

# Postwar State-Reconstruction: Iraq after ISIS as a Case Study

Reconstrucción del Estado de posguerra:  
Irak después de ISIS como estudio de caso

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## Abstract

The political turbulence, the power vacuum, and the security challenges that emerged in post-ISIS Iraq changed and shifted the state's power structure. Iraqi security apparatus and military institutions in 2014 almost collapsed and could not resist the challenges they faced from ISIS. Simultaneously, Grand Shia cleric Sistani issued a fatwa, called to arms for Shiites, and fought for their survival. In this disordered situation, an increasing number of Iran-backed armed groups have started to manage security challenges, most of which operate independently outside Iraq's national security agencies. The most important group was the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), from Iraq's Shia community. PMF is gradually convoluted in Iraq's financial affairs and political system and wields tremendous influence. There are two consequential types of militias in Iraq: Al-Atabat al-Muqadasa paramilitary (AAMP) and Loyalist militias (LM). In May 2021, four divisions of (AAMP) decided to integrate into the Iraqi army, while (LM) has almost 70 different divisions and has not integrated into the government's institutions. In this paper, we look at the possibility of implementing the DDR model for post-war societies such as Iraqi and the obstacles that faced it. Integrating these armed groups became a complicated task for the Iraq Post-ISIS state. First, we look at the history of the state-building process. Then, we develop a conceptual framework for the article. Third, we identify the factors that shape DDR outcomes, define the role of Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), and analyze how their activities became an obstacle to rebuilding the Iraqi state in the post-ISIS era.

**Keywords:** PMF, DDR model, Iraqi Shi'a militias, Post-ISIS societies, Post-ISIS state-rebuilding

## Resumen

La turbulencia política, el vacío de poder y los desafíos de seguridad que surgieron en Irak posterior a ISIS modificaron la estructura de poder del estado. El aparato de seguridad y las instituciones militares iraquíes por poco colapsan en 2014 y no pudieron resistir los desafíos que tuvieron que enfrentar desde ISIS. De manera simultánea, el gran clérigo chiita Sistani emitió una fatwa, llamó a los chiitas a las armas y luchó por su supervivencia. En esta situación desordenada, un número cada vez mayor de grupos armados respaldados por Irán han comenzado a manejar los desafíos de seguridad, la mayoría de los cuales operan de forma independiente por fuera de las agencias de seguridad nacional de Irak. El grupo más importante fue el de las Fuerzas de Movilización Popular (FMP), de la comunidad chiita iraquí. Las FMP se enredan gradualmente en los asuntos financieros y el sistema político de Irak y ejercen una tremenda influencia. Hay dos tipos de milicias relevantes en Irak: las milicias paramilitares Al-Atabat al-Muqadasa (MPAA) y las milicias leales (ML). En mayo de 2021, cuatro divisiones de MPAA decidieron integrarse al ejército iraquí, mientras que las ML cuentan con casi 70 divisiones diferentes y no se han integrado a las instituciones del gobierno. En este artículo, exploramos la posibilidad de implementar el modelo DDR para sociedades de posguerra como la iraquí y los obstáculos que enfrentaron. La integración de estos grupos armados

se convirtió en una tarea complicada para el estado de Irak Post-ISIS. En primer lugar, examinamos la historia del proceso de construcción del Estado. Luego, desarrollamos un marco conceptual para el artículo. En tercer lugar, identificamos los factores que dan forma a los resultados de DDR, definimos el papel de las Fuerzas de Movilización Popular (FMP) y analizamos cómo sus actividades se convirtieron en un obstáculo para reconstruir el estado iraquí en la era posterior a ISIS.

**Palabras clave:** FMP (PMF), modelo DDR, milicias chiitas iraquíes, sociedades post-ISIS, reconstrucción del estado post-ISIS.

## Introduction

Since the occupation of Kuwait in 1990, the Iraqi state was subject to many severe internal fissures during the former Ba'ath regime, primarily ethno-sectarian tensions involving violent conflict, institutional distrust, and divided political coalitions. During that time and subsequently, these dynamics have progressively eroded Iraq's fragile social contract (Alaaldin, 2017). Power has shifted away from state institutions toward divided power structures, undermining effective state-building in the post-Ba'athist period (Mansour, 2017). The state is further weakened by a lack of rule of law, corruption, and militancy (Daoud, 2018). These structural problems enabled the emergence of the Sunni-based Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militant group, which captured significant parts of northern and central Iraq –up to a third of the entire country– starting in 2014 (Taha, & Taib, & Sulaiman, 2021). In this chaotic situation, various counter-groups formed to manage security challenges, many of which operated independently outside Iraq's national security agencies. The most important was the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which essentially, but not exclusively, came from Iraq's Shia community. Known locally as the Hashd al-Shabi, these paramilitaries are increasingly involved in Iraq's financial affairs and political system and wield tremendous influence (International Crisis Group, 2018). Reorganizing the security sector in the post-ISIS era, integrating non-state armed groups into the government-controlled security sector, and rebuilding Iraqi state institutions are some of the most complicated challenges Iraq faces today. Many of the PMF militias are considered to be armed wings of powerful political parties (Cigar, 2015, p. 22). The fall of ISIS presents a pivotal chance for Iraq to move forward and create national cohesion that restores citizens' faith in government institutions (Mansour, 2018). This research will identify obstacles to rebuilding the state in the post-ISIS environment and assess the possibility of reintegrating militias fully into the state-controlled security apparatus.

The omnipresent threat in post-conflict environments is that state reconstruction will result in a cosmetic transformation leading to an unstable, frail, and criminal state structure that enables the return of violence (Paris & Sisk, 2009). Iraq is not an exception. In 2003, the U.S.-led coalition invaded the country and toppled the Ba'athist state, providing an opportunity to change governance structures. The U.S., the U.K., and other coalition countries defeated the Iraqi army in less than three weeks on March 20, 2003, formally conquering Baghdad on April 9.

Paul Bremer was appointed as the head of a Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), which governed Iraq in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Ba'athist state (Doa & Schmitt, 2003). From May 11, 2003, until June 28, 2004, Bremer played a vital role in forming the country's post-Ba'athist sociopolitical direction (Marr, 2012, p. 266). Bremer's goal was to create democratic institutions in Iraq, which he and others designed to adhere to the principles of "ethnic power-sharing" between Kurds, Sunnis, and Shias (Rached & Bali, 2019). Iraq's post-2003 power-sharing mechanisms empowered particularistic and sectarian politics, and communities mobilized and combined around political objectives based on their sect or ethnicity (al-Shadeedi & Van Veen, 2020).

Iraq's negative security dynamics were exacerbated by two executive decisions ordered by the CPA that dissolved the former regime's institutional structure. First, the CPA called de-Ba'athification, which dismantled the Ba'ath party to ensure that the newly constituted representative institutions would not be intimidated by the return to power of Ba'athist forces (Tripp, 2007, p. 282; Marr, 2012, p. 267). The de-Ba'athification decision expelled 30,000 senior Ba'athists, including 500,000 Iraqi security and intelligence agency members, from their positions. The decision drove numerous former members of the Ba'ath party, which had its power base in the Sunni community, to join jihadist groups, particularly al-Qaeda (Williams and Sterio, 2020, p. 425). The politics of Shia identity emphasized discrimination against them by the former, Sunni-dominated regime and the necessity of forming a consolidated Shia political majority that reflected its status as the largest ethno-sectarian grouping in the country.

The second decision was the CPA's plans to form an Interim Governing Council (IGC) to administer Iraq until the 2005 elections (Marr, 2012, p. 271). The IGC, known in Arabic as Majlis Alhukum, brought together major Iraqi ethno-sectarian groups to develop a roadmap for writing a new constitution and forming a new government. The IGC consisted of 25 members, including 13 Shia, 5 Sunni, 5 Kurd, one Turkmen, and one Assyrian (Otterman, 2005).

Sectarianism in Iraqi society became the foundation on which state institutions were rebuilt. Ministerial and administrative roles were similarly distributed on this basis. For example, the Shia controlled the military and the intelligence agency, while the Kurds handled foreign affairs (Rached & Bali, 2019). Sectarian competition and jockeying intensified during the two elections held in 2005. First, voters elected a constituent assembly in March, tasked with writing a draft constitution and later having a referendum to approve it. In December, voters went to the polls again to elect a new parliament (Christiaans, 2021).

The election results indicated that Iraqis voted based on their ethno-sectarian identities. Seventy-five percent of Shia voted for the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), nearly all the Kurds (likely more than 95 percent) voted for Kurdistan Alliance, and most Sunnis boycotted the election. As a result of the Sunnis' approach, just 17 of the 275 members of parliament were from that community, most of whom were members of secular and nationalist parties (Dawisha, 2009, pp. 248-249). Shia politician Nouri Al-Maliki came to power as prime minister on May 20, 2006, and stayed in office until 2014. Maliki is widely blamed for further marginalizing the Sunni community and sowing the seeds of further insurgency (Rached & Bali, 2019; Bennett, 2013). The withdrawal of U.S. combat forces began in 2007 and was completed in 2011. During the particularly violent period between 2006 and 2007, Shia militias engaged in the war against remnants of the former regime, Sunni tribes, Al-Qaeda, and the U.S. and coalition forces. The invasion of Iraq created a security vacuum, which armed Shia groups like Badr and others attempted to fill. The militias also took on influential political and financial roles as well. For instance, Badr penetrated the state security sector, controlling large parts of the Ministry of Interior (Gaston, 2018).

Nevertheless, the militias still operated independently of the state, waging a sectarian war across Iraq. According to estimates, 34,452 Sunni civilians were killed by Shia militias during this violent period, or about 1,000 victims per month (Tavernise, 2007). Maliki successfully dished some Sunni and Shia militias and centralized power under his authority during his first term (2006-2010), effectively turning Iraq into a one-party government. Many members of the Shia community supported his anti-Sunni policy. Ethnic cleansing was one consequence of his approach, with the effects particularly visible in Baghdad.

Baghdad went from some 45% Sunni in 2003 to only 25% Sunni by the end of 2007. Al-Maliki's sectarianism led to the transformation of Baghdad into a largely Shiite city. (Cole, 2014)<sup>1</sup>

Shia hegemony eroded almost all national institutions, including the military, police, and court, which became fiefdoms of Shia parties. Sunnis were isolated from these institutions, and that community came to view them as tools of ethno-sectarian oppression. This disassociation of the Sunni community from the state helped to fuel the rapid growth of ISIS and other radical groups (Rached & Bali, 2019).

At the beginning of 2014, ISIS launched an offensive that took over central and northern Iraq; eventually, the Sunni-based militant group would occupy one-third of Iraq and a large section of neighboring Syria (Taha, & Taib, & Sulaiman, 2021). Iraqi military forces failed to stop ISIS' offensive and suffered damaging setbacks between 2014 and 2015. It took eight years following 2003 before the U.S. and the coalition invested an estimated \$25 billion in equipment and training (Scher, 2016). On June 13, 2014, the government asked Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's top Shia religious leader, to issue a fatwa calling on Iraqis to take up arms against ISIS under the authority of the newly created Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) to protect their communities, the Iraqi state, and holy sites (Eriksson, & Khaleel, 2019, pp. 82-101). While militarily effective, the fatwa also transformed Shia identity away from the nation and directed it further inward into sectarian commitments (Rached & Bali, 2019). The PMF increased its power by receiving support from the Iraqi government and religious sources. After December 9, 2017, when Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared final victory over ISIS, the PMF transitioned into a new stage of development, expanding their political and financial interests at the expense of others (Mansour, 2018).

## The Conceptual Framework

Since ISIS was territorially defeated in 2017, the primary duty of the Iraqi state has been to carefully manage the aftermath of the areas liberated from the militant group. Robert Rotberg, a U.S. academic who served as president of the World Peace Foundation, identified four types of states: strong, weak, failed and collapsed (Rotberg, 2003, p. 1). This categorization relies on the condition and capacity

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of the state to fulfill its duties. Identifying what sort of state exists is a critical first step toward assessing the challenges that a state must take on, mainly when it is a collapsed state. Scholars developed guidelines for rebuilding and strengthening the state, including those advocating disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) (del Castillo, 2008, p. 40). The DDR model focuses on the aftermath of war and provides ways to bargain with armed groups and other interested parties who must be reintegrated into civil society. Iraqis nowadays live in post-war conditions, resulting in a failed or, in some cases, a collapsed state. It led INGOs and NGOs to play a significant role in the state reconstruction. Scholars emphasize the critical part of NGOs and INGOs in leading the DDR model and contributing to peace in the state reconstruction process following the post-war era (Gamage, 2022). NGOs identified as a possible point of contact with their building blocks, namely civil associations (Whaites, 2000), and INGOs can facilitate peacebuilding via aid for NGOs (Crowther, 2001).

To determine the applicability of a DDR model to Iraq, this paper assessed the form and capabilities of the Iraqi state and whether the armed groups present a real obstacle to rebuilding the state (Felbab-Brown, 2019).

Scholars define the concept of the "state" according to their field of study, which results in a range of definitions. Based on the work of the famous German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920), political scientists have defined the state as the institution that maintains a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence over a territory (O'Neil, 2010, p. 22). In other words, the state should be capable of acting as the primary authority within its control area. Beyond this general definition, a state may take different forms based on internal and external influences. The Peace of Westphalia (1648) established the principal elements of the state as a territory, population, authority, and sovereignty that was recognized, drawn, and combined. (Nisancioglu, 2020). Degrees of autonomy and capacity determine states' forms (O'Neil, 2010, p. 40). In his book "State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror," Robert Rotberg defined four forms of state based on the capacity for conducting its duties:

1. **A strong state** sufficiently fulfills its duties in all territories and can provide most needs for its citizens, including security and services.
2. **A weak state** performs its duties only in some areas while fulfilling them poorly in others.
3. **A failed state** is highly fractured and can experience high levels of violence. Rebel groups may aggressively dispute control. The state cannot manage its

borders, does not hold sway over all of its territories, and offers only a limited number of basic needs.

4. **A collapsed state** is the most extreme type of failed state. Gaps are robustly filled by non-state actors (Rotberg, 2003, pp. 2-10).

From Fragile States Index’s perspective, Iraq remains fragile and ranked 23 in the index published by The Fund for Peace (FFP) in 2022.

	Rank	Total																	
2022	23rd	92.8	7.8	9.6	7.9	6.6	5.8	6.4	8.3	8.6	8.1	8.5	8.0	8.2					
2021	20th	96.2	7.9	9.6	8.2	6.9	6.1	6.5	8.8	8.9	8.1	8.4	8.3	8.5					
2020	17th	95.9	8.2	9.6	8.5	5.6	6.4	6.8	9.1	8.4	7.8	8.1	8.6	8.8					
2019	13th	99.1	8.7	9.6	8.8	5.9	6.7	7.1	8.9	8.7	8.1	8.4	9.1	9.1					
2018	11th	102.2	9.0	9.6	9.3	6.3	7.0	7.4	9.2	8.3	8.4	8.7	9.6	9.4					
2017	10th	105.4	10.0	9.6	9.6	6.6	7.3	7.7	9.5	8.2	8.7	8.6	9.9	9.7					
2016	11th	104.7	10.0	9.6	9.8	6.8	7.5	7.9	9.2	7.8	8.9	8.1	9.4	9.7					
2015	12th	104.4	10.0	9.6	10.0	6.9	7.8	8.1	9.2	7.5	8.9	8.2	8.9	9.4					
2014	13th	102.2	10.0	9.6	10.0	7.0	8.1	8.0	8.7	7.7	8.7	8.0	8.5	7.9					
2013	11th	103.9	10.0	9.6	10.0	7.3	8.4	8.3	8.6	7.6	8.6	8.3	8.8	8.5					
2012	9th	104.3	9.9	9.6	9.7	7.7	8.7	8.6	8.4	7.8	8.3	8.0	8.5	9.0					
2011	9th	104.8	9.5	9.6	9.0	7.0	9.0	8.9	8.7	8.0	8.6	8.3	9.0	9.3					
2010	7th	107.3	9.5	9.6	9.3	7.6	8.8	9.3	9.0	8.4	9.1	8.5	8.7	9.5					
2009	6th	108.6	9.7	9.6	9.7	7.6	8.6	9.1	9.0	8.4	9.3	8.7	8.9	10.0					
2008	5th	110.6	9.9	9.8	9.8	7.8	8.5	9.3	9.4	8.5	9.6	9.0	9.0	10.0					
2007	2nd	111.4	10.0	9.8	10.0	8.0	8.5	9.5	9.4	8.5	9.7	9.0	9.0	10.0					
2006	4th	109.0	9.8	9.7	9.8	8.2	8.7	9.1	8.5	8.3	9.7	8.9	8.2	10.0					

Source: Fragile States Index, <https://fragilestatesindex.org>

To sum up, if the state cannot maintain a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence over the territory, it is considered a failed or collapsed state (Jabareen, 2013). When a state with low capacity cannot meet the demands of its citizens for security and other public goods, other actors fill the gap. Levitsky defines "black spots" as localized areas that the state theoretically controls without an official government. In those places, the state administration cannot provide essential services to the people whose needs are met by non-state armed groups' actions (Villa & Pimenta, 2019).

During the period when ISIS was at its height of power, Iraq could be considered a collapsed state. Its hold over the typical features that define state power –population, territory, government, and sovereignty– eroded under the assault of the militant group (Hamasaheed & Nada, 2020). The Iraqi state's fragile structure allowed diverse militant groups to destabilize the country and sparked a humanitarian crisis where nearly 3 million people became internally displaced (Alaaldin, 2017). Brinkerhoff argued that the biggest problem was that the state could not protect its citizens and, therefore, lost legitimacy (Brinkerhoff, 2007, p.



88). Cordesman wrote that "many reasons why Iraq is a failed or even collapsed state are structural," with factors related to politics, justice, past conflicts, and sectarian and ethnic divisions. In this context, achieving peace, stability, social cohesion, and prosperity is challenging (Cordesman, 2017). Collier and Hoeffler define a civil war as "an internal conflict with at least 1,000 combat-related deaths per year" (Collier & Hoeffler 2004). Based on Collier and Hoeffler's framework, Iraqi society was engaged in an ongoing civil war between 2003 and 2019. Figure 1 shows data from Iraq's Body Count to support that conclusion. The nature of Iraq's structural problems renewed and reactivated previous conflicts and divisions in the country.

**Figure 1.** Iraq Body Count casualty figures 2003-2022

<b>Civilian deaths in Iraq since 2003</b>	
Years	Total death
2003	12,152
2004	11,737
2005	16,583
2006	29,526
2007	26,112
2008	10,286
2008	5,382
2010	4,167
2011	4,162
2012	4,622
2013	9,982
2014	20,218
2015	17,578
2016	16,393
2017	13,183
2018	3,319
2019	2,393
2020	908
2021	669
2022	507 till 28/10/2022

**Source:** Iraq Body Count, <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/>

**Research questions:** To that end, this paper seeks to answer the following questions: 1) what are the obstacles to stabilizing Iraq following the territorial

defeat of ISIS? Furthermore, 2) how do PMF and similar groups become barriers to achieving DDR?

## Literature Review

Iraq's post-war society is complex. The state faces enormous challenges in re-constituting legitimacy, re-establishing security, and rebuilding effectiveness. Legitimacy refers to the public's acceptance and support for a governing regime as correct, appropriate, and suitable. The loss of legitimacy among population segments causes state failure. Without a minimum degree of legitimacy, a state cannot function. Re-establishing security implies taking actions by the state to rebuild, professionalize, and reform the police, military, and paramilitary units, and demobilize and integrate those outside state control. Rebuilding effectiveness refers to the functions and capabilities of the public sector to provide basic needs to those under its jurisdiction (Brinkerhoff, 2005). These three pillars enhance the formal authority for the successful transition from a failed or collapsed state to a strong one, where the state has a monopoly on the use of force, and affairs are run according to the rule of law and principles of equality and fairness.

Unable to fulfill this ideal, weak and failing states occasionally use militias as theoretically obedient non-state proxies to meet tactical objectives. They employ a range of approaches to managing their activities. States can deal with the militias in four ways: 1) Suppression and 2) incorporation work to eliminate armed groups as autonomous actors, while 3) containment and 4) collusion allow for a measure of independent action on the part of the non-state groups. Regarding the latter two approaches, containment aims to keep a group's efforts under a politically reasonable threshold, while collusion involves coordination between the state and the non-state actor. With dynamic flux, the state may adopt a combination of tactics over time (Staniland, 2015).

After the Cold War ended, academics and analysts started paying considerable attention to non-state actors like militias. In almost every region where multinational military missions have been deployed, militias have played a significant role, from Somalia and the Balkans to Colombia and Congo to Afghanistan and Iraq. They run the gamut from warlords and criminal groups to paramilitaries and other more sophisticated organizations with complex goals. In Iraq, militia groups that have emerged from the Shia community, like the PMF, can be viewed as part of a sociopolitical movement due to their public

legitimacy, the pursuit of social and political goals, and involvement in state institutions. They have strong foundations of public support that attract new members, and though harsh reactions against them by other actors unleash outrage from their supporters who depend on their social services. Shia militias in Iraq are not merely warlords, paramilitaries, or foreign proxies; each contains elements present in their construction. They are also profoundly engaged in the legitimate state apparatus and have achieved significant public legitimacy. The two most prominent Shia militias in Iraq — the Sadrists and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq — successfully transformed from resistance organizations during the Ba'athist period into significant sociopolitical movements, complete with armed wings, following the fall of Saddam Hussein (Thurber, 2014).

Fanar Hadad notes that Iraq and local non-state actors contribute to a condition known as "hybridity" (Hadad, 2020). In the Iraqi context, it is not valuable to outline strict distinctions between state and non-state actors, formal and informal activities, and legal and illegal behavior when examining groups like the PMF. The PMF is an umbrella with diverse groups that often operate independently. The Iraqi state has attempted to force the PMF to conform to the standards of the military organization by separating its fighters into "brigades." The PMF consists of several autonomous organizations and "formations," which differ in location, ideology, sectarian identity, authority, and ties with Iran. The PMF is not a unified phenomenon or actor. Its most potent, pro-Iran factions were well-established in Iraqi politics and the security apparatus before its creation. They involved many figures within the political elite. The PMF is neither completely connected to the Iraqi state nor independent from it; it is neither wholly subservient to Iraqi authority nor merely an Iranian proxy. Instead, it behaves in a grey zone where the distinctions between formal and informal, licit or illicit and criminal, are obfuscated. In this way, it is like a wide range of Iraqi institutions. The PMF mirrors the mixed reality of the Iraqi state, where these distinctions are also blurred. More generally, creating a clear division between the state and non-state actors in Iraq is futile for policy investigations, since it ignores the hybrid nature of the PMF and the more significant state (Hadad, 2020).

Many decision-makers favor implementing DDR in post-conflict environments to facilitate economic growth, stabilize security, and reconstruct the state. The traditional typology of DDR models is divided into cooperative and coercive approaches. Under the cooperative model, militias agree to a ceasefire and surrender their weapons through a negotiated settlement, with the international community often serving as grantors. Under a coercive approach, armed groups

are compelled to lay down their arms by force, requiring demobilization and reintegration. Moving beyond this traditional typology, Amal Shimir suggested "fluid DDR" as a new flexible approach that uses the coercive system to disarm militias and the cooperative approach for demobilization and reintegration. Security sector rebuilding is critical to achieving successful DDR implementation and peacebuilding.

In Iraq, the robust presence of armed, non-state groups continues to be a significant obstacle to DDR. The state is unwilling or unable to achieve disarmament through cooperative or coercive means. In addition to refusing to give up their arms, some PMF militias hesitate to renounce their political and international ties. For example, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and the Badr Organization do not wish to be reintegrated into the Iraqi armed forces (Shimir, 2021). This stumbling block, along with subsequent challenges, means that DDR has not yet been implemented (Ahmad and Othman, 2022).

## **Disarmament, demobilization, and Reintegration DDR Model and the Future of Stability in Iraq**

Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (**DDR**) of ex-combatants—including members of all militia groups—are primary conditions for the successful rebuilding of the state in post-war society (Del Castillo, 2008, p. 256). The DDR model ordinarily seeks to deal with post-war fighters in three ways: gathering, governing, and destroying weapons; discharging soldiers, managing their modification into civil life; and assisting ex-combatants and their families by reintegrating them politically, economically, and socially into mainstream society (Parry & Burlinghaus, 2019). DDR aims to replace ex-combatants military identity with a civilian one. The risk is that if a civilian identity is not established, unreconstructed ex-combatants will contribute to instability and undermine state efforts to build social and economic recovery (Parry & Aymerich, 2022). To that end, Brian McQuinn argued that the essential factors in successful DDR are buy-in from ex-combatants and the internal structure of their groups (McQuinn, 2016).

As Eriksson and Kaleel argued, the nature of the post-conflict environment in Iraq is a repetition of previous crises in that it is at risk of a "cycle of revenge." In this situation, previous tensions are unresolved and provoke new clashes

(Eriksson & Khaleel, 2019, p. 5). This violence perpetuates existing grievances, and peaceful coexistence becomes challenging to achieve. In Iraq, Shia groups acted on grievances developed during the former Ba'ath regime, which was Sunnified (Brinkerhoff, 2007, p. 74). The CPA's core mistake was the de-Ba'thification decision, which disbanded the former Iraqi army without fulfilling the DDR model it left 400,000–500,000 armed citizens unemployed and deprived the civil service of critical technical expertise (Del Castillo, 2008, p. 195). Professor Nabil Younis at Baghdad University claimed that "de-Ba'thification turned out to be de-Sunnification" (Dalmuji, 2010, p. 73). Later, some of these expelled members joined extremist groups and started an insurgency against the U.S. invasion and the Shia out of revenge (Williams, Sterio, 2020, p. 425). Continued Shia excesses led some Sunnis to join ISIS in 2014 (Özerdem, 2009). Although somewhat abeyance, factors contributing to this cycle of revenge remain unresolved.

The second factor in determining the DDR outcomes is the primary actors. In successful DDR cases, the actors leading the process include international organizations and the assistance of other states, with significant buy-in from the state. In sub-national conflicts like Sierra Leone, Colombia, or Somalia, the state used DDR or similar models to encourage desertions from militant groups, or as part of a peace process (Revkin, 2018).

In the case of Iraq, liberal institutions and non-governmental organizations, including GIZ, UN, UNDP, and UNESCO, are assuming a prominent role. Some European municipal governments receive UN assistance in improving Iraq's peacemaking processes. For example, the Swedish government offered peace dialogue programs in 2018 and 2019 that sought to reintegrate adolescents and various Iraqi communities by offering peace-academic and practical education. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has been essential in improving "humanitarian aid," which is a critical step in fostering negative peace (Hassan, 2021). There are around 1.5 million internally displaced persons in post-conflict Iraq, and OCHA concentrates on assisting these citizens in finding accommodation and integrating them into society once again. It has been widely advocated by the OCHA, UN, and EU agencies that "there should be a social agreement between the internally displaced and host societies" (OCHA annual report, 2020).

The main priority of the local communities and internal organizations following ISIS' defeat in Mosul is to maintain the rationality and stability of the state. The period between 2017 and 2020 should be known as "inclusive planning," which must be based on ongoing community engagement and

strengthening the bridge of confidence between the people and the armed forces. Several NGOs have developed significant degrees of "specialization" to fulfill the aim of establishing peace in Iraq. For instance, the Al-Rafidain peace organization was founded in 2007 and concentrates on gender issues and their relation to Iraqi reconciliation. To achieve non-violence and negative peace accords, men and women are treated equally and given the same opportunity to engage in various activities (Hassan, 2021).

Despite all that, DDR has not been performed yet, which is a practical approach and precondition for successfully rebuilding a state in post-war society (Del Castillo, 2008, p. 40). The Iraqi state did not have a clear plan for dealing with post-conflict dynamics in the areas liberated from ISIS, especially with former militants and their families. Iraqi officials' stated goal in the fight against ISIS was to force the militant group to leave Iraqi territory and eliminate its members. Iraqi security personnel saw ISIS members as a threat to be destroyed rather than citizens to be rehabilitated. When asked how the Iraqi security forces planned to prevent the re-emergence of ISIS, one federal police commander in Mosul responded: "Kill them" (Revkin, 2018). Many Sunnis feel that the state and the Shia militia groups view all Sunnis as terrorists, which is hardly conducive to reconciliation and reintegration (Cigar, 2015, p.49).

Contributions from the international community would also be valuable assets for DDR implementation in Iraq. Cordesman argued that "such a process will need outside technical and financial aid for years until its progress reaches a self-sustaining level" (Cordesman, 2017). Many citizens living in ISIS-controlled areas had no choice but to cooperate with the group because resistance was harshly punished. The state now faces the significant challenge of reintegrating them into mainstream society. Instead of taking a more forgiving approach, the Iraqi authorities fail to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary affiliation with ISIS. This policy is generally regarded as the collective punishment of Sunnis and seems likely to produce new grievances (Revkin, 2018).

## **Popular Mobilization Forces, from reintegration to autonomy**

A primary concern in a post-conflict environment is dealing with militia groups and integrating their members into the apparatus of the state. These groups' behavior (or existence) can negatively impact the official security sector. In late

1980, armed, non-state actors were pervasive in numerous countries in Africa because of failures of democratic governance and security:

(1) armed conflicts that take on regional dimensions; (2) ineffective state security institutions; (3) growth of domestic and transnational crime; and (4) regime protection (Brinkerhoff, 2007, p. 92).

Non-state security institutions have some standard forms, including armed resistance groups, unofficial paramilitary or militia groups that are assisted by state bodies, political elites, or neighboring countries, or groups established by local communities for self-protection (Brinkerhoff, 2007, p. 92). Iraq's destructive war against ISIS undermined the official security sector and empowered militia groups that operated autonomously outside the state (International Crisis Group, 2018). Based on the McQuinn framework, the internal structure of armed, non-state actors is a primary factor in determining DDR outcomes (McQuinn, 2016). Many militias under the PMF umbrella can be categorized as armed branches of political parties. They are political institutions founded and driven by political elites, such as Badr leader Hadi al-Ameri and former Prime Minister Maliki. They influence the state and take advantage of state weakness for self-enrichment (O'Driscoll, 2018). In Maliki's words, "Hashd leaders are already politicians" (International Crisis Group, 2018).

Many scholars classify the militias within the PMF and the Shia community more broadly into three main groups based on their functions and loyalties: 1) those whom Iran and its supreme leader back, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, 2) those who follow the Iraqi populist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, and 3) those loyal to the leader of the Shia in Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani (Al Jbour, 2021; Mansour & Jabar, 2017; Rubin & Al-Salhy & Gladstone, 2014; Arif, 2021). They do not constitute a unified organization under a single leadership group. Instead, they are distinct groups with different agendas and receive assistance from various internal and external actors.

The Iraqi state cannot manage to control the behavior and activities of armed, non-state actors, and its policy toward managing the challenge they pose has shifted over time (El-Dessouki, 2017). Its approach towards the militias, as organized under the umbrella of the PMF, changed drastically in 2014, when the state needed the militias' help in defeating ISIS. In June of that year, as the Iraqi army was on the verge of collapse, Maliki issued an official order establishing a formal state body to coordinate their efforts, the PMF Commission. Such a decision directly violated the Iraqi constitution, specifically Article 9 Paragraph

B, which prohibits the formation of military militias outside the framework of the armed forces (Iraqi Constitution, 2005). Regardless, it gave the PMF significant influence over decision-making in Iraq, as Figure 2 shows. Through the assistance of the political parties affiliated with its constituent militias, the PMF successfully evaded constitutional accountability using a law passed by the Iraqi parliament in November 2016 that legalized the militias' existence. The law defines the PMF as "an independent military formation as part of the Iraqi armed forces and linked to the Commander-in-Chief" (Arif, 2021).

Haider al-Abadi, the prime minister at the time, issued a decree in March 2018 that attempted to sunset the official role of the PMF, saying that the militias would not remain on active duty indefinitely. The decree imposed certain conditions, including that any member of lieutenant or above must graduate from either the Command College or the Defense Ministry's Staff College. PMF commanders who do not meet this standard would be required to retire. Following the end of major hostilities with ISIS in March 2018, the National Reconciliation Committee claimed that 43,000 PMF fighters would likely start demobilizing. At the time, PMF leaders claimed that 20 percent of their forces had already returned home (Parry & Burlinghaus, 2019). Nevertheless, Abadi's attempts to sunset the PMF's roles were unsuccessful.

Parry and Aymerich identify two significant challenges for reintegration: providing civilian jobs and services for ex-combatants, and the inability to restore confidence and trust between former fighters and members of the community. Former soldiers interviewed by Parry and Aymerich in Basra, Midaina, and Shatt Al-Arab stressed difficulties finding work, particularly those without specialized skills or previous work experience. Interviewees said, however, that the last member of the PMF provided access to civilian careers that would otherwise be unavailable. One former fighter said:

*"Relationships formed when part of the PMF are very important since influential leaders or other fighters may facilitate job opportunities for demobilized fighters." (Interview with male ex-combatant in Basra Centre, 2020) (Interview #2), (Parry and Aymerich, 2022).*

Confidence and trust between former fighters and members of the community depend on the conditions they experience (does the ex-combatant still have an income source from PMF or not) and the role they play (does the ex-combatant perceive themselves as self-serving or acting in the community interest). One ex-combatant explained the distinction as follows:



*"The community accepts and welcomes support provided to ex-combatants who deserve it, especially low-income families. However, the community disagrees with supporting ex-combatants who already have an income source and enjoy good living conditions due to their relationship with the PMF. Providing support, in this case, creates grudges and tensions, especially because many people in the community do not have jobs."* (Interview with male ex-combatant in Zubair, 2020) (Interview #8), (Parry and Aymerich, 2022).

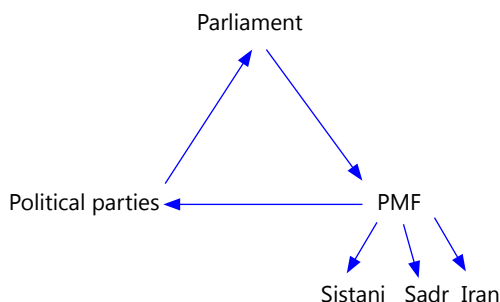
Another interviewee said:

*"Leaders of the PMF and political parties provide valuable assistance like facilitating paperwork for demobilized combatants to help them access employment opportunities. This creates tensions among community members because ordinary citizens see it as unjust. If this type of assistance was provided only to the PMF who are not affiliated with political parties, it might be acceptable because those combatants are dedicated to the country without taking anything in return."* (Interview with local authority in Qurna, 2020) (Interview #8) (Parry and Aymerich, 2022).

Demobilizing combatants without reintegrating them is a potential spoiler in post-conflict environments (Özerdem, 2009). PMF activity has both positive and negative influences. On the one hand, it blocks resettlement and is involved in corrupt activity and violence. On the other hand, it provides security and facilitates humanitarian access to actors cooperating with the PMF. In the territories where PMF has a significant presence, its buy-in is critical to political, financial, and social decision-making processes (Global Public Policy Institute, 2019).

Additionally, the PMF took advantage of state weakness to further penetrate state institutions, involve itself in Iraq's economy, and monopolize sources of wealth. Controlling geographic areas allows the PMF to accrue economic benefits through taxation and extortion (Mansour, 2018). According to the national budget for 2019, 128,000 militia members were on the state payroll, compared with the Iraqi national army, which has only about 65,000 soldiers (Nowacka, 2020). As a result, it is mainly impossible to put an effective DDR model in place because the PMF is unwilling to disarm, and the state cannot compel it to do so (Al-Khafaji, 2019).

**Figure 2.** Militia Influence on the decision-making process in Iraq



**Source:** own elaboration

## Conclusion

Characteristics of militia position in society are constructed not only by the group itself but also by outsider factors and the encirclement environment. Consequently, the process of demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration will be directly affected. This paper aims to present an argument that the status of the Shia armed groups in Iraqi society as an alternative security provider makes it almost impossible to accomplish the DDR model. The religious authority pre-determines its role and affects the maintenance or grows its impact. Furthermore, they also use this religious-predetermined role as a social contract. Together, these affect how to deal with these militias in reintegrating them into society.

After the collapse of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime in 2003, Iraq was presented with an opportunity to resolve its ethno-sectarian conflicts. Instead, the new state was established on the contours of these fault lines, which has had long-term consequences. The actions of many Shia groups have deprived other groups of power, which influenced the rise of militant groups. Shia sectarian policy continued explicitly during the Maliki administration, and many Sunnis reacted by joining groups like ISIS. The State and political elites' inability to meet all the groups' demands equally created cycles of revenge and grievance. The emergence of ISIS in 2014 exposed the rot at the core of state institutions, including the military, and effectively rendered Iraq a failed state.

The state's primary task in a post-conflict environment is disarming, demobilizing, and reintegrating armed groups. However, Iraq could not confront powerful Shia militias and failed to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary

affiliation with ISIS. As a result, they operate alongside formal authority with the assistance of political parties, religious fatwa, and external actors. The PMF has penetrated the state apparatus and established localized areas of control. The Iraqi government is incapable of bringing the PMF under the power of the national military forces, which has further eroded state sovereignty.

Consequently, Iraq failed to break the cycle of failure and has not built effective state institutions to manage the country's ethno-sectarian conflicts. It will cause new conflicts in the future, and the Iraqi people are the ones who will pay the price. PMF is now between regional balances and local variables. One of the challenging barriers to reintegrating PMF into Iraqi institutions is its regional activities and involvement in the Syrian conflict, which, on the opposite side, has become essential for Iraq's neighbors like Iran. The Iraqi State is now in a dilemma regarding PMF's military role, which operates inside and outside the country. It has strengthened the position of PMF for the Iranian and uses it as its proxy.

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