

# Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups

By Michael Knights

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**Pro-Iranian militias in Iraq—excluding Badr—have swollen from as few as 4,000 personnel in 2010 to over 60,000 in 2014 when they plugged into government funding through the Popular Mobilization Forces raised to fight the Islamic State. Large, new pro-Iran militias such as Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali deserve more attention from the analyst community, as do new Kata'ib Hezbollah leaders such as Abu Zaynab al-Lami, who are emerging as challengers to the movement's leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. A pantheon of smaller, newer pro-Iran militias is arguably closer to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps than larger and older pro-Iranian militias such as Badr and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. Key behaviors for analysts to monitor include corrupt money-making, control of the Iraq-Syrian border, human rights abuses, and development of exclusive bases outside Iraqi state control.**

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**T**he Iraqi state has drawn upon militia-like reserve forces throughout its history to defeat internal and external threats.<sup>1</sup> The use of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, *Hashd al-Sha'abi* in Arabic), raised in 2014 by a combination of executive orders and religious fatwa, is merely the latest example of this trend. Within the PMF—forming its core, in fact—are older pro-Iranian militias that were previously labeled “Special Groups”<sup>a</sup> by the United States and designated as terrorist organizations in some cases. A broader range of Special Groups now exist than when the U.S. military left Iraq in 2011, underlining the diversification of actors that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force (IRGC-QF) works with in today's Iraq. Unlike previous militias that were tolerated and

controlled by the state, the Special Groups are already operating outside the state's ability to monitor or discipline them. Building on six research visits to Iraq in 2018 and 2019, where the author interviewed senior Iraqi political and military figures, this article will provide new data on the state of Iranian-backed Special Groups in Iraq today.

Coming out of the main combat stage of the war against the Islamic State, the Special Groups are growing in economic and political power and are attacking foreign entities on Iran's behalf. A dozen attacks have been launched on U.S. military, diplomatic, and commercial targets in Iraq so far in 2019.<sup>2</sup> Then on May 14, 2019, two Saudi oil pumping stations were struck by long-range explosive drones launched from Jurf as-Sakr,<sup>3</sup> the Baghdad outskirts base of the most powerful Iranian-backed Special Group, Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), led by U.S.-designated terrorist Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis,<sup>4</sup> who is also sought by Interpol and Kuwaiti authorities.<sup>5</sup> The coordinated drone attacks underline KH's graduation as the third major militant force alongside IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah in Iran's “axis of resistance.” Iraq's large population, weak government, and powerful level of IRGC-QF penetration make Iraq the most consequential and fastest-growing arena for Iran's expansion of malign influence in the Middle East.

## Pro-Iranian Militias after the U.S. Withdrawal

The Syrian civil war and the interrelated war against the Islamic State in Iraq breathed life back into the Special Groups after the removal of U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011. As U.S. forces departed, Special Groups like KH harried the withdrawing U.S. presence until the very end but faced a future in which their commonly understood *raison d'être*—the removal of the U.S. occupation—had expired. In late 2011, the Islamic State's predecessor group, the Islamic State of Iraq, appeared to be defeated and the Iraqi security forces appeared to be robust.

The 2011-2014 period of the Special Groups is important to understand at a time when today's Iran-backed militias are also looking beyond their prior mission, the main combat phase of the war against the Islamic State. Back in 2011-2012, the Special Groups immediately began deploying to a new battlefield as the United States was leaving Iraq. Providing an Iraqi foreign fighter cadre to the Iranian intervention in Syria provided one outlet for militancy and most of the Special Groups contributed, including KH, Kata'ib Sayid al-Shuhada (under U.S.-sanctioned terrorist Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani<sup>6</sup>), and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH).<sup>7</sup> Within Iraq, the Special Groups remained ready to support Iran in the case of an Iranian clash with the United States, the Gulf States, or Israel. On March 27, 2012, a 12-rocket attack was partially undertaken (nine misfired) during the lead-up to the first post-Saddam Arab League summit in Baghdad. AAH, meanwhile, focused on assassinating its militia rivals in Moqtada al-Sadr's Promised Day Brigades (forerunner to today's Saraya Salam) and negotiating with the government

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a The original “Special Groups” were breakaways from Moqtada al-Sadr's Jaish al-Mahdi such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and breakaways from Badr, such as the Sheibani network and Kata'ib Hezbollah. For further discussion, see Michael Knights, “The Evolution of Iran's Special Groups in Iraq,” *CTC Sentinel* 3:11-12 (2010): p. 2.

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*Dr. Michael Knights is a Senior Fellow with the Military and Security Program at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He has traveled extensively in Iraq since 2003, including periods embedded with a variety of security forces in militia-dominated environments. He has visited the country three times this year to interview Iraqi political and security figures about pro-Iranian militias. Knights has written for the CTC Sentinel since 2008. Follow @mikeknightsiraq*

to release its detained members.

As the security situation in Iraq worsened in 2012-2014, the Special Groups began to mobilize more strongly. Their Syrian deployments—which violate Article 9 of the Iraqi Constitution,<sup>b</sup> undertaken without approval, but overlooked by the government of Iraq<sup>c</sup>—required larger-scale recruitment and resulted in the injection of new, intense battlefield experience into the movements. Inside Iraq, then Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki began to draw small units of Special Group fighters into “Sons of Iraq” forces, and he accelerated his planning to raise larger Popular Defense Brigades (Saraya al-Dif‘a al-Sha‘abi) to operate under the prime minister’s command, alongside the conventional armed forces.<sup>8</sup> On June 13, 2014, following the fall of Mosul to the Islamic State, the highest Shi‘a authority in Iraq, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, issued a fatwa (religious edict), the al-Jihad al-Kifa‘i (collective obligation)—calling for able-bodied male citizens to “volunteer and join the security forces.”<sup>9</sup>

### The PMF and War Against the Islamic State

The resultant Hashd al-Sha‘abi Commission of the Prime Minister’s Office (the PMF) reflected al-Maliki’s vision<sup>10</sup> of a predominately Shi‘a reserve army that contained both new recruits and what al-Maliki called “mujahedeen” from Special Groups such as KH, AAH, and Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, plus new pro-Iranian militias like Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (led by U.S.-designated terrorist Akram Kaabi<sup>11</sup>), Kata’ib al-Imam Ali (led by U.S.-designated terrorist Shibl al-Zaydi<sup>12</sup>), and Kata’ib Jund al-Imam. From the outset, however, the key leader in the PMF was Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the most inveterate opponent of the United States among the Special Group leaders, and al-Muhandis worked assiduously to develop the PMF into an organization that was neither subject to full prime ministerial command nor subordinate to the conventional security forces.<sup>d</sup>

The PMF phenomenon and the war against the Islamic State greatly altered the political and military profile of the Special Groups. Prior to 2014, a figure like Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis was an obscure former MP in Iraq with little public profile.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, opinion polling from pre-2011 Iraq shows that Iraqis frequently found it hard to differentiate or remember differences between groups like Promised Day Brigades, Kata’ib Hezbollah, or Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq.<sup>14</sup> Respondents were often unaware of the tight connections between Special Groups and the Iranian government.<sup>15</sup> In 2011, only 15.5% of respondents had high or very high confidence that militias could provide security, versus 65.8% for the Iraq army.<sup>16</sup>

b Article 9 of the Iraqi Constitution states that all armed forces are commanded by the Prime Minister.

c The author has asked numerous senior Iraqi leaders, in the course of interviews in 2015-2019, whether the Iraqi government authorized, opposed, or simply ignored the issue of Iraqi fighters traveling to Syria to participate in the Syrian civil war. They are almost unanimous that the government turned a blind eye, even though such deployments contravene constitutional provisions about the exclusive authority of the government over foreign policy and the exclusive authority of the prime minister to involve Iraqis in armed conflict.

d In all the author’s interviews with Iraqi leaders in 2014-2019, al-Muhandis has always been recognized as the most dominant individual within the PMF. PMF Commission chairman Falah Fayyadh concentrates on his role as National Security Advisor and leaves the PMF entirely to the deputy PMF chairman al-Muhandis.

Much of this changed after 2014: militia leaders and individual armed groups (fasa’il in Arabic) gained widespread name recognition.<sup>e</sup> In opinion polling, members of the public express differentiated views on KH, AAH, Kata’ib Al-Imam Ali, Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, and Badr.<sup>17</sup> Compared to pre-2014, following the PMF role in liberating many Sunni cities, the Iraqi public has considerably more faith that militias within the PMF structure are positive contributors to local security—91% among Shi‘a respondents in 2017 and 64.5% in Sunni areas in 2017, far greater than 15.5% for all respondents in 2011.<sup>18</sup>

### Growth of the Special Groups

The Special Groups also militarily transformed as a result of the Syrian civil war and the anti-Islamic State fighting in Iraq. First, more Iran-backed Special Groups were formed, and each grew larger than in the pre-2011 period due to their adoption as government-paid fighters under the PMF Commission.

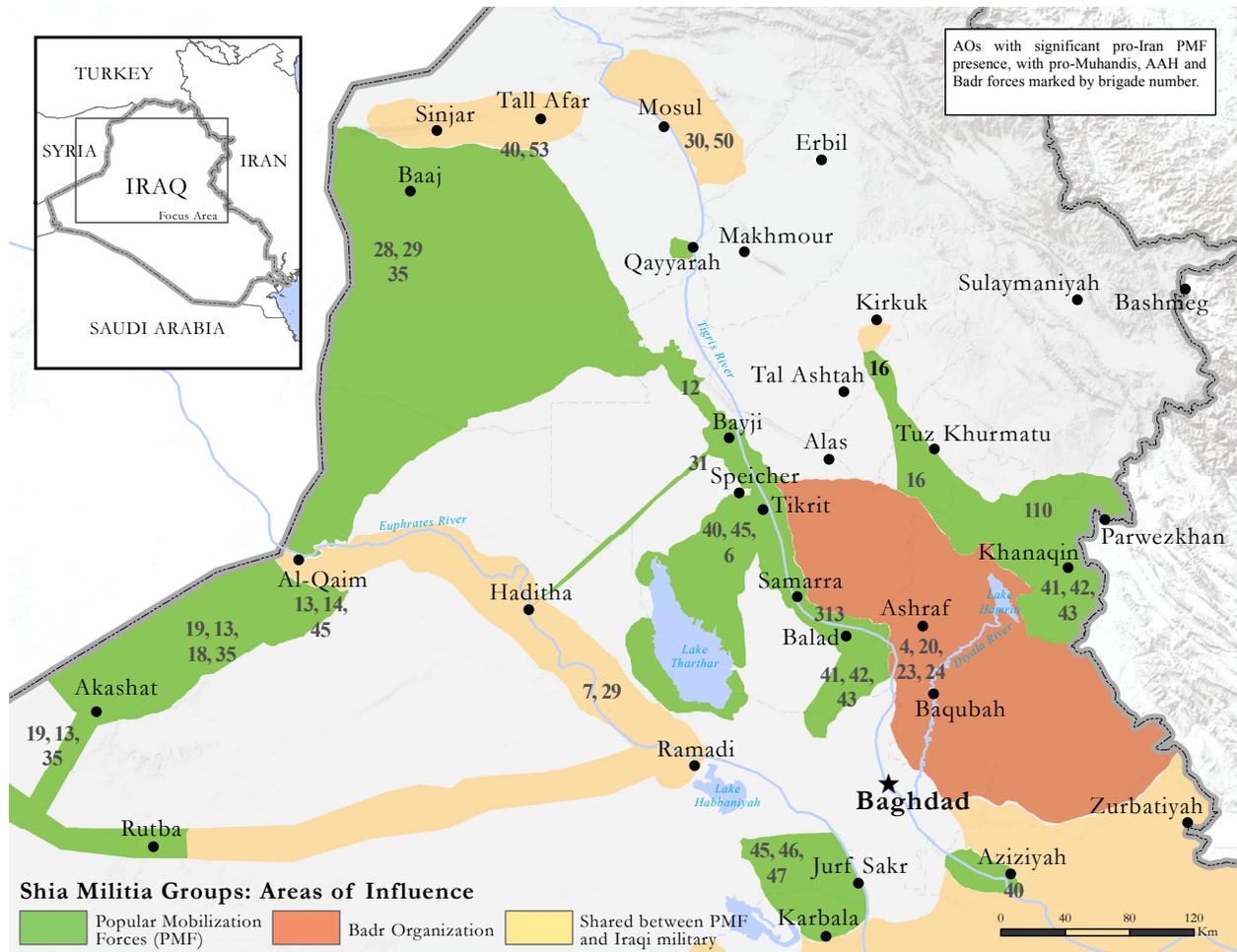
- In 2011, KH was assessed to have 400 active members in Iraq,<sup>19</sup> while today KH (PMF brigades 45, 56, 57) maintain around 7,500 fighters assigned to Iraqi operations, 2,500 fighters assigned to Syria, for a total of 10,000.<sup>20</sup>
- AAH (PMF brigades 41, 42, 43) has likewise swollen from a small Sadrist splinter militia of under 3,000 members in 2011<sup>21</sup> to an equivalent KH-size three-brigade force of around 10,000.<sup>22</sup>
- Kata’ib Al-Imam Ali (PMF brigade 40) has expanded from a tiny Sadrist splinter group to an 8,000-strong PMF mega-brigade with deployments across Iraq.<sup>23</sup>
- Kata’ib Jund al-Imam (PMF brigade 6) has around 5,000 registered fighters,<sup>24</sup> Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (PMF brigade 14) and Saraya Talia al-Khurasani (PMF brigade 18) each have around 3,000 fighters,<sup>25</sup> and even the small Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (PMF brigade 12) now boasts more than 1,500 fighters—nearly four times the KH membership in 2011.<sup>26</sup>
- Newer Special Groups assessed to be primarily loyal to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and willing to provide material support to IRGC-QF include (from most militarily capable to least) Harakat al-Abdal (PMF brigade 39), Saraya al-Jihad (PMF brigade 17), Liwa al-Tafuf (brigade 13) and the less capable Liwa al-Muntadher (brigade 7), Ansar Allah al-Tawfiya (brigade 19), Saraya Ansar al-Aqeeda (brigade 28), Kata’ib Ansar al-Hujja (brigade 29), Quwwat al-Shahid al-Sadr al-Awwal (brigade 25), Quwwat al-Shahid al-Sadr (brigade 35), and Kata’ib al-Tayyar al-Risali (brigade 31).<sup>27g</sup>

Newer Special Groups listed here have, by the author’s tally of figures provided by Iraqi contacts, 22,500 registered personnel.

e As of mid-July 2019, AAH leader Qais al-Khazali had 226,912 Twitter followers. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis had 36,799 followers for his official Facebook page. Kata’ib Al-Imam Ali celebrity fighter Abu Azrael alone has 15,377 Facebook followers.

f Sadrists are those who identify Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, the father of Moqtada al-Sadr who was murdered in 1999 by the Baathist regime, as their object of emulation.

g The assessment of relative military capability is judged by the author based on combat experience of the unit, its ability to source heavy weapons and surveillance drones, and its access to Iranian and/or Lebanese Hezbollah training and advisory support. The author would like to thank Philip Smyth and Aymenn al-Tamimi for their advice on this section.



*Main areas of operation for Iran-backed militias in Iraq, annotated with PMF brigade numbers (Brandon Mohr)*

Adding in all the other bulleted groups above, the author assesses that the Special Groups (not including 18,000-22,000 Badr troops<sup>h</sup>) currently have 63,000 registered personnel.<sup>i</sup> According to the author's calculation, this is 15 times the size of the Special Groups in 2010, when there were probably as few as 4,000 Special Group operatives in Iraq (again not including Badr personnel in 2010).<sup>j</sup>

The expanded pantheon of Special Groups adopted medium and heavy weapons, attained significant battlefield experience, and openly absorbed training and embedded advisers from IRGC-QF

and Lebanese Hezbollah within Iraq.<sup>28</sup> Each established "economic offices" in Baghdad, southern provinces, and in areas of sustained battlefield presence, which serve as hubs for local organized crime activity.<sup>29</sup>

Special Groups answering primarily to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and willing to provide material support to IRGC-QF are scattered across Iraq. Unlike an Iraqi Army division, the Special Groups deploy detachments in many different areas of operation (AOs), but it is nonetheless possible to discern areas of concentration for some of the groups.<sup>30</sup>

### Western Anbar

This area refers to the swath of Iraqi-Syrian border between Walid border crossing and Al-Qaim district. This area is of critical importance to the Special Groups because it contains the Baghdad-Damascus highway crossing—currently blocked by U.S.-backed forces at Tanf, Syria—and also the workaround tracks from the Akashat area to the highway systems north of Tanf.<sup>31</sup> The Akashat sub-sector is garrisoned by brigades Allah al-Tawfiya (brigade 19), Liwa al-Tafuf (brigade 13), and Saraya Talia al-Khurasani (PMF brigade 18).<sup>32</sup>

At the eastern end of this sector is the Husaybah border crossing on the Euphrates, facing the Albu Kamal areas in Syria. Iraqi Special Groups such as Kata'ib Hezbollah (brigade 45), Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali (brigade 40), and Harakat al-Abdal (PMF brigade 39) maintain combat forces in Albu Kamal (in Syria).<sup>33</sup> The Hu-

<sup>h</sup> Badr has around 18,000 to 22,000 troops registered within the PMF, based on a tallying of the author's interview data. Authors interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

<sup>i</sup> This assessment is based on a tallying of the author's interview data. Authors interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees. The author would like to thank Philip Smyth and Aymenn al-Tamimi for their advice on this section.

<sup>j</sup> This assessment was based on a tallying of an estimate of 3,000 Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq fighters, 400 Kata'ib Hezbollah fighters, and 600 others. These figures were derived from interview material gathered by the author from a range of Iraqi security force intelligence and operational personnel in Iraq during visits in 2008, 2009, and 2010, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

saybah/Al-Qaim sub-sector is garrisoned mainly by Liwa al-Tafuf (brigade 13).<sup>34</sup> The Euphrates River Valley leading down to eastern Anbar is garrisoned mainly by a mix of Iraqi Army forces and Liwa al-Muntadher (PMF brigade 7) and Kata'ib Ansar al-Hujja (PMF brigade 29).<sup>35</sup> Within their areas, 122mm rockets are assessed by U.S. government agencies to have been fired by Iran-backed militias at the U.S. advisor site at Al-Asad airbase on February 2, 2019.<sup>36</sup>

Qasim Muslih, the commander of Liwa al-Tafuf, is also the head of the PMF Western Anbar Axis, the sector headquarters for all PMF operations along the border and in Rutbah.<sup>37</sup> The axis headquarters is based in Al-Qaim, and there is a sub-sector headquarters in Rutbah, on the Baghdad-Damascus highway.<sup>38</sup> In collaboration, Liwa al-Tafuf and Kata'ib Hezbollah control all cross-border smuggling and commerce.<sup>39</sup> Kata'ib Hezbollah operatives buttress each of the garrison forces along the border, maintaining checkpoints on the border road (Highway 20).<sup>40</sup> Kata'ib Hezbollah also controls the Husaybah Point of Entry, where it clears its military vehicles to enter and leave Iraq without being inspected by customs.<sup>41</sup> Akashat border crossings—where no customs personnel are present—are coordinated via a KH base at the H-3 airfield, near Rutbah.<sup>42</sup>

### Southern Baghdad Belts

Formally, there is no PMF operational headquarters for Baghdad province,<sup>43</sup> but in practice, the Special Groups have emplaced substantial bases in Baghdad's rural 'belts.'

Kata'ib Hezbollah has carved out an exclusive principality in Jurf as-Sakr, 40 kilometers southwest of Baghdad. This area was liberated in late 2014, when it was celebrated as the first major liberation undertaken by the PMF. Since then, KH has strongly consolidated a "no-go" zone in which displaced Sunni residents cannot return<sup>44k</sup> and where only KH forces operate,<sup>45</sup> complete with private prisons (holding well over 1,000 illegal detainees).<sup>46</sup> In March 2019, Iraqi air traffic control was instructed by KH to prevent U.S. drone overflights of Jurf as-Sakr, and as noted previously, it was from this site on May 14, 2019,<sup>47</sup> that two explosive drones were launched toward Saudi Arabian oil pipeline pumping stations.<sup>48</sup> According to Iraqi government contacts, KH has even acquired land use rights from the government, making its areas private property.<sup>49</sup>

Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali is trying to build out a similar redoubt in the southeastern Baghdad belts, between Suwayrah and Aziziyah, around 50 kilometers southeast of the capital. A former Iraqi military base was improved in 2018 with the aid of 27 mechanical diggers.<sup>50</sup> Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali's leader, U.S.-designated terrorist Shibl al-Zaydi, is one of the richest Special Group leaders, with broad involvement in legitimate business and property in Baghdad.<sup>51</sup>

### Northern Baghdad Belts and Salah al-Din

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq is dominant in the swathe of northern Baghdad belts and southern Salah al-Din, including Taji, Dujail, and Balad.<sup>52</sup> Within this area, AAH's Ali Haj Safa al-Saadi leads the PMF Salah al-Din Operations Command, nominally covering all of the Tigris

River Valley inside Salah al-Din.<sup>53</sup> In practice, AAH allows other militias their own sub-sectors of Salah al-Din. Moqtada al-Sadr's militia, Saraya Salam, exclusively controls the shrine city of Samarra.<sup>54</sup> Camp Speicher, a large, unused military base west of Tikrit where 1,700 Shi'a cadets were taken from before being massacred by the Islamic State in June 2014,<sup>55</sup> is dominated by KH, Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali, and Kata'ib Jund Al-Imam (PMF brigade 6).<sup>56</sup> Kata'ib al-Tayyar al-Risali (PMF brigade 31) has leadership of the sector in Bayji, where it has concentrated its activities.<sup>57</sup> Alas oilfield is presently controlled by militias, who divert quantities of oil for trucking to Iran (and the Gulf ports) via the Kurdistan Region.<sup>58</sup>

AAH is the dominant economic and political actor only from Samarra to Baghdad.<sup>59</sup> In July 2018, Sunni tribal groups were forced to push back muscularly on AAH intimidation and extortion in this area.<sup>60</sup> AAH criminal rackets resulted in the complete destruction by looting of Iraq's largest refinery<sup>61</sup> and have even targeted U.S. contractors<sup>62</sup> and stolen major equipment supporting the Iraqi F-16 program at Balad airbase.<sup>63</sup> Rockets are assessed by U.S. government agencies to have been fired by AAH at the U.S. advisor sites in Taji on May 1, 2019, with two AAH operatives arrested by local security forces in connection with the attack.<sup>64</sup>

### Mosul and Rural Nineveh

All PMF units in Nineveh are nominally supposed to answer to the PMF Nineveh Operations Command, which is dominated by al-Muhandis appointee Ali Kadhim al-Musawi and his powerful deputy, Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali operative Hajj Ali Kerwei.<sup>65</sup> In practice, Nineveh is another area where a patchwork of local and outsider militias are largely doing their own thing.

The Nineveh-Syria border and connected wadis in central Nineveh are garrisoned by a collection of smaller pro-Iran units such as Saraya Ansar al-Aqeeda (brigade 28), Kata'ib Ansar al-Hujja (brigade 29), and Quwwat al-Shahid al-Sadr (brigade 35).<sup>66</sup> KH and Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali advisors are occasionally visible.<sup>67</sup> This segment of Syrian border is presently of limited interest to IRGC-QF due to the presence of U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces on the other side.<sup>68</sup>

In Sinjar and Tal Afar, KH and Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali advisors work with Liwa al-Hussein (PMF brigade 53) and Lalish (PMF brigade 36), which are each staffed by local Yazidis and Shi'a Turkmen.<sup>69</sup>

In the Nineveh Plains and eastern Mosul city, two local militias draw on support from al-Muhandis to refuse legal orders from the Iraqi government to redeploy away from Christian areas.<sup>70</sup> One is Liwa al-Shabak/Quwat Sahl Nineveh (PMF brigade 30), led by Waad Qado, and the other is Babiliyun (brigade 50), led the Rayan Khaldani.<sup>71</sup> Both leaders were sanctioned by the United States for human rights abuses under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act.<sup>72</sup> These militias have also dominated the tolling of trucks on the Erbil-Mosul highway and the large-scale scrap metal business in Mosul.<sup>73</sup>

### Badr's Stronghold in Southern Diyala

The fifth major AO for PMF forces covers essentially all the areas east of the Tigris River in Diyala, the Jallam desert east of Sa-

k The issue of Sunni mass displacement and blocked resettlement at Jurf as-Sakr (which militias renamed Jurf an-Nasr after the 2014 battle) is widely discussed and accepted as fact by all major politicians. In the author's interview program with Iraqi politicians and security leaders in 2018-2019, a number of Sunni politicians justified their cooperation with al-Muhandis-linked forces in terms of an effort to negotiate the return of hostages held in Jurf as-Sakr and the broader right to return for their displaced persons in Jurf and elsewhere.

marra and Tuz Khurmatu district, and Kirkuk.<sup>l</sup> Much of this area has historically been the preserve of the Badr organization, which was originally created as a formation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps during the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>74</sup> Led by Hadi al-Ameri, Badr remains the “first among equals” in this AO, particularly in al-Ameri’s native southern Diyala.<sup>75 m</sup>

The PMF Diyala Operations Command is led by Talib al-Musawi, a Badr commander<sup>76</sup> based at Camp Ashraf, which is the old encampment of the Iranian oppositionist Mojaheddin-e Khalq Organization—Badr’s most bitter foes during the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>77</sup> Badr’s local forces—Badr-leaning Iraqi Army brigades plus PMF brigades 4, 20, 23, and 24—are all under al-Ameri’s effective command<sup>78</sup> and are almost all focused on southern Diyala and the adjacent Jallam Desert.<sup>n</sup>

### Shi`a Turkmen Militias Lean Toward al-Muhandis

Digging deeper, it is clear that neither al-Ameri nor Badr has a monopoly of control in areas east of the Tigris.<sup>79</sup> In Abu Sayda, in northeastern Diyala, AAH militiamen have unsuccessfully contested Badr’s control of the town.<sup>o</sup> In Jalula, adjacent and to the northeast of Abu Sayda, AAH has developed a foothold by building out local Sunni-manned militias from the Kerwei tribe,<sup>80</sup> who were displaced from the area by the Kurds based on the high number of Islamic State fighters provided by the Kerwei in 2014.<sup>81</sup> AAH manages these tribal fighters out of Jalula’s Cobra camp (an old U.S. forward operating base).<sup>82</sup> The arming of these Kerwei militias, who include many former Islamic State members, coincided with the rise in anti-Kurdish insurgent attacks in the same areas, south of Khanaqin, since May 2018.<sup>83</sup> AAH’s involvement also places it astride one of the busiest Iran-Iraq trade arteries, a lucrative tolling opportunity.<sup>p</sup>

Shi`a Turkmen communities in Tuz Kurmatu and Kirkuk were some of the hardest hit by the Islamic State in 2014 and 2015,<sup>84</sup> and their leaders have gravitated toward Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and IRGC-QF.<sup>85</sup> Tuz Khurmatu and Kirkuk are controlled by the

PMF Northern Axis, which is led by Abu Ridha Yilmaz al-Najjar, a Shi`a Turkoman primarily loyal to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.<sup>86</sup> In Kirkuk, Shi`a Turkmen militias look to Mohammed Mahdi al-Bayati, another Shi`a Turkoman primarily loyal to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.<sup>87</sup> While often identifying organizationally with Badr, Quwwat al-Turkmen (PMF brigade 16, based in Tuz and Kirkuk) looks toward al-Muhandis and Iran first for direction and support.<sup>88</sup> Al-Muhandis has also placed loyalists within Kirkuk’s governor’s office.<sup>89</sup>

As a result of the special penetration of the Shi`a Turkmen community in Tuz and Kirkuk, Iran-backed Special Groups have been particularly active in smuggling and the provision of material support to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.<sup>q</sup> For instance, IRGC-QF leaders have used Tal Ashtah dispersal airfield—just west of Jawwalah (Rashad), 35km southwest of Kirkuk city—for a variety of purposes.<sup>r</sup> On October 16, 2017, this is where IRGC-QF intermediaries including IRGC-QF Colonel Haj Ali Iqbalpour (the long-standing Kirkuk area liaison<sup>90</sup>) met with Kurdish and Iraqi leaders to broker the handover of Kirkuk to federal forces.<sup>91</sup> This is also where IRGC-QF launched and recovered surveillance drones<sup>92</sup> to designate targets for the September 8, 2018, precision rocket strike on the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) headquarters in Koya, in Iraqi Kurdistan, which killed 14 and wounded 42 oppositionists.<sup>93</sup>

In Tuz Khurmatu, where Badr has failed to rein in criminal Shi`a Turkmen mafias backed by al-Muhandis, oil is being extracted from the small number of producing wells in Pulkhana field and smuggled into Iran (and thereafter to the Gulf) by local Turkmen militias.<sup>94</sup> The field—sitting astride an area contested by the Islamic State, Shi`a Turkmen forces, and multiple Kurdish groups—has created strange bedfellows who mutually profit from the still-contested area,<sup>95 s</sup> and this has given outlaw groups<sup>96</sup> breathing space to survive outside the reach of Iraqi government and coalition forces.

### Presence in Baghdad City and the South

The PMF was raised to fight the Islamic State, which renders conspicuous the presence of PMF units in peaceful areas of southern Iraq. The PMF Commission maintains administrative offices in each Iraqi province outside Kurdistan, providing a necessary link to wounded fighters and families, as well as a recruitment hub and contact point for off-duty members.<sup>97</sup> Less logically, the PMF also maintains two operational commands in southern Iraq: the PMF Rafidain Operations Command (in Maysan and Dhi Qar) and the

l This area essentially encompasses the old Iraq Tigris Operations Command AO, a now defunct Iraqi Army headquarters sector that Badr has taken over. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

m This remains the case today, as the author’s interviews with Iraqi security officials in 2019 suggests. Hadi al-Ameri continues to head local mediation efforts in southern Diyala whenever inter-tribal or inter-militia tensions spike. Badr leader Hadi al-Amiri personally accompanied 400 Sunni families returning to Mansouriyah in May 2016. See “Diyala Governor Splits Sunnis to Defeat Impeachment Bid,” *Inside Iraqi Politics* 134, July 11, 2016.

n The exception is in Khanaqin district, where the local Shi`a Kurdish (Fayli) PMF brigade 110 is a Badr unit tied to al-Ameri. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

o On September 21-26, 2016, Badr paramilitaries and AAH paramilitaries were fighting for control of the sub-district center of Abu Sayda. In Tuz Khurmatu, meanwhile, Badr moved against AAH locations within the town. All incident data is drawn from the authors’ geolocated Significant Action (SIGACT) dataset. The dataset brings together declassified coalition SIGACT data plus private security company and open-source SIGACT data used to supplement and extend the dataset as coalition incident collection degraded in 2009-2011 and was absent in 2012-2014.

p The Perwez Khan/Muntheriya point of entry and the Iran-Baghdad highway in Diyala (Highway 5) are a major artery for trucking and pilgrim traffic, both of which can be tolled by militia checkpoints.

q In addition to being especially brutalized by the Islamic State, Iraqi Turkmen have experienced intense violent factionalism and a search for external sponsors to help them minimize Kurdish influence in places like Tuz Khurmatu and Kirkuk. The traditional Badr leadership of Hadi al-Ameri stressed deal-making with the Kurds and tried to mount crackdowns on new, highly criminalized Shi`a Turkmen militias. Al-Muhandis and IRGC-QF delivered military victories against the Kurds and have shielded militias from crackdowns. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

r The airfield is located in a zone garrisoned by Federal Police formations, but easily accessible to Liwa a-Turkmen (PMF brigade 16) forces.

s Multiple interviewees have told the author since 2018 that the reason an insurgent pocket still exists in the small and surrounded enclave in Pulkhana is corruption involving Kurdish forces and Iraqi PMF, all of whom trade in oil, goods, and money to facilitate local ceasefires, smuggling of oil, and movement of people and goods.



*Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, left, a commander in the Popular Mobilization Forces, and Adel Abd Al-Mahdi, right, then Minister of Oil and now Prime Minister of Iraq, attend the funeral of Iraqi politician Ahmad Chalabi, in Baghdad, Iraq, on November 3, 2015. (Karim Kadim/AP Photo)*

PMF Basra Operations Command, both led by Badr commanders.<sup>98</sup> These commands appear to be maintained by Badr in readiness for any of a number of contingencies: the deployment of Badr PMF units to restore order during electricity-related or secessionist rioting, to deliver civil engineering and disaster relief, or to crack down on uncontrolled militias.<sup>t</sup>

Militias in Baghdad and southern Iraq also undertake less savory behavior. On September 7-8, 2018, after the burning down of Iran's local consulate, a rash of rocket attacks triggered the closure of the U.S. consulate in Basra,<sup>99</sup> and on July 6, 2019, a roadside bomb detonated in Basra on a logistical convoy hauling supplies to the U.S. embassy in Baghdad.<sup>100</sup> Baghdad has also witnessed repeated rocket launches toward U.S. diplomatic facilities, most recently in September 2018, December 2018, and May 2019.<sup>101</sup> In Basra, some piers at Umm Qasr port and the Shalamchek land border crossing to Iran are militia-controlled smuggling routes for Iraqi crude oil gathered by militias from oilfields such as Qayyarah and Alas.<sup>102</sup>

Most individual PMF units, including Iran-backed Special Groups like KH and Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali, also maintain local offices in numerous parts of Iraq for fundraising and recruitment. The concentration of unauthorized unit-level economic offices is highest in Baghdad city, where non-PMF Iran-backed militias such as Quwwat Assad Allah al-Ghalib and Qaeda Quwwat Abu Fadl al-Abbas also have economic offices.<sup>103</sup> Within Baghdad, individual militias have carved out zones of dominance: Palestine Street for Kata'ib Hezbollah, Sadr City for Saraya Salam and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Badr and Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali for Karradah and Jadiriyyah. Within these

t These forces have provided back-up to Hadi al-Ameri's political effort to demonstrate leadership as a form of "Basra reconstruction czar." See Ali al-Aqily, Jassim al-Jabiri, Samya Kullab, and Staff of Iraq Oil Report, "Hadi al-Ameri appointed czar of Basra," Iraq Oil Report, April, 2019.

areas, most real estate transactions and business enterprises are taxed by the dominant militias.<sup>104</sup> The presence of economic offices have caused so much concern within the Iraqi government due to their racketeering and predatory control of real estate that Prime Minister Adel Abd'al-Mahdi chose on June 18 and July 1, 2019, to issue successive orders for the closure of all PMF unit offices by July 31, 2019.<sup>105</sup> (On July 30, the PMF released a letter asking for two more months to comply.<sup>106</sup>)

### **The Centrality of al-Muhandis, KH, and Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali**

The central nervous system of IRGC-QF influence in Iraq is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Kata'ib Hezbollah, which maintains a stranglehold over most of the key relationships and posts in the PMF structure.<sup>u</sup> As this author noted in this publication in November 2010,<sup>107</sup> KH emerged as the primary IRGC-QF proxy in Iraq when larger and more disparate networks—Badr and splinter groups from Moqtada al-Sadr's Jaish al-Mahdi—proved too unwieldy and prone to infighting for IRGC-QF to control.<sup>v</sup> From the IRGC-QF perspective, a smaller and centrally controlled force was no doubt required<sup>108</sup> to manage and provide Iranian signature weapons (like Explosively Formed Penetrators, or EFPs) to groups that used them effectively against U.S. forces in line with Iranian guidance, rather than against Shi'a rivals.<sup>109</sup> Higher-quality Iraqi proxies may have been required by the IRGC-QF due to the difficulty of moving IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah trainers inside Iraq.<sup>110</sup> KH's 'touch points' with the broader Shi'a insurgent networks were the most anti-American and progressively more pro-Iranian splinter groups from Badr and Sadrist militias.<sup>111</sup>

Those touch points have today become the extensions of al-Muhandis' system of control in the much larger PMF structure. Though the most obvious example of this kind of proxy is Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani (U.S.-sanctioned leader of Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, PMF brigade 14<sup>112</sup>), a more urgent threat is arguably posed by the rapidly expanding powerbase of Shibl al-Zaydi<sup>113</sup> and Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali. The group qualifies as the new Special Group that has experienced the most prolific growth since 2014.<sup>114</sup> IRGC-QF appears

- u This is another point of consensus in all the author's interview programs with Iraqi political and military leaders in 2018-2019. Al-Muhandis is feared and respected above all other militias' leaders and above most Iraqi politicians, including successive Iraqi prime ministers since 2014, due to his very strong backing from Qassem Soleimani of IRGC-QF.
- v The U.S. Army's history of the Iraq War makes a similar assessment, stating "Kata'ib Hizballah was designed as a small, disciplined, specially equipped organization of a few hundred highly trained fighters. It remained under the tight control of the Quds Force." See Joel Rayburn and Frank Sobchak (eds.), *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War, Volume 2: Surge and Withdrawal, 2007-2011* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2019), p. 66.
- w The most dramatic cases were the internecine assassinations of two provincial governors and two provincial police chiefs in the latter half of 2006, all Shi'a-on-Shi'a political killings using Iranian-provided Explosively Formed Penetrators (EFPs). Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
- x U.S. seizures of senior IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah officers in Iraq in 2007-2008 hastened the transition to reliance on small, higher-quality Iraqi proxies. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

to have put special effort into cultivating al-Zaydi while ensuring that al-Muhandis provided Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali with a very large number of paid billets within the PMF payroll system, growing the unit to a size on par with al-Muhandis' own KH.<sup>y</sup> In addition to very slick propaganda—including the development of the celebrity fighter Abu Azrael, who carries a samurai sword<sup>z</sup> and boasts of spit-roasting Islamic State captives<sup>115</sup>—Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali has the same dispersed training and advising presence at many strategic points as KH.<sup>116</sup> The group has a stronger financial base than any other militia in Iraq through property holdings, legitimate investments, and corrupt influence within the Ministry of Transport and Communications.<sup>117</sup> In the view of this author, Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali looks very much like a parallel first-tier IRGC-QF proxy that is intended to reduce overdependence on KH. The movement—and its business connections—deserves much closer scrutiny.

Another body that merits closer attention is the Central Security Directorate (CSD) of the PMF Commission.<sup>118</sup> This is the part of the PMF that is sanctioned by al-Muhandis to discipline PMF leaders, a powerful internal affairs agency with its own well-equipped special forces and intelligence capabilities.<sup>aa</sup> The CSD is led by Abu Zaynab al-Lami (real name: Hassan Falah), an associate of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and a KH member from Baghdad.<sup>119</sup> The first deputy director is Abu Ali al-Zaydi, and the second deputy director is Abu Wahab al-Maliki.<sup>120</sup> Al-Lami is emerging as a very powerful and widely feared figure who has a direct line to IRGC-QF leader Qassem Soleimani, independent of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.<sup>121</sup> It is possible that Abu Zaynab al-Lami is being groomed to eventually supplant al-Muhandis at the top of the Special Group structure in Iraq, and he was already floated as one candidate for the highly influential deputy minister of interior for intelligence role in the Iraqi government in June 2019.<sup>122</sup> The CSD is believed by Iraqi politicians to operate a technical intelligence branch under an official known as Abu Iman, focused on developing compromising material on politicians, ministry directors, and security personnel.<sup>123</sup>

Al-Muhandis' position at the heart of the PMF Commission has historically allowed him to control the purse strings that dictate how many paid billets each unit is allocated, resulting in very significant influence over local leaders, who directly benefit from

skimming off unit salaries.<sup>124ab</sup> Now the PMF Commission is claiming that the PMF payment, pension, and benefits system has been audited through a biometric registration system about which no details are available.<sup>ac</sup> PMF salaries may, in the future, move from cash payments to the popular QiCard<sup>ad</sup> electronic debit cards to allow easy transfer of money into bank accounts or cash issued by banks. Indications from within the Iraqi power structure suggest, however, that the registration process remains in the hands of al-Muhandis and thus is not an independently verified system.<sup>125</sup> Movement to independent auditing and electronic payment would reduce much of the potential for al-Muhandis to massage the real number of active fighters at unit level, which is his key means of maintaining influence over PMF unit commanders.<sup>126</sup>

### The Role of Badr

Another cross-cutting capability that influences all the PMF units—including the Iran-backed Special Groups—is the Badr organization's function as the most experienced military force in the PMF, with continual operation of a division-sized armed force since the mid-1980s.<sup>127</sup> In today's PMF, Badr is the main provider of expertise and manpower in the PMF "enabler" units, such as the armor, artillery, and missiles directorates.<sup>128</sup> Badr members are in charge of liaising with the Sunni Tribal Mobilization Forces (U.S.-supported elements of the PMF), and they occupy the positions of PMF chief of staff, chief of operations, and head of the training and religious instruction directorates.<sup>129</sup> At the local level, Badr provides the leaders for two operational commands (Basra and Rafidain) and the PMF administrative heads in Basra, Dhi Qar, Qadisiyah, Kirkuk Muthanna, and Wasit.<sup>130</sup> Badr is the heart of the PMF, but not its head, which is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

As noted previously, Badr was a unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in the Iran-Iraq War, so its ties with Iran run very deep. Badr membership is threaded throughout the DNA of many of the non-Badr units in the PMF, such as KH, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Kata'ib Jund al-Imam, and Saraya Talia al-Khurasani.<sup>131</sup> Badr units such as PMF brigade 9 and 10 have operated in Syria in support of Iranian policy.<sup>132</sup> Iran has provided significant material support to Badr units through the transfer of high-end systems like T-72 tanks and HM-20 and HM-27 multiple-barrel

y As noted previously, based on multiple interviewees, Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali has paid billets from around 8,000 fighters, not far short of KH's 10,000 billets. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

z Abu Azrael is irresistible "clickbait" for today's electronic media. For example, see "The 'Archangel of Death' fighting Islamic State," BBC Trending, March 18, 2015.

aa Large amounts of imagery exist of the CSD special forces due to the PMF Commission's keenness to demonstrate that it is purging criminality from the PMF. Troopers wear black jumpsuits and wear insignia and equipment that is very hard to distinguish from Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service troops. Modern night-vision equipment is often clipped to CSD helmets during night raids. For an example of CSD imagery, see Kosar Nawzad, "Iraqi militias crack down on several 'fake headquarters,'" *Kurdistan 24*, February 12, 2019.

ab Units receive their monthly salary allocation in cash, and commanders often skim around 30% of each volunteer's salary off for a "unit fund" that nominally pays for life support but also serves as a method of corrupt fundraising by individuals and factions. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ac On March 25, 2019, the head of finance for the Hashd Hussein Ismael Khalil announced a biometric (fingerprint) enrollment process for the Hashd that began in October 2018, and which by March 2019 had registered "80,000 out of nearly 160,000" members. See "Financial crowd issues a statement on salaries," *Wataniq*, March 25, 2019.

ad QiCard was developed by International Smart Card, a company owned by Iraq's two biggest state-owned banks, Rafidain Bank and Rasheed Bank, together with the Iraqi Electronic Payment System. See the company website at <https://qi.iq/>

rocket launchers.<sup>ae</sup> Badr-linked local auxiliary units like Babiliyun (PMF brigade 50) and Liwa al-Turkmen (PMF brigade 16) are involved in a range of criminal activities, human rights abuses, and material support to IRGC-QF.<sup>133</sup>

Disentangling Badr networks from al-Muhandis and IRGC-QF networks is thus not a simple proposition. All this being said, however, it is also arguable that Hadi al-Ameri's camp within Badr would prefer not to be digested whole and dissolved into the al-Muhandis-led Special Group structure.<sup>134</sup> As the above sections have detailed, cracks have emerged in al-Ameri's control of Badr<sup>135</sup> (mainly in far-flung auxiliary units) and al-Ameri's profile as the most visible Shi'a militia leader has been diluted by the rise of al-Muhandis, Qais al-Khazali (of AAH),<sup>136</sup> and Shibl al-Zaydi.<sup>137</sup> IRGC-QF leader Qassem Soleimani did not support al-Ameri's bid for the Iraqi prime ministership after the 2018 elections, nor did he secure al-Ameri the interior minister's job after the 2014 elections. Now al-Muhandis and up-and-comers like Abu Zaynab al-Lami get Soleimani's attention, while al-Ameri's practical ideas on PMF professionalization—backed by decades of military experience—are sidelined.<sup>138</sup>

### A More Precise U.S. Policy Toward Today's Special Groups

As the above assessment makes abundantly clear, the pro-Iranian militias within the PMF do not represent all—or even most—of the Popular Mobilization Forces. As a result, this author has argued,<sup>ag</sup> that U.S. officials would be wise to never *publicly* use the words PMF, Hashd, Shi'a militias, or any other collective descriptor because the popular mobilization, as a societal experience and as an institution, is viewed with reverence and respect by many Iraqis.<sup>139</sup> Many average citizens have relatives who fought honorably in the PMF structure primarily for the benefit of Iraq, not Iran or pro-Iranian militia leaders. The U.S. government arguably alienates potential allies when it publicly criticizes the PMF phenomenon in a generalized manner.

Even behind closed doors, none of the old descriptors (Shi'a Extremist Groups, Shi'a Militia Groups) make sense due to the multi-ethnic composition of the Iraqi components of Iran's threat network. There is a very strong argument for a new descriptor for

ae Imagery and videos of the Badr-provided PMF artillery and armor directorates is widespread because the PMF is proud to show off its capabilities. For a good description of Badr equipment holdings, see Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), p. 100. Also see Michael Knights, "The Future of Iraq's Security Forces," Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, March 2016, p. 78.

af In a number of the author's interviews, Iraqis expressed the possibility that there will soon no longer be "one Badr." Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ag This author wrote: "First, whether Iraq has an institution called the Popular Mobilization Forces is none of our concern. The movement itself has a cherished place within the hearts of millions of Iraqis. Every time a U.S. leader publicly references the Popular Mobilization Forces as a whole, they set back our overall policy in Iraq, especially if these references are negative. Instead, the United States should only discuss our legitimate and specific concerns as a security cooperation partner and donor to Iraqi counterparts behind closed doors." See Michael Knights, "How the U.S. government should think about Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces," Fikra Forum, Washington Institute, May 9, 2019.

those groups with primary loyalty to U.S.-designated terrorist Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and who are willing to provide material support to IRGC-QF and other sanctioned entities including but not limited to Lebanese Hezbollah. What Iraq faces today are effectively the new 'Special Groups' of the Iraqi militia scene—'special' in that, like their forerunners in 2006-2011, they are not under government control and they provide material support to IRGC-QF and other sanctioned Iranian entities.

### The Main Threat: Kata'ib Hezbollah

The United States does not have the same influence it did in Iraq prior to 2011, and it therefore needs to be parsimonious and pragmatic if it wishes to push back effectively on today's Iran-backed Special Groups. The first step in the process of addressing the challenge posed by today's Iran-backed Special Groups is to clearly define—and continually refine—identification of the main threat group. That main threat is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Kata'ib Hezbollah. A key challenge is that al-Muhandis dominates the finances of the PMF. If Iraq chooses to place a second deputy chairman of the PMF Commission alongside al-Muhandis, as was unsuccessfully attempted in 2016,<sup>ah</sup> this could be a start in diluting his influence.

At the same time, the analyst community needs to put significant effort into understanding how the main threat will evolve. Al-Muhandis may try to use a PMF reform process to consolidate his power, providing other factions (like Badr, Saraya Salam, and shrine PMF units) with long-term geographic cantons and salary allocations while keeping the more important core functions of the PMF Commission for himself. Alternately, the analyst community should also watch for the potential evolution of Special Groups beyond al-Muhandis and KH. The rising power of Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali has been overlooked for too long. The rising star of CSD director Abu Zaynab al-Lami is worthy of close attention in the analyst community, particularly in light of sanctionable activities.

### Targeting Second-Tier Special Groups

Beyond these main threat groups, U.S. government analysts should continue to refine the criteria for prioritizing urgent threats to U.S. citizens and U.S. interests, Iraqi stabilization and economic well-being, and the human rights of Iraqis. As PMF units are likely to shed their public use of unit names (for instance, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada) in the near future,<sup>140</sup> the United States would be wise to always refer to such units using their brigade numbers, as this article has done, which may outlive their faction names. The most capable pro-Iran militias may not be the best known. For instance, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (PMF brigade 14) was formed by, and remains led by, Abu Mustapha al-Sheibani, a U.S.-designated terrorist, so it is an obvious target for U.S. sanctions. Yet, newer militias such as Kata'ib Jund al-Imam (PMF brigade 6), Harakat al-Abdal (PMF brigade 39), Saraya al-Jihad (PMF brigade 17), and Liwa al-Tafuf (PMF brigade 13) are larger, are present on the Syrian border, and

ah Retired Mohsen al-Kaabi was appointed by then Prime Minister Abadi on February 17, 2016, with responsibility for finances and administrative monitoring. He mysteriously withdrew from the position in under a month, and his resignation was announced first by Kata'ib Hezbollah. See "Abadi Assigned Mohsen al-Kaabi as Deputy Head of the PMF," Al-Ghad Press, February 7, 2016. See also "Al-Kaabi withdrew from his post as deputy chairman of the Popular Authority for Administrative Affairs," Al-Masalah, March 10, 2016.

may be equally or more valuable to IRGC-QF as proxy forces.

There is a value to sanctioning leaders of smaller militias as a warning to the leaders of larger ones to amend their behavior, but the United States would be wise to make this choice deliberately and not due to a mis-assessment of the threat posed by groups. For instance, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (PMF brigade 12) is one of the loudest, most anti-Israeli and anti-U.S. groups in Iraq,<sup>141</sup> led by U.S.-designated terrorist Akram Kaabi, and it was duly sanctioned in March 2019.<sup>142</sup> What few observers realize is that Nujaba is one of the smaller and less capable Special Groups at the moment.

The United States should also continue to explore non-terrorism authorities for sanctioning militia leaders. The recent linking of sanctions to corruption and human rights abuses was recently done with the leaders of PMF brigades 30 and 50.<sup>143</sup>

As was the case with these latter brigades, it was their leaders—not their rank and file—that were initially targeted, which may be replicated with future measures. Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq may be a particularly relevant case for the targeting of mid-level commanders. The behavior of some elements of AAH toward other Iraqis remains deplorable—ranging from intimidation of common people all the way up to the Baghdad provincial council chairman<sup>144</sup> and the head of the Shi`a Endowment, appointed by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sis-

tani.<sup>ai</sup> This offers a wide variety of non-terrorism issues that could be highlighted in targeted sanctions against mid-level AAH commanders in the future.

### Denying IRGC-QF Deniability

When U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Baghdad on May 7, 2019, he brought a simple and strong message for Iraqi and Iranian ears: any attack by Iran-backed militias that harmed American citizens in Iraq would be considered to be an Iranian attack, triggering a U.S. military response against Iranian interests in Iraq.<sup>145</sup> The demarche appears to have reinforced a pre-existing IRGC-QF preference that harassment of U.S. bases remain non-lethal in nature, corresponding with an “aim to miss” pattern visible in rocket strikes in late 2018 and early 2019.<sup>146</sup> <sup>aj</sup> Providing clear and sharable evidence of Iranian and militia malfeasance to support such demarches may become a more important priority for intelligence collectors and analysts. **CTC**

ai Alaa al-Musawi, the Sistani-appointed head of the Shi`a Waqf (religious endowment), suffered a home invasion by AAH forces on July 10, 2019, and continues to shelter in the Prime Minister's guesthouse at the time of writing. See “Storming the residence of the head of the Shiite Waqf for refusing to take over the Grand Mosque,” Kitabat, July 11, 2019.

aj Both the U.S. Embassy complex in Baghdad and the U.S. consulate in Basra are large enough that highly experienced militia rocketeers ought not to entirely miss these facilities unless they intend to do so.

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- 90 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
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- 122 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
- 123 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
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- 127 See Knights, "Iraq's Bekaa Valley," and George.
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- 129 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures in 2018 and 2019, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees. The author wishes to thank Hamdi Malik and Aymenn al-Tamimi for their strong support to the author's knowledge of such enabler units.
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