

Baghdad considers compulsory military service

Muhanad al-Hussam

Baghdad

Iraq is reviving compulsory military service, not only to boost defence capabilities in the face of the Islamic State (ISIS) but to end sectarian strife that has claimed a heavy civilian toll and shattered the country's once tightly knit fabric.

Although the government and its security agencies hailed the plan to require military service all Iraqi men aged 19 to 45 as a step towards incorporating the minority Sunni Muslims into the system, critics rebuked it as costly, predicting it would worsen the country's economic problems.

Iraqi Defence Ministry spokesman Naseer Noori said compulsory service provides trained personnel to assist the army in the fight against ISIS and other militants. More significantly, Noori said, it brings together men of various sects and ethnic backgrounds. "Soldiers from all parts of Iraq will live together and communicate with each other after years of separation and isolation," he explained.

"By putting them together, serving on each others' side, protecting each other while fighting a common enemy, we believe that both sides will put behind their sectarian and ethnic divisions."

The army currently has 1.8 million active servicemen and is dominated by Shias.

He said another advantage for the proposed law would be a decrease in unemployment, especially among the young, when thousands of Iraqi men are enlisted, even on a temporary basis, in the army.

Since the creation of the modern Iraqi state in 1932, all males over 18 years were required to serve in the military, which has played a key role in shaping Iraq's politics.

In the wake of the 2003 US-led invasion, Iraq's military was disbanded and compulsory service revoked

by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), which was responsible for Iraq after Saddam Hussein's regime fell.

The decision unleashed a bloody insurgency and a sectarian strife in which 174,000 people, mainly civilians, were killed from 2003-13, according to the Iraq Body Count state project.

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**Iraqi political analyst
Ahmed Abdullah**

The new Iraqi Army has 3.8 million members with 2 million slated for the reserve. The army currently has 1.8 million active servicemen and is dominated by Shias. Sunnis and other religious and ethnic minorities have been sidelined since Saddam's ouster.

Hundreds of thousands of militiamen, mainly untrained Shia volunteers, emerged in recent years. Some have strong backing and financing from Iran. The heavily armed militias back a US-trained Army in most offensives but many Sunnis are critical of their Iranian links.

Iraqi lawmaker Abdul-Aziz Hassan, a member of parliament's Security and Defence Committee, said that the period of the service would be determined by education. A person who completed only elementary studies must serve for 16 months, while it is 12 months for a high school graduate. Holders of a bachelor's degree would serve 9 months and those with post-graduate degrees are excluded.

The draft bill, which must be approved by the cabinet, would later be sent to the legislature for debate and a vote.

There is a general sense that it would pass through all the channels, partly because of a rare public consensus that ending sectarianism could avert Iraq's eventual division.

Nonetheless, an obstacle is the financial crisis hitting Iraq, which



Iraqi soldiers reload a weapon during clashes with Islamic State militants on the outskirts of Makhmur, south of Mosul, on March 25th.

sits atop the world's second largest known oil reserves. However, low oil prices have limited revenues, and overspending and mismanagement by top officials are blamed for Iraq being 30% short of its projected cash target each month.

The Iraqi government is barely able to pay the salaries of soldiers and Shia militiamen fighting ISIS; therefore, it is highly unlikely that it would be able to afford more for hundreds of thousands of newcomers.

The government allocated 20% of its \$88 billion budget for the fiscal year 2016 for security and defence.

"Any extra expenses will add more burden on the budget. I think it is the right decision but at the wrong time," said political analyst Ahmed Abdullah.

But security expert Ashraf al-Obeidi, a retired army brigadier, described compulsory army service as "unrealistic and unpractical", considering the situation in the country.

"The trustworthy and disciplined Iraqi army has been the protector of the state till 2003," Obeidi said. "The question is whether we have a real army now."

"It's impossible to convince some youth to join an army they do not trust in the first place."

Obeidi said that on several occasions, police units in southern provinces disobeyed orders to fight against ISIS, arguing that they would only serve in their own cities and that recapturing Sunni areas is not their duty.

Also, many Sunni political groups suspect that the draft law aims to

foil plans to create local national guard forces in Sunni provinces similar to the Kurdish peshmerga. Many Shia officials and lawmakers rejected the national guard idea, claiming it is a step to establishing an autonomous Sunni region.

Another problem is whether the central government would impose compulsory military service on men living in the autonomous region of Kurdistan.

"Compulsory service should be implemented on all the people of the country. Any exclusion or exemption would have a negative impact on the whole thing," said Obeidi.

Muhanad al-Hussam, a pseudonym used for safety reasons, is an Iraqi journalist who has reported on Iraq for 17 years.

The survival of Iraq matters

Viewpoint



Hassan Mneimneh

Upon the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003, optimists hoped that Iraq, one of the few countries in the region endowed with both human and natural wealth, would emerge from years of isolation and animosity to assume its natural role as a force of stability and as a mitigator of regional conflicts.

Instead, unforgivable errors by the US-led occupation, compounded with decades of attrition due to oppression, war and sanctions and deeper innate problems and limitations of Iraqi society, conspired to reduce Iraq to a battleground of regional and factional rivalries and an open field for excesses and abuse.

A new dawn seemed to emerge with the selection of Haider al-Abadi as prime minister in the aftermath of the catastrophic loss of Mosul to the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014. A decent, energetic and unassuming figure, Abadi injected into the Iraqi political debate no-

tions of genuine reform.

While being overwhelmed by events and outmanoeuvred by entrenched interests, Abadi maintained his resolve and continues to wage a focused battle towards a new system of governance, away from the autocracy but also away from the dysfunction of an incapacitated central government, a fertile ground for corruption and kleptocracy.

As valiant as Abadi's efforts appear to be, the cards are stacked against him, unless determined support is offered by the United States.

Iraq faces two major conflicts. Handling any one of the two is an extremely demanding task; tackling both is a gargantuan burden.

Whether due to improvisation, incompetence, *naïveté* or to the deliberate subversion by detractors of a would-be forward-looking model of governance, Iraq inherited from the US-led occupation the structural shackles of a system that obstructs the emergence of a powerful centre without properly delegating authority to the periphery.

More dramatically, it is a system that features few checks against a steady descent towards kleptocracy – through which the political class appropriates much of the country's wealth – and provides no path against the vertical segregation, along sectarian and provincial lines, in which thrive political parties with factional narratives.

With revenues deeply affected

by the cataclysmic collapse of oil prices, the sustainability of the system was put in question but the resilience of entrenched interests remains too powerful to overcome.

Abandoned by the United States, which appears from Baghdad as a superpower whimsically revising its existential role on the global scene, but also ostracised by most of its neighbours who have failed to adjust to its new realities, Iraq was left open to Iranian influence – at times out of necessity, at others out of compulsion.

The Iranian "engagement" in Iraq is far from localised. A tried-and-true formula thoroughly tested in Lebanon sees Iran firmly taking root in segments of Iraqi society, bypassing normal international relations channels and creating parallel institutions with, at best, questionable loyalties.

In Lebanon, Iran introduced Hezbollah initially as a manifestation of a local Lebanese resistance momentum, before graduating it into an advance force with open allegiance to Tehran. In Iraq, Iran has multiple pressure points but the Popular Mobilisation Forces offer Tehran the best path towards creating a parallel Iraqi order, towards which Iraq itself has little leverage.

Can Abadi check the interests of kleptocracy, tame corruption and introduce a service and delivery oriented system of governance, while facing the Iranian Leviathan, in its many manifestations – not to mention the equally visceral

The Popular Mobilisation Forces offer Tehran the best path towards creating a parallel Iraqi order.

threats of terrorism and secession?

Left to its own capacity, the prospects for an Iraqi recovery in which the dual goals of state power and sound governance are achieved are rather grim. Yet, the survival of Iraq is of vital importance, not solely for Iraqis, but for regional and international security and stability. Abadi thus needs regional and international support in disentangling the two severe conflicts that Iraq faces to get a fair chance of success.

Regional stakeholders in Iraqi stability must overcome the odd combinations of fatalism, short-sightedness and utter sectarianism that have plagued their policies towards this crucial country. Arab governments have plenty of remedial efforts to show to restore the broken bond between Iraq and its natural environment. The main reconsideration, however, is due in Washington, whose policy towards Iraq has been mostly rabbit-like.

Iraqis are evidently to blame for their plight but they are far from being the only ones. What Baghdad needs from Washington is a steady hand that recognises the gravity of the double challenge faced by Abadi, a challenge that needs to be split back into domestic and regional elements, with help and support provided accordingly.

Hassan Mneimneh, a scholar at the Middle East Institute in Washington, is principal at Middle East Alternatives.

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