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Gradualism in Addressing the Arms File and Strengthening the National Command and Control System

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● **Analyses**

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The gravity of major security issues is not measured merely by the number of armed individuals or weapons they involve, but rather by the degree of their entanglement with the institutions of the state, society, the economy, and politics, and by the number of interests, structures, and authorities that have accumulated around them over the years. For this reason, the most dangerous way for a state to confront a complex security issue is to reduce it to a single manifestation and then attempt to resolve it through a single decision.

The Iraqi experience has taught us that security problems that develop over years do not disappear in a single day, and that a successful state does not charge into the crux of a problem at its most rigid point, but rather begins by dismantling its periphery, trimming its extensions, and separating its components from one another, until it encapsulates the essence of the problem in its true size, and then proceeds to address it at the lowest possible security, political, and social cost. From this perspective, we view the issue of the weapons of armed factions and the strengthening of the capabilities of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Commission. What is required

is not backtracking on the principle of confining weapons to the state, but rather selecting the most realistic and safe path to achieve it.

First: The Experience of the Iraqi State in Managing Complex Security Issues

This was not the first time that the Iraqi state confronted a highly complex security legacy. Following 2003, it went through several experiences differing in their circumstances and causes, yet sharing one fundamental lesson: that institutional gradualism, when coupled with the state's will, unity of decision, and coordination among its institutions, is capable of transforming intractable security problems into issues that are manageable and ultimately containable.

1. The Experience of Integrating Armed Formations:

The issue of militias and armed formations post-2003 was one of the most complex files inherited by the new state. It was not merely a matter of individuals carrying weapons, but rather formations possessing political and organizational history, leaderships, loyalties, social structures, and accumulated sources

of influence.

Order No. 91 of 2004 came to lay down an initial framework for addressing this phenomenon, but the issuance of the text did not mean the end of the problem. Iraq required years of political, security, and administrative work until significant portions of those forces transitioned into state institutions or the status of their personnel was reorganized, with aspects of this file continuing to be executed under subsequent governments.

This experience reveals that legislation was the beginning of the path, not its end. What made resolution possible was the transformation of the legal decision into a series of executive, administrative, and security measures, the distribution of responsibilities among state institutions, and the follow-up of implementation in stages, rather than imagining that a single legal order is capable of ending a phenomenon that formed over decades.

The experience also demonstrated the importance of having a state center capable of coordinating between the Office of the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, the National Security Advisory, the Ministries

of Defense and Interior, the security and intelligence agencies, and the relevant civilian institutions. An issue of this magnitude cannot be managed by a single security ministry or institution alone, as it combines law, security, politics, human resources, salaries, military deployment, and social reintegration.

2. The Experience of Regulating Foreign Security

Companies: Likewise, Iraq faced a file different in nature, yet deeply relevant to the concept of sovereignty over the use of force, represented by the proliferation of foreign security companies during the early years following 2003. The large number of security companies, the multiplicity of their governing authorities, the broad scope of their movement and armaments, and the issues surrounding some of them regarding accountability, legal jurisdiction, and rules of engagement created a genuine challenge for the emerging Iraqi state. It was not possible to end the phenomenon simply by demanding that these companies leave the country, because some were tied to contracts, interests, protection duties, international institutions, missions,

and foreign companies.

Hence, the state gradually moved toward shifting the problem from the realm of unregulated force to the realm of legal and institutional regulation: regulating licensing, defining conditions of operation, movement, and carrying arms, tightening oversight and accountability, regulating the relationship with security agencies, and curtailing the spaces in which any company could act outside state authority.

Here too, success was not the product of a single institution, but rather the outcome of legislative and executive accumulation and coordination between the Office of the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, the National Security Advisory, the Ministries of Interior and Defense, the security agencies, and other legal and executive bodies. The significant implication of this experience is that the state did not need to own every piece of weaponry carried by company personnel to reclaim its sovereignty; rather, it first had to reclaim authority over licensing, movement, accountability, and the decision on the use of force. Once the state reclaimed these authorities, the security problem diminished and became subject to legal

and institutional control.

- 3. The Experience of the Sahwa (Awakening):** As for the third experience, it was the Sahwa file, which represents another model of the Iraqi state's ability to absorb a large security and social block without resorting to shock measures.

The state found itself confronting large numbers of armed individuals who were formed under the circumstances of the war against Al-Qaeda, and whose experience was bound up with highly sensitive tribal and local environments. With the withdrawal of U.S. forces, the responsibility for handling this file transitioned to the Iraqi state, along with all the security, financial, social, and political dimensions it carried.

It was not possible to deal with tens of thousands of these individuals using the logic of "either the weapons or the state." What was required was preventing a force that contributed to confronting terrorism from turning into a new security problem. Here, the role of gradualism re-emerged: vetting, reclassification, absorption, transferring parts of them to security institutions or civilian jobs,

addressing salaries, rights, and affiliations, and scaling down the file in stages. Coordination among the Office of the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, the National Security Advisory, state ministries, security agencies, governorates, and local leaderships was an essential factor in preventing the collapse of the file all at once or its transformation into an open confrontation.

The Sahwa experience differed from the militia file, and both differed from the foreign security companies; nevertheless, the state employed a similar logic in all three cases: do not address the entire block as a single problem, but disassemble it into its constituent components; absorb what can be absorbed, regulate what can be regulated, isolate non-compliance, and then contain the portion that poses a genuine threat to security and sovereignty.

Second: What Have We Learned from Previous Experiences?

The most important lesson from these experiences is not to replicate their specific tools, as each stage has its own constitutional, political, and security conditions; moreover, the Popular Mobilization Forces Commission today is an official, legal institution that has made immense sacrifices in defense of Iraq and cannot be mechanically compared to any of the previous cases. Rather, the intent is to draw upon the state's methodology in managing security transitions.

Experience has proven that a complex security problem usually consists of overlapping spheres: legal, organizational, financial, military, and political/social spheres. When the state attempts to address all these spheres simultaneously, it unites entities with divergent interests into a single front of resistance, converting administrative and legal reform into a comprehensive political and security conflict. Gradualism, on the other hand, accomplishes the exact opposite.

It disentangles interests from one another, distinguishing

the fighter from the politician, the official personnel from the organizational member, the military brigade from the faction, government weaponry from organizational weaponry, combat duty from economic activity, and military command from parallel centers of influence. Thus, the state no longer faces a single “armed block,” but rather separate files, each with an appropriate instrument for resolution.

Nor does gradualism mean laxity or buying time. There is a vast difference between postponing a problem and dismantling it. Postponement leaves elements of power outside the state to grow, whereas deliberate gradualism strips away the problem’s reasons for persistence phase by phase: at times by reforming the law, at times by regulating funding, at times by unifying identity, at times by organizing headquarters, and at times by separating the organizational structure from the military formation, until the state reaches the core of the problem after having divested it of most sources of complexity.

Most importantly, this approach preserves stability as well as the dignity and rights of thousands of personnel who

do not constitute part of the problem in the first place. Not every fighter in a PMF brigade is an organizational member of a faction, nor is everyone who responded to the fatwa of collective defense duty or fought ISIS concerned with the struggle for political influence. It is a matter of justice and national security imperative that the state differentiate among these individuals, and not transform the reform process into a collective punishment against an institution whose members spilled their blood in defense of the homeland.

Herein lies the importance of joint central management of the file. The file of strengthening the capabilities of the PMF Commission should not be left to the Commission alone, nor to the Ministry of Defense or Interior individually. Rather, we propose the formation of a supreme mechanism led by the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, with the Office of the Commander-in-Chief and the National Security Advisory serving as its planning and coordination center, and with the participation of the Ministries of Defense, Interior, and Finance, oversight and legal bodies, and security and intelligence agencies, each according to its specialty. Thus, decision-making rests

with the Commander-in-Chief, planning, coordination, and follow-up emanate from the state center, execution is distributed among competent institutions, and security and intelligence evaluations accompany each phase. In this way, reform becomes state policy, rather than a measure by one institution against another.

Third: Phases of Work

Phase One - The Priority Now Is Monopolizing the Decision to Use Weapons: Here, a distinction must be drawn between two goals that are frequently conflated in political discourse: confining the decision to use weapons to the state, and confining weapons themselves to the state.

Both are legitimate and necessary goals, but they do not necessarily have to be achieved at the exact same moment. The urgent security priority, in our assessment, is for the state to fully reclaim the decision to use force. The criterion that poses the greatest danger to sovereignty is not merely the existence of weapons, but rather the existence of an armed capability that can make the decision to use them outside the official command and control system.

Accordingly, the objective of Phase One should be to arrive at a national rule with no exceptions: no firing, no troop movements, no launching of rockets or drones, and no armed movement outside designated duties, except by an order issued within the chain of command and control that culminates with the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces.

After firmly establishing this principle, the state begins Phase Two, which is deeper, to confine weapons themselves and to regulate their ownership, storage, handover, and registration in accordance with the law.

This distinction also helps address certain political objections comparing the weapons of the factions with those of the Peshmerga forces. The decisive factor in Phase One is not the national or political name of the force, but rather the sovereign question: Is its decision to use force governed within the constitutional and legal order and the state's official command and control system, or does there exist an armed will capable of making the decision to go to war or engage independently?

The ultimate objective to which we should aspire is

subjecting all official armed forces, including PMF formations and others, to a single logic: military branches, formations, and legal specificities may vary, but the wills that decide on the use of force must not proliferate. The state can accommodate a multiplicity of military branches, but it cannot accommodate a multiplicity of decisions regarding war and peace.

Phase Two - Reforming the Institutional Environment of the Popular Mobilization Forces: From this perspective, our viewpoint on “National Entitlement Day” was that the state does not begin by demanding that everyone surrender their weapons all at once; rather, it begins by reforming the environment that produced the duality of command and decision-making.

We propose incorporating the eight measures below into a preliminary plan for re-strengthening the command and control system within the first phase of the government’s gradualism program for addressing the weapons crisis, namely:

- 1. Severing the affiliation of Al-Muhandis Company from the PMF Commission:** thereby refocusing the Commission on its military and security function and separating economic and service activities from the military institution, while rectifying the company's legal status and transferring its affiliation to the relevant civilian entity.
- 2. Restructuring the senior leadership of the PMF Commission:** through reviewing the organizational structure, definitively settling powers between the Chairman of the Commission and its Chief of Staff, and reorganizing the deputy directorates, thereby ending areas of overlap and ambiguity in responsibility.
- 3. Reorganizing the deployment of brigade headquarters:** such that their headquarters are linked to their actual sectors of responsibility and operational duties, and ending the presence of unnecessary combat headquarters inside Baghdad and provincial centers, thereby restoring the natural separation between military deployment and civilian space.

4. **Ending the duality of leadership positions:** and prohibiting the combination of brigade command with senior administrative posts or holding more than one leadership position simultaneously, thereby ensuring full-time leadership commitment, defining responsibility, and reducing conflicts of interest.
5. **Rebuilding the command and control system:** by redefining the relationship among senior leadership, the chief of staff, brigades, and directorates, effectively linking all units to the official chain of command, and restricting decisions regarding deployment, transfer, armaments, leave, and human resources to the relevant institutional authority.
6. **Reorganizing brigade affiliations and enhancing military professionalism:** through gradual organizational and functional separation between military brigade personnel and the organizational structures of the factions, such that the brigade becomes a state military unit and its cadre is restricted to those actually working in it, while addressing the status of personnel detached for organizational work within appropriate administrative formations

that preserve their rights without keeping them on combat unit rolls.

7. **Unifying the security card and ID system:** by restricting the issuance of IDs and cards to a single central security authority, creating a unified database, and abolishing informal organizational titles and IDs, thereby linking personnel identity to the institution rather than the faction.
8. **Reforming administrative and security directorates:** through reviewing financial, administrative, logistical, and security directorates, evaluating their leadership, adopting competence and professionalism, reinforcing inspection and internal audit, and addressing dual employment and conflicts of interest.

The overarching purpose of these measures is not to change names or oust individuals, but rather to transition the Popular Mobilization Forces from managing formations to managing an institution, from multiple centers of influence to unity of decision, and from intertwined organizational relationships to a clear, official military system.

Phase Three - Smooth Gradualism: By this approach, we are neither postponing the restriction of weapons nor offering a compromise with the phenomenon of weapons outside state control; rather, we are reordering the path leading to its elimination.

We begin first with unity of decision, then unity of command, then unity of military identity, followed by regulating human resources, headquarters, funding, deployment, and armaments, and then separating the military institution from the organizational body. At that point, we reach the weapons file itself, after it has lost much of its independent political and organizational functions. Thus, the problem gradually narrows. Instead of the government confronting tens of thousands of personnel, institutions, brigades, interests, and social, economic, and political ramifications as a single block, it will have removed from the problem's scope everyone who has become part of the disciplined official institution, while safeguarding fighters' rights, isolating economic activity, controlling headquarters, unifying identities, and subjecting brigades to a single chain of command.

Only then will the true scale of weapons outside state authority become apparent to the state, along with the individuals and organizations that still insist on retaining an independent decision to use force.

This is the moment when resolution becomes more precise, less costly, and more just; because the state will not then be in confrontation with the Popular Mobilization Forces or with tens of thousands of its members, but rather before a defined sphere of non-compliance that can be addressed through law, security, and politics, each according to the exigencies of the case.

Conclusion

The philosophy of reform that we propose can be summarized in a single sentence: we prune the problem before encapsulating it, separate the institution from the faction before dealing with the faction, and reclaim the decision to use weapons before completing the restriction of weapons themselves. Iraq does not need a new battle among its sons; rather, it needs a state stronger than all its sons, fair among them, preserving their rights and sacrifices, and simultaneously capable of protecting its sovereignty.

Preserving the Popular Mobilization Forces Commission and the blood of its martyrs is not achieved by allowing imbalances to accumulate within it, but rather by transforming those sacrifices into an established military institution whose name, weapons, or personnel no party, faction, or individual can exploit outside the will of the state.

When the fighter is reassured regarding his rights, the brigade is linked to its command, leadership is subject to the Commander-in-Chief, weapons are controlled by

the institution, and the decision to use them is issued exclusively by the state, we will have traversed the most difficult stretch of the road toward restricting weapons - without clash, without humiliation for anyone, and without squandering the blood of those who fought in defense of Iraq. For the ultimate aim is not an Iraq without power, but a strong Iraq in which no power exists outside its decision; nor is it a state that confiscates rifles from the hands of its sons, but a state in which no weapon is raised except by its order, and no force is used except to protect Iraq and under its flag.



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