

Iraq Faces the “Ninety-Day Test”

(Translated)

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In Iraq, Ali Al-Zaidi's plan to consolidate arms under state control appears to be more than just a new security measure, and the ninety-day deadline is not merely a fleeting truce between armed factions and the United States. Underlying this deadline is a deeper question: Can the government transition Iraq from a phase of managing armed forces to one where weaponry is fully subject to state authority—without sliding into internal conflict or once again turning the country into an arena for regional strife?

Consolidating arms is not solely a military matter; it is a test of the Iraqi state's nature, the future of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), relations with Iran and the US, and the government's ability to craft a settlement that safeguards Iraq's interests and sovereignty.

According to reports citing Ali Al-Zaidi, the plan entails an initial ninety-day phase during which factions would halt attacks in exchange for immunity from US strikes. This serves as a prelude to subsequent stages addressing weaponry, the status of fighters, and the organization of armed formations, culminating in a final phase reportedly targeted for June 2027.

However, these timelines should not be viewed as a finalized agreement endorsed by all parties, given the ongoing negotiations and conflicting statements regarding the plan's details and phases.

Nevertheless, the significance of the ninety-day period lies not in the date itself, but in the opportunity it offers to break the cycle of reciprocal attacks and to foster a political and security environment conducive to discussing the future of these arms.

From Halting Attacks to Reorganizing Arms

A pivotal element of the plan lies in the attempt to shift focus from the weapons themselves to halting their use in the first instance. If attacks cease, the likelihood of a military response diminishes, making negotiations regarding the future of these arms more feasible. However, a period of calm—no matter how long—does not necessarily equate to a resolution; it could merely be a temporary freezing of the conflict unless it evolves into clear understandings and binding implementation mechanisms.

Baghdad is not negotiating with a single entity; the Iran-linked armed factions are not a monolithic bloc. They differ in their political affiliations, military capabilities, institutional ties to the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), and the degree of autonomy in their decision-making. It would be a mistake to assume they all operate under a unified command center, just as it would be an error to overlook Iran's influence on their calculations. Iran maintains deep ties with various Iraqi forces, making its stance a potentially decisive factor in the success or failure of any settlement.

Nevertheless, the calculations of these factions cannot be reduced solely to Iran's position; they also harbor internal interests and considerations regarding their political standing and future within the Iraqi state. Herein lies Al-Zaidi's challenge: transforming the move away from independent armed activity into a viable political and institutional path.

Can Arms Be Brought Under State Control Without Bloodshed?

If the likelihood of direct confrontation with the United States recedes, and the justifications cited by certain factions for attacking U.S. forces and interests weaken, some groups may find that transitioning to political and institutional engagement is a more realistic course of action than continuing the confrontation. However, a faction that has held onto its weapons for years will not view relinquishing them merely as an administrative procedure. It seeks clarity regarding the fate of its leadership and fighters, its political standing, and the guarantees that will prevent it from being targeted once its military role concludes. This does

not imply granting immunity from the law; rather, it entails establishing a clear legal pathway to address the status of fighters and to distinguish between individual liability for violations and the reorganization of institutions and armed formations.

The true challenge lies not in persuading parties willing to negotiate, but in dealing with those who refuse to surrender their independent military decision-making. If the deadline expires with factions still outside the agreement, the government will face its toughest test: whether to resort to force to enforce the decision, continue negotiations, or combine political and security-related pressure.

The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)... The Most Sensitive Issue

There is a fundamental difference between dismantling factions and reorganizing them within state institutions. The PMF has become an integral part of Iraq's official structure, accumulating various formations, leadership hierarchies, budgets, and political positions. Consequently, addressing this issue cannot be reduced to a simple equation of "weapons in exchange for disbandment." The issue requires reorganizing the military structure, ensuring strict adherence to official institutions, and curbing the ability of any formation to operate outside the state's chain of command.

However, the success of this process hinges on critical details: Who holds the authority to issue orders? How will units be organized? What will become of the leadership? And how can the rights of fighters be guaranteed within a unified legal framework? Consolidating control over arms is not achieved merely by changing labels or redistributing formations; rather, it requires ending the autonomy of military decision-making, ensuring that no armed force outside state institutions holds the power to decide on war and peace.

Washington and Tehran: Between Pressure and Settlement

From the US perspective, halting attacks by these factions offers an immediate security gain by reducing threats to American forces and interests. However, accepting a truce—if officially confirmed—does not necessarily mean Washington is abandoning its goal of curbing the military capabilities of Iran-linked factions. In this context, a truce could serve as a way to give the political process a chance, rather than continuing the cycle of reciprocal strikes.

As for Iran, it could act either as an obstacle to or a contributor to a settlement, depending on how it assesses the impact on its influence within Iraq. If it perceives that reorganizing the distribution of arms does not entail sidelining its allied political forces, it might find it in its interest to support a gradual transition. Conversely, if it views the plan as a direct assault on its influence, the stance of certain factions could harden.

The Ninety-Day Window: The State's Test Begins

Current regional and domestic conditions may offer an opportunity to revisit the issue of arms control more seriously. Yet, this opportunity will not translate into a genuine achievement simply through the announcement of a truce; success depends on the government's ability to turn that truce into actionable understandings and, subsequently, into real institutional reorganization.

If the government succeeds in stabilizing the calm, establishing mutual guarantees, and bringing armed groups under the rule of law, the process of consolidating arms could serve as a gateway to rebuilding the state. However, if the de-escalation collapses at the first test, or if the plan devolves into an open confrontation between the government and the factions, Iraq may remain trapped in the cycle of conflict it has been trying to escape for years.