

Iraq's Shi'a warriors: From battlefield to parliament

Transcript

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Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Raihan Ismail. I'm a professor of contemporary Islamic studies here at the Middle East Center. And today I'm very, very excited to welcome Dr. Inna Rudolph, who is a fellow at the Center for Statecraft and National Security and a research fellow at the Center for the Study of Divided Societies in the Department of War Studies at King's College London. And she has published an amazing book, and I'm very excited to welcome her. And as you can see from the posters, so the title of the book is Iraq's Shia Warriors from Battlefield to Parliament. One thing that's really amazing is that Ina has conducted more than 100 interviews in Iraq, and she's conducted interviews with high-ranking members of the Popular Mobilization Unit. She conducted interviews with the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Defense, government officials, clerics, including the representative of Ali al-Sistani, tribal leaders, paramilitary commanders, and the late Popular Mobilization Unit's chief of staff, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. So Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis was killed alongside Qasem Suleimani the commander of the IRGC in a U.S. drone strike near Baghdad Airport in 2020. And this was during Donald Trump's first presidency. I cannot think of anyone more credible to speak on Hashid al-Shabi and how they have been able to transform their fortunes from the battlefield into Iraq's political landscape. So without further delay, please join me in welcoming Dr. Inna Rudolph, and she can then present the findings of her book.

Inna Rudolph

Thank you very much all for coming, and it's surreal to be able to present now this published work. I had the honor of being hosted here 2022 when I had just defended my doctoral dissertation on the topic of Hashid's pursuit of legitimacy within the Iraqi state and back then we job that when this develops inshallah into a published monography I would be invited again to present the updated version so without further ado the research really examines how auxiliary forces, especially in a context of heterarchical or contested sovereignty, have in a way managed to embed themselves in state structures and have even developed a sense of entitlement to determine the trajectory of the Iraqi state itself. And in a way, it also deals with the paradox how a state authorized paramilitary structure on the one hand challenges the authority of the national chain of command in terms of the Iraqi Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Defense, and on the other hand also strengthens the state even though

to an extent it captures and hollows out the capacity of certain institutions. So it's important that we start with the right framing. The PMU contrary to a lot of misinterpretation in the great literature and also in the media are not a monolithic organization. It's very difficult for them to be studied, analyzed, understood, through the lens of proxy warfare, through a highly securitized approach, through narratives of counterinsurgency movements. Because at the end, we're dealing here with a very complex, embedded economic and political ecosystem. It's very important to also understand this trajectory and the evolution of this actor within the structures of the Iraqi state and also to consider how has their position been affected by the current geopolitical events that we are now witnessing with the ongoing war with Iran. So I would like to start here with the historical moment, how did they emerge? Because the book really tries to trace the DNA, the grassroots identity of this indeed popular mobilization. In Arabic, Hashtashabi means popular mobilization or mobilization coming from the people. So officially, the Hashtashabi started in 2014, when the Islamic State had invaded Mosul, and there was a total collapse of the formal Iraqi security forces. The army had left the city. And Grand Ayatollah Sistani, the highest supreme Shia religious authority, had issued a fatwa of defensive jihad. And here it's also important to understand the fatwa was for jihad al-Khifa, which means not an absolute declaration of jihad, but translated, it means as many people as needed to get the job done to protect the nation-state and to protect the territorial integrity of Iraq from this terrorist threat. It's also important that when Sistani issued the fatwa of defensive jihad, he refrained from any usage of sect-coded references. It was directed at all Iraqis to come and defend the state, the homeland. It was not particularly addressed at the Shia component of Iraq, and it was also very important that Iraqis were called on to enlist within the national security forces. But because of the collapse of the national chain of command and of the defense infrastructure at that point, what happened was a very grassroots type of mobilization. So here it's important to understand who are the actors who manage this initial phase of the recruitment campaign. Those were pre-existing formations which I call in my book the vanguard of the mobilization. Many of them, their roots can be traced back to the 80s when they were operating as an exile force, as an exile opposition anti-Saddam force being harbored, hosted in Iran. And already from that time, you have a very important historical, ideological relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and those forces. Then there was a second wave of mobilization, which as most of you are familiar with, happened in the context of post-2003 Iraq, the so-called special groups, as they were labeled by the Americans, the armed resistance forces that started fighting against the US-led coalition forces in Iraq. Many of them, their names, you might be familiar with some of them, Kitak Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, many of them were splinters from the so-called Jish al-Mahdi, the Mahdi army of Muqtad al-Sadim. So as you see here, I'm already within the book. I am trying to emphasize the nuances even within the so-called Iran-aligned currents. There isn't a monopoly on the interpretation

of resistance even within those groups that are clustered or in popular literature thrown all together. under the label of or like the loyalist Hashed, the Iranian agents, et cetera, et cetera. To give you an example, when it comes to how resistance should be practiced on the ground, specifically in the domestic context, two formations, both supporters from Iran, have very different opinions whether one should be challenging the national chain of command or not. whether one should be prioritizing transnational loyalties or trying to preserve domestic institutional gains. So the book is trying to explain these nuances by looking at the grassroots DNA of those groups. And the way I've tried to do this is to look specifically at the socialization of those groups' leaders. Very interesting fact that is sometimes being misunderstood, even in academic work, is that the leader of Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Qais al-Hazali, has studied under the father of Muqtad al-Sadr, Muhammad al-Sadr. And if you look at the military, the social doctrine of his movement, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, it's very subaddressed from the framing. So without knowing all of these details, you might even come to very different conclusions when you're trying to analyze how are they going to position themselves in the context of the current war? How are they going to affiliate themselves with the so-called axis of resistance? Even though I'm not a particular fan of the term, I prefer speaking about the transnational resistance alliance rather than an axis. So therefore, the book takes on a very historical and sociological approach in understanding those movements. The methodology is extremely important. And as Reyhan was saying, I have adopted a mixed method approach. Part of the data has been collected through fieldwork trips. So instead of doing this classical approach, going for a longer period of fieldwork, staying there, coming back and then writing up, I used to go multiple times. I used to choose specific periods before elections, during a military confrontation, during religious commemorations. going back and forth at some point, I remember I had to apply every time in Berlin for my Iraqi visa, and the Iraqi ambassador was at some point astonished. He said, like, haven't we already given you the citizenship? Like, it might be easier than you coming every month here. So part of the insights generated through this research are based on those interviews, as Raifan mentioned, Some of the interviews were conducted in Najaf and Karbala with representatives of the Hausa, with representatives of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani's office. Part of the interviews were conducted with Iraqi security officials, representatives of Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defense, tribal formations. That was particularly interesting ethnographic work that I conducted in the province of Anbar. I was doing interviews with Sunni tribal formations that have decided to enlist particularly with the majority Shia PMF forces rather than joining the ranks of the Iraqi army. And additional part of the work was also documents analysis. official statements, speeches, government documents, legal materials, all of the executive decrees that have been issued since 2016 meant to adjust and strengthen the military and the state character of this paramilitary organization, and then the The third pillar of the field work is based on ethnographic observations, because the research is really focused on how legitimacy is being constructed on the ground and also reproduced

socially, emotionally, And this is where I theoretically borrow from the framework of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, and borrowing from the toolkit of the fields theory, because I look at how legitimacy in one particular meta-field of power or arena of competition for the pursuit of legitimacy and political authority can be translated and reproduced in another field. Just to give you an example, the book deals with three major fields of competition that in my theoretical construct constitutes what we refer in the academic literature as the backbone of the polymorphous Iraqi state. So those are the political fields, the religious fields, and then the civic field. So within the political field I very much looked into how battlefield legitimacy, the way that they were able to claim victory over ISIS, was then converted into political currency when they decided to contest the 2018 parliamentary elections in Iraq. And then further, when they were offering services for certain marginalized Iraqi communities. I also looked at how this was generated in a way into religious form of legitimacy by strengthening their narrative of the Holy Hashid or Hashd al-Muqadis. I do not want to walk through chronologically all of the different chapters of the book, but I want to explain a bit the rationale of the book being structured across these different fields. And the book deals first and foremost with the externally projected self-perception of these actors, because most of the work that has been published on the PMF or on Iraqi Shia militias takes a very securitized, very simplistic approach analyzing them primarily through the lens of their geopolitical alliance with Iran. And then there is a second tendency, which is also a bit misleading, that comes from the political economy. So there they are mainly represented as self-interest mafia resembling organizations, mafia like conglomerate, who are just rent seeking and trying to embed themselves and capitalize on the post-conflict informal economy era. And I think both of these tendencies are very misleading. To give you an example, you can be ideologically motivated and you can be still very successful in the political or in the economic field. This does not mean that you have forsaken your ideology or you have forsaken your principles. And we see a bit the misleading statements now being issued in the context of the ongoing attempt to realize a security sector reform in Iraq. The moment a certain paramilitary formation decides to speak in favor of laying down the weapons, complying big cosmetically with the national chain of command. There are all of these interpretations labeling that this is now a pragmatic actor. They have moved away from whatever transnational ideology has been driving them, and now they're primarily politically or economically motivated. This is not, this is not the case and I wanted to give you here a very interesting example. I somehow can't let this run automatically. So this is one of the actors I was talking about, Qais al-Hazali. On the 20th of December last year, he gave a very important speech at the convention of Assayeb Ahlelha and he declared that The time has come for the Iraqi resistance to lay down the weapons and for the weapons to be in the hands of the state authorities. And now this evoked a wave of wishful thinking, the resistance is laying down the weapons. But what people misunderstood was the second paragraph or the second part of the speech in which he said, yes, weapons should be in

the hands of the state. And then he added, because we are the state. So this is very important when we are trying to understand the readiness of these groups to comply with whatever DDR or SSR approaches, mechanisms are being promoted. It very much depends on the level of domestic, institutional, and social embeddedness. So for a group like Asaib Ahed Al-Haq, who have been very successful in pursuing the path of parliamentary representation, capitalizing on the formal economy. And I'm not talking here about, the usual suspect fields of oil smuggling, kept on trade. No, we're talking here very much about being embedded into the official state economy of Iraq. For them, risking, jeopardizing this status quo is much riskier than for a group like Kitab Hezbollah or Hadakat Hezbollah who have for a very long time maintained the position that they would always prioritize resistance politics over domestic embeddedness or domestic pursuit of legitimacy. Having said that, I have very much tried to engage in narrative analysis and to explain to audiences what do they mean when they justify or try to rationalize their participation in the political field. And I want to give you another example. I was conducting this interview with Hadi Al Amri. It was the year of 2018. Hadi Al Amri is the very famous resistance veteran commander of the Badr Brigades. also very much known to the Americans from the post-2003 years and even from before. So when I interviewed him, this was in the green zone, and he was not in military attire, he was wearing a tailored costume. was very much projecting this political charisma, getting ready for elections. And we were not discussing military maneuvers. We were discussing the political program of the Fatah coalition. And in a way, already there, he maintains, no, what we're witnessing here is not what Paul Staniland might frame in his armed politics approach as the militarization of the political sector. But it's basically a patriotic person returning from the military field, returning back to politics, because even before ISIS he was engaged in politics. He felt a patriotic duty to abandon his post in the capital, to go and defend the country militarily. And now it was only natural for him to return back to the political field. And what I was doing during this 2018 period, I was looking at the political programs of all of these parties and formations, at the narratives being used. And there was an active attempt to translate the battlefield legitimacy that they have acquired while fighting against ISIS. into political legitimacy. So the political motto, in a way, was the way we fought ISIS on the battlefield. This is the way we're going to fight corruption in the domestic, in the political field, and in the whole parliament. So therefore, in the political field, one of the roles that I speak about is the role of al-Haras, the guardian, the guardian of the state. And this is very important because there has been an attempt in a way to look at them as non-state actor, but the non-state actor necessarily tries to replace the established order. In contrast, what the PMF like was adamant and like very committed to prove of their constituency, but even like for for people that were a bit skeptical of the whole project is that they are there to defend the state. They establish power sharing system, also known in academic circles as in Iraq, the mode of stakeholders, allocation of rents and positions within the Iraqi state, and also a bit to be a safety valve for the state. What's very important when I was

writing about this role is already to move away from the narratives that they adopted while fighting ISIS, because there was a bit of an existential fear. When ISIS was declared as more or less territorially defeated in Iraq, there was also a bit of a move to reinterpret the al-Haris, the guardian mandate, and to make it a bit broader, because there was anxiousness in the room that if ISIS is declared as defeated, what's the rationale of having Hashtashabi when we already have federal police, when we already have Iraqi army? Why do we need Hashtat in Iran? So in a way, the argument was that they're there to defend the state and they're there to defend their idea of the state. And this is very important because if we come from a Eurocentric Westphalian understanding of monopoly on the use of force, this is not their understanding of staple. For them, even commanders that I have had opportunity to interview, it's not a paradox to position yourself against the representative of the executive power, to criticize the prime minister, and still to claim you're doing this in defense of the state, or in defense of what you believe the identity of the Iraqi state should be. So when the Dashrin protest movement erupted, there was a very important speech from Abu Mahat al-Muhandis back then. This was before the targeted assassination. That if needed, the Hashep would interfere to protect the established order. And this I write in the book in great detail about this episode, because I think this has been the biggest threat to the legitimacy of the PMF. Because the PMF, in a sense, has the Shabi. It's the people's mobilization force. So in a way they have spent so much time trying to prove that they are a state actor, that in a way the moment the protest movement erupted they positioned themselves not in the defense of the masses, but they were allied with state security forces in a very violent repression of a grassroots popular protest movement. And this left a huge hole in their street credibility charisma that they had in 2018. And it was also reflected in the electoral results during the next round in 2021. As we're progressing in time, the second practice or role that I write about in the political fields is also very interesting, is the practice and role of El Mubader, the entrepreneur. And here it's not just about defending the state. It's about defending your sense of entitlement to determine the re-foundationing of Iraqi statehood itself. It's not about protecting the integrity or the capture of certain institutions, but very much to interpret, to reinterpret the rules of statecraft. And this has been done through different mechanisms. One of my criticisms against the more securitized approach is that it only focuses on looking at PMF as a paramilitary security agency. But a lot of the interesting work that these networks are engaged with happens outside of the PMF. They have allies, proteges, embedded within the Iraqi judiciary, within the Iraqi parliament, within the formal and informal bureaucracy in Iraq. And in a way, this allows them to engage in forms of lobbying, to have influence on how certain constitutional articles are being interpreted. And I want to give an example when there was a bit of an existential threat to the way business was being conducted and policy was being conducted in Baghdad when the Sadrist won the elections. They had declared this visionary project of creating a majority government, aligning themselves with KDP and with the Sunni block of Al-

Bunsi. So this was perceived as a major threat to the conventional, the traditional Shia powerhouse. In a way, they decided not to engage militarily or to try to sabotage this project through violent means, but they went through constitutional and legal mechanisms. And there was a very interesting hashtag, the blocking third, that was adopted from these factions to find a way through parliamentary politics to block the realization of this political project up to the point like that. Sadr announced that all of his MPs should be resigning from the Iraqi Parliament. And in a way, even though they did not win the elections, they ended up being the most important power broker after the 2022 government formation crisis. So this really comes to highlight what I mean by entrepreneurship. Another example of this political or economic entrepreneurship that they were being engaged with was Lobbe Inc. within the Sudan administration for establishing a state-owned company under the authority of the PMF. So in a way, it was a very lucrative and small enterprise. The financial capital was coming from the states. And the Hashids, in a way, would have full authority on how this capital would be invested and how, again, the revenue should be spent. Again, also having for themselves, preserving for themselves the right to claim credit for whatever social or humanitarian projects were being conducted. And it's a bit anecdotal here, but the first project that they announced or launched in the name of this Mohandas state-owned company was the planting of million pound trees. And there you might be surprised, but the Hashid came up with this motto that the way they fought ISIS on the battlefield, they are now also ready to fight the challenges of climate change. So you can see this constant urge to reinterpret, in a way to enhance their competences and to claim credits for performing where Iraqi state institutions are seen as either incompetent or overwhelmed. In the second field that I'm looking at, and this is the religious field, I've also identified 2 practices. One is the practice of , the holy hashid. And this is very important because it shows you how important it is for them to be able to draw on the legitimacy of the fatwa of Grand Ayatollah Sistani. So an existential risk for all of these actors, if there will be a move at some point from the house, from the office of Sistani, to oppose their ability, like to claim legitimacy based on the platform. So, in a way, is being performed through religious rituals. I was able to conduct very interesting ethnographic observations 2000 and when did I go for I think it was 2000 and 2019, it was after the Iraqi protest movement was in full force. There were almost no foreign participants in the Arba'in procession. I was hosted by Atabat Abbasia, and it was an extremely enlightening experience because there you see that this holy warrior practice aims being constructed social, it's been really constructed on the pathway from Karbala to religious symbolism. I have very interesting photo material. Yeah, this is from the Arba'in procession. You have a mixture of martyr iconography, revolutionary Shia slogans, and also what's very important, you see here in the poster, there are all of these symbolic comparisons or trying to draw a parallel between the mission, the ideological mission of the Hashids and the Battle of Karbala with Imam Hussein. So this is a very important part of their pursuit of religious legitimacy. The more interesting role

in light of the current geopolitical events is the role of and I was thinking of a way how can I write about their affiliation and in a way buy into this transnational resistance alliance without engaging in this proxy warfare narrative or lens. And I did it again, like through the perspective of narrative analysis. And I looked at two things when I was analyzing this practice or role of Hashti Muqawim. One was shared antagonisms. So for example, narratives of anti-Zionism, anti-globalism, anti-Americanism. And on the other hand, like trying to analyze, but like from the perspective of domestic agency, what was their relationship, and what was their alliance with Hezbollah, with the Houthis, and back then with the regime of Bashar al-Assad. And I want to stress one important point here. The fighting in Syria, it was no surprise, no one would deny that they had military presence, on the battleground in Syria, again, like fighting on the side of Assad's regime forces. But whenever you would discuss this, they would never argue that they're in defense of Bashar al-Assad. There was never a geopolitical argument here that we are here in defense of one of the allies of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The narrative was always in defense of Shia brother communities in Syria that are under threat. And I have another example. Here, when they used to post in any posting of martyrdom iconography, it was very important for them, regardless of where the person had been attacked, to make it very clear that the person had died in defense of the Saida Zainab shrine. So it was never about defending Iranian allies in the region. It was about defending Shia sanctuaries and defending Shia brothers in distress. And yeah, as I want to leave enough time for questions, I will jump to the last field, which is the civic field. This is the last pillar in a way of the PMF generated legitimacy claims. And there I speak about two roles. The first role is Hasht al-Khadin. The Hasht is a servant of the people, the one who is there to provide welfare, to provide services, to be there as a crisis management auxiliary. And it was very interesting during the COVID years during the emergency response campaign, they used to post in a way not mocking the state but trying to make the argument the state cannot do it without us. So we are not here to replace the state but we are here in support of the state. So one example was that they said Hashid Field hospitals are now presented at the disposal of the overwhelmed Iraqi health ministry. So in a way, the rationale was not to replace the states, but to make a very compelling argument that the formal bureaucracy, the formal institutional infrastructure in Iraq is incapable of dealing with the multiple challenges for the diverse Iraqi social fabric without the help of an actor like the Hashid. And the other practice I called Hashid Shamin, which can be translated as inclusive. And the arguments there or what they interpreted as an important currency in the civic field is to present the Hashem as an inclusive employer. It's a good and inclusive employer that's not just there to serve all of the components of Iraq's social fabric, but also to employ all of the components of your social fabric. And again, like with these caveats, all of these are externally projected self-perception practices. It should be always taken with a pinch of salt. And the book does not claim that this is who the Hashid are, but the book analyzes why is the Hashid, what's the rationale of the Hashids trying to portray themselves like

that What do we learn about their perception of statehood? And what do we learn also about how they understand their own role and their own contribution to the post-2003 state-building project in Europe? And this is where towards the end of the book I give scholars a bit of ideas where they can engage in further research or complement this work. I write about the limitations of this research. And again, like the book will not tell you whether the Iraqi polity considers the PMF a legitimate actor within the Iraqi social political field. But the book is there to analyze how did the Hashids try to build, to generate a brand that they themselves consider capable of competing within those different like arenas, interlinked arenas of competition constituting the Iraqi state. And I think it would be fantastic and I'm very open to engage in further discussions in case you're writing MA thesis, doctoral thesis or are pursuing other academic projects because there is a need to do probably a second book that deals specifically like with people's perception of the PMF. But because, as Rayhan mentioned, as researchers we have first and foremost ethical responsibilities, and your positionality in the field is very important. So in my case, in the context of post-ISIS Iraq, with all of the political and security sensitivities, and knowing the degree of penetration of the military, the political, and the social sector, Having interviewed high-ranking commanders from the PMF, it made no sense to try to conduct ethnography with members of Iraqi minority communities and asking them about their perception of the Hashid, because there would have been two scenarios. One would be a bit like the social desirability effect. They might have tried to adjust their answers depending on whom they think I would report their answers to. Or on the other hand, even more dangerously, I might have put them in jeopardy if they would have shared very negative perceptions and got them into trouble with, let's say, informal coercive actors out there in the field. So yes, I still hope that you would find some benefits in reading this book. And in a way, if the book manages to encourage people to approach Iraq with more humility and away from these commercialized headlines about militias, about collapsing security infrastructure, and look really into the humanitarian, into the sociological component, then I think it's a journey worthwhile. Thank you.