

Local, Hybrid, and Sub-State Forces in Afghanistan & Iraq

The Global Public Policy Institute (GPPI) in Berlin, the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), the Institute for Regional and International Studies (IRIS) at the American University in Sulaimani in Iraq won a three-year grant from the Netherlands Research Organization's to explore Local, Hybrid and Substate Security Forces (LHSF) in Afghanistan, Iraq, and, in a more limited vein, in Syria. The project will run from August 2016 to August 2019 and analyze the impact of LHSFs from a comprehensive security perspective, with special attention to how these forces are affected by foreign support and transnational or regional security threats. Working jointly, the three organizations will map prevalent LHSF dynamics and models, and conduct independent field research into the role played by different LHSFs in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the impact for local and national dynamics. The field research will be the base for a variety of different research products by the three lead research organizations, including documentation of ongoing trends, at least three thematic or comparative pieces, and short analytical pieces or memorandum applying the lessons from the research to critical programmatic or policy concerns.

Thematic Focus and Research Questions

Security assistance for non-state militias or local defence forces is having a comeback. Abandoned or failed by national security forces, many local communities have turned to non-state actors or local defense forces for protection. Regional, national or subnational political actors have also hedged their bets by developing or protecting militia or hybrid forces. International actors have also increasingly gotten involved. Wary of committing international troops and theorizing that community-driven, locally tailored responses may be more effective and legitimate, Western donors increasingly address transnational security concerns by supporting local security forces – including sub-national state actors, non-state militias, or hybrid community defence forces. Afghanistan has been a laboratory for LHSFs since 2002, most recently the country-wide Afghan Local Police program with community members trained and equipped by US Special Forces. In Iraq, the US, UK, German, Italian, Canadian, and Dutch governments, among others, provide trainers and equipment to Kurdish Peshmerga fighters. The US, UK and France support Syrian rebel groups fighting ISIL. Western actors are not alone: regional actors such as Iran and Turkey have backed local forces in Iraq and Syria.

LHSFs are framed as an attractive solution because they know the local terrain and threats, and may be more dedicated to containing local insecurity to protect their communities. However, these assumptions are often not realized in practice. Transnational security threats and a multitude of intervening actors may complicate the effectiveness of purely local security forces. In practice, such groups may not be responsive or accountable to communities; may undermine state-building and the rule of law; or sometimes engage in abusive behaviour. Donors have responded by increasing oversight, vetting, or other mechanisms to check militia behaviour or mitigate unintended side effects. However, these have not always worked as intended, and sometimes bring additional unintended consequences of their own.

This research will explore each of these issues in turn, examining the following major research questions or approaches concurrently to provide a true comprehensive security assessment:

- **Security impact:** Key questions: What has been the contribution of LHSFs in addressing recent or ongoing security concerns in Iraq? Is there any evidence that LHSFs fare better or worse against transnational elements than state forces? In addition to supporting tactical gains against ISIL or opposition elements, is there evidence that LHSFs increase stability? Does reliance on these groups have negative repercussions for other security concerns, such as on inter-ethnic, inter-communal, or inter-state violence?
- **Inclusiveness and local empowerment:** Are these actors perceived as legitimate or representative by local communities? Are local communities able to exercise meaningful control and influence over local security forces acting in their name, and hold them accountable for their behavior? Given that many of these groups are viewed as no more than proxies for other regional or national actors, is local legitimacy and accountability realistic?
- **State-building, rule of law and governance:** How does the proliferation or reliance on LHSFs impact long-term political and conflict dynamics? How does empowering local security actors affect the development of the rule of law and legitimate governance, both locally and nationally? Is there potential for internationally-sponsored militias to rival state-led armed services, undermine the state's monopoly on violence, and weaken overall stability?
- **Do no harm:** What is the impact of a rise in LHSFs for civilian protection and other humanitarian concerns? Where LHSFs are supported, how do mechanisms such as human rights screening or vetting, training or other donor-enforced accountability mechanisms for those supported work in practice? What is the impact of different transnational donors and constituencies, some of whom are less concerned about human rights, on these mechanisms?

Research Outputs and Results

The project began in August 2016 with a mapping of existing literature on LHSFs. Field research began in both Iraq and Afghanistan in 2017, however, the research is not designed to be identical or parallel in both countries. Instead it will respond to the level of existing documentation, the relevant policy and practitioner questions, and the overall nature of LHSFs in each country. The field research will be used to develop a series of different research products. These might include blogs or short analytical pieces that respond to a current policy issue or share immediate field research findings, longer form articles that share some of the documentation from Iraq or Afghanistan at greater length or delve into a particular thematic issue, or comparative or survey pieces that explore findings from both countries, or from Syria.

At the end of first year of this project, in August 2017, the Consortium had produced:

- Two background literature reviews assessing existing research related to the key questions in Afghanistan and Iraq; these studies not only surveyed the gaps or open questions in existing research but identified key trends and patterns in LHSF mobilization and activities in both countries;
- Two investigative dispatches sharing the preliminary research in Afghanistan – exploring foreign accountability mechanisms and the state of play of the largest LHSF group in Afghanistan, the ALP;
- An extended website containing 18 distinct articles providing the results and analysis of field research into the role and impact of LHSFs in 11 areas in Iraq.

This project is not only about producing evidence-based research, but applying it to critical policy and programmatic issues, and sharing with relevant policymaker, practitioner, and academic audiences. Although preliminary findings have been shared with key stakeholders throughout the research, a critical component of the second year of the project will be greater knowledge sharing and outreach, in addition to continuing field research in Iraq and Afghanistan.