

How can Iraq's destructive pro-Iran militias be tamed?

Tue, 2021-11-16 22:53

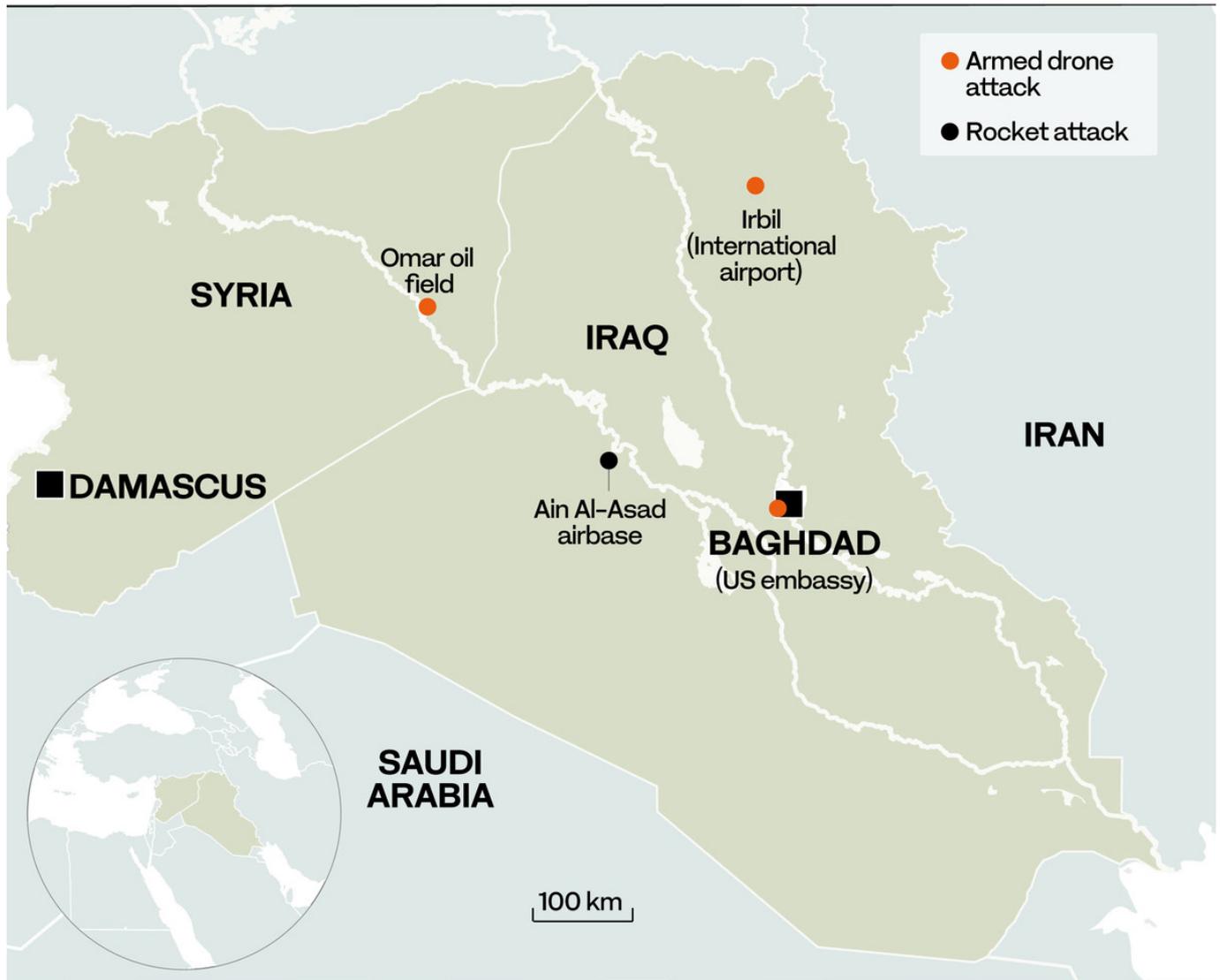
IRBIL, IRAQI KURDISTAN: Iran-backed Iraqi militias have rejected the results of Iraq's October parliamentary election, in which their political wings performed very poorly, and elements among them may well have been behind the attempt on Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi's life earlier this month.

But can anything be done on a practical level about the malignant menace of Iraq's pro-Iran militias?

For years now, there have been widespread fears that the Iran-backed elements of Hashd Al-Shaabi (or Popular Mobilization Forces) have amassed enough fighters and weaponry to outgun the Iraqi Security Forces and pose a Hezbollah-style threat to the Iraqi government and state.

FINGERPRINTS OF PRO-IRAN MILITIAS

Where the US has been targeted in recent months in Iraq and Syria



ARAB NEWS

That could lead to Iraq's "Lebanonization" – a situation whereby a powerful well-armed Iranian proxy, borrowing from Hezbollah's playbook, forcibly imposes its will on the country at Tehran's behest.

How likely is such an outcome in today's Iraq, where powerful, armed rejectionist elements are challenging the outcome of an election that was monitored by the UN and even praised by the Security Council?

"The militias are a serious threat, but Iraq's government and security forces are stronger – in contrast with Lebanon and Hezbollah," David Pollock, Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, told Arab News.

READ MORE

Why Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah is unlikely to disarm voluntarily. [Click](#)

[here to read.](#)



Even so, tackling the militias could prove challenging, even if they are not more militarily powerful than the state. Consequently, Baghdad might need foreign backing. But who could help?

The US has retained a small troop presence in Iraq as part of the multinational coalition it has led against Daesh.

However, under an agreement with the Iraqi government, those troops must only serve as advisers and trainers for Iraqi and Kurdish security forces from the end of this year.

MUSTAFA AL-KADHIMI IRAQI PRIME MINISTER

NATO is taking on a more active mission in Iraq, but that will also be a non-combat training mission to help Iraqi forces tackle Daesh and prevent its resurgence.



- Born in Baghdad in 1967. He studied law in Iraq but left for Europe to escape the dictator Saddam Hussein, working as an opposition journalist.

- Returned to Iraq after the US-led 2003 invasion toppled Hussein, working as a human rights advocate.

- Handpicked by then PM Haider Al-Abadi in 2016 to head the National Intelligence Service (INIS).

- Became prime minister in May 2020.

- Survived an assassination attempt on Nov. 7, 2021.

ARABNEWS

“The main responsibility lies inside Iraq, not foreign help. But friendly powers do support Iraq, and US forces will maintain that mission, just with a new title, after this year,” Pollock said.

“Arab governments also should contribute more to Iraq’s economy and public life, to balance Iran’s interference via its militias. The trend is actually positive in the past two years, and election results largely reinforce that.”

Al-Kadhimi has made substantial diplomatic efforts to foster closer ties between Iraq and other Arab countries during his short time in office. He has established improved links with Egypt and Jordan, resulting in a state visit to Iraq by Egypt’s President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi over the summer, the first such trip by an Egyptian leader to Iraq in 30 years.

The general consensus is that closer economic and political ties with these Arab countries, along with the Arab Gulf countries, could, over time, help reduce Tehran’s heavy-handed influence over Iraqi affairs.

Joel Wing, author of the Musings on Iraq website, says comparisons between Lebanon and Iraq are premature.



A demonstrator lifts a national flag by burning tyres amid clashes between Iraqi anti-government protesters and supporters of firebrand Shiite cleric Muqtada Sadr. (AFP/File Photo)

“In Iraq, every group wants to be part of the state so that it can exploit the oil money,” he told Arab News.

To be sure, the Iraqi Shiite militias are not a singular monolith eager to do Iran’s bidding in the country. The influential Iraqi Shiite leader Muqtada Al-Sadr, for example, has often opposed Iran’s influence in the country and has called for disbanding and disarming of militias outside of state control.

His alliance was victorious in the election and won far more seats in parliament than the Iran-backed political blocs.

Wing pointed out that the Sadrists and the Iran-backed factions had already fought each other in the past.

“The Sadrists and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq had a long-running battle for control of southern Iraq during the US occupation,” he said.

“The 2008 Charge of Knights (battle of Basra) operation was Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki’s attempt to take out his rival Muqtada Al-Sadr. So, you have precedent for Shiite parties fighting each other already.”

Wing also noted that the militias had been running amok in Iraq for almost 20

years. "Militias have had the power to largely do as they please since 2003. That's because they were part of, and supported by, the government. That doesn't look to be changing anytime soon," he told Arab News.



Iraqi Shiite members of the Asaib Ahl Al-Haq group (The League of the Righteous) units gather in the southern city of Basra. (AFP/File Photo)

Nevertheless, Wing believes that foreign support of the Baghdad government and security forces remains important for the future of Iraq.

"The role the West can play is to continue to support the Iraqi government and security forces," he said.

"This is not a perfect formula because there are all kinds of problems with both, but to step back would give the pro-Iran forces even more sway in the country."

Emily Hawthorne, Stratfor's senior Middle East and North Africa analyst at RANE, told Arab News that there appears to be no sign that Iraq's militias are "setting aside their aggressive tactics despite pressure from the government."

"But continued violence will mean they have to tolerate broader, popular backlash against their actions, negatively impacting their electoral popularity," she said.

PRO-IRAN GROUPS IN IRAQ

Paramilitary:

- * Hashd Al-Shaabi
- * Asaib Ahl Al-Haq
- * Kataib Hezbollah
- * Kataib Sayyid Al-Shuhada

Political:

- * Fatah (Conquest) Alliance
- * Al-Sadiqoun

Similar to Wing and Pollock, Hawthorne doubts that Iraq is on the verge of becoming another Lebanon.

“Both the Lebanese and Iraqi governments struggle to exert full control over state authority,” she said.

“But a big difference between Iraq and Lebanon is the Iraqi federal armed forces are more cohesive, well-armed, and well-trained compared with the array of non-state militias operating in the country. Whereas in Lebanon, Hezbollah is heavily armed and could challenge Lebanese federal forces if it chose.”

Hawthorne does not rule out the possibility of an intra-Shiite civil war in Iraq, but says it is “still more likely to play out in the political realm than in terms of a violent conflict in the streets.”

She believes that while Iraq will have to take the lead in any initiative to combat the militias, foreign assistance is still a very important factor.

“It is true that Baghdad will mostly be on its own in its struggle with the Iran-backed militias for control,” Hawthorne told Arab News.

“But the international support that the Iraqi government has, and which the militias lack, does help Baghdad maintain the financial and military aid that will help the federal government maintain the upper hand.”



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Middle East](#)

[Iraq](#)

[Iran](#)

[Editor's Choice](#)

Why Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah is unlikely to disarm voluntarily Militia
'tried to murder Iraqi PM with Iranian-made drones'

[El-Sisi, Putin discuss nuclear plant, industrial zone](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-11-16 21:32

CAIRO: Egypt's President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin discussed by phone the latest developments regarding construction of the El-Dabaa nuclear power plant and a Russian industrial zone east of Port Said.

The nuclear plant will be Egypt's first, with capacity of 4,800 megawatts, following the signing of an agreement with Russian company Rosatom for its

construction in the city of El-Dabaa on the shores of the Mediterranean. The industrial zone will cover 5 million square meters and aim to attract Russian investments and industries.

Bassam Rady, spokesman for Egypt's presidency, said El-Sisi and Putin discussed economic, industrial and energy cooperation, as well as regional and international developments.

Rady added that Putin stressed Russia's keenness to continue promoting bilateral cooperation, and the importance he attaches to regular consultations with El-Sisi on regional and international issues. Putin expressed his appreciation for Egypt's mediating role in regional crises.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Abdel Fattah El-Sisi](#)

[Vladimir Putin](#)

[Nuclear plant](#)

Macron, Putin agree on 'de-escalation' of Belarus/Poland crisis: FranceWater is key to Egyptian national security, says El-Sisi

[US accuses Iran of unsafe helicopter maneuver near US Navy ship](#)

Author:

Associated Press

ID:

1637014505073096500

Mon, 2021-11-15 21:33

WASHINGTON: The Pentagon on Monday accused Iran of “unsafe and unprofessional” conduct by a naval helicopter that it said flew within about 25 yards of a US Navy ship and circled it three times in the Gulf of Oman. Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said the Iranian helicopter circled the USS Essex, an amphibious assault ship, three times and at one point flew as low as 10 feet off the surface of the water. He said the incident on Nov. 11 had no effect on the Essex’s operations.

“Without getting into specifics, the crew of the Essex took the appropriate force protection measures they felt that they needed to, and they acted in accordance with international law,” Kirby said.

The US Navy periodically has reported what it characterizes as unsafe and unprofessional encounters with Iran naval forces in the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Iran says stopped US navy seizing tanker in Sea of OmanUS Navy fires warning shots in new tense encounter with Iran

Morocco says hundreds of migrants assisted off coast

Author:

AFP

ID:

1637010699252690300

Mon, 2021-11-15 00:13

RABAT: Moroccan coast guards have assisted more than 300 migrants in difficulty aboard various craft since Friday, the official MAP news agency reported on Monday.

Most of the 331 were from sub-Saharan Africa, the agency said, citing a military source.

Despite stepped-up controls, migrant departures from Morocco's coasts have increased lately.

Mainland Spain is only about 20 kilometers (12 miles) from Morocco.

Further south along the Moroccan-controlled coast of the disputed Western Sahara, the migrants' goal is normally Spain's Canary Islands.

The passengers received first aid aboard navy units "before being taken to the nearest ports, then handed over to police for the usual administrative procedures," the source quoted by MAP said.

On Monday, two migrants were found dead among about 40 on a drifting boat off Gran Canaria island, Spain's coast guard told AFP.

On Friday, officials and relatives said four Moroccan migrants drowned in the Atlantic Ocean while trying to reach the European Union.

Between January and October a total of 32,713 migrants arrived in Spain by sea, an increase of more than 24 percent compared with the same period a year earlier, Spanish interior ministry figures showed.

To the end of September there have been 1,025 deaths on the route to Spain, making this year the deadliest, according to the International Organization for Migration.

Other North African countries, Tunisia and Libya, are also major migrant departure points to Europe.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Morocco](#)

[African migrants](#)

[Spain](#)

[Canary Islands](#)

Italy rescues 430 migrants from fishing boat
NGO rescue ship with 800 migrants aboard asks Italy for safe port

[Critics: Greece criminalizes migration, prosecutes helpers](#)

Author:

AP

ID:

1637010756162695600

Tue, 2021-11-16 00:12

CHIOS, Greece: Among the prison inmates of the Greek island of Chios, three young men from Afghanistan and Somalia are serving dramatically long

sentences: 50 years for two of them, a staggering 142 for the third. But these are not violent criminals, even according to their trial verdicts. They were convicted for steering inflatable dinghies carrying them and other migrants after they say smugglers abandoned them in the Aegean Sea between Turkey and Greece.

"I didn't think saving people is a crime," said Hanad Abdi Mohammad, 28, a soft-spoken Somali charged as a smuggler after arriving in Greece last December and sentenced to 142 years.

Mohammad told journalists and European Parliament lawmakers visiting the three in prison last week that he had no choice but to drive the boat. The smuggler forced him to take over, hitting him in the face and threatening him with a gun before abandoning the dinghy in rough seas.

Critics say the men's cases, as well as prosecutions or threats of criminal proceedings against aid workers, illustrate the expanding arsenal of techniques authorities in Greece and other countries are using to deter asylum-seekers.

"It's not possible that someone who comes to claim asylum in Greece is threatened with such heavy sentences simply because they were forced, by circumstances or pressure, to take over handling a boat," said Alexandros Georgoulis, one of the lawyers representing the three imprisoned in Chios. Greek authorities, he said, "are essentially baptizing the smuggled as the smuggler."

Mohammad's journey is also a stark indication of the chaos asylum-seekers may experience as they migrate between two countries long divided by deep-seated mistrust.

Fearing for their lives after the smuggler fled, the nearly three dozen panicked passengers abandoned their quest to reach Greece. Mohammad says he called the Turkish coast guard repeatedly, begging for a rescue. But when it arrived, the Turkish patrol boat circled the migrants' vessel sharply, sending water into the dinghy and gradually pushing it toward Greece. In the chaos, two women fell overboard and drowned.

The Greek coast guard rescued the survivors, and Mohammad helped other passengers onto the rescue boat. He admitted to having driven the boat after the smuggler left. It didn't cross his mind that would lead to him being prosecuted as a smuggler.

Aid workers and volunteers have also found themselves in the crosshairs of Greek authorities. In one widely publicized case, Syrian human rights worker Sarah Mardini, a refugee herself, and volunteer Sean Binder were arrested and detained for months in 2018 on suspicion of espionage, money laundering and a litany of other offenses. They deny all charges, and say they were doing nothing more than helping rescue people.

It's not just Greece. According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Germany, Italy, Malta, the Netherlands, Spain and Greece have initiated 58 investigations and legal proceedings since 2016 against private entities involved in search and rescue.

"I think it's important to challenge these in the courts, to not at all sit back and accept that we should be cast as smugglers or spies because I offered CPR, (or) more often than not just a smile, to someone in distress," Binder told the AP. "It is preposterous that we should be cast as criminals. I don't accept it...It doesn't matter who you are, you don't deserve to drown in the sea."



Main category:
[Middle-East](#)

Morocco says hundreds of migrants assisted off coast Polish Muslim leader helps feed migrants and soldiers