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Speaker: Dr. Renad Mansour, Research Fellow in the Middle East and North Africa Programme and Project Director of the Iraq Initiative at Chatham House

Chair: Professor Sanam Vakil, Adjunct Professor of Middle East Studies at Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe, Bologna, Italy

**“Between "State" and "Non-State": Hybrid Armed Actors in Iraq?”**

*States and Non-state Actors in the Middle East Series*

The current political situation in Iraq has developed into a complex and fragmented state with the proliferation of powerful non-state actors despite numerous attempts from domestic and foreign powers to stabilise or control the region. In his talk at SAIS Europe, Dr Mansour argues that defining the numerous influential groups across Iraq as either state or non-state misses the nuances of the situation on the ground and hinders the success of policy in the region, as many groups work both as a part of state structures as well as outside state control. Interestingly, however, many of these actors show a desire to be formalised in the state structure to benefit from the legitimacy and financial advantages it lends.

As Dr Mansour highlights, a state can be defined through a variety of theoretical frameworks and by considering the state as combining decision-making authority or power, the capacity to enact policies, and public legitimacy, some previously considered non-state actors become state-like. This is seen more clearly through the example of Hizballah in Lebanon; however, similarities can be drawn across the complex networks of Popular Mobilization Units in Iraq and how they work with the current Iraqi state. These groups are more than warlords, criminals or insurgents, they resemble parastatal actors.

The history of these actors in Iraq lends some clarity on how they developed into state-like actors and how and why they have become successful. When the US entered Iraq in 2003, in deposing Saddam Hussein, they weakened the state leaving a vacuum at the top layers of each ministry, which allowed for the looting of the state. In its place an ‘elite pact’ entailing proportional representation of each major ethnic-religious-political movement was instated in the country. However, the lack of fair democracy ultimately appears to have doomed this system. This weakness in the state apparatus, including the military, allowed for the pervasive growth of parastate actors that resemble states at times but also are not accountable to the state, such as the PMUs, the KDP or PUK peshmergas and Sunni tribal forces..

These groups control large swathes of land in Iraq with swiftly changing borders between areas as they rise and fall in influence. The PMUs for example, are a collection of about 50 parastatal armed groups in networks of around 60,000 people and each of the brigades are numbered and recorded. They collect salaries from the central government. In March of 2019, their salaries were put on par with the Iraqi security forces salaries. Some of these members are also official members of ministries in Iraq. They collect taxes from those transporting oil, gas, and other commodities through their regions and have economic policies

for them. In addition, checkpoints between areas are manned by both PMU and Iraqi army officers lending another layer of legitimacy and cooperation to the militia's relationship with the state.

However, the PMU also operate outside of the traditional legal frameworks of the state, fighting with various groups, and often act with impunity. Furthermore, the different militia have a varied collection of ideologies and Dr Mansour argues they work as a collection of social networks rather than one consolidated structure which makes its engagement as a state actor complex. As he details, these actors in part wish to be a part of the state, to confirm their legitimacy and standing in society as well as to capitalise on the riches of the Iraqi state, however, they do not want to become accountable to centralised command structures or fall under ministries of defence or interior, undermining the likelihood of this.

Thus, the groups appear to be straddle the line of "formal" state and "informal" non-state actors with varying perceptions of legitimacy. However, as Dr Mansour concludes, these groups are part of the competition of the state in post-2003 Iraq. Therefore, the idea of integrating these groups into some armed infrastructure misses the political and socio-economic nature of these groups and as such becomes an impossible Weberian ideal.