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From: Post-ISIL Mosul Wargame Team, OA4604 Wargaming Course, Naval Postgraduate School

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Subj: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – POST-ISIL MOSUL WARGAME

**1. Purpose.** Our objective is to execute an operational level wargame to explore potential interactions between Shia Militia Groups (SMGs) and the local population as well as U.S forces in a post-ISIL Mosul environment with external influencers in order to evaluate deterrent and de-escalation options. This memorandum includes the background, framework, findings and key takeaways from our wargame.

**2. Background.** To address interactions between SMGs and the local Mosul population as well as U.S. forces we built two sequential scenarios. A brief overview of each scenario is provided below and the full scenarios are provided in Appendix A.

**A. Scenario 1: Shiite Militia Threat to Sunni Population.** Our first scenario portrays a potential Shiite Militia Threat to the Sunni population of Mosul following the defeat of ISIL and the occupation of Mosul by predominantly SMGs. This scenario uses a previous takeover of Diyala as an example where ISIL had taken over in June 2014 and SMGs pushed them back out by February 2015. SMGs saw Sunni civilians as either complicit with or neutral to ISIL. While extrajudicial killings are somewhat extreme cases, harassment of Sunnis by Shiite militia is commonplace.

**B. Scenario 2: Shiite Militia Threat to U.S. Forces.** Our second scenario portrays a potential Shiite Militia Threat to U.S. forces as ISIL is no longer seen as a threat, and anti-U.S. sentiment and the desire for U.S. forces to leave Iraq increases. Shiite groups have been quoted as vowing to fight any American troops on ground in Iraq. Shiite groups blame the U.S. for the creation of ISIL and are suspicious of any attempt of the U.S. to restore their presence in Iraq under the pretext of fighting ISIL.

**3. Analysis Methods.** Our wargame broke down into 5 major players, with 2 minor players rolled up into the key players. These players were the Government of Iraq (major) with Iraqi Security Forces (minor), the Government of Iran (major) with Quds Forces (minor), Shia Militia Groups, the United States Government, and the United States Military. Our team had a facilitator to conduct the wargame as well as 5 observers, one per player. Each observer followed their player throughout the wargame and recorded their thoughts and comments through closed door planning sessions with other players and as they reacted to injects during the play of each scenario. Players were also given notebooks on which to take their own notes and these were used to cross check the observers' notes.

**4. Analysis findings.** Findings are classified.

## Shia Militia Group Scenario

Retrieved from multiple open source news outlets:

### Introduction:

“In the power vacuum that followed the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, a range of militia groups became a lethal feature, their abuses often overlooked by a U.S. military focused on battling Sunni insurgents. But when ISIS seized a huge chunk of the country and routed the Iraqi army in 2014, it was the Iran-backed Shi’ite militias that led the charge against them, overshadowing Iraq’s security forces. After the fall of the city of Mosul that year, the militias expanded their local prestige by rushing to defend Baghdad and its environs from the advancing jihadists.

The armed groups — three of the largest of which are listed below — have a complex relationship with the Iraqi state. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared the “popular mobilization forces,” an umbrella organization of armed groups, to be an official arm of the state in September in recognition of their role in the fight against ISIS.

But the militias remain a deeply controversial force; human-rights groups have documented brutal human-rights abuses, apparently motivated by sectarianism. After pro-government forces retook the majority Sunni city of Tikrit from ISIS, predominantly Shi’ite militias destroyed hundreds of civilian homes and shops in the city and towns in March and April of 2015.

The militias also abducted more than 200 Sunni residents, according to a Human Rights Watch report, including 160 who were still unaccounted for when the rights watchdog released its report in September 2015.

When Iraqi forces began the operation to retake the city of Ramadi from ISIS in December, al-Abadi’s government sidelined the militias — reportedly at the urging of U.S. officials concerned that those groups’ involvement could further inflame sectarian relations.

“The militias are resentful of the success of the army in Ramadi which was achieved with the support of the U.S.-led coalition and without their involvement,” Baghdad-based analyst Hisham al-Hashemi told Reuters.

There are three primary militia organizations....

### The Badr Organization

The oldest of the militias, this group’s history dates to the epic Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, which killed hundreds of thousands on both sides. In that period, the group’s Hadi al-Amiri fought on the Iranian side and continued to fight the regime of Saddam Hussein in the years after the war. After the U.S. occupation in 2003, al-Amiri re-emerged as a force in Iraqi politics. He is openly pro-Iran, and is close

with Qassem Suleimani, the commander of the elite Quds Force in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Today the group is reported to command 10,000 fighters and also enjoys tight relations with elements of the Iraqi state. Iraq's Interior Ministry is currently headed by a member of the Badr Organization. As al-Amiri told Foreign Policy magazine in response to a question about the group's Iranian support: "We don't need weapons — we have weapons. We're part of the Iraqi government now."

### Kataib Hezbollah

The U.S. State Department declared this secretive group a terrorist organization in 2009, blaming the group for attacks on U.S. forces. Its leader, known by the nom de guerre Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes, began working with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps in Kuwait in the 1980s and later lived in exile in Iran. Returning to Iraq following the fall of Saddam Hussein, he was elected to parliament and today commands "tens of thousands" of new recruits in the fight against ISIS.

### Asaib Ahl al-Haq

Created following the U.S. occupation of Iraq, Asaib Ahl al-Haq was formed as a result of a split in forces loyal to the influential Shi'ite cleric Moktada al-Sadr. The group is also reported to receive support from Iran's Quds Force.

In addition to fighting ISIS in Iraq, the group is also sending fighters to support the regime of President Bashar Assad in Syria. According to the U.S. military, the group's leader, Sheik Qais al-Khazali, oversaw operations that included an attack that killed five U.S. soldiers in Karbala in 2007. Al-Khazali was captured by U.S. forces and released in 2010. Al-Khazali also reportedly organized the kidnapping of five British men in Iraq in 2007." (*Shi'ite Militias in Iraq Remain a Dangerously Potent Force*, Time, Jan 20, 2016)

## **SCENARIO 1: Shiite Militia Threat to Sunni Population:**

"There's a slow-motion crisis brewing in Iraq — one dramatized by recent events that, over the long term, could make any victory over ISIS illusory. On January 11, ISIS carried out two suicide bombings in Muqdadia, a town in Iraq's Diyala province, killing at least 26 people. Retaliation was swift — but it wasn't directed against ISIS. The targets, instead, were Diyala's Sunni residents. The Shia militias that control much of the province went on what analyst Joel Wing called a "rampage": They killed at least 12 people and demolished, per Wing, "7 mosques, 7 houses, and 36 shops."

"I know the militiaman [name withheld] and others who roam our streets. They are from the area," Abbas, a Sunni resident of Muqdadia, told Human Rights Watch. "ISIS may have been

behind the café bombing, but the attacks on Sunni houses, mosques, and people in our area was the League of the Righteous [militia]."

This isn't an isolated problem. Since Shia militias recaptured most of Diyala from ISIS in 2015, they have dominated the province, with minimal oversight from the Iraqi state. As a result, the ultra-sectarian groups have been free to attack Sunni civilians with impunity, making Diyala a dangerous place for Sunnis (a minority by national standards). Analysts disagree about whether it's an organized campaign of ethnic cleansing, but the effect has been quite clear: Diyala has been depopulated of Sunnis.

And Diyala's problems point to something bigger: While the militias are especially powerful in Diyala, they wield enormous influence throughout Iraq due to their key role in the fight on ISIS. Their influence is doing serious harm to the prospects of Sunni-Shia reconciliation in Iraq — which is the only way to ensure ISIS's long-term defeat.

Diyala is right in the middle of Iraq, bordering Baghdad on its western side and Iran on the east. Prewar, Diyala was demographically mixed: Sunni Arabs were a slight majority, Shia Arabs made up another third, and the roughly 15 percent remaining were Kurds.

ISIS conquered most of Diyala in June 2014, when it surged from its northern stronghold in Mosul nearly to the gates of Baghdad. The Iraqi army, decimated by mass defections, couldn't retake the province on its own. So the government turned to Shia militiamen: independent military organizations dominated by hard-line Shia that are in large part financed, supported, and directed by Iran.

One of the largest such militias, the Badr Brigades, took the lead in reclaiming Diyala — then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki appointed Badr's leader, Hadi al-Ameri, the province's military governor. Badr and their militia allies secured most of the province by February 2015. With Iraq's central government still reeling from the ISIS onslaught, they emerged as the de facto government in Diyala.

"Diyala is mostly under the control of Hadi Ameri and his Badr," Wing explained in a note to me. Other Shia-extremist militias, like Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) and the League of the Righteous (Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, or AAH), have set up shop in Badr-controlled territory.

While the militia move into Diyala may have mostly pushed out ISIS, it's been devastating for Sunni civilians. For one thing, the fighting itself was a disaster: Neither ISIS nor the Shia militias are especially discriminate in their targeting, which led to the destruction of entire towns by mortar fire and RPGs.

And the militias have been quite cruel to Sunni civilians since taking over. The militiamen see the Sunnis as ISIS collaborators and take out their anger at ISIS on the civilian population. While the kind of killing that happened in Muqdadia in January is an extreme case, militia harassment of Sunnis is common.

"You just look at the demographic maps, you look at where people are living, and it's obvious they're not living in those areas anymore," Phillip Smyth, a researcher at the University of Maryland, told me. "That's not because they don't want to keep living there — it's because of repeated visits by a police force that's dominated by the Badr Organization. ... Some [Sunni residents] had their children detained just because they're Sunni and male."

The twin pincers of war with ISIS and Shia militia governance have forced huge numbers of Sunnis from the province. The war pushed out large numbers of Sunni civilians, and the terrible climate created by militia rule has intimidated many of them from returning and driven an additional, smaller number out.

"It's not like they are running masses out of the province," Kirk Sowell, publisher of the newsletter Inside Iraqi Politics, told me via email. "It is that areas liberated from IS well over a year ago are still only receiving back a small number of [displaced Sunnis]."

This has resulted in a huge drop in the Sunni population. Mohammed Taha al-Hamdun, a spokesperson for a major Iraqi Sunni political movement, told a Kurdish media outlet that "forty percent [of Sunnis] have left due to current security issues and the stationing of Shia militia groups there."

This precise number is very hard to verify, but it's plausible. "That could be," Douglas Ollivant, National Security Council director for Iraq from 2008 to 2009 and current managing partner at Mantid International, said of Hamdun's estimate. He also warned that there isn't a lot of information coming out of the province, so any precise estimation should be treated skeptically.

Regardless, it's undeniable that many Sunnis have fled Diyala — and more continue to leave. "You don't want to downplay what's happening," Ollivant says. "It's a very real problem that the government needs to deal with."

Badr and its fellow militias aren't openly declaring that they're attempting to rid Diyala of Sunnis. That makes it tricky to figure out whether this spate of violence and harassment is more ad hoc — the inevitable consequence of putting extremist Shia in charge of a Sunni population — or an organized, directed campaign designed to push out even more Sunnis and create a Shia majority.

Ollivant, for his part, thinks claims of ethnic cleansing are overstated. "Is it an attempt to actually cleanse the territory, and turn it into a Shia area? ... No, it's not," he says.

Ollivant links the militia violence to ISIS's small but significant remaining presence in the area. ISIS has some strongholds in eastern Diyala, which it uses to launch attacks in the province and even, at times, into Baghdad.

A close examination of militia violence patterns, performed by Wing, shows that the big attacks by Shia militias on Sunni civilians tend to follow in the wake of ISIS attacks. That suggests revenge killings — which are, to be clear, war crimes — but not necessarily organized ethnic cleansing. "It's tit for tat: You have [ISIS] attacking the Shia militias, and then the Shia militias attacking, in turn, the people who are rightly or wrongly giving them sanction," he explains.

Smyth, the Maryland researcher, sees something even more sinister at work. "When you look at it from a grand strategic arc, it's clear that there are cleansings going on, that certain demographics are trying to be addressed by the Shia militias," Smyth says. "I wouldn't call this an ad hoc campaign." The logic, according to Smyth, is essentially strategic and political. From the militias' point of view, all Sunni civilians are potential ISIS recruits and collaborators. Driving them out of the area, especially so close to Baghdad, denies the territory to ISIS, thus securing Shia civilians. Moreover, pushing Sunnis from their homes renders them politically impotent, as refugees are hard to organize. This would help Shias, especially political parties affiliated with the militias, cement their control on elements of Iraq's government.

"They are trying to cleanse Diyala, at least partially, to bring the Sunni Arab percent of the population far enough below 50 to ensure the Shia and Kurds can always elect a Shia governor," Sowell tells me.

According to Smyth, they're too smart to admit this openly. Instead, the militias send out dog whistles rather than open calls for cleansing, making it clear that they want Sunnis to leave areas — or else — without actually saying it. "If you look at their social media reports, you'll see areas that you know are Sunni that are completely bombed to hell," Smyth says. In the images are "Shia militiamen holding Shia banners ... that does send a broader message to Sunnis who are out there who see this."

The claim of a mass ethnic cleansing campaign is shared by some Iraqi Sunni politicians and media, though it has yet to be echoed by a major international human rights group. Human Rights Watch notes that even Badr leader Ameri has called targeting Sunnis "a crime no different from terrorism."

The Iraqi government is consumed by three main tasks: fighting ISIS, rebuilding in territory retaken from ISIS control, and setting a budget (which, in a country with huge oil resources, is incredibly contentious). "They just don't have a lot of energy for anything else," Ollivant says.

Iraq's Shia majority and Kurdish minority just don't have a lot of sympathy for Sunni civilians, whom they (like the militias) see as responsible for ISIS's rise. "This is like trying to generate sympathy for the ethnic cleansing of Germans in the wake of the Second World War," Ollivant says.

Today, ISIS's extremism has turned off a lot Sunnis. The group is steadily losing ground in Iraq, having lost something like 40 percent of its territory there since its 2014 peak. Iraq's current prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, is a moderate Shia who understands the need to reach out to the Sunni population and convince them to accept the legitimacy of Iraq's central government.

Abadi's task is made a lot harder by militia rampages. When groups like Badr and AAH slaughter and harass Sunni civilians, to the point where some informed observers worry about ethnic cleansing, then Sunnis don't have much reason to trust the central Shia state. After all, these groups are operating with the permission of the Iraqi government, which still needs their support to finish the fight against ISIS.

"We're already creating the next conflict," Smyth says. "If the main players who are crushing [ISIS] are Shia militias — who, mind you, are extremist Shia — you're replacing one radical Islamism with another ... and this other radical Islamism was one of the reasons it was so easy for [ISIS] to embed itself in the Sunni population." (*The US uses Iraq's Shia militias to fight ISIS -- They just got accused of ethnic cleansing*, Vox World, Zack Beauchamp, Feb 5, 2016)

## **SCENARIO 2: Shiite Militia Threat to U.S. Forces:**

"Shiite groups in Iraq have issued a statement vowing to fight any American troops on the ground following the announcement of a new deployment of special operations forces to fight the Islamic State in the war-torn nation.

Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter announced that the United States would create a special operations force in Iraq, tasked with carrying out raids and intelligence-gathering missions against the Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria.

Carter's announcement was not taken well by Shiite militia groups in Iraq. Although these militias have seen significant action against ISIS, they did not welcome the possibility of American assistance. Instead, they immediately vowed to attack the American troops.

"We will chase and fight any American force deployed in Iraq. Any such American force will become a primary target for our group. We fought them before and we are ready to resume fighting," said one militia leader, as quoted by Reuters.

Reuters reported similar comments from other Iran-backed Shiite militia groups, which expressed their “distrust of American forces after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein and the subsequent occupation.”

“The U.S. commends progress by Iraqi Security Forces and popular mobilization forces against ISIL terrorists in Baiji,” said presidential envoy Brett McGurk via Twitter on October 21. “We’re proud of our partnership with Iraqi forces in this battle, including 130 precision airstrikes since August, and training key ISF units. These units performed heroically over months of fighting, and we now look forward to strengthening our partnership in coming offensives.”

The Long War Journal noted that many of these militia groups, praised by the Obama administration, were previously designated terrorist organizations with long and bloody records of murdering American soldiers.

The administration was desperate to curry favor with these groups, giving the Shiite militias—and their Iranian sponsors—a clean slate because their assistance was needed with ISIS. The reward for those efforts is a bloodcurdling threat to abandon the fight against the Islamic State and turn against American forces the minute their boots hit the ground.

Perhaps President Obama should have a talk with his respected partners-in-peace in Tehran, and see if they could put in a good word for the U.S. with their proxies in Iraq.” (*Shiite Militias in Iraq Vow to Treat U.S. Special Ops as ‘Primary Target’*, BreitBart.com, John Hayward, Dec 1, 2015)

“One of the deadliest Iranian-backed militias in Iraq has threatened to attack US troops deployed fighting the Islamic State (Isil) and “deal” with them as occupying forces. The Asaib Ahl al-Haq militia, known as the League of the Righteous, issued the warning after it emerged the US has deployed several hundred marines to aid Iraqi forces as they try to retake Mosul.

The US and the Shia militia are in theory on the same side against Isil and the threat underscores the complex web of alliances and antagonism among the forces fighting the jihadist movement. “If the US administration doesn't withdraw its forces immediately, we will deal with them as forces of occupation,” the League said on its TV channel, al-Ahd. “The forces of occupation are making a new suspicious attempt to restore their presence in the country under the pretext of fighting their own creation, Daesh,” the group said, using another name for Isil.

It is not clear if the League would actually follow through but the group played a major role in fighting Western forces after the US-led invasion in 2003 and is a powerful force within Iraq today. The League was responsible for the kidnapping in May 2007 of British computer expert Peter Moore and his four bodyguards, in what turned out to be one of the worst kidnap crises in modern British history. Mr. Moore was eventually released in December 2009, while his four bodyguards - Jason Creswell, Jason Swindlehurst, Alec MacLachlan, and Alan McMenemy - were killed in captivity. Its fighters also shot down a British Lynx helicopter in Basra in 2006, killing five UK military personnel.



The militia is backed by Iran and operates under the supervision of Qassem Suleimani, a Revolutionary Guard general in charge of most of Iran's expeditionary missions in Syria and across the Middle East. Members of the League have fought Isil in Iraq but also sent troops into Syria to fight alongside Hizbollah and the Assad regime against the Syrian opposition. Between 2006 and 2011, the group claimed responsibility for over 6,000 attacks on US forces, according to a report by the Institute for the Study of War.

The presence of US Marines in northern Iraq emerged only after a member of the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit was killed by a rocket attack on Saturday. Staff Sergeant Louis Cardin was part of a force deployed to provide artillery support for Iraqi troops ahead of an operation to retake Mosul, according to CNN. Mosul is the second largest city in Iraq and has been held by Isil since the summer of 2014.

The Iranian-backed Shia militias are watched warily by the US in Iraq. They have repeatedly proved themselves to be more reliable fighters against Isil than the Iraqi military, which collapsed in the face of a jihadist offensive two years ago. However, many of them are loyal to Tehran before Baghdad and their violence against Iraqis Sunnis has helped inflame sectarian tensions in Iraq. (*Iran-backed Shia militia says it will fight US Marines deployed to Iraq*, The Telegraph, Raf Sanchez, Mar 21, 2016)

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