
US-Shia Militias Tensions: Call for War in the Shade of Coronavirus

07-04-2020

Authors

Rudaw RC

By Ziryan Rojhelati|

Introduction

In a joint statement, eight Shia armed groups in Iraq^[1] that call themselves as "axis of resistance" against the presence of US forces, calls America as "occupying power that responds only to force". This statement is important because this was came out right after the visit of newly appointed commander of Iranian al-Quds forces Esmail Qaani to Iraq. And the press reported that there is likely US attack on Hezbollah brigades in Iraq and also President Trump tweeted " Upon information and belief, Iran or its proxies are planning a sneak attack on U.S. troops and/or assets in Iraq". This could be one of the latest chain in the practical-verbal tensions between US and its Shia rivals in Iraq but not the last one.

The question here is what will happen? Why amid increasing outbreak of global pandemic covid-19, tensions are increasing in Iraq? Is this related to the fault assessment of each other's power during coronavirus or there is another reason behind this?

This analysis believes that main goal of the eight Shia groups joint statement is the current internal politics of Iraq. Particularly is to fail new designated Prime Minister Adnan al-Zurfi's efforts or to force him listen to their demands. At least in the short term neither America nor Iran want war, but Shia 'resistance' groups want to have limited tension with US.

Ongoing limited confrontation

The eight Shia "resistance" groups statement is telling us some indications that what is likely to happen. First of all through this line that said " if we decide to fight with you, will turn the land and skies of Iraq into hell for you" this tell us that still they have not decided to launch war against America and do not want US to perceive them this way. In such cases these Shia militias in place of making attacks, they threatens to launch attacks. Hezbollah and Nujaba's support for the attack on Iraq's Taji military base (home for US-led Coalition forces) on March 11 that killed two American soldiers and a British soldier, which later an unknown newly establish group claimed responsibility of the attack is an indication that Shia militia groups want to have continuous and limited tensions with America. They need to have tensions with America, because ideologically this has existential meaning for them and is in the interest of protecting their position within Iraqi internal politics. America's exit from Iraq might be is in their interest. But these groups are more realistic than going to force out America through deadly warfare. Because they realize that such war politically, militarily and economically won't be in their interest. And if we look at the issue externally, due to some reasons Iran is not in the situation to be driven for a major war against America. First after killing of Qasim Soleimani, Iran's influence on the PMF groups and Iraqi Shia politics has waned. Therefore start a war that is very likely to get out of control might be is not in the interest of Tehran. Unlike Soleimani the new al-Quds commander Qaani does not seem to have wide connections and affective. Disagreement between Shia parties on the candidate for PM especially between Shia parties that are close to Iran is an indication of such weakness in Iran's current role in Iraqi politics. And this was the same case to candidate a replacement for Mahdi al-Muhandis.

Second due to coronavirus and fall of oil prices, economies of Iran and Iraq are facing serious problems therefore going to war at this time will lead to bad consequences. But having limited tensions might be is useful for Iran to cover its weak policy in fighting coronavirus and stop economic crisis impacts, but launching major war will damage Iran. Even prior coronavirus, due to Iran's bad economic and political situation when America killed its major commander Soleimani but Iran as reaction still would not consider war and satisfied only with limited respond. In situation like now where covid-19

spread out all over the world that even some countries are asking to lift sanctions on Iran. Is not likely that US will go to a big war with Iran and its proxies in Iraq. The news on an American plan to attack Hezbollah in Iraq is not any new. Hezbollah is the backbone of Iranian influence in Iraq. And has regional influence from era of Abw Mahdi Muhandis until other commanders that been suggested as replacement of Muhandis such Abw Ali Basri and Abw Fidk, these leaders are affiliated with Hezbollah and in reality they are running PMF. Earlier US has killed people like Muhandis and put some of the Hezbollah officials on the terror list. Even in some areas in Iraq and Syria US has targeted offices and bases of Iranian proxies. But this does not mean Washington is prepared for a major war as some Iranian officials and PMF groups call for it. For President Trump killing an American soldier was a red line and this happened last month in Taji base attack. But despite crossing the line but America did not go to a war. But some media agencies considered US patriot air defense system deployment and evacuating smaller military bases in Iraq as preparation for war.

After killing Soleimani and developments afterwards, US took tactical step in pulling hundreds of troops from smaller outposts and shifting them to larger one as is easier to defend bases. On March 19 in al-Qaim base (west of Anbar) and March 26 in Qayyara air base (south of Mosul) and March 29 in Kirkuk's K1 base US forces withdrew. When you look at the map of PMF forces deployment [\[2\]](#) in those areas then it make sense the level of military threat that these Iran-backed militia groups could make to the US forces : in Al-Qa'im area at least there are 9 bases and offices of Hezbollah, Saraya al-Khorasani , Saeed al-Shuhada brigades. In Qayyarah ,there are bases and offices of Badr, Imam Ali and Jund al-Imam brigades.in Kirkuk there are about 19 base and offices of Badr, Saraya al-Khorasani, Hezbollah and Imam Ali brigades, and even there are unknown militias in Kirkuk. Since January until now there were about 14 attacks made on the US targets in Iraq.

Targeting Iraq's new PM-designate

First part of the 8 Shia armed groups statement is more repeating previous slogans and playing on the anti-American sentiment, second part which can be the main goal is rejecting al-Zurfi to become new PM and they call him as a "spy" for America .

In January most of these Shia armed groups in Iran's town (Qom) convened with Hadi Amri and Muqtada al-Sadr and have discussed forming "resistance" front which this statement also came out under name of "resistance" groups, but Sadr's famous page under name of Mohammed Salih Iraqi is now supports Al-Zurfi and is against the statement, said that these groups statement is to earn more gains. Despite protest of Iranian _backed groups, Al-Zurfi still is insist in his efforts to make it to PM. Al-Zurfi in Iraqi version repeated Trump's " America is first" and published his program for his cabinet. But is difficult for him within a year to make "Iraq is first" successful. And that's not only issue he faces. Through internal loans or get money out from reserves of central bank he might be able to reduce economic impacts of coronavirus crisis temporarily. But finding radical solution for Iraq's main economic problems require more time than a year. And holding pure election, eradicate corruption and meet demands of protesters with solving issues between Erbil and Baghdad as he promised to do, these are not short term issues and need more time to be fixed. Al-Zurfi like his predecessors is emphasizing on that government need to be committed and listen to the Shia authority (Marja'aya) instructions which is above the law institution in Iraq. And al-Zurfi is repeating paradoxical slogans of Abadi and Adil Mahdi by calling for limiting weapons to the hands of the state, where he is supporting multi-armed force! One of the main obstacles to implement his program (if he became PM) is increasing tensions between Iranian-backed groups and America. Increasing such tensions can fail his efforts to form or continue the new cabinet or he has to obey the demands of these armed groups.

Conclusion

The tensions between Shia groups "resistance front" with America is very likely to continue, but in the short term is not going to lead for a major war between them. Bounded tension is in the interest of Iran as well but yearning for a major

war is not. Especially since Iran has witnessed America's insistence on retaliation as happened in the case of killing Soleimani and Muhandis. Therefore is likely that America take advantage of the current situation to weaken Iranian-backed groups more, but in the short term war is not in the interest of America either. In general if these tensions continue may push US to be closer to the Kurds and Sunnis. Thus in the short term talks to form new government will be in the interest of Kurds and Sunnis.

[1] Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Nujaba, Saeed Shuhada brigades, Imam Ali brigades, Awfiya movement, Jundl al-Imam movement, Saraya al-Ashura and Saraya al-Khurasani.

[2]
<https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1KanwykNx7VkQUN52zNSmj6qxNL7IYwsr&ll=32.754608181685114%2C48.78839005917257&z=7>