

The Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq

Regional Dynamics and Local Variables

Abdullah Al Jbour
March 2021



The PMF has emerged at a time when major international coalitions had failed to eliminate ISIS in Iraq, where it was causing great turmoil.



The PMF includes large-, medium-, and small-scale armed groups, including those with prior experience and arms training before the PMF was founded, as well those with military experience from the Iraqi army.



The overlapping political, religious, and partisan spheres transformed the idea of the PMF from a short-term initiative with a single goal to a permanent entity with diverse political and ideological objectives, therefore it has strayed from its purpose.

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Contents

Introduction	7
The Emergence of the PMF in Iraq	9
Internal PMF Affairs	12
Internal Conflicts in the PMF before the Assassination of Soleimani and Al-Muhandis	15
The PMF after the assassination of Soleimani and al-Muhandis	17
From Combatting ISIS to Suppressing Protests	18
The Leadership and Organizational Structure of the PMF	21
National Implications in Iraq	24
Implications beyond Iraq	26
Recommendations	27
References	29

1

Introduction

Iraq has endured decades of tragedy and chaos and is one of the countries in the Arab world that has dealt with the most interference in its domestic affairs. It has been used as an arena of conflict in struggles over political, economic, and ideological influence in the region. Because of its geopolitical position, it has also been a target for many different armed groups with various ideologies and aims. For decades, Iraq's lifeblood has been spilt, whether in the name of religion or the name of democracy. In both cases, the price has been paid by the Iraqi people, who only want a safe, stable, and independent country.

Iraq has dealt with a wide array of armed groups across the spectrum, including both Iraqi and foreign organizations, those that existed prior to 2003, and others that emerged after the fall of the regime in support of foreign interests, especially Iran. Iran has begun to rethink its modes and mechanisms of influence in response to regional dynamics, particularly the growing societal rejection of sectarianism and religious identity, especially among the new generation in Iraq and Lebanon. This

trend away from religion among youth has been reflected in the Arab world as a whole, according to studies and polls about religion and religiosity in the region.

This analytical paper aims to examine the emergence and development of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraqi society, as well as the ideological and organizational shifts in the PMF's approach since it was founded in 2014, and how these transformations have shaped the relationship between the PMF, the state, and civil society. This paper also traces the different domestic and foreign allegiances of PMF factions, and how the idea of the PMF has been employed to reestablish Iranian influence in Iraq. Finally, it considers potential scenarios for the future.

This paper's methodology draws upon an analysis of a selection of studies and reports related to the PMF and militias in Iraq, as well as tracking media discourse and official PMF publications. The author had travelled to Germany in July 2019 to interview religious authorities from both Iran and Iraq while

they were participating in the Religions for Peace conference. Also, during a trip to Lebanon in October 2019, he carried out a field study of protests discourse among young men and women in various areas of Lebanon. Additionally, he travelled to Turkey in September 2020 to conduct interviews with activists and youth leaders from Iraqi civil society organizations. Some of these interviews were with activists who had led the October protest movement in the southern governorates and in Baghdad, and then fled to Turkey because of threats from militias. Other interviews were with civil society activists based in Iraq, including government officials and former PMF volunteers, were conducted remotely.

The statistics related to the PMF in published reports and studies are different from one report to another. Therefore, this study draws upon data from an analytical paper on the PMF published by the researcher and the security expert Hisham Al-Hashimi five days before he was killed in July 2020. The researcher has chosen to use these statistics for several reasons. First, al-Hashimi had excellent professional and scholarly credentials, and his report reflects this, and is also consistent with the numbers given by former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi in TV interviews. Secondly, al-Hashimi had a close relationship with decision-makers, a regular presence in the prime minister's office, and a relatively cordial

relationship with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the former deputy commander the PMF. He was also close to Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, who served as director of the Iraqi National Intelligence Service before becoming prime minister¹.

¹ Hisham al-Hashimi, "Internal Conflicts in the PMF," analytical paper published by the Center for Policy-Making for International and Strategic Studies, Istanbul, 1 July 2020, <https://www.makingpolicies.org/ar/posts/internal-dispute-in-alhashd-alshaabi.php>. Al-Hashimi held the position of lead researcher and expert on security affairs and extremist organizations.

2

The Emergence of the PMF in Iraq

At a time when major international coalitions had failed to eliminate ISIS in Iraq, where it was causing great turmoil, the PMF emerged in response to a fatwa issued by the Shi'ite marja' in Iraq, Ali al-Sistani². This fatwa on "al-Jihad al-Kefa'ey" - collective duty of jihad - called on able-bodied Iraqi civilians to take up arms, and to volunteer for the Iraqi army in order to fight ISIS, which had taken control of Mosul, the second largest Iraqi city, and committed a series of war crimes, including targeted killings along sectarian lines and bombing religious sites that were sacred to Shi'ites. ISIS then started to turn towards Baghdad, with its sights set on the region of Najaf southwest of the capital, which contains important Shi'ite religious sites.

Al-Sistani's fatwa spread further through a Friday sermon given by the representative of the Shi'ite reference "Marja'iyya" in Karbala, Shaykh Abdul Mahdi al-Karbalai, on 13 June 2014³,

in which he emphasized the "need to organize volunteer operations and to incorporate volunteers within the official Iraqi military and security forces, and not to allow armed groups to operate outside legal frameworks under any circumstances."⁴ This prompted Nouri al-Maliki's government to endorse the fatwa and to supply these groups, particularly the armed factions operating under the umbrella of the PMF, with the necessary resources and equipment. These included groups of civilians who had volunteered to take up arms after the fatwa, and groups that had been in Iraq both before and after the fall of the regime in 2003. Because they received military backing and resources from Tehran, these groups were able to control more administrative, field, and leadership positions in the PMF than other groups⁵, as will be explained later in more detail.

² Website of the Shi'ite marja' in Iraq, Ali al-Sistani. www.sistani.org

³ PMF media directorate, <http://al-hashed.net/>

⁴ See the text of the "collective duty" fatwa as published on al-Sistani's website: <https://www.sistani.org/arabic/archive/24918/>

⁵ Interview with an Iraqi government employee on 5 October 2020

The PMF was able to provide logistical field support to the Iraqi army, while PMF factions inflicted significant losses on ISIS and were able to stop its advance. The PMF succeeded also, in liberating areas that had been under ISIS control for many years. Nouri al-Maliki's government embraced the PMF's work and wanted to keep it going, so they provided both material aid and political support for the factions working as organized forces in the field. Of course, most of these were Iranian-aligned factions, so the monthly distribution of aid to PMF members became more stratified. Some of the payments were roughly equivalent to the monthly salaries of the Iraqi army, while others were only half that amount or sometimes even less, which consequently led to problems and accusations that the state's resources were underwriting Iranian activities in Iraq and in the region,⁶ which sparked internal conflict in the PMF.

At the same time, the Iranian-aligned factions within the PMF took advantage of this legitimacy to undertake armed operations to expand their scope both within Iraq and abroad. The new Tehran-Beirut corridor passed through Iraq towards Syria and Lebanon, in an effort to reproduce the Lebanese experience on the one hand, and also to reestablish influence through a

decentralized strategy based on networking and building factions with many different names and orientations, as will be explained later.

Haider al-Abadi's government, which assumed power in September 2014 tried to reorganize the PMF, institutionalize Iraqi identity in the forces, and integrate the PMF within state institutions in order to block efforts by Iranian-aligned militias and factions to infiltrate and internationalize the PMF. However, the government's efforts failed because of the widening scope of these militias, which were keen to establish a wing of factions under the PMF umbrella, while also maintaining another wing of factions outside the PMF. The latter allowed them to operate freely outside the PMF law, which required them to obey state security orders and to integrate their factions within the institution of the army. This was something the militias did not want and tried to avoid, due to the nature of their operations, which stretched beyond the Iraqi state to Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen⁷.

On 26 November 2016, the Iraqi Council of Representatives ratified a law formalizing the status of the PMF within the state, despite a boycott from Sunni representatives. The law stipulated that PMF forces would function as

⁶ Interview with head of an Iraqi civil society foundation specialized in research and studies, September 2020

⁷ Interview with an Iraqi researcher specialized in religious groups, September 2020

a reserve force working alongside the Iraqi armed forces and would be linked to their general commander. The main justification given for ratifying the law was that it would honor PMF volunteers who had helped protect the Iraqi state from ISIS attacks, and from all forces that threatened Iraq and its new regime.⁸ However, an Iraqi security expert claimed that the PMF law was actually the result of political pressure and was thus an ill-conceived and rushed initiative from both a legal and military perspective⁹.

8 Hisham al-Hashimi, "The PMF: Challenges and Solutions," *Strategic Policy Journal*, Center for Policy-Making for International and Strategic Studies, November 2017

9 Hisham al-Hashimi, "The PMF: Challenges and Solutions." Center for Policy-Making for International and Strategic Studies, Turkey, t.ly/uaJT

3

Internal PMF Affairs

The PMF includes large-, medium-, and small-scale armed groups, including those with prior experience and arms training before the PMF was founded, as well those with military experience from the Iraqi army. Also it incorporates diverse elements from across Iraq and is not limited to a single marja' or religious school of thought. Within the PMF, there are also Turkmens, Kurds, and the Christian Babylon Brigade, the latter of which helped the PMF to regain control of the cities of Baiji and Mosul.¹⁰ Additionally there were the Yazidi, Shabak, and Kaka'i forces, some of which were linked to the PMF, while others were affiliated with the Kurdistan region in Iraq, and a few to international coalition forces. Sunni tribes from former ISIS-controlled areas in the Saladin, Nineveh, and Al Anbar governorates also later joined the PMF. The number of Shi'ite and Sunni groups has continued to grow as time has passed, even though the task of the PMF as set out in the fatwa has been completed¹¹.

There is some discrepancy in the numbers of PMF members with regard to both fighters and administrative forces. In fact, there was a very large number of members at the time that the fatwa was released, although there are not official statistics because the logistical approach for recruitment was based on the idea of volunteering oneself. This included government employees, military retirees, and private sector and civil society representatives. After the defeat of ISIS, many volunteer fighters returned to their homes and felt that the national mission that they had volunteered for was over. Some volunteers stayed in the field waiting to join the army or particular factions¹². These statistics will be further discussed in greater detail, with regard to the numbers and percentages of PMF members with different sectarian affiliations and allegiances.

As a result of the growing popularity of militias that had helped fight the war against ISIS, Iranian-aligned militias shifted in 2018 from military to primarily political work. They

¹⁰ PMF online magazine, issue 1, p. 4. <http://t.ly/1PV6>

¹¹ Firas Elias, "Normalizing the PMF in Iraq," Center for Policy-Making, Istanbul, <http://t.ly/a2Aj>

¹² Interview with a former PMF volunteer in Iraq, September 2020

participated in the Iraqi parliamentary elections and won a large number of seats in parliament. In this way, the armed factions became part of the official structure of the political system, which used the tools it had on hand to deal with the opposition and the popular uprising.

The PMF Inspector General stated in an interview with Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi that there were less than 60,000 PMF members after the fall of ISIS in 2017. This referred to the number of people who received monthly salaries. However, the factions were keen to expand their fighting base and areas of control, so they had distributed salaries meant for 60,000 people among more than 150,000 people. Al-Abadi tried unsuccessfully to resolve this problem, because the number of new members increased as the number of organized militants decreased.

Of course, these numbers do not take into account other material or logistical support from Tehran for the factions working in Iraq¹³.

After Haider al-Abadi turned power over to Adil Abdul-Mahdi in October 2018, the latter sought to improve economic conditions and fight corruption. At the same time, he was occupied with the relentless Iraqi protests, i.e. the October revolution, which broke out on 1 October 2019 in Baghdad and other

southern governorates to protest deteriorating economic conditions in the country, widespread administrative corruption, and unemployment. The October protests were sparked by a number of deep-seated causes, including frustrations with injustice, exclusion, marginalization, and the suppression of freedoms, which led to the erosion of trust and lack of connection between the regime and society. The protestors, who were mostly from the younger generation, accused Abdul-Mahdi's government and the political forces of being loyal to Iran before their own country. Protestors' demands escalated to include liberating Iraq from foreign interference as well as the resignation of the Abdul-Mahdi government, forming a provisional government, and holding early elections.

Despite Abdul-Mahdi's attempts to organize the groups within the PMF, and to regularize their operations under the institutional umbrella of the military, these efforts floundered as a result of the chaos among groups and differences over religious authority *marja'*, as well as the different levels of support they received within the Iraqi parliament.

The influence of Iranian-aligned factions expanded during Abdul-Mahdi's rule. Acting in the name of the PMF, these factions were able to occupy key governmental positions, a significant portion of parliament, and to obtain their own funding and develop a

¹³ Interview with former Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi on the "Behind the Scenes" program, 16 July 2019 (between 25:00-30:00), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFCODjmrZdg>

network of domestic and foreign investors and governmental protection, which shielded them from security problems and judicial prosecution¹⁴. These factions became a cornerstone of the current Iraqi political regime, which later dealt with the opposition and protest movements using the security, political, and military tools it possessed, which is explained in the 2020 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report on Iraq¹⁵.

Abdul-Mahdi's government found itself in an embarrassing position because of its repression of protestors, and because security forces and militias had used violence against them¹⁶. According to the HRW report, there were arbitrary detentions, forced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings of protestors at the hands of the Iraqi security forces and militias at the end of May 2019, and again in another wave that lasted until the end of 2020, which led to clashes among protestors, security forces, and the PMF. The report stated that there were at least 560 protestors killed¹⁷. The Iraqi protest movement also accused Abdul-Mahdi of being overly deferential to militias loyal to

Tehran¹⁸, which started to control the inner workings of the political regime. These militias defended their legitimacy and continued to hold on via a parallel military force outside the regime, along with a corresponding political authority that tried to expand the scope of its power in both foreign and domestic arenas, particularly through working to broaden its influence in the Tehran-Beirut corridor.

14 Hisham al-Hashimi, "Internal Conflicts in the PMF," analytical paper published by the Center for Policy-Making, Istanbul, 1 July 2020, <https://www.makingpolicies.org/ar/posts/internal-dispute-in-alhashd-alshaabi.php>

15 2020 Human Rights Watch report on Iraq, <https://www.hrw.org/ar/world-report/2021/country-chapters/377380>

16 Interview with the youth leadership of civil society organizations in southern Iraq, September 2020.

17 2020 HRW report on Iraq.

18 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, analytical paper entitled, "The formation of the al-Kazemi government in Iraq: Real change or temporary settlement?" 13 May 2020, <https://www.dohainstitute.org/ar/PoliticalStudies/Pages/The-Formation-of-Al-Kazemi-Government-in-Iraq.aspx>

4

Internal Conflicts in the PMF before the Assassination of Soleimani and Al-Muhandis

During 2017-2020, the PMF experienced divisions and disagreements, during which some factions departed from the principles on which the organization had been founded. The crux of the conflict was between two different Islamic jurisprudential currents. The first group was previously led by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who followed the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei. The second current, which consisted of all the factions connected to “al-A’tabat” -the shrines of the Shi’ite Imams- in Iraq, followed Ali al-Sistani, the supreme marja’ in Najaf¹⁹. This conflict escalated to the point that al-Sistani decided to split thousands of militants who followed him from the PMF and instead place them under the Ministry of Defense. These factions included Kata’ib al-Imam Ali, Kata’ib Ali al-Akbar, the al-Abbas forces, and Liwa Ansar al-Marja’iyya²⁰.

As a result, two separate PMFs began to emerge in the minds of Iraqis and PMF volunteers. The first was the Iraqi PMF, as represented by the Grand Ayatollah in Iraq, Ali al-Sistani, and the second, the Iranian PMF, as represented by the Iranian-aligned forces in positions of authority in Iraq, and whose vision was embodied in Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

These opposing sides were both present in the government, but they had different positions on funding, ideas, and allegiances. The Islamic resistance factions included groups that had been formed before al-Sistani’s fatwa in 2014 (which established the PMF) and which saw themselves as more deserving of funding and privileges because they had fought the US presence in Iraq in the wake of 2003. These included the Badr Organization, the Asa’ib, and Kata’ib Hezbollah, which at the time represented Iranian influence in Iraq²¹.

¹⁹ Hisham al-Hashimi, “Internal Conflicts in the PMF,” analytical paper published by the Center for Policy-Making, Istanbul, 1 July 2020.

²⁰ Suadad al-Salhy, “Iraqi Shia leader Sistani moves to break Iran’s grip over militia movement,” Middle East Eye, 1 May 2020, accessed on 6 September 2020, <https://bit.ly/35S7wVq>

²¹ Hisham al-Hashimi, “Internal Conflicts in the PMF.”

The internal conflicts in the PMF have contributed to increasing insurgency by non-state actors. It is clear that political and partisan interests have become mixed up with the functions of the PMF. A group of factions is using the PMF name to strengthen their political clout, especially in parliament and other decision-making arenas, and is pursuing legislation and development programs within the state structure for the benefit of these factions. In doing so, it aims to outcompete other factions in recruitment and expansion, and has exploited the economic plight of the youth, rising unemployment, and inability of the state to meet the generation's demands. Even more importantly, it has influenced many of these youth to turn to militias working outside of the framework of the Iraqi state²².

22 Interview with an Iraqi journalist and civil society activist, October 2020.

5

The PMF after the assassination of Soleimani and al-Muhandis

Iraq found itself at a perilous crossroads after the US assassinated the leader of the Al-Quds brigades, Qassem Soleimani, and the deputy commander of the PMF, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, as well as a number of Revolutionary Guard and PMF officers near the Baghdad International Airport on 3 January 2020. Everyone was waiting for an Iranian response directed at US forces in Iraq, whether from Tehran or one of their aligned militias that represent Iran in Iraq. However, this response did not turn out in the way many had hoped or expected.

In examining the speeches of the Iranian marja', we find calls for revenge taking on a political rather than military dimension. The message of deterrence succeeded, and they used the time to build the new Tehran-Beirut corridor and reformulate their working strategy, moving towards diverse networks in order to exploit the chaos and expand spheres of influence for the "new Hezbollah" in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. This paved the way for the emergence of several armed cells, the most prominent of which are Ashab al-Kahf, Isabat al-Tha'irin,

Rab' Allah, Qabdat al-Huda, Liwa Tha'r al-Muhandis, and Liwa al-Muntaqimun. All of these groups were connected in one way or another to Kata'ib Hezbollah leadership in Iraq and to other Iranian-aligned factions, including Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Saraya Khorasani, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, and Kata'ib al-Imam Ali²³.

²³ Firas Elias, "Kata'ib Hezbollah: Shifting towards greater influence in Iraq," Center for Policy-Making <http://t.ly/A0Fr>

6

From Combatting ISIS to Suppressing Protests

As a result of the second wave of Arab protests, which have been described by observers as a second Arab Spring, demonstrations spread quickly from North Africa to the eastern Mediterranean, especially to the two main sites of the uprisings, Iraq and Lebanon, where youth adopted slogans of collective outcry, such as “All of us means all of us” and “We want a country”. This reflected the youth’s distrust and uncertainty of state institutions. Protestors adopted a new and bolder discourse, rejecting sectarian and foreign interference in national politics, and third-party involvement in political corruption. Protests are still ongoing in the Lebanese street at the end of the first decade of the Arab uprisings²⁴. At the same time, the southern Iraqi governorates continue to witness protests from youth and civil society groups that formed an organized movement despite being harassed by security forces, militias, and armed religious groups²⁵.

The anti-corruption protests of October 2019 gained new energy after Mustafa al-Kadhimi was appointed prime minister at the beginning of May 2020. The protests were geographically concentrated in areas with a Shi’ite majority in Baghdad and southern Iraq. These unprecedented demonstrations occurring amidst pressures from Iranian-backed factions resulted in the use of force against protestors, which in turn produced tensions within Shi’ite communities with regard to the continuing role of Iranian-backed militias in the PMF. These tensions became most apparent when al-Kadhimi came to visit the PMF headquarters in Baghdad and called on militias to operate within the official legal parameters, and to focus on fighting ISIS rather than acting as police against protestors²⁶.

The October protests produced major transformations within the PMF infrastructure. Iraqi civil society began to see the PMF and its factions in a negative light because some

²⁴ Field observation of Lebanese protests in various areas of Beirut, October 2019.

²⁵ Abdullah Al-Jabour, “Youth and approaches to revolution in Arab countries,” Friedrich Ebert blog, 4 January 2021, <http://t.ly/pN6U>

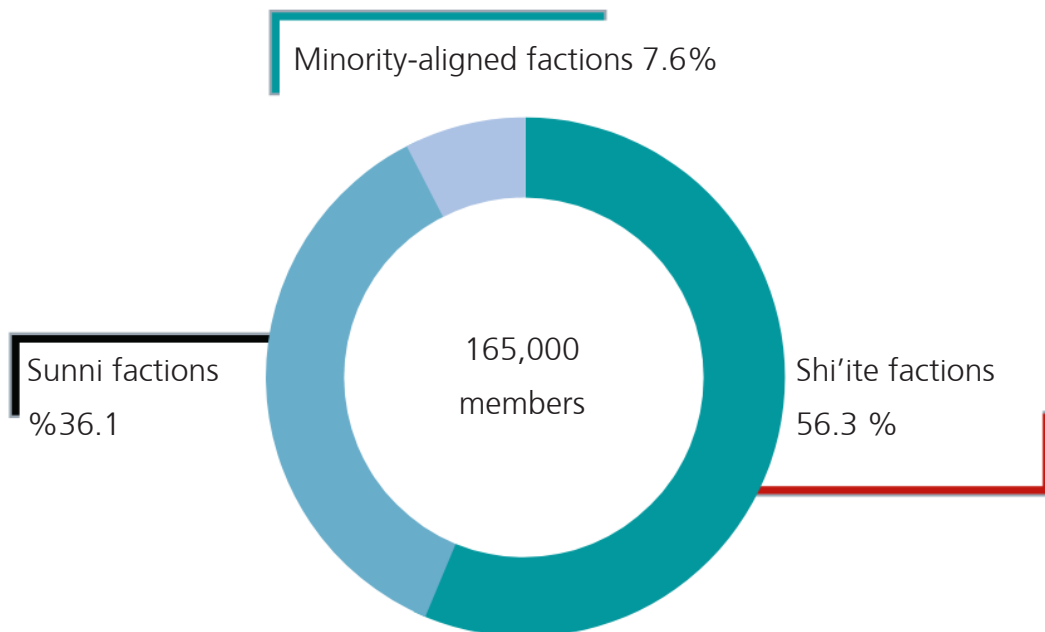
²⁶ Waleed Al-Rawi and Sterling Jensen, “The silver lining of the coronavirus pandemic in Iraq,” Carnegie Middle East Center, accessed on 4 September 2020, <http://t.ly/HyNN>

of the groups that defined themselves as PMF factions were suppressing youth protestors and those who incited protests in the Iraqi street. This included killing activists or those inciting protests, as well as youth leaders calling for change and for holding the corrupt accountable. Most importantly, the new protest discourse rejected external sectarian interference in Iraqi politics. This was a shock for the religious establishment in both Iran and Iraq, since these demands were coming from youth in southern areas of Iraq, which are Shi'ite areas in which Iran has a foothold and organizes initiatives based around sectarian

identity²⁷. This has influenced efforts to revive cross-border sectarianism in Damascus, Beirut, and Houthi areas in Yemen.

The PMF contains 164,000 members, including both fighters and logistical staff, who are distributed as follows: Until 2018- after the announcement that ISIS was defeated in Iraq- the PMF contained 67 Shi'ite factions, 43 Sunni factions, and 9 factions representing minorities in southern Iraq and the Kurdistan region.

**Figure (5-1):
The Sectarian Composition of the PMF**

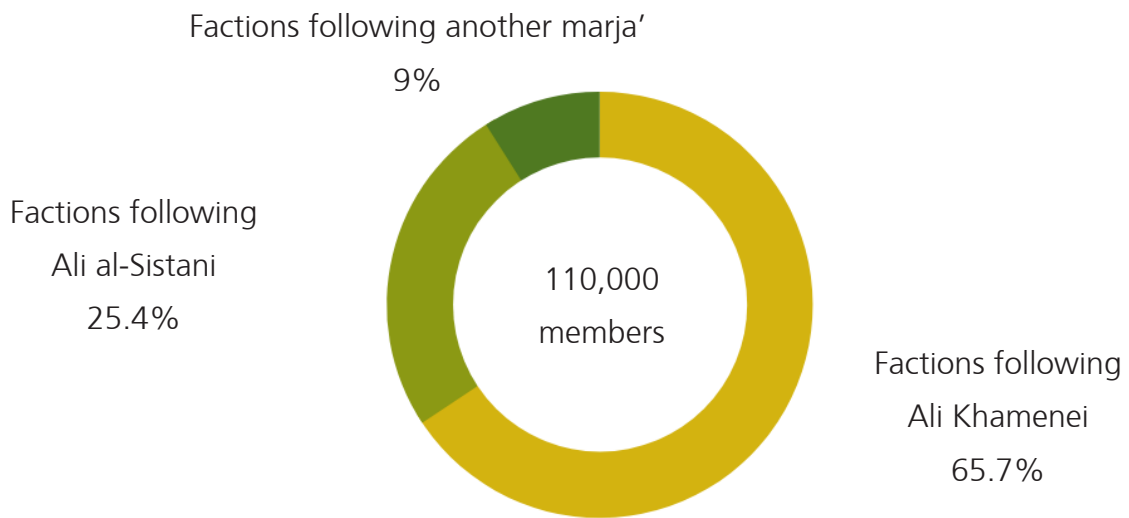


Source: Hisham al-Hashimi, "Internal Conflicts in the PMF" (analytical paper published by the Center for Policy-Making), Istanbul, 2020

²⁷ Interview with civil society activists in southern Iraq, September 2020.

The doctrinal and jurisprudential orientation of the 67 Shi'ite factions can be divided as follows: 44 factions following Ali Khamenei, 17 factions following Ali al-Sistani, and six factions following another Shi'ite marja' either in Iraq or elsewhere, which are covered by the Law number 40 of 2016. Their organizational structure is based on the Diwani orders issued in 2019 in Iraq²⁸.

**Figure (5-2):
Distribution of Shi'ite Factions According to Religious Affiliation**



Source: Hisham al-Hashimi, "Internal Conflicts in the PMF" (analytical paper published by the Center for Policy-Making), Istanbul, 2020

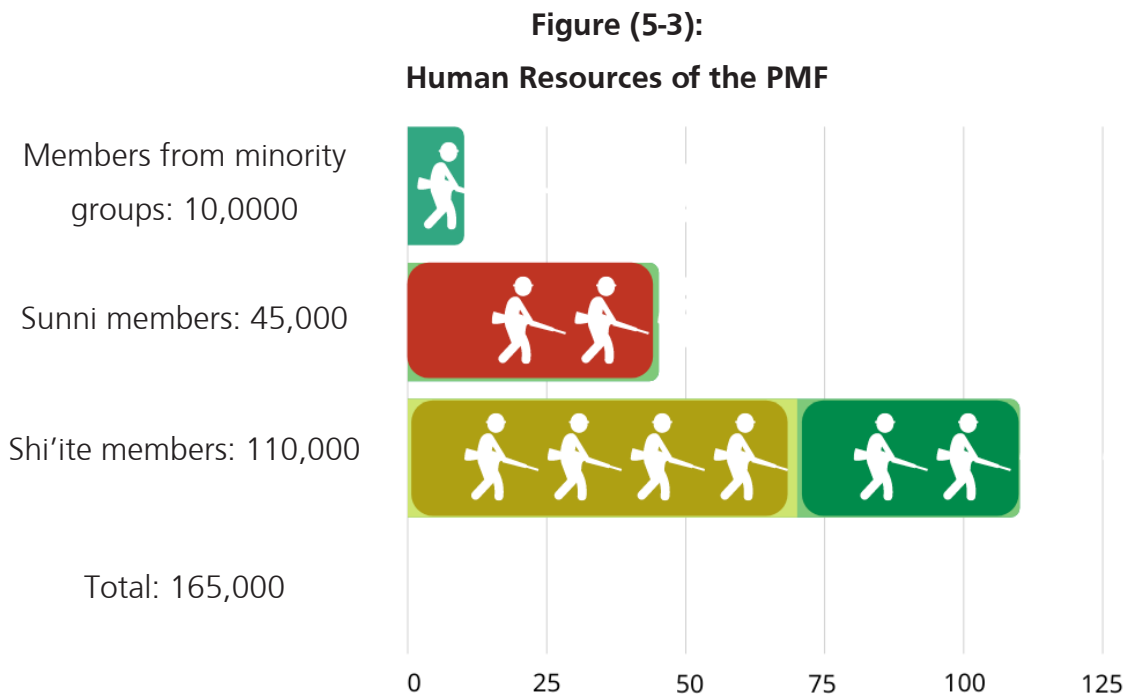
²⁸ Hisham al-Hashimi, "Internal Conflicts in the PMF," analytical paper published by the Center for Policy-Making, Istanbul, 1 July 2020.

7

The Leadership and Organizational Structure of the PMF

The human resources of the Iranian-aligned PMF factions are estimated around 70,000 members. The factions following another marja', including Saraya al-Salam, contains around 40,000 members. In accordance with the 2019 Diwani orders, the PMF tried to address the internal chaos in the organizational structure of the PMF, given that the factions

became split among 64 different brigades spread across eight main leadership axes for PMF operations. These various brigades were banned from using their specific faction's banners and names and were instead required to use a designated brigade number and the official banners of the PMF²⁹.



Source: Hisham al-Hashimi, "Internal Conflicts in the PMF" (analytical paper published by the Center for Policy-Making), Istanbul, 2020

²⁹ Hisham al-Hashimi, "Internal Conflicts in the PMF," analytical paper published by the Center for Policy-Making, Istanbul, 1 July 2020.

The 2019 orders led to the severance of ties between PMF factions, political parties, and other political and religious entities, and created avenues for PMF coordination within the joint leadership of the Iraqi armed forces. It also established an organizational and administrative structure consisting of:

Figure (5-4)
64 Brigades distributed across 8 Operational Axes



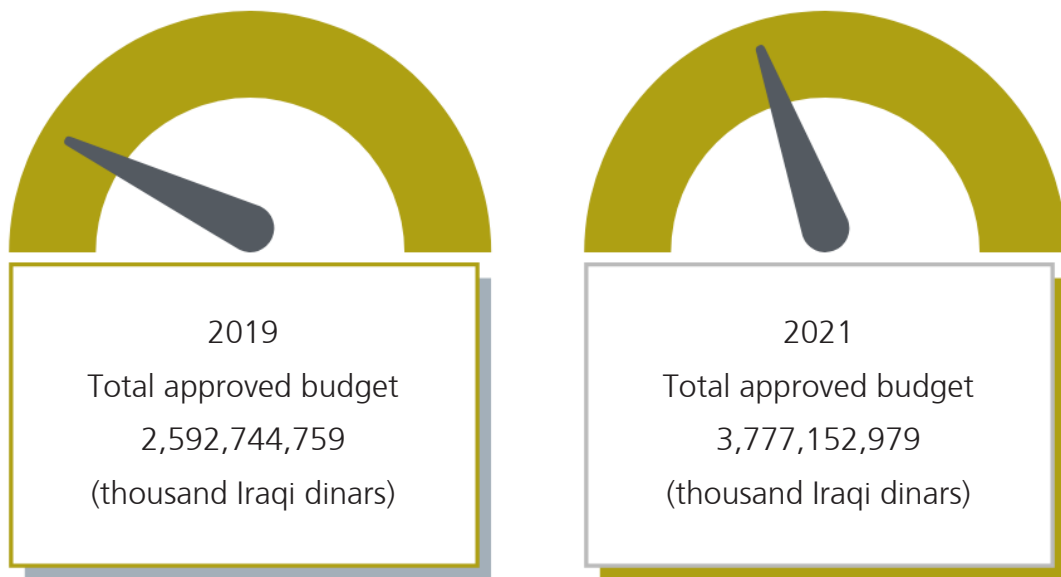
In the organizational and administrative structure of the PMF, about 80 percent of leadership and administration positions are occupied by members of factions following the Iranian marja'. Factions following to the Iraqi marja' and Sunni and minority factions do not hold high- or mid-level leadership roles within the administrative structure of the PMF³⁰.

In Iraq's 2019 budget, the PMF was allowed to appoint 128,000 employees, and was allocated a budget equivalent to 2.17 billion dollars, while 583,666 employees and a budget of 9.43 billion dollars were allocated to the Ministry of the Interior, and 288,979 employees and a budget of 7.58 billion dollar to the Ministry of Defense³¹.

³⁰ Hisham al-Hashimi, "Internal Conflicts in the PMF," analytical paper published by the Center for Policy-Making, Istanbul, 1 July 2020.

³¹ Michael Knights, "How the US Government Should Think About Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces," The Washington Institute, <http://t.ly/nzb3>

Figure (5-5)



Source: Comparative study of the 2019 and 2021 budgets, Research Office for Parliamentary Studies in the Iraqi Council of Representatives

8

National Implications in Iraq

Iraq failed to transition to democracy after the sudden fall of the regime in 2003, which left a crucial gap due to the totalitarian approach that was adopted. As a result, the tools and conditions for a democratic transition - a vibrant civil society, political diversity, and effective political forces - did not materialize. Civil society leaders and enlightened religious figures saw problems in the understanding and application of consensus-based rule in Iraq, since the intermingling of the work of political authorities with the interests of religious groups negatively affected the public good for Iraqis. The Iraqi public sphere receded as the private interests of political authority took precedence. The protests led by the new generation called for Iraq's full independence from foreign interference and strengthened the culture of accountability which contributed to ending rampant corruption produced by conflicts of interests and multiple allegiances. The remarkable discourse of young men and women in the popular protests has also affected the image of groups that responded with violence to protect the political regime. The regime exerted control over the protests

through silencing those encouraging demonstrations, whether journalists, men and women activists, or even researchers and writers on social media platforms.

The key issue for the Iraqi state today is the spread of Iranian-aligned factions under the PMF umbrella. These factions are aligned with the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, and have formed a strong parallel institution to the Iraqi state. They have military forces, a judicial system, and an independent economy, and have even begun to directly confront the Iraqi state and its institutions through struggles between state and non-state actors. The relationship between these two sides is situated within complex political equations that reflect negatively on the political reality in Iraq.

The PMF has now strayed from the purpose for which it was established. The fatwa of the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani stated that the able-bodied Iraqis should volunteer to fight ISIS, which was wreaking havoc on Iraq and murdering its people. The concept of volunteering in the fatwa had a set timeframe

and was not supposed to be permanent: it was to take place under the umbrella of the official national agency specialized in this work, i.e. the Iraqi army. For Iraqis, volunteering was directly tied to the ISIS threat. However, the overlapping political, religious, and partisan spheres resulted in the idea of the PMF—originally a short-term initiative with a single goal—being utilized as a permanent entity with diverse political and ideological objectives. Because the idea of the PMF was so well-established in the minds of Iraqis, they would defend it even at the expense of Iraqis themselves. In doing so, they violated Islamic jurisprudential norms regarding the *marja'*, which require compliance with the fatwa and what it stipulated.

The muddled state of governmental support for the PMF created an unhealthy imbalance in the PMF infrastructure and its relationship with society and the state. The factions that received logistical and financial support from Tehran were targeted by the new generation of youth as well as by volunteers for factions following the *marja'* in Iraq. As time passed, and in light of the deteriorating economic situation due to the coronavirus pandemic, the militias began to turn towards Iran, and their geographic scope for recruitment expanded outside the state.

In light of the chaotic array of armed groups, Iraqi state institutions need to reestablish

societal trust in the Iraqi state, in order to impose the rule of law and to implement the Iraqi constitution which states in article 9 that “it is forbidden to form armed militias outside of the armed forces.” This is the most important thing that Prime Minister Al-Kadhimi could achieve with his remaining time in power.

Because of the confusing assortment of groups and militias, armed and non-armed groups in Iraq took on the PMF name to justify violent acts they committed in Iraqi society, at levels that could be classified as religious extremism. It is clear that the laws governing foreign funding, the role of the prime minister, mechanisms for combatting terrorism in Iraq, and monitoring new groups as they emerge all need to be developed.

The younger generation in Iraq is experiencing major transformations in its ways of thinking, especially regarding growing questions about cultural and religious heritage. This new generation attributes the political authorities' failure to achieve a democratic transition to societal instability and the ineffectiveness of development programs. Because of this discontent, youth are emigrating and searching for new places to follow their hopes and dreams. If the current situation continues as it is now, Iraq will experience brain drain in the near future as it has never experienced it before.

9

Implications beyond Iraq

Iranian-aligned factions make up almost 42% of the forces in the PMF, while the rest belong to other security forces such as the army, federal police, and intelligence agencies, whether within the PMF infrastructure or otherwise. Iran's agents are forming small organizations resembling the Islamic Revolutionary Guard.³² Six years after the fatwa of al-Jihad al-Kefa'ey through which the PMF was founded, successive governments in Iraq find themselves dealing with major internal and external pressures. They are monitoring the PMF as it transforms and grows outside of the organs of the state, especially since there are PMF elements aligned with Iran and its Revolutionary Guards. This puts Iraq on a path towards future confrontation with countries trying to curtail religious sectarianism in the Arab region.

Iran has tried to recreate a version of the Iranian Basij – one of the five forces under the Islamic Revolutionary Guard- within the PMF, following a fatwa targeting the US project at

the time. Iran hoped that the membership of this group would reach 20 million people. In fact, the estimated number of members is around 11 million, with an additional base of support from students, intellectuals, and civil society forces numbering around one million people.³³

The current Iranian influence in Iraq is based on networking and contemporary digital tools to reestablish its influence and create new work spaces that would provide flexibility for tactical shifts, especially in the decentralized network, its ability to use media techniques and recruitment and works from its available economical resources. The new approach in the region aims to repeat what it did in Lebanon through creating new Hezbollah(s) in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, where parallel forces are developing in the political sphere that can support armed groups in the public sphere.

32 Michael Knights, "How the US government should think about Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces," The Washington Institute, <http://t.ly/nzb3>

33 Diyari Majid, "Geopolitics and the PMF: A look at US concerns," Middle Eastern Affairs Review, issue 17 March 2015, p. 109.

10

Recommendations

1. Review and develop legislations that regulates the PMF work, and link them to a martial law in line with the fatwa principle through which the PMF were established, also develop laws that help separate the political and security functions of the PMF, and monitor illegal external funds for armed militias, whether they are affiliated with the PMF or operating outside its framework.
2. Intensify the official state national security and customs' support at the borders' checkpoints in Iraq, and expand the control over the borders in order to stop weapons trafficking from other countries to Iraq and vice versa.
3. Work through the conflict among PMF groups by adopting a rational dialogue approach, and end the policy of "Internationalization of Sectarian Identity." It is in Iraq's best interests to resolve internal crises especially in light of rampant corruption, the deteriorating economic situation, and the repercussions of the coronavirus pandemic on Iraqi society and the Iraqi state.
4. The psychological study of religious identities in general and PMF orientations in particular will help Iraqi policymakers to find lasting solutions and programs to address security problems and political instability, in order to prevent further chaos in the domestic and foreign spheres, especially in relations with neighboring countries.
5. The new generation's movement for change in Iraq should support civil society organizations, including through strengthening the culture of accountability, imposing the rule of law, implementing civic education and political participation programs, and working towards popular support for human rights, in addition to developing digital media skills.
6. Develop spaces for dialogue between the government, youth, and society, encourage the youth to participate in

the upcoming parliamentary elections, ensure their involvement in monitoring the electoral process, and facilitate the presence of international missions to monitor elections in order to preserve the integrity of the electoral process and preventing meddling with the will of the electorate.

7. Iraq may be able to reestablish public trust and control organizations operating outside state frameworks by imposing the rule of law. The legislation that currently exists on this matter is good in theory but needs to be properly enforced. The only way to reach this goal is to establish the rule of law in the political and public spheres and to build a culture of democracy among Iraq's citizenry.

11

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About the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Jordan & Iraq

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The Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq

Regional Dynamics and Local Variables



At a time when major international coalitions had failed to eliminate ISIS in Iraq, where it was causing great turmoil, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) emerged in order to fight ISIS which had taken control of Mosul the second largest Iraqi city, and committed a series of war crimes.



The PMF strayed from its purpose, which was that the able-bodied Iraqis should volunteer to fight ISIS, that was wreaking havoc on Iraq and murdering its people. The concept of volunteering here had a set timeframe and was not supposed to be permanent: it was to take place under the umbrella of the official national agency specialized in this work, i.e. the Iraqi army. For Iraqis, volunteering was directly tied to the ISIS threat. However, the overlapping political, religious, and partisan spheres resulted in the idea of the PMF- originally a short-term initiative with a single goal-being utilized as a permanent entity with diverse political and ideological objectives.



This paper aims to examine the emergence and development of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraqi society, as well as the ideological and organizational shifts in the PMF's approach since it was founded in 2014, and how these transformations have shaped the relationship between the PMF, the state, and civil society. This paper also traces the different domestic and foreign allegiances of PMF factions, and how the idea of the PMF has been employed to reestablish Iranian influence in Iraq.

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