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INCREASING ATTACKS OF SHIA MILITIA GROUPS AND THE FUTURE OF US FORCES IN IRAQ

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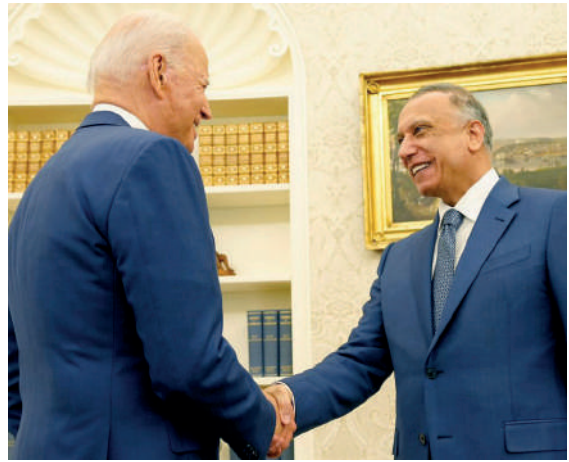
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INTRODUCTION

The Iraq region has witnessed many conflicts and turmoil with the US invasion in 2003. After 2003, many non-state actors other than the legitimate government have emerged and increased their activities in Iraq. The US, which has withdrawn most of its troops from the region, is negotiating the future of its remaining elements with Iraq as of 2021. The future of the US elements in Iraq will be determined not only by the negotiations between the states but also by the state of play in Iraq. The Hashd al-Shaabi, which was established after 2014 with the fatwa of the Shiite authority Sistani, to fight against the terrorist organization ISIS, plays an important role in the US-Iraq relations as it is integrated into Iraqi politics and the army, and is an influential actor in the country. The assassinations by the US of the Quds Force Commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Qasem Soleimani, and Hashd al-Shaabi Vice President Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in 2020 made the US troops and bases the tar-

gets of Shia militia groups operating in Iraq. Although the connections and capabilities of these groups beyond the geographical borders of Iraq are questionable, their activities in Iraq have reached a level that can directly affect the security environment in the country. It is seen that the recent attacks carried out or thought to be carried out by the Shia militia groups in Iraq were especially against the US military presence there. An evaluation of the attacks in Iraq, which are still relevant as of 2021, reveals that the attacks are political. In the 2020-2021 period, when the details about the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq were being negotiated between the US and Iraqi governments, and the leaders of the Shia militia groups targeted the US elements in Iraq, the Shia militias received the support of Iran against the 'common enemy', the US, and increased their influence in the country. The aggressive attitude of the Shia militia groups towards the US elements and the US confrontation with these groups are of great

importance for the security and future of the US forces as well as for the stability of Iraq. It is possible to say that the actions of the militia groups may lead to regional conflicts in Iraq.

In this context, this study examines the importance of the attacks on the logistics and strategic regions of Iraq targeted by the

Shia militias, for the future of the US forces. In addition, the study attempts to discuss the effects of the Shia militias' attacks on the Iraq-US Strategic Dialogue on the US military pullback, the future of US-based private companies operating in Iraq, and the influence of Iran in Iraq.

ATTACKS OF THE SHIA MILITIAS AGAINST THE US PRESENCE



After the arrest of Qasim Muslih, Commander of Hashd al-Shaabi Operations in Anbar, militia groups besieged the Green Zone, where Muslih was held.

The killings of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis by the US on 3 January 2020 led Shia militia groups to harden their anti-US stance. The attacks carried out from January 2020 to August 2021 threaten the security of the Iraqi people as well as of the US troops and support personnel located in the region. It is observed that the attacks in May-June 2021 overlap on certain coordinates with the previous attacks. It was reported that on 6 June 2021, two drones attacked the Ayn al-Asad Air Base, where the US and Coalition forces were stationed in Iraq, and that the missile defense system engaged the drones.¹ The Centurion C-RAM Air Defense System, which was deployed by the US against intensified attacks, shot down two combat drones targeting the airbase in the desert region of Anbar.² It was announced that a rocket attack had also been carried out against the Baghdad Diplomatic

Support Center on the same day at night. It is stated that in May 2021, the Ayn al-Asad Base was attacked at least four times with missiles and drones. Qasim Muslih, Commander of Hashd al-Shaabi Operations in Anbar who had been arrested after the previous attacks, was arrested under Article 4 of the Anti-Terror Law, on charges of involvement in the attack on the Ayn al-Asad Military Base and attempted murder against the protesters.³ Also in June, a roadside bomb struck the logistics support convoy of the coalition forces passing through the Anbar International Highway. In Iraq, convoys of trucks contracted with the international coalition were targeted by repeated attacks for months.⁴ The arrest of Qasim Muslih and the statement of Qais al-Khazali, the leader of Hashd al-Shaabi-affiliate Asaib Ahl al-Haq, that they would put pressure on the

¹ "Ayn Esed Hava Üssü'ne İHA'lı saldırı", Basnews, 06.06.2021.

² "Ayn el-Esed Hava Üssü'nü hedef almaya çalışan 2 SiHA düşürüldü", Rudaw, 06.06.2021.

³ "Irak'ta bir Haşdi Şabi komutanı Ayn el-Esed Askeri Üssü saldırısına karıştığı gerekçesiyle tutuklandı", Şarkul Avşat, 27.05.2021.

⁴ Shafaq, انفجار جديد يستهدف التحالف الدولي غربي العراق, <https://shafaq.com/ar/انفجار-جديد-يستهدف-التحالف-الدولي-غربي-العراق>

Iran has reportedly reduced its monthly payments to four powerful Shia militia groups in Iraq from 4-5 million dollars to 2-3 million since the coronavirus pandemic began.

US, whom they believed should be removed from Iraq, caused the Shia militias to intensify the attacks. On 8 June 2021, Muslih was released by Iraq's Joint Operations Command and was welcomed by the members of the Hashd al-Shaabi in al-Anbar. Hours after Muslih's release, it was reported that Balad Air Base in Saladin governorate was hit by missiles and Katyusha rockets⁵ with two rockets falling near an area used by US contractors. Balad Air Base was used by the US company Sallyport Global Holdings to service the Iraqi Air Force's F-16 fighter jets. At least three foreign and one Iraqi contractors were injured in the attacks on Balad.⁶

The attacks that put the US soldiers under pressure in the region increased relatively during the period when Muslih was arrested and released, as Balad Air Base was attacked again on 9 June 2021. About an hour after the rocket attacks, Camp Victory Army Base near Baghdad Airport housing the US troops was targeted by Katyusha missiles.⁷ The US forces

shot down a drone shortly after the base was hit.⁸ At the beginning of 2021, the US had deployed the same C-RAM Air Defense System at the Camp Victory Army Base in Baghdad Airport as the one located in the Baghdad Embassy.⁹ During the attacks of the Shia militias on Baghdad International Airport with three drones, one was shot down mid-air by the air defense system. There is no clear information regarding the material damage caused by the other two.¹⁰ According to the statement of the Iraqi Security Media Cell, two bomb-laden drones were destroyed in the skies of al-Rasheed Military Base late on the night of 15 June 2021.¹¹ Photographs of the downed drones were broadcast by the Security Media Cell.¹²

The Shia militia groups within the Hashd al-Shaabi are known to receive political, military, and economic support from Iran. The financial dimension of this support plays an important role in these groups' operational capacity. A commander of one of

⁵ "Beled Askeri Hava Üssü'ne roketli saldırı", Basnews, 09.06.2021.

⁶ "Five Rockets Target Iraq's Balad Airbase Housing US Contractors, No Casualties", Asharq AL-Awsat, 10.06.2021.

⁷ "Irak'ta Balad ve Victoria askeri üsleri roketlerle hedef alındı", Şarkul Avşat, 10.06.2021.

⁸ "U.S. forces down a drone over the Victoria military base", Shafaq News, 10.06.2021,

⁹ "ABD, Bağdat Havalimanı'na hava savunma sistemi yerleştiriyor", Savunmatr, 01.01.2021.

¹⁰ "Bağdat Havalimanı'na bomba yüklü 3 İHA'yla saldırı", Basnews, 10.06.2021.

¹¹ "Bağdat Havalimanı'na bomba yüklü İHA'larla saldırı girişimi", Basnews, 16.06.2021.

¹² Irak Güvenlik Medya Hücresi resmi hesabı, <https://twitter.com/SecMedCell/status/1404914292709904384> Accessed: 24 June 2021.

the powerful militia groups said that Iran has reduced its monthly payments to each militia group in Iraq to \$2-3 million from \$4-5 million since the coronavirus outbreak. As the reduced financial support affects the operations of the militia groups, the commanders may have had to look for new funding sources.¹³ This further supports the argument that

the reduced cost of operations led to an increase in drone attacks, as the Shia militias target strategic locations with low-cost weapons. Considering the difficulty of detecting and intercepting drone attacks, Shia militias in Iraq also seem to have adopted this method widely used by both states and non-state actors.

¹³ "US sanctions, pandemic hit Iran's funding for proxies in Iraq", The Arab Weekly, 03.07.2021

US ATTITUDE TOWARDS ATTACKS BY SHIA MILITIA GROUPS AND THE FUTURE OF US FORCES IN IRAQ



In the 4th round of US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue Talks (2020-2021) held in July 2021, it was decided that the US combat forces in Iraq would leave by the end of 2021.

The US presence in Iraq consists of its troops deployed in the region for the fight against the terrorist organization ISIS and the personnel of private companies in the region providing technical support. Despite the ongoing negotiations between Iraq and the US regarding the withdrawal of US troops from the region, private companies operating in the region as private enterprises are likely to stay. Located at Balad Air Base and a part of Caliburn International, which provides consulting, engineering, medical, and environmental solutions, as well as large-scale program management services that support the US core markets of national defense, healthcare, global diplomacy, and homeland security,¹⁴ Sallyport provides base operations support, base life support, and security services for the

Iraqi F-16 program. The company is expected to complete its work on the base by 30 January 2022. With the contract, the company won \$240 million in May (as it was a sole-source acquisition).¹⁵ The company has reportedly won around \$2 billion in Pentagon-awarded contracts at the Iraqi air base since 2014.¹⁶ In March 2021, it was alleged that Sallyburn and Lockheed Martin companies operating at Balad Air Base would pull their personnel from the base, but these claims were denied by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Lockheed Martin officials.¹⁷ Considering the conditions of the period, the death of a contractor of a heart attack during the rocket attacks on Ayn al-Asad Air Base¹⁸ can be considered as a warning to private companies providing services in Iraq in terms of person-

¹⁴ Caliburn, <https://www.caliburnintl.com/about/>, Eriřim tarihi: 17 Haziran 2021.

¹⁵ "Sallyport wins \$240m Iraq Contract", Iraq-Business News, 03.05.2021.

¹⁶ "How the Pentagon Accidentally Funnel Millions to Iraqi Militia Groups It's Also Fighting", The American Prospect, 25.03.2021.

¹⁷ "Iraq, US step back from planned evacuation of contractors from Iraqi base", Reuters, 03.03.2021.

¹⁸ "US Contractor dies as rocket attacks in Iraq pose fresh challenge to Biden", Washington Post, 03.03.2021.

The decision of big companies such as Lockheed Martin to pull their maintenance personnel is projected to trigger technical problems for the Iraqi Air Force in the short term.

nel safety. Indeed, the attacks on Beled Air Base reminded the importance of personnel safety and resulted in Lockheed Martin pulling its personnel from the base in May 2021 due to safety reasons. The company's vice president of communications, Joseph LaMarca Jr. announced that Lockheed Martin relocated its maintenance teams for Iraq's F-16 fighter jets in coordination with the US government and with employee safety as the top priority. An Iraqi security official, on the other hand, told Lockheed Martin had 70 employees at Balad, 50 of whom would be relocated to the United States while about 20 would be moved to Erbil. Upon Iraqi authorities' request for the personnel to stay, Lockheed Martin announced that it had temporarily left the area and that the personnel would return when protection would be provided. Prime Minister al-Kadhimi said Iraq was trying to persuade the remaining US companies that their employees would be safe and admitted that the F-16 program had been problematic.¹⁹ Al-Kadhimi acknowledged that the lack of experts for aircraft maintenance was a serious problem for

the F-16 fleet. In early 2021, the Iraqi Air Force managed to fly 23 F-16s over Baghdad to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Iraqi Army. However, reports indicate that only 20 percent of the Iraqi Air Force was operational.²⁰ In fact, according to some claims, only seven F-16s were able to fly without any problems during the conflicts since December 2020.²¹ According to New York Times, Iraq had to keep most of its F-16s grounded due to inadequate maintenance caused by the withdrawal of Lockheed Martin crews in 2020.²² Another withdrawal of personnel by Lockheed Martin in 2021 is projected to trigger technical problems for the Iraqi Air Force in the short term.

As of July 2021, there are 26 F-16s among 189 aircraft and helicopters in active service in the Iraqi Air Force inventory. If the problems with F-16s are to pose problems on the operational capability of the air force, it seems likely that Czech L-159 light fighter jets will be used more often, of which Iraq currently has 10, and that Iraq will search for new alternatives for a way out.²³ Although some of the L-159 light

¹⁹ "Iraq's F-16s Grounded After U.S. Contractor Pulls Maintenance Crews, Newyork Times, 10.05.2021,

²⁰ "Irak'ın F-16IQ filosunu lojistik açıdan zor günler bekliyor", SavunmaSanayiST, 12.05.2021,

²¹ "Iraq's Air Force Is At A Crossroads", Paul Iddon, Forbes, 11.05.2021.

²² "Iraq's F-16s Grounded After U.S. Contractor Pulls Maintenance Crews", Newyork Times, 10.05.2021.

²³ "Iraqi Air Force (2021)", The World Dictionary of Modern Military Aircraft, 25.06.2021.

fighter aircraft are airworthy, it is stated that active use is not possible in the near future, due to pending requalification training.²⁴ Iraq has already ordered 70 aircraft and helicopters, of which 38 are ready for combat use. However, these 38 aircraft and helicopters consist of US-origin T-6C, Bell 412, and AC-208s, and Iraq may have a similar experience in terms of maintenance, as was the case with F-16s. Today, the Iraqi Air Force has at its disposal a diverse range of aircraft in terms of their source of supply. Although numbers indicate that the existing and ordered aircraft are mostly US-made, 35 of the 189 aircraft and helicopters in the inventory are of Soviet Union and Russian origin.²⁵ The Iraqi Air Force has Russian aircraft and helicopters such as Su-25, Mi-8, and An-32. The Su-25 jets, which were used in important operations in 2015 in the fight against ISIS, cannot be used actively as of 2021 due to financial issues and the unavailability of parts. The Iraqi Air Force fleet consisting of Chinese CH-4 drones was not used in any activity in 2021, as Baghdad was waiting for spare parts from Beijing.²⁶ Iraq's efforts to develop its Air Force seem to suffer due to reasons such as the uncertainty that these aircraft would be used against the KRG, and the security concerns regarding aircraft maintenance in Iraq. Hashd al-Shaabi's developing ties with Russia and its official and unofficial position in the country's politics may push Iraq to pursue new defense initiatives. In this context, to develop its Air Force, the Iraqi government may become more willing to co-operate with countries such as Russia, France, China, and Pakistan in the near future. Indeed, Iraqi government officials emphasized Iraq's need for Russian Su-57 fighter aircraft in 2020. That is why problems with the use of F-16 air-

craft in the Iraqi Air Force inventory may force Iraq to seek new alternatives. On the other hand, this situation may create new opportunities for the Turkish defense industry in Iraq. The drones and combat drones developed by Turkey in the recent period, whose effectiveness, high strike power, and capacity were proven both in the fight against terrorism and in regions such as Libya, Syria, and Karabakh, may benefit Iraq in its fight against organizations and non-state armed actors. At this point, it is safe to say that new trade opportunities may emerge between the defense industries of Turkey and Iraq in the future and that Turkey will be able to provide assistance to Iraq.

The attacks, which targeted the CIA station in Erbil and other strategic locations such as fuel supply lines, as well as certain technical and strategic areas, transportation and communication lines, and bases accommodating US troops to drive out US troops and contractors, have common points with the threats of pro-Iran Shia militias, even though they did not claim responsibility on some of the attacks. According to the US policy toward Iraq, the Shia militia groups, which already receive popular support, should not be neglected. For example, Robert Cole, who was an inspector at Balad Air Base in 2015, uncovered a plot of three Iraqi Sallyport personnel working for the Iran-backed militia group known as Kata'ib al-Imam Ali. During the interrogation, one of the suspects, who was a Sallyport guard, even threatened the inspector with joining the militia. Cole says this person walked around freely in the base although he should have been expelled. Although some claim that around that time, activities such as prostitution, theft,

²⁴ "Iraq's Air Force Is At A Crossroads", Paul Iddon, Forbes, 11.05.2021.

²⁵ "Iraqi Air Force (2021)", The World Dictionary of Modern Military Aircraft, 25.06.2021.

²⁶ "Iraq's Air Force Is At A Crossroads", Paul Iddon, Forbes, 11.05.2021.

The activities carried out by the US after 2014 in cooperation with people having close relations with Shia militia groups proved to be detrimental in 2020.

smuggling, and professional abuse took place in the base, it would be wrong to reduce such cases to local sources only.²⁷ It is observed that the government and politicians pin the burden of corruption and military operations on private companies to avoid assuming responsibility for wars and mistakes.

The activities carried out by the US after 2014 in cooperation with people having close relations with Shia militia groups proved to be detrimental in 2020. The attacks discussed in this study were supported by a company named Medina al-Qibab through additional fuel supply, run by General Sahi al-Amiri, a former Balad Base senior official, who is known to be related to Hadi al-Amiri and Falih al-Fayyadh, and who has ties with Shia militias.²⁸ This means that the US was able to obtain its needs from the groups it declared enemies. In this context, it is thought that the attack on fuel suppliers of the base in 2017 pushed the US to make deals with companies affiliated with Shia militias. Medina al-Qibab is one of the companies approved by the US Embassy in terms of supply and transportation of fuel to the Diplomatic Support Center, Balad Air Base,

and al-Asad Air Base in support of the F16 program.²⁹ After 2017, the US chose to safely transport fuel to the base through agreements with companies affiliated with Shia militias. Yet, the US was targeted in 2020 and 2021 in regions where Shia-affiliated companies were also operating. Medina al-Qibab, the Diplomatic Support Center, Balad Air Base, and al-Asad Air Base, all supplied fuel by the company, were heavily attacked in May and June 2021.

The presence of the US-led international coalition forces and personnel of contractors in the targeted area jeopardizes the elements deployed in the region on approval of the Iraqi government. It is estimated that there are approximately 3,000 foreign troops in Iraq affiliated with the US-led anti-ISIS coalition, 2,500 of which are American.³⁰ Although the majority of these troops are in the region for consultancy and technical support services, the presence of US troops in the region strengthens the military and technical integration between the US and Iraq. As some Shia groups openly threaten the US, attacks with unidentified perpetrators are pinned on 'pro-Iran Shia militias'. After the US strikes targeted Shia militia

²⁷ "U.S. company turned blind eye to wild behavior on Iraq base", Chicago Tribune, 3.05.2017.

²⁸ "How the Pentagon Accidentally Funnel Millions to Iraqi Militia Groups It's Also Fighting", The American Prospect, 25.03.2021.

²⁹ Medina al-Qibab, <http://madinaalqibab.com/>, Erişim tarihi: 21 June 2021.

³⁰ "Iraq military body vows to escalate attacks against US forces", Middle East Monitor, 24.05.2021.

facilities on 27 June 2021, these groups threatened revenge, and the US Embassy in Baghdad, Erbil Airport, Ayn al-Asad Air Base were all attacked on 5-8 July 2021. Qais al-Khazali, the leader of pro-Iran militia group Asaib Ahl al-Haq, denied responsibility for the attack on the US Embassy.³¹ On the other hand Abu Ali al-Askari, head of security division of the Shia militia group Kata'ib Hezbollah, said in a press conference that they were determined to respond to the US air attacks, but that they would not target the diplomatic representation of any country except the US Embassy in Baghdad, which is a 'war embassy'.³² However, the attacks do not have consequences only for the US and the Shia militia groups. Indeed, Greece announced that the visit of Prime Minister Kiriakos Mitsotakis to the KRG capital Erbil, which was planned for 13 July, was postponed due to the drone attacks on the Erbil International Airport.³³ The drone attacks in Erbil make precautions necessary. David Williams, Commander of the Joint Coalition Coordination Center, announced that a team was established in the KRG to counter the drone attacks. Williams also emphasized that they provide \$20 million in support to the Peshmerga forces every month in addition to consultancy for the Peshmerga to become a professional force, and stated that a team and joint centers were established for this purpose.³⁴

The attacks perpetrated by Iran-backed militia groups reinforce Iran's influence in Iraq at a time when the US military pullback

from Iraq was being discussed. CENTCOM Commander McKenzie said in a briefing in April 2021 that for the year 2020, Iran thought they had a political solution to force the United States out of Iraq, but with the signals received from Iraq, that was no longer the case. McKenzie stated that the US would be in Iraq for the fight against the terrorist organization ISIS, and linked the US presence in Iraq to ISIS to a large extent. McKenzie said it is important to realize that the Iraqi government wants the US to stay on Iraqi soil and needs the US in the fight against ISIS.³⁵ When Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi met McKenzie in May 2021, al-Kadhimi's media office said in a statement that an agreement was reached in order to develop mechanisms to implement the outcomes of the third round of the strategic dialogue between Iraq and the United States. One of the main issues discussed in this round was the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq.³⁶ In April 2021, online meetings were held between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein, and the parties agreed to set a timeline for the withdrawal of American Troops. Iraq's National Security Adviser Qassem al-Araji held a press conference after the third Strategic Dialogue Meeting between Baghdad and Washington in April 2021 and said it was agreed that only Iraqi forces would fight against the terrorist organization ISIS and that the United States promised to withdraw a significant portion of its troops from the country. Araji also announced that the Iraqi government would ensure the security of foreign missions and

³¹ "Two injured in rocket attacks on Iraqi airbase housing US troops", Mohammed Tawfeeq, CNN, 08.07.2021.

³² "Irak Hizbullah'ından ABD güçlerine saldırı tehdidi", Basnews, 09.07.2021.

³³ "Miçotakis Erbil ziyaretini erteledi", Rudaw, 08.07.2021.

³⁴ "Koalisyon Komutanı: Kürdistan Bölgesi'ni İHA saldırılarına karşı korumak için ekip kurduk, artık tüm dünya Kürtlerin dostu", Basnews, 10.07.2021.

³⁵ General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., Commander, U.S. Central Command, Holds a Press Briefing, 22 April 2021.

³⁶ "ABD ve Irak'tan stratejik müzakerelere ilişkin anlaşma, Kürdistan 24, 20.05.2021.

The US, with its commitment in the 4th round of talks to withdraw, seems to plan to do so without actually leaving Iraq, by pulling its small number of combat troops and focusing solely on consultancy and training services.

embassies in the country, assuring there would be no place for US bases in Iraq.³⁷ These forces in the region, which McKenzie regards as 'permanent' and essential, can be said to be aimed at preventing Iran from increasing its influence in Iraq, although the US emphasizes their sole purpose is to fight against ISIS. The third round of talks and McKenzie's statements are unclear and inconsistent about the US withdrawal. The details of the withdrawal of the US military forces will become clear in the future as a result of the negotiations, meaning that the US military presence will be evaluated based on the state of play in Iraq in the near future. Al-Kadhimi said his country no longer requires foreign combat troops on its soil and visited the US for the fourth round of strategic talks in July 2021.³⁸ At the talks, Iraqi Prime Minister al-Kadhimi and US President Joe Biden agreed on the withdrawal of US combat forces from Iraq by the end of 2021. However, there is no information about the number of American combat troops currently in Iraq and the number of American troops who will stay in Iraq after 2021.³⁹ After the agree-

ment, some even suggested the number of American troops to be pulled from Iraq by the end of 2021 may be as low as 10.⁴⁰ Although Iran-backed Shia militias are skeptical about the agreement, they may have lost one of their main justifications to oppose the US-allied Kadhimi government. At this point, the funding of the projects promised by Iraq before the election period, the statements of Hussein Latif, the President of the Iraqi Radioactive Sources Regulatory Authority, regarding the preliminary negotiations for a nuclear reactor, and the economic reasons such as foreign funds to be provided to Iraq for the project, as well as situations such as the weakening security structure caused by the conflicts between the central authority and the Shia militias, especially the Hashd al-Shaabi, may reinforce the US presence in Iraq planned to continue in the medium term in the form of advisory and training missions. The increase in the number of NATO personnel in Iraq upon the Iraqi government's request in February 2021 and the fact that al-Kadhimi visited NATO headquarters in June 2021 to

³⁷ "ABD, Irak'ta kalan muharip askerlerini geri çekmeye devam edecek", Hakan Çopur; Haydar Karaalp, Anadolu Ajansı, 07.04.2021.

³⁸ "AP Interview: PM says Iraq doesn't need US combat troops", Qassim Abdul-Zahra, Samya Kullabap, AP News, 26.07.2021.

³⁹ "White House: From Combat to training and advisory is to be our mission in Iraq", Iraqi News Agency, 26.07.2021.

⁴⁰ "Inside Al Kadhimi-Biden agreement on future US troop levels in Iraq", Bryant Harris, National News, 22.07.2021.

discuss the situation in Iraq indicate that NATO will have an increasing role in the balance of power in Iraq.⁴¹ Thus, it can be concluded that the US, with its commitment in the fourth round of talks to withdraw, plans to do so without actually leaving Iraq by pulling its small number of combat troops and focusing solely on consultancy and training services. However, 2,500 American troops and 4,000 NATO

personnel in Iraq are not expected to face any operational difficulties with the withdrawal of US combat elements only. NATO's expansion of its Iraq Mission in 2021 on Iraq's request despite the latter's statement that Iraq does not need foreign troops, strengthened the impression that NATO will fill a military vacuum that may be caused by the withdrawal of the Western alliance.

⁴¹ "Prime Minister of the Republic of Iraq visits NATO Headquarters", NATO, 30.06.2021.

IMPORTANCE OF THE SHIA MILITIA ATTACKS FOR IRAN



Through pro-Iran Shia militia groups, Quds Force Commander Qaani tries to give the impression that he is the patron of all groups affiliated with the Hashd al-Shaabi.

Iran's influence in Iraq has gradually increased since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Considering the US activities in Iraq, the country stands out as one of the most important fronts witnessing the US-Iran conflict. In this struggle for influence, Iran intensively uses military and political channels. Iran's influence on Shia militia groups affects not only Iraq's national security but also its economy, domestic and foreign policy. In this context, the proxy war carried out by Iran through its Shia militia proxies serves as a key method in Iran's foreign policy in the face of tensions between the US. However, Iran's proxy war is not limited to only Iraq, as Iran has been increasing its support to the local proxies in the Middle East. The low-cost methods used by these local elements in their attacks are gradually reaching a technical level due to Iran's strategy of spreading the war.

It is observed that Shia militia groups in Iraq quickly adapt to the technology and diversify their methods by using low-cost drones. Indeed, the Hashd al-Shaabi and affiliated Shia militia groups are starting to show off by flaunting their drones in videos about their weaponry. McKenzie stated that the biggest concern in the region after the attack on Erbil Airport in April 2021 was drone attacks.⁴² Reports indicate Iranian-backed militia groups carried out their first known drone attack in Iraq against the US facility at Erbil Airport on 14 April 2021. It is estimated that this non-lethal attack was most likely a show of force rather than an attempt to inflict excessive damage or casualties.⁴³ The active use of drones is quite common in conflict zones and places where state authority is weak. The active use of drones by the states fighting against terrorism eliminates the chances of terrorist

⁴² General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., Commander, U.S. Central Command, Holds a Press Briefing, 22 Nisan 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2582980/general-kenneth-f-mckenzie-jr-commander-us-central-command-holds-a-press-briefing/>, Eriřim tarihi: 15 Haziran 2021.

⁴³ Katherine Lawlor, IRAQ 2021–2022: A Forecast, Institute for the Study of War, S.23.

organizations gaining a temporary advantage in terms of time and location and prevents security forces from being caught off-guard. This situation limits the asymmetric actions of terrorist organizations. Drones, which are used by states as well as by non-state actors, especially terrorist organizations, provide significant tactical advantages. The use of drones by Shia militias is associated with the increasing influence of Iran in the Iraq region. It is thought that Iran provides drones to its supported groups in Iraq and the Middle East in general. Iran's copying of technical features of some captured US drones for the production of its own drones makes it strong in drone technology. According to some reports, Iran developed its own unmanned systems after capturing and reverse-engineering the American RQ-170 Sentinel in 2011. In fact, regarding the drones that were downed and seized for violating the Iranian airspace at the time, Amir-Ali Hajizadeh, Commander of Aerospace Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, stated that Iran possessed a collection of US drones and that if such aggression was repeated, they would add other US products to complete this collection. Following the reports about the capture of the drone, Iranian commanders said they had extracted valuable technology from the aircraft and were in the process of reverse-engineering it for their own defense industry, and unveiled a copy of the RQ-170 drone manufactured by Lockheed Martin.⁴⁴ The threat posed by Iran, which uses American drones to expand its arsenal, seems to disturb the United States. Iran is thought to have combat drones that are about the size of a human, equipped with a warhead, and

use precise coordinates, in addition to being capable of launching kamikaze strikes. Vehicles with predetermined flight paths are difficult to jam and hard to hit. In an attack on Erbil, it was established that the drone used a civilian flight path to avoid detection or interception. McKenzie hinted at better air defense or "kinetic" approaches to stop the drones. For this reason, the C-RAM air defense system was used to prevent attacks against al-Asad Air Base. Iran has been increasingly using drones throughout the region as part of a new strategy and tactic. The Jerusalem Post claims Iran sold the drones or the technology to build them to militias, such as the Houthis in Yemen, pro-Iran militias in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Gaza.⁴⁵ According to Iraqi security officials, at least 250 militias traveled to Lebanon in a few months in 2020, where they received training in flying drones, firing rockets, planting bombs, and announcing attacks on social media, from a group of advisors affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Lebanese Hezbollah.⁴⁶ Projections for 2021-2022 estimate that attacks by Iranian proxies against US elements in Iraq will be more accurate and deadly, most likely due to newer types of weapons such as drones. In addition, it is predicted that independent militia activities may escalate unexpected tensions between the US and Iran.⁴⁷

Despite the predictions that Iran will increase its control over its proxies as a result of Ebrahim Raisi's conservative tendencies, who was elected President on 18 June 2021, a conflict that this situation would escalate may result in a softening of tensions between the

⁴⁴ "Iranian-built copy of U.S. drone takes first flight: IRNA", Reuters, 10.11.2014.

⁴⁵ "US CENTCOM: Iran drone threat in Iraq", Jerusalem Post, 08.06.2021.

⁴⁶ "Exclusive In tactical shift, Iran grows new, loyal elite from among Iraqi militias, John Davison; Ahmed Rasheed, Reuters, 21.05.2021.

⁴⁷ Katherine Lawlor, IRAQ 2021-2022: A Forecast, Institute for the Study of War, S.9.

US and Iran. As the increasing attacks against the coalition forces in Iraq were supported by Iran, the Shia militias' targeting of the US may have strengthened Iran's hand in the nuclear negotiations held around that time. However, the softening of the US attitude toward Iran increases the possibility that the relations would be damaged due to Iran's actions escalating the tension. Although it was thought Iran's activism would decrease after the assassination of Qassem Soleimani in Iraq, revenge attacks carried out by Iran-backed militia groups enabled Iran to maintain its control over Iraq. The arrival of the Quds Force Commander Qaani to Baghdad on the day Qasim Muslih was released points to the strength of the relationship between Shia militia groups and Iran. From this, it can be concluded that Qaani is trying to act as the protector of the Hashd al-Shaabi, given some Shia groups are pro-Iran. Looking at the process, the arrest of Muslih at a time when Iran was going through an electoral period, and there were discussions over the elections planned to be held on 10 October 2021 in Iraq, points to the power struggle between al-Kadhimi and pro-Iran Shia militia groups. The Shia militia groups' siege of the Green Zone after Muslih's arrest and the intensification of attacks following his release caused these militia groups to consolidate power. With Qaani's visit to Iraq, al-Kadhimi's attempts to discredit Shia militia groups during the election process further suffered. For this reason, Iran, which seems to be in an effort to systematically use Shia militia groups against the al-Kadhimi administration, may become the most powerful 'external actor' in Iraq in case the US forces withdraw. In addition, al-Fayyadh's talks with Russia on behalf of the Iraqi government⁴⁸ and the militias' forming a chain of relations against the US

will deepen Hashd al-Shaabi's anti-US stance and strengthen its legitimacy. In Iraq, China's investments in energy and aids in healthcare, Russia's energy investments, and progress in defense trade strengthen the possibility that a possible vacuum with the US withdrawal from Iraq will be tried to be filled with Iran's support. At this point, Iran might consolidate its position as the 'shadow power' behind the militias; and together with Russia and China, it can take the Iraqi government in its sphere of influence. Thus, Russia may need Iran, which it ignored throughout 2020-2021 in matters related to the Syrian Civil War, more in Iraq. Iran's efforts to promote its School of Qom by suppressing the entrenched Iraqi Shiism may turn the process in favor of Iran like a catalyst but may cause a reaction among Iraqi Shiites. In this context, the Pope's meeting with Aya-tollah al-Sistani during his visit to Iraq in March 2021 shows that Iraqi Shiism is supported by the West, even though Iran sometimes comes to the fore in the region with its pragmatist Shia identity.

The fact that Iraq has turned into a field of struggle for influence despite the balance between the US and Iran, shows that in a scenario in which US forces will withdraw from Iraq, a possible vacuum will benefit Iran. Considering the US foreign policy priorities, its advancements in the Asia Pacific led the US to reduce the number of its troops in the Middle East. The Head of Russian Military Intelligence (GRU) Igor Kostyukov accuses the United States of trying to form an anti-Chinese coalition that includes India along with Australia and Japan,⁴⁹ while Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov says the US has deployed missile systems in Europe and the Asia-Pacific, and that this is a desta-

⁴⁸ "Russia's growing ties with Iran-aligned militia groups", Samuel Ramani, Middle East Institute, 26.03.2021.

⁴⁹ "Rusya Askeri İstihbaratı: ABD, Çin karşıtı koalisyon kurarak Asya-Pasifik'i kontrol etmeye çalışıyor", Anadolu Ajansı, 23.06.2021.

bilizing factor.⁵⁰ Russian Special Presidential Envoy for Syria, Alexander Lavrentyev, stated that his Iraqi colleagues told them Baghdad intends for a US withdrawal from the country. Drawing a parallel between the negotiations on US withdrawal from Iraq with Syria, Lavrentyev said should the US withdraws from Iraq, it would be impossible to maintain its contingent in Syria due to logistics issues.⁵¹ The shift of the balance of power to Asia and the increasing presence of China and Russia in the Middle East may pave the way for Iran to pursue a more aggressive Middle East policy, especially toward Iraq. In this context, Iran's geographical proximity to Iraq, its influence on Shia militia groups and in Iraqi domestic politics may enable it to play complementary roles to Russia and China's policies toward Iraq. The US Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, in a phone call with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on 2 June 2021, reportedly announced that his country would pull hundreds of troops, fighter aircraft, and air defense systems stationed in the Middle East.⁵² Therefore, the fact that the Middle East is an important market, especially in the fields of energy and defense, remains to be a decisive factor in the regional power struggle.

The US decision to pull its combat forces seems to be a solution aimed at enabling the US military personnel to stay in Iraq. With this solution, the US seems to have taken a step in support of al-Kadhimi against the Shia militia groups and their political extensions, and aimed to prevent the US troops from being targeted by withdrawing the combat troops from the region. The fact that the Biden government followed a more moderate policy

toward Iran compared to the Trump era and tried to confront the realities of the region in Iraq-Iran politics is important for the future of the US presence in Iraq. In this context, the US's relationship with the Iranian government may guarantee its presence in Iraq. In such a scenario, there is an increasing possibility that Iran's foreign policy, which has been occupied by processes such as nuclear negotiations and the US embargo, will be more active in Iraq's domestic policy and provide a new way out. The stay of US forces in the region in the near term may increase the political power of al-Kadhimi and his close circle, although he will not participate in the early elections in Iraq scheduled for 10 October 2021. However, if this stay becomes long-term, this would pave the way for the US to carry out more operations in the regions, in case the Shia militia groups escalate the tension.

The expansion of Iran-backed Shia militia groups' sphere of influence in Iraq negatively affects Turkey's initiative power in the region. Although these groups do not directly declare Turkey an enemy, they adopt an anti-Turkey stance in situations that affect Turkey's national interest, such as the implementation of the Sinjar Agreement. For example, issues such as the deployment of militias to the region in support of YBŞ and PKK in Sinjar cause further tensions between Turkey and the Shia militia groups. In case the US pulls its troops from the region, the increase in Iran's influence in Iraq and the Shia militia groups acting independently of the Iraqi government may adversely affect Turkey-Iraq relations. However, if the vacuum caused by the US withdrawal is filled by NATO, Turkey can open a new chap-

⁵⁰ "Rusya Genelkurmay Başkanı'ndan ABD'nin Avrupa ve Asya-Pasifik'teki füze sistemlerine 'istikrar bozucu' yorumu", Anadolu Ajansı, 23.06.2021.

⁵¹ "Baghdad is set for the US withdrawal, Russia says", Shafaq, 09.07.2021.

⁵² ABD'nin Orta Doğu'dan asker, uçak ve hava savunma sistemlerini çekeceği iddia ediliyor, Anadolu Ajansı, 19.06.2021.

ter in Iraq. In this context, Turkey's active participation in NATO's Iraq Mission can strengthen Turkey's position in many issues, especially the fight against terrorism, and contribute to the development of Iraq-Turkey relations. If the US partially leaves Iraq and NATO cannot fill the power vacuum, Saudi Arabia and Turkey may enter into a struggle for influence in the region to balance Iran; or, considering

the softening of relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia, they may ally against Iran. Since the possibility that NATO may be unable to obtain an effective position in the balance of power in Iraq will lead Iran to increase its influence in the region, it can be predicted that Iran-Saudi Arabia relations will be negatively affected, resulting in Turkey and Saudi Arabia to develop a common attitude toward Iran.



There is a significant number of people in Iraq controlled by pro-Iran Shia militias.

CONCLUSION

It is seen that Iran has expanded its influence on Iraq's domestic and foreign policy through Shia militia groups. The Shia militias' targeting of many facilities accommodating US troops and the US retaliation to these attacks make Iraq the center of conflicts between the US and Iran. This situation constitutes an important variable in the negotiations between the US and Iraq regarding the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq.

As a result, the withdrawal process of the US troops from Iraq may bring new dynamics for Iraq. Indeed, Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who sought balance in Iraqi foreign policy after he took office, tried to limit

and reorganize the country's relations with the US and Iran. However, administration changes in both the US and Iran may require Iraq to review its foreign policy calculations. At this point, the cooperation process between Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq does not go unnoticed. Iraq's development of relations with the Arab states, which are also allies of the US in the Middle East, seems to be an effort to reduce Iran's influence in Iraq. However, the process of forming a government after the parliamentary elections planned to be held on 10 October 2021 in Iraq and the type of government to be formed may lead the withdrawal process of the US soldiers to be reevaluated.

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