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# **TAMING THE MILITIAS**

## **Building National Guards in Fractured Arab States**

**Frederic Wehrey and Ariel I. Ahram**

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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace  
Publications Department  
1779 Massachusetts Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
P: +1 202 483 7600  
F: +1 202 483 1840  
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## About the Authors

**Frederic Wehrey** is a senior associate in the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He focuses on security affairs, civil-military relations, and identity politics in North Africa and the Gulf. His latest book, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings* (Columbia University Press, 2013), was chosen by *Foreign Affairs* magazine as one of the top three books on the Middle East for 2014. Wehrey is a twenty-year veteran of the active and reserve components of the U.S. Air Force, with tours across the Middle East and North Africa. His commentaries and articles have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, and the *Atlantic*, among others. He has testified before the Senate and the House of Representatives and routinely briefs U.S. and European government officials on Middle East affairs.

**Ariel I. Ahram** is assistant professor of government and international affairs at Virginia Tech. His research focuses on issues of security and development, particularly in the Middle East. His book, *Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State-Sponsored Militias* (Stanford University Press, 2011), examines the emergence and evolution of armed nonstate actors that collaborate with governments. Ahram is also currently editing a book on the unique challenges posed in studying closed, authoritarian regimes.

Ahram has provided commentary to the BBC, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and Regional News Network (NY), and written in such online venues as *Dissent*, *Washington Post's Monkey Cage*, *Foreign Policy's Middle East Channel*, and *Political Violence at a Glance*.

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## Summary

Since the eruption of the Arab Spring in 2011, centralized military power has broken down in North Africa, the Levant, and Yemen, and several weak Arab states have turned to local militias to help defend regimes. While these pro-government militias can play important security roles, they have limited military capacity and reliability. Transitioning militia fighters into national guard forces with formal ties to the national command structure can overcome some of these limitations, but the shift must be accompanied by a wider commitment to security sector reform and political power sharing.

### The Growing Role of Militias

- Some militias are tied to ruling parties and draw fighters directly from regime supporters. Others are made up of former rebel factions or defectors from terrorist and insurgent groups, and they often seek to retain their autonomy even as they avow loyalty and service to the state.
- In many Arab countries, including Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, militias play an important role in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations.
- Militias are often cheaper and more flexible than regular security forces, and they have greater local knowledge, allowing them to operate effectively in areas where regular security forces cannot.
- Militias often lack professionalism and can commit violence against civilian populations while allowing regimes plausible deniability and immunity from international censure for human rights violations.
- Reliance on militias is risky. Militias may refuse orders or turn against their state sponsors. Even if militias are loyal, they often lack training and equipment necessary to confront stronger enemies. And their proliferation risks further fracturing the state's monopoly over the use of force.

### How National Guards Can Help Ensure Stability

**National guards can provide formal and legal linkages between local militia fighters and the state.** Organizing national guards along provincial or municipal lines can help to maximize local support while at the same time tethering local forces to a national command structure.

**The new corps can only be effective if they are launched as part of broader security sector reforms.** Successful integration of national guards will require

adjustments in the culture and training of the main security organs in order to reduce distrust and interservice competition.

**National guard programs must be launched in concert with political reform and power sharing.** National guards can bolster federal arrangements that allow for regional autonomy while helping to guarantee fighters' loyalty to the state and strengthening political cohesion. But military devolution alone is not a substitute for political accommodation between the central government and ethnosectarian or regional minorities.

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## Introduction

Faced with national armies that have broken down to varying degrees, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen have increasingly turned toward alliances with armed militias to ensure security.

The fragmentation of the armies—which began in Iraq with the U.S. toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and elsewhere with the revolutions of 2011 and 2012—was precipitated by confrontations with popular protests and escalating battles with insurgent groups, many tied to Islamic radicalism. But internal cleavages, including clan rivalries in Yemen, town- and region-based fissures in Libya, and sectarian defections in Syria and Iraq, hastened the breakdowns.

Many of the pro-government militias that are now allied with these beleaguered Arab states are organized on the basis of entrenched ethnosectarian or tribal relations. These forces supplement and at times even stand in for the weak or absent army and police as providers of local security.<sup>1</sup> Moving forward, militias could form the basis for the creation of new national guard corps. This approach would capitalize on the militias' local bases of support while integrating them under the national command structure.

The national guard concept faces many hurdles, as seen during its consideration in Iraq and Libya. The guard structure raises significant questions about accountability and the cohesion of the state overall; the forces could well weaken rather than strengthen the state. But properly constructed, they could serve as tentative first steps on the long path toward new power-sharing arrangements that favor inclusion and local representation over exclusion and repression by the center. In this sense, they may represent the best hope for restoring stability in these fragile nations.

Ultimately, the creation of national guards must be linked to reforms in other arenas if the approach is to be successful. A key priority is reform within the security sector itself, involving the establishment of cultures of cooperation instead of competition and the solidification of chains of command and oversight between the militias and the regular security services. Another imperative is political reform, affecting the way power is distributed and the accommodation of ethnosectarian minorities and other peripheral groups within the state.

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**Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen have increasingly turned toward alliances with armed militias to ensure security.**

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## The Evolving Role of Militias

Arab rulers have always had ambivalent relationships with militias and other armed nonstate actors. The medieval Arab historian Ibn Khaldun posited an inherent tension and rivalry between the state and warlike tribes that roamed the hinterlands.<sup>2</sup> Yet states often turned to tribal chieftains, warlords, and criminal gangs to help collect taxes, impose order, and suppress revolts. The Ottoman, British, and French empires all recruited tribal forces to help exercise control.<sup>3</sup>

Upon gaining independence in the early to mid-twentieth century, Arab rulers tried very hard to approximate Max Weber's famous definition of the state as a monopoly over legitimate force, building up national armies that were essential for survival in a region marred by frequent interstate wars. These armies were also employed to suppress internal opposition and rebellions against the state. Military officers saw themselves as holding a unique and privileged position and often seized power for themselves in the name of the nation. Consequently, coups became a recurrent feature of Arab politics from the 1930s to the early 1970s. From the 1950s to the 1970s, some regimes associated with the radical pan-Arab socialist camp tried to insulate themselves from military coups by setting up party-based militias, modeled roughly on the Soviet Union's popular committees and militias. Regular army officers resisted what they saw as the trespass of untrained civilians onto their professional terrain. These militias were often little more than collections of party thugs who brutalized opposition figures.

By the 1970s and 1980s a new, two-tiered model for organizing security services had emerged in many Arab states. The innermost layer was made up of heavily armored praetorian guards and intelligence services, whose members were often drawn from rulers' close kin and associates. Their primary responsibility was to prevent coups and internal plots. The outer layer was composed of the army and police, which could be deployed in case of foreign wars and against popular revolts. This division of labor, though, had a number of problems, including inducing interservice competition and mistrust and hampering actual combat effectiveness.<sup>4</sup>

That structure is still largely in place in Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, and the Gulf Arab monarchies, where armies remain intact, albeit bloated. These national militaries have limited power-projection capabilities, with some niche exceptions in special operations and air forces. Their most important roles continue to be preventing coups and extracting rents for loyalist constituencies.<sup>5</sup>

But in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, where armies have broken down, the prominence of pro-government militias highlights a troubling dilemma. On the one hand, they are playing important roles in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, often in areas where the regular security services cannot or will not operate. Many of these militias draw from former rebel factions and defectors from insurgent groups, giving them unique knowledge of local conditions and terrain.<sup>6</sup> In 2015, Shia militias in Iraq helped recapture the northern city

of Tikrit from the self-proclaimed Islamic State, and militias from Misrata, a coastal town in western Libya, helped battle Islamic State forces that had occupied part of the neighboring town of Sirte and surrounding villages.

On the other hand, there are a number of inherent risks in mobilizing these nonstate actors. Governments can use militias as proxies, attacking civilians while maintaining a degree of credible deniability and avoiding international censure. The militias themselves often lack training and professionalism, making them prone to human rights violations and general criminality.

Syria's *shabiha* (ghosts) militias illustrate this conundrum. These militias originated in smuggling and racketeering networks that operated under the protection of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime, and the *shabiha* have provided a measure of protection for minority Alawite and Christian communities from the onslaught of the Islamic State and other Sunni Islamist radicals. But the militias have also been implicated in atrocities like rape, torture, and mass killings.<sup>7</sup>

In a wider sense, reliance on militias can subvert efforts to reestablish the state's monopoly over the use of force. In Yemen, for instance, the government sanctioned the emergence of the Popular Committee militia movement in 2011 to combat the encroachment of al-Qaeda-affiliated Ansar al-Sharia radicals in the southern governorate of Abyan. The committees succeeded at repelling Islamist advances and gained a measure of popular support by rolling back the imposition of Islamic law. But while the committees espoused loyalty to the government in Sanaa, they became increasingly predatory toward civilians, using violence to settle personal and tribal vendettas and demand a greater share of government patronage.<sup>8</sup> During the Houthi rebel advances of early 2015, the Popular Committee militias were a key element in President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi's defense efforts.<sup>9</sup>

In several Arab states, the idea of shifting informal fighters into formally constituted national guard forces has been floated at various times as a way to ameliorate some of these problems. A national guard would formalize and legalize the existing relationships between states and pro-government militias. By providing a vehicle for recruiting, absorbing, and mobilizing militias as auxiliaries to the regular army, they would also allow weak central governments to more effectively combat terrorist groups and insurgencies.

Yet efforts to build national guard corps in Libya and Iraq have so far failed. In both cases, there was resistance not only from some prospective members of the national guard but also from political factions, members of the regular armed forces, and communal groups. In Libya, more secular factions and the old officer class opposed the national guard program, which they saw as a bid by Islamist militias to challenge the regular army. Similarly, in Iraq, where the national guard was meant to empower Sunnis to join the fight against the Islamic State, the idea fell victim to parliamentary disputes about its scope

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**Reliance on militias can subvert efforts to reestablish the state's monopoly over the use of force.**

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and role, particularly from Kurdish and Shia factions. Examining these abortive efforts can help elucidate the potential of national guards to rebuild Arab states, as well as their limitations.

## **The Iraqi National Guard: A Harness on Sunni Power?**

In late 2014, as Iraq struggled to contain the advances of the Islamic State, Iraqi and U.S. officials called for the creation of a national guard as a way to integrate Sunni tribal militias into the national command structure.

The proposal had much in common with what was known as the Sunni Awakening of the mid-2000s, when the United States backed the formation of Sunni militias to help defeat al-Qaeda in Iraq. But the idea of a new Iraqi national guard faced many hurdles and has failed to materialize.

### **The Sunni Awakening Experience**

Militias have been prominent in Iraq since the removal of former president Saddam Hussein in 2003. The United States immediately dismantled Iraq's army and police force, seeing them as a redoubt of loyalty to the old regime and fearing that they could be the source of military coups. The Shia and Kurdish parties that dominated Iraq's newly installed government relied on their own autonomous militia forces: the two leading Kurdish parties each had their own peshmerga units, and the major Shia political parties had their own armed factions, such as the Badr Corps (now the Badr Organization) of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (since renamed the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq). Other militia forces emerged organically to provide security and political muscle for new political aspirants like Muqtada al-Sadr, a radical Shia cleric, and his Mahdi Army.

Meanwhile, in Sunni areas in the north and west of Iraq, insurgents, Islamists, and tribal militias quickly filled the vacuum, intending to frustrate the designs of the Shia-dominated government and the United States. Washington failed to commit sufficient resources to help disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate former army officers or militia fighters in these regions into civilian life. Moreover, legacies of distrust hampered efforts to incorporate these forces into a cohesive Iraqi army: Shia political parties were hesitant to give up their autonomous militia forces, while Sunnis with military experience were reluctant to work with what they deemed unprofessional and untrained civilians, many of whom had been allied with Iran and the United States.

By 2006, Iraq was in a full-fledged ethnosectarian war. Sunni insurgents used improvised explosive devices, bombings, and suicide attacks against Shia, Kurdish, and American targets. The government waged its own dirty war

of abductions, torture, and assassinations against suspected Sunni terrorists, often using Shia militias who acted in concert with Interior Ministry forces.

It was in this context that the United States began to actively recruit and empower Sunni tribes as a means of weaning them away from the insurgency. The Sunni Awakening hinged on a crucial bargain between the United States and the tribes: the United States provided weapons and jobs and effectively shielded the tribes from interventions by Shia militias and Iraqi security forces, and the tribes essentially became self-governing and responsible for rooting out insurgents. Support from Jordan and Saudi Arabia was crucial to building and maintaining links to the western Sunni tribes. By the end of 2007, the militias had taken in over 65,000 men in arms across seven Iraqi provinces.<sup>10</sup>

This approach initially seemed to be effective. Violence in Iraq dropped dramatically in 2007 and 2008 and the civil war appeared at an end. Many observers today point to the example of the Awakening as a possible model for a future national guard force in Iraq.

But the central government in Baghdad was not fully a party to the negotiations between the United States and the Sunni leadership and never embraced the Awakening plan. As U.S. forces withdrew from Iraq in 2009 and 2010, the Iraqi government appeared to renege on promises to integrate the largely Sunni force into the apparatus of the state. Only a handful of former Awakening fighters were inducted into the police, army, or elsewhere in the government. Most were simply dismissed or offered menial positions. The government of then prime minister Nouri al-Maliki began to attack prominent Sunni militia leaders, indicting and arresting them on charges of terrorism or political subversion.

By the end of the decade, disaffected tribes began to drift back into collaboration with the remnants of Hussein's Baath Party forces that were still hiding out in the Sunni north and with radical groups like the Islamic State, which originated as al-Qaeda in Iraq and grew immensely strong with the opportunity to establish a safe haven in Syria when the civil war erupted there in 2011.

Meanwhile, the intermingling of state and nonstate armed forces allied with the government continued. On the one hand, Maliki took control of elite special operations forces that were drawn from the ranks of Shia militias and specially trained and equipped by the United States; he also commanded local militia forces tied to him directly through patronage and patrimonial networks. On the other hand, other Shia militias associated with Maliki's rivals, such as Sadr's Mahdi Army, appeared to dissolve, while the ranks of the Iraqi army and other Iraqi Security Forces branches continued to expand with Western support.

### **Combating the Islamic State**

The sudden advances by the Islamic State on Anbar and Nineveh Provinces in western Iraq in the summer of 2014 betrayed just how unstable this arrangement really was. Regular Iraqi troops proved poorly trained and undisciplined;

they quickly scattered and fled. By some estimates, 300,000 of the men on the roster of Iraq's security forces, or 30–40 percent of the total force, were phantom personnel who never actually served.<sup>11</sup>

Nonstate Shia militia forces stepped up to fill the breach. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the foremost Shia religious authority in Iraq, issued a fatwa (religious edict) calling for Iraqi civilians to take up arms in self-defense. The dormant Mahdi Army quickly reconstituted itself, standing at the barricades in Baghdad and nearby Samarra. Iran dispatched the special forces unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Quds Force, to help organize, equip, and train Shia militias, which came to be known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, or Hashd al-Shaabi).<sup>12</sup>

In August 2014, as the United States began to offer air support to Iraqi forces fighting against the Islamic State, Washington sought to induce the Iraqi government to reach out to the estranged Sunni community. U.S. President Barack Obama specifically mentioned U.S. support for an Iraqi national guard (ING) as a means to help Iraq's "Sunni communities secure their own freedom" from the Islamic State in a September 10, 2014, statement.<sup>13</sup>

Many U.S. commentators likened the idea of the ING to the U.S. National Guard. Additionally, many linked the new ING to the 2006 Sunni Awakening. Offering military and financial aid through the ING would encourage Sunni tribal factions to turn against the Islamic State militants. As the ING was envisioned, the militias would be placed under the supervision of provincial governors and could be called up by the central government to serve as auxiliaries to the regular army.<sup>14</sup>

Neither the PMF nor the ING initiative was on strong legal footing. The Iraqi constitution specifically prohibits the formation of militias outside the framework of the armed forces (with an exception for the Kurdish peshmerga forces).<sup>15</sup>

Still, the ING initially seemed to be off to a good start. Newly elected Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi expressed support for the idea and a draft bill was introduced in the Iraqi legislature in October 2014.<sup>16</sup> Iraqi and U.S. government officials met with leaders of major western tribes.<sup>17</sup> Some 2,000 volunteers emerged from Anbar Province.<sup>18</sup> In the northern city of Kirkuk, tribesmen volunteered to fight the Islamic State under the supervision of Anwar Assi, the leader of the Ubayd tribe.<sup>19</sup> U.S. officials met directly with tribal leaders in Anbar, including Ahmed Abu Risha, whose brother had spearheaded the Awakening until his assassination in 2007.<sup>20</sup>

Yet the early momentum behind the proposed national guard quickly faded. The ING faced significant resistance within Abadi's own camp. Abadi's first nominees for the crucial positions of defense and interior minister were blocked; the draft ING bill itself languished in parliament. Ultimately, the Defense Ministry post was filled by an established Sunni politician who had little sway in the crucial provinces where the Islamic State had gained a foothold. An affiliate of the Islamic Supreme Council took the Interior Ministry, reinforcing the close ties between the government and Shia militias.<sup>21</sup>

Sunnis themselves saw the ING as a vehicle to demand significant autonomy and power sharing, comparable to what they had received from the United States in 2006. Some Anbar tribes made their participation in the ING contingent on the removal of Shia militias from their province.<sup>22</sup> As it was, the Shia-dominated government distrusted the Sunnis' intentions and was wary of establishing a force that could counterbalance the central government or even come to ally with the Islamic State.

Geopolitical factors exacerbated such fears. While Iraq's central government has become more and more reliant on Shia Iran, particularly in regard to building up the PMF militias, the United States planned to enlist Sunni Arab states, namely Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, to provide training and support for the ING.<sup>23</sup> This raised the possibility that the ING would serve as a proxy for the United States and Sunni Arab states within Iraq's domestic political arena.

Moreover, many Iraqis saw the ING as another step in the fragmentation of Iraq as a whole. Upon learning of the possibility of new Sunni militias, leaders of Iraq's Turkoman minority, for instance, clamored for their own militia units.<sup>24</sup>

As hope for a formally constituted ING faded in late 2014, the informal Shia PMF militias continued to grow with Iranian support. Yet the PMF has also exhibited some of the fundamental problems of discipline and training typical of part-time militia forces. During the March 2015 assault on Tikrit, the combined regular security services and PMF fighters enjoyed a clear numerical advantage, yet failed repeatedly against tough resistance from Islamic State fighters. The PMF's autonomy also complicated efforts to coordinate between Iraq and the United States. Some PMF units closely tied to Iran chose to quit the fight rather than cooperate with U.S. plans to provide air cover for their assault. The United States has insisted on engaging only the formal Iraqi security services, not PMF units, in its train-and-equip programs.<sup>25</sup>

Even more significantly, PMF militias have been implicated in a campaign of terror against Sunnis suspected of sympathizing or cooperating with the Islamic State. Eyewitnesses have described militiamen looting property and carrying out illegal detentions and extrajudicial killings against Sunnis. Given the relationship between the central government and the PMF, these could well be deliberate attempts to intimidate Sunnis and possibly drive them from their homes.<sup>26</sup>

Naturally, reliance on Shia militias served to deepen Sunnis' feelings of alienation from the central government and may even have pushed them further into the arms of the Islamic State. While a handful of Sunni tribesmen did apparently join the government's campaign in Tikrit, the overall impression of the PMF as a collection of distinctly Shia militias is inescapable.<sup>27</sup> In his March 2015 assessment of the situation in Iraq, U.S. General David Petraeus, who oversaw the 2006 surge of American forces in Iraq, specifically cited these

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Iranian-backed forces as a more significant threat to Iraq's future than the Islamic State itself.<sup>28</sup> For its part, the central government appears to be either unwilling or unable to put a stop to the militias' atrocities.<sup>29</sup>

## The Libyan National Guard: A Failed Effort to Regularize Militia Power

Muammar Qaddafi, Libya's longtime leader, feared coups and, with the exception of elite security brigades commanded by his sons, he kept the regular army weak. After the 2011 revolution, what had been a highly centralized but ill-equipped and underfunded national military and police force devolved into a fragmented and informal security sector that was polarized along regional lines. The army all but collapsed; it was a largely hollow force, heavy at the top with senior officers but bereft of leadership at the junior and middle levels. Real authority resided in numerous revolutionary battalions and companies—the localized militias that had fought Qaddafi and filled the security vacuum after his ouster. In the revolution's wake, the militias seized armories, airports, and ministries.

As Libya's transitional governing authorities started putting militias on the payroll, the number of revolutionary fighters swelled far beyond those who had actually fought the dictator. The question of how to demobilize and integrate these fighters into a more formal structure has bedeviled successive governments in post-Qaddafi Libya.

One attempt to resolve this dilemma was made by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), which in late 2012 floated a national guard–like concept called the Libya Territorial Army, to be composed of three revolutionary brigades that would act as an interim stabilizer while the regular national army was being trained and bolstered.<sup>30</sup> The idea was to create a standing military force consisting primarily of recruits from various state-sponsored militias. In interviews, Libyan proponents of the plan drew direct parallels with the U.S. experience in militia integration after the American Civil War, as well as that of the Territorial Army, a part-time, volunteer force that was integrated into the British Army in the early twentieth century, and the Home Guard in Denmark, which incorporated anti-Nazi resistance militias into a national command structure after World War II.<sup>31</sup>

In April 2013, then prime minister Ali Zeidan proposed a separate national guard scheme that was backed in principle by UNSMIL. The Libyan National Guard (LNG) was meant to carry out nationwide policing functions while the regular security services were still being trained and equipped.

Even as a potential stopgap, the LNG program was highly controversial. Unresolved questions about its purpose, composition, command and oversight, and relationship to the regular army eventually torpedoed the proposal in late 2013. The idea remains on the table with one of the factions in Libya's civil war, but it is still plagued by uncertainties about its scope and mandate.

### **Militias by Another Name: The Precedent of the Libya Shield Force**

In an initial statement in April 2013, Zeidan argued that the LNG would accommodate so-called freedom fighters who had battled Qaddafi's forces and opted not to join the regular army after his fall. The force would be used to protect forests, roads, oil installations, and service projects in the desert regions as well as electricity and communications transmission towers and all other vital facilities located outside Libya's cities. It could also be assigned to augment the army and police if the need arose.<sup>32</sup>

A critical point of dispute was whether the LNG would permit whole revolutionary factions to remain intact as units. The architects of the plan insisted that people would join the LNG as individuals and would be assigned to mixed units to prevent replicating the factional militia structure within the new force. But many critics of the plan were not convinced. Secular-leaning politicians from the National Forces Alliance (NFA), a coalition of more than 50 parties, saw the proposal as an attempt by Islamists to create their own militias, albeit under a more formal name.<sup>33</sup> For their part, the officers of the regular army, which numbered roughly 35,000 soldiers in 2012, feared competition for resources and authority from the LNG, which was also planned to be 35,000-men strong.<sup>34</sup>

Most important though, many of its critics believed that the national guard was simply a duplication of the Libya Shield Force (LSF) project, which arose in 2011 but fragmented in 2014 after the start of Libya's civil war between what are known as the Operation Dawn and Operation Dignity factions. The LSF was in many respects the first test of militia integration in the period preceding the national guard project—and its collapse carries a number of important lessons.

The LSF was initially a bottom-up initiative by regionally affiliated militias, particularly those in Misrata that were aligned with Salim Juha, a former army officer and well-regarded revolutionary leader. The idea was to supplant the defunct regular army, which many revolutionaries—especially Islamists—believed was dominated by officers from the Qaddafi-era and bloated at the senior ranks. The transitional government under then prime minister Abdel-Rahim el-Keib officially recognized the LSF in April 2012, subordinating it to the chief of staff of the armed forces and authorizing direct cash payments to militia heads.

A fundamental flaw of the LSF was that certain commanders allowed militias to join its regionally aligned divisions en masse, preserving their autonomy and social and tribal cohesion. This was not Juha's original intent; he had insisted that the Shields would break up the militias by incorporating individuals, not entire units.<sup>35</sup> But in Juha's home city of Misrata, also home to Libya's most powerful militias, this insistence created tension. A schism emerged between the city's two Shield divisions, the Libya Shield West under Muhammed Musa and the Third Force, which had ties to Juha. Musa had taken entire brigades from Misrata and surrounding areas (Zliten and Khoms,

as well as Hun, to the south) and incorporated them into the Shield. Out of Misrata's 230 brigades, roughly 70 incorporated themselves into the Shields as whole units, not as individuals.

There was also tension between the LSF and the national military. The thirteen LSF divisions were nominally headed by regular army colonels. But in actuality the militia heads called the shots. The average salary provided by the Libyan government to LSF members vastly exceeded that provided to even senior officers in the regular army.<sup>36</sup> In interviews, Shield commanders and members said they saw themselves as the sole army for the country, while denigrating the remnants of the "official army" as corrupt and incompetent.

In some areas, the Shields did contribute to public security. The LSF proved valuable to the National Transitional Council, which ruled Libya after Qaddafi was overthrown but lacked an army capable of extending its authority into Libya's southern and western peripheries, where outbreaks of communal and tribal infighting erupted in Kufra, Sabha, and the Nafusa Mountains throughout 2012 and into 2013. LSF forces intercepted cross-border drug trafficking and mediated intratribal conflict. In the west, the Libya Shield West protected the road from Tripoli to Tunis for at least two years.

But in other areas, they had a more malign effect. Using the official writ of the chief of staff and their affiliation with one of the LSF divisions, militias were free to pursue agendas that were parochial, ideological, and in some cases criminal. Some were perceived as having a distinctly Islamist hue. And as time wore on, some became political. In April and May 2013, Islamist-leaning brigades affiliated with the Libya Shield Force used the threat of armed force to pressure the elected parliament to pass a sweeping political isolation law that banned Qaddafi-era officials from future government employment. This coercion and the wrenching debate over the law was a watershed moment in Libya's post-Qaddafi trajectory and one that would indirectly lead to the civil war.

The size of the LSF, which was flush with government subsidies, swelled to roughly 67,000 militiamen in 2013. According to some estimates by Libyan and United Nations officials, roughly two-thirds of those registered "revolutionary" militiamen had never actually fought in the 2011 revolution but rather were latecomers who joined after the fall of Qaddafi.

Critics in Libya perceived the LSF as playing the roles of both arsonist and fireman, exacerbating the very conflicts it was meant to suppress so as to justify its existence. They pointed to the social and familial linkages between LSF commanders and radical Islamist groups in Benghazi and to statements by LSF personnel that continually lambasted the weaknesses of the regular army and police. In areas where the LSF had sought to quell communal conflict, there were accusations of partisanship, most notably in the southeastern oasis of Kufra, where ethnic Tabu complained that the Shield forces were sympathetic to the rival Arab Zway tribe.

But most important, the LSF was always dominated by Misratan and eastern Islamist militias; it was opposed by powerful factional leaders in the

western town of Zintan and tribes who constituted the older officer class. Usama Juwayli, the defense minister during this period, created separate streams of funding for Zintani and western mountain militias that were not under the LSF umbrella. The result was parallel lines of authority that jostled for resources and outright competition within the fractured security sector.<sup>37</sup>

The LNG that was proposed in 2013 was also plagued by criticism. This time, however, the opposition came from both sides of the political spectrum, for different reasons. The suspicion that the LNG was a ploy to perpetuate the power of militias was deepened by the composition of the seven-person committee charged by the prime minister with developing the national guard. Many brigade leaders and former officers thought the committee had a narrowly eastern and Islamist slant and was not representative of all of Libya's factions. Mustafa Sigizli and Nuri al-Abbar, the primary architects of the plan, were both aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood and had ties to the powerful constellation of Benghazi-based Islamist militias that arose in the early days of the 2011 revolution. To many critics, the LNG proposal was simply evidence of the Brotherhood's plan to build an armed wing. Brigade leaders in Zintan felt excluded, telling the United Nations, "If you want to create a national guard, have a committee of the top revolutionary commanders from all the cities, across the country."<sup>38</sup> Another problem was that the actual membership of the rest of the seven-person committee was not known to the Libyan public or to Libya's brigade leaders, deepening suspicion of the group.

For their part, revolutionary brigades and some Islamists saw Zeidan's plan as a means to sideline the militias by giving them mundane tasks like guarding communications towers and forests that were far removed from Libya's centers of power.

Still, these fears were driven more by political concerns than factual analysis. The militias from which the national guard would have been formed are highly fragmented and have no formal ties to political parties. At most, they have opportunistically developed patron-client relationships with various politicians. Moreover, such affiliations are not limited to Islamists: the NFA, for example, has developed close ties to the powerful Qaqa and Sawaiq brigades in Zintan, which have themselves used the threat of force against elected institutions.

### **Factional Gridlock Undermines the National Guard**

In the final reckoning, the LNG faltered because of both divisions within Libya's security sector and the capture of ministries and the armed forces by various political factions.

In interviews, Sigizli and al-Abbar cited unresolved political disputes about whether the LNG would be commanded by the elected General National Congress, the Ministry of Defense, or the prime minister. Moreover, the issue of the LNG's time horizon was never resolved. The guard was meant to be a

three-year stopgap, and its members were intended to transition into a reserve force after the regular army had been built up. But regular army officers were skeptical of the LNG as they had been of the LSF before it, and they feared that once such a militia force was established it would never stand down.

To the chagrin of liberal-leaning activists, eastern and Zintani factions, and older technocrats and officers, the United Nations Support Mission in Libya put a national guard idea on the agenda for a proposed national dialogue in mid-2014.<sup>39</sup> But the dialogue collapsed amid the outbreak of civil war. In early 2015, the General National Congress in Tripoli passed a law to create the national guard. This congress, which claims authority over the western

part of the country but is unrecognized by international governments, is dominated by the militias of Operation Dawn, an alliance of Misratan, ethnic Amazigh (Berbers), and Islamist-leaning factions.

Interviews in early 2015 in Misrata suggested that the national guard idea was still largely the product of powerful Misrata-led militias, meaning it may not have broad support, particularly from eastern-based Operation Dignity

factions and the older officer corps. Quasi-national guard structures have already emerged on the Dawn side—one key example is the 15,000-strong, largely Misratan Third Force deployed to the south and center of the country, where it clashed with the Islamic State in early 2015. But here again, although the Third Force recruits individual militia members for rotating ten-days-on, twenty-days-off deployments, the cohesiveness of the revolutionary battalions and brigades still exists within it.<sup>40</sup>

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**The national guard idea was still largely the product of powerful Misrata-led militias, meaning it may not have broad support.**

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## Lessons Learned From Failed National Guard Experiments

While analysts and policymakers naturally focus on cases of success, understanding the roots of policy failures is equally critical for improving future outcomes. In the long term, some variation of a national guard still represents the best hope for restoring stability in both Libya and Iraq.

In Libya, regionally constituted militias with organic ties to communities and tribes are an inescapable reality. In many towns and regions, they are embedded in the fabric of local economies, providing a measure of protection to communities. At the same time, plans for a regular national army exist only on paper.<sup>41</sup> In this scenario, the only path forward may be to find ways to incorporate existing, locally organized fighting forces into a national command structure overseen by elected authorities.

Similarly, though the prospects for the ING appeared dim in mid-2015, some similar model may be the only way forward in Iraq. While Shia militiamen have had a hand in clearing Islamic State forces from the northern

provinces, their ability to remain in place and hold these areas is far less certain. The PMF remains essentially an informal, part-time, volunteer force, not a professional army. Its fighters are operating far from home, with at best limited logistical and technical support. Unless the PMF somehow becomes a full-on army of occupation in Sunni areas, the Iraqi government will have to find local partners in order to maintain peace and stability within the Sunni heartland. In doing so, some version of a national guard could reemerge.

The abortive attempts to establish national guards reveal some of the larger security challenges facing not just Libya and Iraq, but all the states in the Arab world where the political order is uncertain.

First, within the military itself, professional officers often perceive the national guard at best as an amateur interloper—and at worst as a direct competitor for power, funding, and influence. These problems are exacerbated when prospective national guard members are seen as having at some point fought against the state.

Second, setting up and sanctioning militias can upset balances of power within the larger state. As soon as one faction is perceived to “own” an armed group, other factions are likely to seek the same as a means to counter any potential threat.

Third, militias in general and national guard forces in particular can complicate international bilateral engagements. Foreign states often see militias as pawns or proxies in their bids to interfere in their neighbors’ internal affairs. And democratic states subject to legislative oversight of security assistance activities such as the United States may lack the legal and bureaucratic authority to engage and liaise with quasi-official militias, as opposed to the official military.

Future national guard initiatives should not be conceived, as they were in Libya and Iraq, as a series of short-term, improvised measures to address specific and immediate tactical needs. Rather, the creation of national guard corps should be seen as a component of broader security sector reform efforts and the demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration of nonstate fighters. Induction into the national guard should proceed at the individual—rather than the unit—level in order to prevent members of militias from simply changing into government-issued uniforms while retaining their previous loyalties and cohesion as nonstate actors. Militiamen should also be offered opportunities to transition to civilian work, the private sector, or further education.

The creation of the national guard should be accompanied by efforts within the echelons of the military to revise chains of command that link the guard, the regular armies, and various other police and security agencies under civilian oversight and within the overall mission and responsibilities of the security apparatus as a whole. These efforts may begin with formal procedures and instructions, but they need to be expanded to include changing habits and

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**The creation of national guard corps should be seen as a component of broader security sector reform efforts and the demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration of nonstate fighters.**

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embedded cultures of distrust between the military and civilians that are legacies of decades of authoritarian rule.

Any national guard initiative must also be accompanied by negotiations toward a broad political compact involving power sharing and accommodation. The success of national guards ultimately depends not just on their short-term tactical effectiveness, but on the degree of local buy-in, which can be encouraged by fostering inclusion and reciprocity. Constitutional amendments can help cement the reciprocal relationship and bolster confidence between a central government and subnational militia forces. Given the territorial linkages of most militias, national guards will play a key role in any step toward federalism and power devolution. Ultimately, though, these legal and constitutional arrangements must be met by informal gestures that guarantee militia fighters' loyalty to the state and the central government's commitment to local autonomy.

Western governments can contribute to these measures in a number of ways. The most obvious is through train-and-equip programs. The United States has drawn extensively on its own experience integrating the National Guard within its regular army as a model for setting up other national guard-type forces. Yet other countries have other structures for part-time militia forces that might be even better examples for Arab states to follow. Given the larger linkages between the national guards, security sector reform, and political opening, any assistance that outsiders provide to a national guard must be calibrated to avoid tipping the scales in delicate negotiations between regional power holders and the central government.

Western powers can also help solidify the status of national guards by working to alleviate and dampen regional security threats. Because many governments are concerned that national guards could be turned into proxies of foreign powers and used to destabilize the state internally, finding ways to mitigate these external threats can help make a national guard more palatable.

National guards are political institutions, not merely military instruments. They can have far-ranging consequences for political stability and cohesion. They are no panacea for the challenge of building effective states, but they can play an important role in addressing security concerns and moving toward more effective power sharing.

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