioned form of militant Islam, members of militias have shown more deference to religious leaders and are usually more apt to adhere to non-extremist Islamic directives issued by respected religious authorities.

Negatives and Positives Associated with Militias

The threats militias pose to national political, economic, and security institutions over extended periods far outweigh any such threats from

insurgents. Militias in Iraq and Afghanistan have undermined the political process repeatedly. Although some Iraqi militias and their affiliated political parties support a broad based disarmament initiative in principle, they are reluctant to proceed because of political rivalries, insurgent attacks, ethnic or sectarian violence, and lack of faith in the ability of national security forces. Ali Ahmad Jalali, Interior Minister of Afghanistan from January 2003 to September 2005, asserts that while militias do not yet possess the capacity to pose strategic threats to the government in Afghanistan, they create a sense of insecurity, hinder economic reconstruction, and weaken government influence—especially in remote areas.¹⁰ Many Afghan militias fought alongside coalition forces during initial combat operations against Taliban insurgents, but the net effects of militias in Afghanistan as well as Iraq have been overwhelmingly negative. By 2004, American and Afghan officials considered militia activity more destructive to nation building and democratic reform than insurgent attacks. In August 2004, the head of international security forces in Kabul commented, “Warlords are a bigger threat than the terrorists because you can’t build state institutions or enforce rule of law (as long as militias exist).”¹¹ Three weeks later, President Hamid Karzai called armed militias a greater threat to democracy than existing Taliban remnants still active in the region.¹²

From an economic perspective, disarmament programs in Afghanistan have yielded limited positive gains using vocational assistance programs (featuring incentive packages including livestock and agricultural implements, job training, and help in establishing small businesses with partnering agencies in order to help former militiamen find new professions).¹³ However, militiamen are generally reluctant to support state-sponsored economic growth initiatives by accepting alternative careers because the benefits (wages, status, and personal gratification) are far outweighed by those provided by their respective militia. An officer in charge of disarmament for Afghanistan’s New Beginnings Program (ANBP) told reporters in 2003, “We have commanders who make huge sums of money from what they do” referring to the foreign support they received while fighting the Soviets and later the Taliban, as well as the money they earn collecting border taxes and providing private security.¹⁴ Another ANBP adviser commented, “Finding jobs for the mid-level (militia) commanders is hard . . . they’re used to getting more important jobs—and more money.”¹⁵

From a security standpoint, militias could not be more damaging. Though they possess a common desire with coalition forces to expel violent agents of power hoping to restore or establish oppressive regimes, militias do not support state institutions. Loyalties lie within the militia organization only. Even worse, militia members often pervade state security mechanisms

in order to further the militia's agenda. Rather than providing security for a national populace, they have little regard for non-militia members. Militias influence the Iraqi security forces at all levels, making legitimate national security force units unable or unwilling to confront them. The same holds true in Afghanistan. As of February 2005, militia commanders were present in Afghanistan's national police forces, intelligence units, and National Security Directorate.¹⁶ Commanders employ their militiamen as police, maintain patronage links with sub-commanders, and protect their economic interests, and some have reportedly used their recruited personnel and access to police vehicles and arms to transport heroin.¹⁷ Initial attempts to disrupt Afghan militia influence on security yielded positive results, as coalition forces seized huge amounts of heavy weaponry during the first three years of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Unfortunately, Afghan militia commanders have adapted their tactics. Most no longer see a need for maintaining stockpiles of heavy weapons since the coalition presence does not allow for the waging of open warfare. Today these militias maintain leaner, lightly armed forces more suitable for protecting their political, military, and economic interests.¹⁸ These agile, nimbler forces can more easily disrupt a sovereign government's operation and are exponentially more difficult to track and subdue. When they infiltrate government security forces, as they have in Afghanistan and as has been alleged in Iraq (including the reported Shia militia death squads comprised of forces within the Iraqi government's Ministry of Interior), militia activity is even more detrimental to security.

Despite their glaring flaws, militias have sometimes proven beneficial for coalition forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. During the major combat phase of OEF, US Special Forces performed targeting missions to facilitate military offensives by militias against Taliban forces. In fact, most of the ground combat at the height of fighting (between October and December 2001) was between Taliban units and Afghan opposition militias.¹⁹ In 2003, the initial security situation was so perilous in Iraq that rather than focus efforts on dissolving militias, US forces made tactical arrangements with them. Commander, Joint Task Force Seven, for example, made intelligence-sharing deals with five militias, and US forces in Northern Iraq relied solely upon Kurdish militias to conduct policing and border security operations.²⁰ In 2005, the US military fought alongside the Wolf Brigade and other militia commando units in counterinsurgency operations in Mosul and Samarra. Several experts credited the US military with giving assistance to these units in the form of money, training, and equipment.²¹ Former Marine officer and counterinsurgency expert Thomas X. Hammes called this relationship "a marriage of convenience," and said that during that period, "US policy was to

equip those who were the most effective fighters.”²² During a news conference in April 2005, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani announced that the insurgency could be ended immediately if authorities made use of Kurdish, Shia Muslim and other militias. He made public his intention of accepting offers by Sunni militia leaders who wanted to be a part of the political process to allow them responsibility for security in select areas. Talabani also referred to various militia forces as “popular forces” and believed they could add value to “government security forces.”²³

In the last year, most parliamentarians have concluded that militias will never be part of the solution. In July 2006, Mithal al-Alusi, an Iraqi lawmaker, remarked, “We should stop creating militias. We have too many political mafia groups in this country. Enough is enough.”²⁴ The limited benefits from fighting in conjunction with militias listed above notwithstanding, coalition forces cannot afford to view militia forces as true partners. Many experts argue that US dependence on the use of Afghan militia forces in OEF strengthened the militias’ subsequent assertions of independence.²⁵ Fortunately, leaders of both countries now admonish the presence of militias. President Karzai has outlawed their presence in Afghanistan. Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki has vowed to disband them, stating that their continued presence in Iraq’s streets will fuel sectarian violence and pitch the country into an all-out civil war.²⁶ Still, many Afghans and Iraqis who cheered the ousting of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein’s regime continue to support militias because they create positive and tangible results. As late as July 2006, Iraq’s Mahdi Militia was still attacking British coalition forces in Basra. The negative imagery these attacks produced was mitigated by the fact that in other areas of Iraq, particularly in and around Baghdad, the Mahdi Militia was creating checkpoints to secure safe passage of Shias, enforcing widely accepted social mores, patrolling neighborhoods, and engaging in social work.²⁷ Certain Iraqi leaders continue to see the need to utilize militias as an interim solution to quell violence until national security forces are able to provide decisive security. Some experts believe that Iraq’s national party leaders do not have strong beliefs in the long-term political process, and for this reason, will not push to disband groups they view as effective at filling immediate security voids.²⁸

Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR)

A Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration plan for Afghanistan was initiated in October 2003. The goal was to demobilize all Afghan militia forces by the middle of 2005. Publicly supported by Afghan political leaders and financially resourced by the United Nations, the demobilization phase officially came to an end in July 2005, though the reintegration

tion process, which consists of helping those who have given up arms rejoin Afghan society as contributing citizens, continues today. This reintegration involves a variety of financial packages, education and training, and job opportunities.²⁹ The follow-on component to Afghanistan's DDR program, begun in June 2005, is the Disbanding Illegal Armed Group program. It targets nearly 2,000 illegal armed groups and seeks the voluntary, negotiated, and forced disbanding of more than 100,000 members of various groups.³⁰

DDR initiatives in Afghanistan produced the demobilization of more than 62,500 factional militiamen and resulted in the collection of over 36,000 small arms and the storing of nearly all the militia's heavy weapons.³¹ According to the United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan (UNAMA), at least 20,000 light weapons and about 8,650 heavy weapons (tanks, armored personnel carriers, and artillery pieces) were collected by March 2005.³² Despite the ostensible successes of DDR in Afghanistan, Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry, commanding general of Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan, admitted that many challenges remain. During a May 2006 press conference, he cited uneven security in southern regions of Afghanistan—not all of which he attributed to remaining Taliban elements. General Eikenberry went on to report instances of general crime, narco-trafficking, and tribal fighting.³³ Much of these phenomena are perpetrated by Afghanistan's remaining militia forces. The long-term success of Afghanistan's DDR program is often questioned, as its goal was only aimed at disarming officially recognized units and collecting heavy weapons. It did not therefore target unofficial militias that possess illegal and unregistered small weapons.³⁴ An estimated 850 unofficial militias with an excess of 65,000 members remain outside the scope of this formal DDR process.³⁵ Further, many militia leaders were reintegrated as political figures, which now affords them a power base from which to reassemble fighters and institutionalize their roles in the country's affairs³⁶ (paradoxically, one original aim of DDR was to undercut the strength of regional governors relative to the central government).³⁷ Political participation by militia leaders also limits the leverage the national government can impose upon unofficial militias associated with these new statesmen.³⁸ Despite these circumstances, DDR efforts in Afghanistan have significantly reduced the effectiveness of militias and at the very least can serve as reference tools for coalition forces as they design a comprehensive program aimed at eradicating militias in Iraq.

Iraq made its own attempts at DDR one year after the 2003 invasion. On 5 June 2004, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq announced Order 91, formal legislation that marked the completion of negotiations on the nationwide transition and reintegration of militias and other armed forces outside of state control.³⁹ This law actually recognized nine different militias,

linked them to their respective political parties, and provided for the “orderly, timely, and complete transition and reintegration” of militia forces into national security forces or civilian occupations. There were three significant problems with this plan, however. First, the directive was created at the hands of US lawmakers serving in a temporary status. The measure did not receive buy-in from the three Iraqi governments who have since assumed control of the country, and therefore quickly lost its teeth. The ban was never enforced as an Iraqi law—even though all militias except the Mahdi Militia agreed to the ban.⁴⁰ Second, the directive was not resourced appropriately since millions of dollars earmarked for militia demobilization and reintegration were actually used to address unplanned-for security threats. Third, and partly a function of the second problem, many Iraqi leaders soon saw a need for militias to fill security gaps left by the nascent Iraqi police and army. According to Kenneth Katzman, senior Middle East analyst for the Congressional Research Service, many Iraqi lawmakers believed that the existence of militias was necessary because they were willing to use brutal methods to “get tough” on insurgents in ways that national security forces either would not (because they lacked the will) or could not (because of newly formed Iraqi civil rights laws).⁴¹

Several additional strategic miscues hindered DDR-related attempts in Iraq. Initially, a formal DDR process was not considered necessary because Iraqi armed forces had self-demobilized. When the CPA did begin a DDR-type process to address threats posed by illegally armed groups, it did so far too late, had too limited a staff and budget, and according to a 2005 RAND study, lacked support from the interim government and coalition nations.⁴² This original CPA attempt at outlawing militias lacked political will on the part of Iraqi lawmakers as well as incentives required for program success. In April 2004, a Badr Corps member and Shia politician reviewed Order 91 and remarked, “We’d consider standing down for the right reasons, but nothing has been put on the table by the CPA to convince us we should do this.”⁴³ After the Iraqis assumed full control of government, a primary security ministry, the Ministry of Interior, was allowed to fall into the hands of the Badr Corps.⁴⁴ Though this private army has since renounced its militia title and now operates under the auspices of a civic group called the Badr Organization, common perception was that Bayan Jabr, former Badr Corps leader and Minister of Interior in 2005, was allowing Badr Corps ideology—if not its leaders directly—to play a strong role in directing the actions of Iraqi police.⁴⁵ Many Shia militia members have been allowed to place members into army and police units as a way to serve political interests and gain influence for associated lawmakers. This phenomenon is especially evident in the Shia-dominated south, where militia members have hindered the implementation of objective law enforcement.⁴⁶

US military leaders once regarded Iraqi militias as a secondary concern. In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in May 2004, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz suggested that the American government had accepted the continued existence of militias, provided they remained friendly to the United States.⁴⁷ As previously mentioned, many officials even found militias to be useful ad hoc fighting forces to counter insurgents. Since June 2004, leadership, coordination, and resourcing for DDR are all lacking, and any DDR efforts that targeted militias have effectively ceased.⁴⁸ US officials now realize that militias actually pose significant long-term detriments to Iraq's growth as a democratic and transparent nation. On 7 March 2006, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and General Peter Pace, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, gave a press conference that addressed militias in Iraq. The associated media guidance noted that Iraq's government must "get control of its militias."⁴⁹

A DDR Plan Tailored for Iraq

Polling results now suggest that despite the substantial amount of grass-roots support provided to militias during 2004 and 2005, the majority of Iraqi citizens no longer desire their presence, seeing them as a liability and a source of instability. Data compiled by the International Republican Institute during March 2006 indicate that most Iraqis believe that militias make Iraq a more dangerous place and should be disbanded. In Northern Arab and Sunni provinces over 90 percent of Iraqis polled support complete abolishment and even in Baghdad, where militias have thrived, 65 percent of Iraqis feel that armed militias make Iraq a more dangerous place to live.⁵⁰ As Major General William Caldwell, spokesman for the Multi-National Force in Iraq, noted in a 27 June 2006 press conference, the Iraqi government must tackle illegal armed groups on three levels: political, economic, and security.⁵¹

Political will is the single most important aspect of a successful DDR plan targeting militias. A 2005 RAND study noted that multiple militias in Iraq have continued to operate as autonomous, non-state armed forces since 2004.⁵² A May 2006 report to Congress by the Department of Defense noted that most of Iraq's militias continue to operate openly and with popular support, and are likely to remain active in areas where national institutions and forces are not yet adequate to meet social and public safety needs of the population.⁵³ Without a strong and clear message from the national government, militia activity will continue. Progress was slow during the first 12 months of the DDR program in Afghanistan, partly due to the perception that President Karzai was slow in mustering political will in support of associated DDR initiatives.⁵⁴ Fortunately, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has dog-

gedly striven to lay the groundwork for DDR. In June 2006, he announced a 24-point national reconciliation plan, which hints that some form of amnesty will be offered for insurgents and militias alike who lay down their arms willingly and agree to become law-abiding citizens of Iraq. The reconciliation plan is important because in addition to extending an olive branch to those who truly wish to see Iraq succeed, it establishes the Iraqi government's position relative to militias. Just after Maliki's announcement, Lieutenant General Martin Dempsey, Commander of the Multinational Security Transition Command in Iraq, called the reconciliation plan the precursor to a willingness on the part of militias to disband, noting that "until militias are convinced that a legitimate government is working on their behalf, there's very little incentive for them to disband and demobilize."⁵⁵ General Dempsey further remarked that the national reconciliation initiative has to gain traction before any move is made against militias, noting that "the last thing you want to do is confront them (militias) without any policy with which to deal with them. . . ."⁵⁶ During an interview with Western and Iraqi journalists shortly after he announced his initiative, Prime Minister Maliki stated, "Many people contacted me on the day I announced the reconciliation plan, and there is a lot of support even from militias."⁵⁷ The International Crisis Group (ICG) recommends that Maliki's government plainly articulate the benefits of DDR to the populace before the program begins, clearly define illegally armed groups, and publicly outline punitive actions for DDR violators.

From an economic standpoint, reconstruction efforts by coalition countries must continue in order to convince groups currently served by militias that the national government can, in fact, provide the basic economic necessities required for an acceptable level of prosperity. In 2005, after four years of war, nearly 90 percent of Afghanistan's budget was still externally funded.⁵⁸ Iraq must hope for similar long-term assistance from the international community. A strong government can effectively court donors through international conferences, but foreign funding must be allocated properly for alternative livelihood programs in Iraq as well as basic necessities. Demobilized soldiers in Afghanistan received a voucher entitling them to individualized career counseling, an interim job if necessary, and one of several assistance packages.⁵⁹ According to the UNAMA, most of the 43,700 militia fighters disarmed by March 2005 have begun to exercise their reintegration options for job training and small business establishment.⁶⁰ Until now, the only tangible progress made in Iraq toward coaxing non-state professional fighters away from illegally armed groups was a short-lived stipend program for former Iraqi soldiers enacted by the CPA in 2003.⁶¹ According to the 2005 RAND study, to adequately resource future DDR programs in Iraq, the international community must support the effort with a dedicated donor assistance

committee charged with providing policy and fiscal support to an Iraqi-led effort to disband militias.⁶² The ICG further recommends ensuring transparency and accountability in disbursement of community development aid and ensuring that funding and planning for reconstruction projects precede DDR efforts.⁶³

Security is the third pillar of an effective DDR plan. Militias are sustained through localized support from citizens who believe popular forces constitute more effective security elements than national security forces. Alexandre Schmidt, crime prevention expert of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, asserts that judicial systems and law enforcement need to be strong outside of capital cities before outlying militias can be effectively disbanded.⁶⁴ A study conducted by the ICG on militia disarmament in Afghanistan cites three essential elements for an effective DDR plan. They include the mapping of official and unofficial militia networks to be disarmed, removing key nodes in these networks from security posts, and imposing criminal penalties on those who refuse to disarm their official militias or who maintain unofficial militias.⁶⁵ These objectives, already being pursued in Iraq, should comprise the security framework for DDR efforts against militias in Iraq.

All three facets of the DDR plan described above must be implemented simultaneously. Announcing a plan without teeth will only make the Iraqi government appear confused and unorganized; programming economic incentives for disarmament and outlining alternative training for militiamen is worthless without the necessary funding to enact such programs; disarming militiamen is futile if there is nowhere to place them. In addition, the plan is both top-down and bottom-up, meaning that militia leaders as well as their followers should be targeted. According to General Dempsey, an effective DDR plan is “something that has to happen from both ends—the top, (by) political mandate, (and the bottom), with enforcement.”⁶⁶

Components for a Successful DDR Plan in Iraq

Repeated Emphasis on Reconciliation by Iraqi Leaders

Reconciliation must not be confused with a complete pardon. This political settlement must be fully articulated and fully endorsed by all members of the Iraqi government. The initiative, now simply an idea, must be voted into a law that clearly defines authorized armed forces. An explicit set of criteria must be formalized to determine exactly who can be pardoned outright, who can be pardoned conditionally based on their progress during reintegration, and who must be tried in Iraqi courts based on past actions against Iraqi security units, coalition forces, other illegal groups, and civilians. Many

military experts argue in favor of an incremental approach to militia disarmament,⁶⁷ where militiamen gradually realize the benefits of disavowing allegiance to an illegal group through positive interaction with nationally recognized forces. Rising sectarian tensions in Iraq, however, do not afford Iraqi lawmakers such a luxury. With a law, no gray area will exist for militias. Formal legislation will preclude any of the present confusion in distinctions between terrorist groups, militias, and insurgents. It must be fully endorsed by the international community, and the United Nations should acknowledge its accordance with the laws outlined in its charter.

Drawing a Line in the Sand

When appropriate, preferably within the next three months, a ceasefire of sorts must be announced. The Iraqi government, en masse, must declare a firm date for all militia activity to cease. Many will challenge this rule, and they must be dealt with swiftly and decisively. This measure will require a large amount of political will, as many Iraqi politicians still possess constituencies comprised of or significantly supported by militias. The fact that many militias in Iraq possess political power is significant. On 28 August 2006 a military adviser serving in Iraq told reporters, “Until the government comes out and says, ‘Disarm the militias,’ it’s a very ambiguous situation. If there was an announcement by the government, there would be no more ambiguity.”⁶⁸ It is also vital that Iraq’s political leadership hold its ground over time. The former commanding general of international security forces in Kabul, Afghanistan, remarked that in order to be successful, “You have to create in the (militia leaders’) minds that DDR is irreversible, that (they) are gone.”⁶⁹ Prime Minister Maliki has already begun waving a carrot in front of militia leaders, but his promises of a stable Iraq will only come to fruition if he carries a stick with which to enforce his decrees. In Afghanistan, the absence of a deterrent force that could ensure compliance with the DDR process remains a critical shortcoming.⁷⁰ Maliki must ensure he wields the proper balance of punitive action as well as incentives to coax militiamen into disarmament.

Permit Militia Fighters to Join Iraq’s Security Forces (Demobilizing)

During a news conference in May 2004, the commander of an American division battling the Mahdi Army said he would entertain the idea of assimilating militia members into a force he could fight alongside. He noted, “If the militia dissolved tomorrow . . . I’ve got 600 unemployed young men on my hands . . . some of them are probably decent young men who have been badly led astray.”⁷¹ Three years ago, creating security forces comprised of non-militia members who have never raised weapons against coalition or

Iraqi government forces might have been a plausible idea. Today a more pragmatic approach is required to bolster existing national security forces and eradicate ad hoc security groups. Violence and bloodshed have pervaded Iraqi society to such an extent that very few “wholly innocent” young men are currently available for such work. Handling a weapon is what many militiamen do best; trained properly, and operating with an allegiance to the national government, they might provide protective services in a legal fashion. As reporter David Gompert warns, however, these men should not be permitted to join Iraqi security forces as groups (with their command chains intact), but rather as individuals, meaning that the security ministries must be taken out of the hands of parties and politicians who want their militias to dominate the security forces.⁷²

Emphasis on Alternative Occupations (Reintegration)

On 19 May 2006, during a conference with the Pentagon press corps, Lieutenant General Peter Chiarelli noted that disillusionment, poverty, and hopelessness are the breeding grounds for violence.⁷³ Once militia members disarm and disavow allegiance to an illegally armed group, a comprehensive program must be in place to show these individuals, through education, training, and job offers, alternative opportunities for productive livelihoods within Iraqi society. In July, a senior Sadr aide, Sheik Abdul Zahra al-Suwaidi, remarked that he looked forward to the day when Iraqi forces become strong enough to handle national security. Then, he noted, “we will be happy to see the Mahdi Army merged into the military and security forces.”⁷⁴

Unannounced and Unscheduled Sweeps by Iraqi Forces (Disarming)

Many experts have written about the need to offer continuous warnings to illegal armed groups residing within Iraqi communities. In fact, the ICG recommends that “communities must have prior knowledge of any military action to disarm militias in populated areas.”⁷⁵ The reason for this concern is obvious. Forewarning should, in theory, mitigate not only loss of innocent life but also loss of popular support for coalition and Iraqi security forces. But given warnings, militias and insurgents alike will simply vacate the premises prior to the sweep, reconstituting after the sweep is complete. The operational failures resulting from ineffective sweeps would outweigh non-combatant losses or declines in popular support during professionally executed raids. Prime Minister Maliki’s policy statements should be the only “warnings” provided. This will not only keep Iraqi forces one step ahead of militias, but will also create a sense of responsibility within a given community to eradicate illegal groups dwelling in their midst, knowing

these groups will only bring bloodshed. As noted previously, polls suggest the vast majority of Iraqis already find militias to be disruptive and dangerous. Unannounced sweeps by Iraqi forces will help sway the opinion of those who are not yet convinced.

Clarify the Multi-faceted Mission for Coalition Soldiers

The idea of winning hearts and minds in Iraq is not a new one. In the last four years soldiers have courageously battled insurgents daily. But the fight against militias adds yet another dimension to the role of coalition forces. Until now, coalition soldiers have been forced to exercise discretion when dealing with the masses in order to properly represent democratic ideals. They have been tasked with modifying that mindset—often times at a moment's notice—in order to swiftly defeat insurgents who would do them harm. Now, in addition, they must judiciously battle militiamen in an attempt to both disarm and reintegrate them. That objective requires a clear understanding of this mission and is only possible with further cultural awareness training and greater emphasis on the proper execution of military actions supporting the limited and evolving objectives of a DDR program. In addition to this new aspect of responsibility, coalition forces must continue to train and equip Iraqi security forces so they can guarantee the safety of Iraqi citizens. The current commander of the Iraq Assistance Group, which oversees coalition security advisers in Iraq, states that in order to weaken militias in the long term, “People have got to be convinced the Iraqi security forces will be able to protect them.”⁷⁶

The resistance in Iraq now involves sectarian strife in addition to insurgent attacks on coalition forces. Militias are, in large part, responsible for this change in the combat landscape, and their activity has been on the rise. A 30 August 2006 article in *The Washington Post* cited rampant assassinations of Sunni medical patients by Shia militias targeting hospitals in Baghdad.⁷⁷ In the article, a Sunni states, “We would prefer now to die instead of going to the hospitals” which he described as “killing fields.” Coalition forces have taken on militia groups before. In 2004, coalition forces battled Mahdi Militia forces during at least two highly publicized uprisings. At that time, the foundations for effective DDR were not in place, and though the militia activity was put down, the coalition victories were only tactical successes. With a full-scale DDR program in place, militias can be targeted with the intent of making operational and strategic-level gains. On 31 August 2006 Sadr officials reported that the Mahdi Army had once again clashed with coalition forces in eastern Baghdad.⁷⁸ Though a US military spokeswoman would not confirm this report, if true, it could mark the beginning of a focused effort to finally eradicate Iraq's militias. Now is the time to deal with militias. Iraqi

leaders appear to have the necessary political will, support from the international community is solid, and Iraqi and coalition military forces are poised for a decisive, tide-turning campaign. During what many hope is the last phase of substantive foreign occupation in Iraq, all illegally armed groups must be dealt with in the proper fashion in order to achieve a lasting peace. Full-scale implementation of the DDR initiatives outlined above can effect such peace.

NOTES

1. The days of conventional warfare are gone, replaced by long wars fought over ideology and personal freedoms. The true threat to American policy is not posed by the jihadist, who in many cases lacks the ability to organize, effectively train, and recruit anything but suicide bombers, and has no long-term strategy for generating money, garnering public support, or achieving realistic strategic objectives. Rather, the primary obstacle for coalition policy initiatives in this region of the world is posed by those who possess professional training, have seized the support of their populace, and, in many cases, infiltrated national government institutions; the real hazard posed to American ambition in Southwest Asia comes from armed militias. While not insurgents, these fighters are not our allies. And they can only be defeated through a complete disarmament program built on political, economic, and security pillars.
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