Tomorrow's Affairs
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Assessment of tomorrow

By: TA | AP Insight

Iraq is facing increased pressure from the US due to the actions of Iran-allied forces

Strikes launched by the U.S. and Saudi Arabia against Iran-allied fighters in Iraq have put Iraq's government in a delicate position — and not for the first time.

Since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, Iraq has walked a tightrope between Washington and Tehran, seeking to avoid becoming a battleground for rival powers.

The balancing act has only grown more fraught since the U.S. and Israel went to war with Iran in February.

Saudi Arabia had accused Iraqi armed groups of using drones to attack its oil facilities.

The retaliatory strikes in Iraq hit bases of the Popular Mobilization Forces, a collection of armed groups close to Iran that are officially part of Iraq's security forces but often operate outside of state control.

The groups have also attacked U.S. forces who are in Iraq at the invitation of the government.

The Iraqi government has given non-state armed groups until the end of September to disarm, but some of the most powerful — and the closest to Iran — have said they have no intention of doing so.

U.S. President Donald Trump has been effusive in his praise of Iraq's new Prime Minister Ali al-Zaidi, a political outsider and fellow businessman.

But the Iraqi leader is likely to face mounting U.S. pressure to rein in the PMF, and confronting them directly could lead to internal unrest.

The Iran-backed groups have fought Islamic State extremists and the US

The PMF is a coalition of primarily Shiite, Iran-backed armed groups that joined in the fight against the Islamic State group after it seized large sections of Iraq in 2014. Some have roots in the Shiite insurgency that erupted after the 2003 invasion.

During the war against IS, the PMF were allies of convenience with a U.S.-led international coalition battling the Sunni extremists.

In 2016, Iraq designated the PMF as an "independent military formation" within the armed forces, but many of the factions remain largely autonomous.

> Since the U.S. and Israel attacked Iran, Iraqi militias have launched regular attacks on U.S. military bases and diplomatic facilities

Lahib Higel, an expert at the International Crisis Group, an international think tank, said that despite officially reporting to the Iraqi military command, most of the PMF brigades "have kind of retained the same command structure as they had when they were their individual groups."

Since the U.S. and Israel attacked Iran on Feb. 28, Iraqi militias have launched regular attacks on U.S. military bases and diplomatic facilities as well as other sites, including energy infrastructure.

Saudi Arabia blamed the Iraqi groups for drone attacks

Saudi Arabia blamed Iran-backed Iraqi militias for launching drone attacks on Monday and Tuesday, some of which targeted petroleum facilities.

The Iraqi armed groups have denied any role in the attacks. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq, an umbrella group of Iran-backed armed factions, described the Saudi claims as "fabrications" and an "attempt to justify their inability to respond to the painful Yemeni strikes that have targeted the heart of their infrastructure."

It implied that the attacks were carried out by

Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels, who had themselves claimed to have attacked Saudi oil facilities.

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Iraq's National Security Council condemned the U.S.-Saudi strikes, saying they had killed and injured "a number of innocent people" and undermined the Iraqi state.

It said the strikes came while the Iraqi government was actively investigating and trying to address the Saudi and American concerns. It said Iraq remains committed to ensuring the withdrawal of U.S. forces and consolidating arms under state control.

The PMF said the strikes killed at least 20 of its members and wounded 32.

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Disarmament poses a dilemma for the Iraqi government

Al-Zaidi came to power as a consensus candidate in Iraq earlier this year after months of deadlock following last year's parliamentary elections.

He was backed by a coalition of Shiite parties allied with Iran, but also received the blessing of Trump, who welcomed him at the White House this month.

The prime minister has vowed to disarm non-state groups, saying they will have no justification to retain their weapons after Sept. 30 — the deadline for U.S. troops stationed in Iraq to complete their withdrawal.

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But Iraq faces a similar dilemma to Lebanon, where another U.S.-backed government is under mounting pressure to disarm the Iran-backed Hezbollah.

If they move too aggressively, it could spark fighting in countries with bitter histories of civil conflict. If they move too slowly, they risk U.S. anger — and in Lebanon's case, a prolonged Israeli occupation.

Iraq's predicament is in some ways easier, as some of the PMF factions could be integrated into the armed forces and brought fully under the military's command. But others, like the powerful Kataib Hezbollah — which is especially close to Iran — have refused.

"Everyone knows that this is a process that is going to take months if not years," Higel said of the disarmament effort. "And you only have a handful that have agreed to it, while those that are the sort of self-described resistance groups have rejected it."

As long as the U.S.-Iran war continues, she said, it's unlikely that the holdouts will yield. They "view themselves as a part of Iran's regional network. And this is their moment to fight."