
WHAT ARE IRAQ'S POPULAR MOBILIZATION UNITS DOING IN BEIRUT?

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BEIRUT □ A hotel in Beirut was the scene of a series of secret meetings Aug. 8-11 between a diplomatic delegation that included representatives from Western countries and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and a delegation composed of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) leaders. The meetings were not covered in the media and no press statements were issued; the outcomes of the discussions were not made public. However, Al-Monitor was able to meet with a PMU faction leader who participated in those meetings at a hotel he was staying at in Beirut's surroundings. The leader spoke on condition of anonymity about the meetings in Beirut and the situation in Baghdad.

The meetings were kept secret for several reasons, including security considerations so as to ensure the safety of the members of the Western delegation and Iraqi attendees that included military officials. Also, it is worth noting that the relations between the PMU and the countries represented in the delegation are not public.

The PMU delegation left Beirut feeling more confident about its position and its future. The PMU leader promised Al-Monitor more advanced political developments in the relationship between the PMU and the West after the liberation of Mosul. If liberating Fallujah brought us to Beirut, what will the liberation of Mosul bring? he said.

The text of the interview follows:

Al-Monitor: What can you tell us about the meeting?

PMU leader: This meeting was held as a result of efforts deployed by one of the UN organizations operating in Iraq today [which he did not disclose]. Several weeks ago, this organization suggested to the PMU leadership to meet with several Western diplomats involved in the Iraqi situation and its developments. After liberating Fallujah in June 2016, the diplomats exerted more pressure to meet with us. The only problem was the time and place of the meeting, but we finally agreed to

meet here in Beirut.

AI-Monitor: Can you tell us who participated in the meeting?

PMU leader: The PMU was represented by a delegation of 12 people, representing most of the PMU leaderships in Iraq including brigades commanders, politicians and officials in charge of the various activities of our team. The other party was composed of a large number of Western diplomats from several countries, including Norway, Spain, the Netherlands, Canada, Australia, Italy and Germany, as well as representatives of NGOs and of course the UN organization that launched the initiative. Each of these delegations was composed of one or more officials from [the country's] foreign ministry, as well as one or more diplomats from the country's embassies in Beirut or Baghdad.

Two main parties involved in our cause – namely the United States and Britain – were absent from the meeting, although we were asked when we were invited to the meeting whether we had any reservations about meeting them. We asserted that we had no reservations at all. But we later found out from some of the participants in Beirut that the Americans and the British preferred not to participate in this meeting, and rather test the waters [of this first meeting] and gather information from their allies [Western delegation] before holding a direct dialogue with us.

AI-Monitor: What did they [the United States and Britain] want to check, and what were the issues discussed at the meetings?

PMU leader: Discussions lasted for several hours [every day] and covered almost everything. The Western delegation wanted to meet with us for several reasons. First, the delegation members wanted to know how we see the future of the regulatory and institutional relationship between us [PMU] and the Iraqi government authorities. They know that a government decree was issued under No. 91, which approved the integration of the PMU into the official Iraqi authority. This is why they [Western delegation] wanted to know if we intend to fully merge within the Iraqi army. Our answer was clear. We will be a military force that is part of the Iraqi state, but not part of the Iraqi army. This is due to many reasons that we explained to them, namely the corruption spread within the Iraqi government institutions, and I think they understood our point of view. We made it clear that we will be an alternative army subordinated to the state, just like Iran's [Islamic] Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Second, the Western delegation wanted to know if we are ready to integrate into the political process in Iraq. We were also clear on this point; we asserted that we launched preparations to run in the upcoming Iraqi parliamentary elections in 2017. It seemed clear that the Western delegation expects us to score significant results in these elections and this is why they asked us about our

vision of future alliances, the shape of power in Baghdad and the various scenarios after the elections. They also asked us about our perception on many issues related to the concept of governance, including our relations with the Iraqi internal parties and our stance on the regional and neighboring powers and entities.

Al-Monitor: What were your answers to those questions?

PMU leader: We were clear and firm. We asserted that we have no other enemy in Iraq but terrorism and extremist organizations represented by the Islamic State, and we have no problem with any other party. In terms of our relations with the various components of the Iraqi people, we stressed that the PMU emerged from all spectrums of the Iraqi people. The Western participants noticed from the start of our meetings that our delegation is composed of members representing the various spectrums of the Iraqi people, as we included Shiite officials, two commanders from the Sunni factions within the PMU as well as a commander of a Christian faction too.

As for the neighboring countries, we explained that we want our country to be sovereign and stable and to open up to its regional surrounding. This is what we will seek to achieve.

Al-Monitor: Is there something special that drew your attention during the meeting?

PMU leader: All of the members of our delegation agreed that the discussions with the German delegation were the highlight of the meetings. The Germans made sure to meet our delegation privately for an entire day and to rediscuss all of the issues [that were discussed with the rest of the delegation]. After hours of dialogue, the senior member of the German delegation told us, "We believe that you will win the next elections, and you will be key partners in the governance of Iraq. Therefore, the PMU and the West must be aware of the importance of this victory and start acting on this basis."

And because they insisted on meeting us alone and discussing the same issues, we deduced that the Germans were actually representing the United States □ which was absent from the meetings □ and that this meeting is a preliminary step that paves the way for subsequent direct or indirect contacts [with the United States].

Kaynak/Source: