

Soleimani Is Dead: The Road Ahead for Iranian-Backed Militias in Iraq

By Michael Knights

The killing by U.S. airstrike of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis struck right at the core of the Iranian and militia projects in Iraq, and it occurred after months of anti-government protests had already shaken the militia's towering control of the Iraqi state. Before the protests, al-Muhandis and the Iran-backed militias were at the zenith of their power. They controlled the prime minister's office, dominated any security portfolios they selected, and were positioned to divert value from many major economic ventures to Iraqi militias, Iran's Revolutionary Guard, and Lebanese Hezbollah. This unnatural level of consolidation was built and sustained by Soleimani and al-Muhandis. Their removal, in combination with resistance from protestors, religious leaders, and the international community, could slow or stall the consolidation of militia power in Iraq. Iran's most favored allies have been clearly defined in the twin crises: Badr, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Kata'ib Sayyed al-Shuhada, Saraya Talia al-Khurasani, and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. They failed to defeat the Sadrist-backed protests, and they look unlikely to evict U.S. forces from Iraq. The Revolutionary Guard will likely face an uphill struggle to prevent greater disharmony and fragmentation in the militia ranks, where the likely focus will be a race for positions, resources, and self-preservation.

In August 2019, this author noted that the 60,000-strong Iran-backed militias in Iraq had achieved unprecedented size and influence, and warned that their operational commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and the movement he formed, Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), were "the central nervous system of IRGC-QF (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force) influence in Iraq."¹ Today, al-Muhandis is dead, killed along with his IRGC-QF sponsor Qassem Soleimani in a U.S. airstrike on January 3, 2020. Days beforehand, five Kata'ib Hezbollah sites were also targeted by the United States, killing 25 KH members and wounding over 50.²

This article will ask what happens next to the effort by IRGC-QF and Iran-backed militias in Iraq now that their "central nervous system" has been severely disrupted. Even before the killing of

Soleimani and al-Muhandis, the latest three months have been very bruising for the militias, both in terms of popular and elite dismay at their counter-protestor actions and as a result of U.S. airstrikes. Will such militias rally and cooperate under new leadership, or will they fragment in disarray? In what manner will they confront the U.S. presence in Iraq and seek to protect their political, military, and economic assets? The first two sections outline what was learned about the Iran-backed militias as they organized the Iraqi state's reaction to major protests. Thereafter, the piece looks at the militias' decision to risk a showdown with the United States, leading to the deaths of key militia leaders. The internal relations repercussions for IRGC-QF and Iran-backed militias are next discussed in turn, and the piece ends with an assessment of what may be the next steps for militias as they seek to recover.

The interface between IRGC-QF, militias, and Iraqi political and business elites is a murky one, understood quite clearly by Iraqi insiders but with very little detailed coverage in open sources. In order to build a solid picture of the manner in which the militias have operated, the author undertook two interlinked research processes in the 2018-2020 period. First, the author visited Iraq on six occasions and interviewed over 60 major political, military, and business figures. The conversations were substantive, often up to two hours of focused discussion purely on Iranian influence and militia topics. The interviewees included very senior politicians, many of whom were Shi'a leaders with strong ties to IRGC-QF. Many were interviewed multiple times, with very detailed notes taken. All the interviews were undertaken on deep background due to the severe physical security threat posed by militias, and great care was taken, and is needed in the future, to ensure that such individuals are not exposed to intimidation for cooperating with researchers.^a Alongside face-to-face interviews, the author also undertook communications with Iraqi interviewees using secure messaging applications, amounting to hundreds of specific information requests to verify data and multi-source points of detail. The author used his 16-year track record of interviewing Iraqis to assess information and did his best to verify and triangulate all information contained in this article.

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a Iran-backed militias pay close attention to what is written about them and who says it and who interviewers meet. Answering a question about Western think-tanks, al-Muhandis noted on January 13, 2019, "They have a writer, Michael Knights, who is an expert who has seen some of my friends but that I have not seen yet. He has great expertise and is truly very specific. He has very specific and exceptional information." See "The seminar of the Union of Strategic Experts welcomes Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis to discuss security challenges," PMF, war media team, via YouTube, January 15, 2019.

September 2019: Pro-Tehran Militia Dominance in Iraq

This author published the *CTC Sentinel* article “Iran’s Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups” in late August 2019, just as the Iran-backed militias in Iraq achieved the zenith of their power.³ As the author’s interviews with senior political leaders in Baghdad showed, the Iraqi Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) was dominated by the twinned influence of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, with a pro-IRGC-QF official, Abu Jihad (Mohammed al-Hashemi), installed as the prime minister’s chief of staff.⁴ IRGC-QF-vetted Iraqi militiamen were installed as security and office workers at the PMO.⁵ Damagingly, al-Muhandis had effectively sown distrust between Prime Minister Adel Abd’al-Mahdi and his non-militia security forces, creating concern that the Counter-Terrorism Service and the Iraqi National Intelligence Service were plotting against the prime minister.⁶ When Iran-backed militias assisted IRGC-QF in firing drones at a Saudi Arabian oil pipeline from Iraq on May 14, 2019,⁷ the government took al-Muhandis’ word that the incident never happened.⁸ Based on a significant number of interviews and many dozens of conversations, the author has sensed that al-Muhandis became the embodiment and the central node of IRGC-QF influence in Iraq in 2019. In the author’s view, the best way to express the preeminent position that al-Muhandis achieved by the time of his death is that he was widely perceived within Iraq’s political elite to be Iran’s military governor of Iraq, controlling a puppet civilian government at its head.

The Iran-backed militias were also dominant in business affairs, directly benefitting themselves, Iranian interests, and Lebanese Hezbollah. U.S.-designated terrorist Shibl al-Zaydi, founder of Kata’ib al-Imam Ali (Popular Mobilization Forces brigade 40),⁹ has become one of the richest men in Iraq, with a sprawling business empire and a controlling interest over the Ministry of Communications.¹⁰ Major militia leaders leveraged their muscle to build large real estate portfolios.¹¹ Lebanese Hezbollah piggybacked on this economic dominance to becoming involved in numerous Iraqi contract awards¹² through the partnership between Iran-allied Iraqi politicians and Specially Designated Global Terrorists Mohammed al-Kawtharani¹³ and Adnan Hussein Kawtharani.¹⁴ At least four private banks run by militia-controlled businessmen continue to use Central Bank of Iraq dollar auctions to secure hard currency for Iran.¹⁵ The QiCard payment system used to pay government salaries^b was penetrated by militias, who inserted fake employees into the electronic system and skimmed their allocated salaries in schemes worth tens of millions of dollars each month.¹⁶ Militias control small oilfields such as Najma, Qayyarah, Pulkhana, and Alas.¹⁷ Militia-controlled logistics and shipping companies in Basra provide cover for the smuggling of sanctioned Iranian crude (rebadged as Iraqi crude after being loaded in Iran).¹⁸ At ports and free trade zones, the militias export Iraqi crude oil and oil products stolen from local industries, dominate customs evasion, and levy

taxes for goods coming into the country.¹⁹ Iran-backed Badr organization’s^c former head of intelligence Ali Taqqi took over as director of Baghdad International Airport,²⁰ and transferred the baggage handling contract to a front company controlled by U.S.-designated terrorist movement Kata’ib Hezbollah.²¹

By September 2019, the Iran-backed militias also had curtailed the U.S.-led coalition’s effectiveness in helping Iraq fight the Islamic State and professionalizing the Iraqi security forces.²² From March 2019 onward, in response to al-Muhandis’ instructions, the chairman of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Falah al-Fayyadh cut off the coalition’s access to predominately Sunni tribal mobilization forces, who had previously been an important source of intelligence and operational partnership in Islamic State redoubts like Nineveh and Anbar.²³ From about the same time, Badr took over the Iraqi Civil Aviation Authority²⁴ and began closing airspace to coalition surveillance flights.²⁵ Iraqi army commanders reported growing pressure to exclude U.S. advisors from counterinsurgency operations.^d A mounting series of non-lethal militia rocket strikes on coalition bases forced the coalition into a less active, more protective posture by September 2019.²⁶ Meanwhile, Iran-backed militias used their control of the PMO to remove some of Iraq’s most seasoned soldiers, including Iraq’s most admired combat commander, Counter Terrorism Command’s Staff Lieutenant General Abd’al-Wahab al-Saadi.²⁷ Considering the balance of power in Iraq, this author assesses that the conventional military was likely to face a future of declining budget share and declining influence compared to al-Muhandis’ politically dominant, Iran-backed PMF.

The October 2019 Crackdown by Militias

As the Iran-backed militias reached the zenith of their domestic power, they faced their first major tests as the new operators of the Iraqi state—a test that they disastrously flunked. In late September and early October 2019, the militias stepped forward to lead the security forces in handling protests by a wide cross-section of Iranian society.²⁸ The contours of the militia hierarchy were visible in the crisis cell that met in villas in the upscale Jadriya neighborhood of Baghdad and within the International Zone.²⁹ The meetings were led by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, supported by his putative boss Falah al-Fayyadh and the PMO’s Abu Jihad.³⁰ Next in line of seniority was Abu Muntadher al-Husseini (birth name: Tahseen Abid Mutar al-Abboudi), a Badr veteran, former PMF chief of operations, and current advisor for PMF affairs to the PMO.³¹ Badr also sent Abu Turab al-Husseini (birth name: Thamir Mohammed Ismail), a veteran militiaman and now head of the Minister of Interior’s Rapid Response Division (also known as the Emergency Response Division).³²

Aside from Badr, three Iran-backed militias were prominent in the sniper attacks and repression targeted on protestors. The first was Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH, comprising PMF brigades 41, 42, and

b QiCard is a popular debit card in Iraq that many government departments now use to directly deposit electronic payments to their employees, as opposed to the cash payment systems used until 2019. Employees must show their government ID to cash out, but there is still potential for corruption if fictional employees are created and loaded into the payroll system, which is exactly what has occurred across multiple militia-controlled ministries. The cards are taken to banks where militia members use fake ID linked to the card to withdraw the cash.

c Badr organization was originally created as a formation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps during the Iran-Iraq War. For open source profiles of Badr, see Michael Knights, “Iraq’s Bekaa Valley,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 16, 2015. See also Susannah George, “Breaking Badr,” *Foreign Policy*, November 6, 2014.

d In some cases, Iraqi general officers were ordered to remove coalition forces from operations by militia commanders with the rank of captain or major. Author interviews, multiple coalition officers, 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).



Mourners march during the funeral of Iran's top general Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of Iran-backed militias in Iraq known as the Popular Mobilization Forces, in Baghdad, Iraq, on January 4, 2020. (Nasser Nasser/AP Photo)

43, plus 15 MPs in parliament),³³ represented by Qais al-Khazali, who had been previously toeing a cautious line in the summer³⁴ as his advocates in the Iraqi government lobbied to keep him from being targeted with U.S. sanctions.³⁵ Toward late summer, al-Khazali became more outspoken against the United States and his militias seemed to begin to rocket U.S. bases in their areas of control (i.e., Taji³⁶ and Balad³⁷). In October 2019, al-Khazali chose to align his movement with the anti-protest crackdown,³⁸ one of a number of rhetorical and operational indicators that AAH had decided in the summer to sail closer to IRGC-QF and al-Muhandis, even at the risk of receiving a sanctions designation by the United States.

A second major militia commander present in the crisis cell was Abu Ala al-Walal (birth name: Hashim Bunyan al-Siraji), commander of the Iran-backed militia Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada (PMF Brigade 14).³⁹ The final militia commander present was Hamid al-Jazayeri, commander of Saraya Talia al-Khurasani (PMF brigade 18).⁴⁰ Notable by their absence in the crisis cell were some other militias that might have been expected to be drawn into the

effort, such as Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali (PMF brigade 40), Kata'ib Jund al-Imam (PMF brigade 6), and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (PMF brigade 12), to name a few.⁴¹ If such militias fed into counter-protest activities, they were curiously not represented at leadership level.

Al-Muhandis' own personal cadre took care of much of the operational management of the crackdown on protestors, with day-to-day operations led by Abu Zainab al-Lami (birth name: Hussein Falah al-Lami), the head of the Central Security Division (CSD) of the PMF.⁴² Lami relied upon two of his assistants, Abu Baqir (the CSD's director for the Rusafa district of Baghdad, where the Tahrir Square protest site was located) and Haji Ghaliab (CSD head of interrogations), who helped manage the mass detentions.⁴³ Abu Iman al-Bahali, the head of the PMF Intelligence Directorate, collocated hit lists of civil society activists and journalists in partnership with IRGC-QF cyber-intelligence officials and a 19-person Baghdad-based cell of Lebanese Hezbollah media operatives.⁴³ On-the-ground tactical leadership in Baghdad was provided by Hamid al-Jazayeri, commander of Saraya Talia al-Khurasani, who was highly visible in ordering around Iraqi security forces in the

e Throughout 2019, there was a concerted Iraqi elite effort to hold off U.S. sanctioning of al-Khazali, part of a putative effort to splinter al-Khazali away from the Iran-backed camp. The author had numerous conversations with the highest-ranked Iraqi leaders on this exact issue.

f Rocket attacks on Balad involved controversial arrests of AAH members, at exactly the same time Qais al-Khazali was privately denying their involvement. The U.S. government, according to the author's multiple U.S. government interviews, strongly attributed the attacks to AAH.

g Other Iran-backed militias that might have expected to be been involved, but which were absent, include Harakat al-Abdal (PMF brigade 39), Saraya al-Jihad (PMF brigade 17), Liwa al-Tafuf (brigade 13), 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).

International Zone.⁴⁴ Ali al-Yaseri, another senior commander of Saraya Talia al-Khurasani, held down protests in southern Baghdad.⁴⁵ AAH seemed to focus on Maysan, and Badr handled the deep south, Basra and Dhi Qar.⁴⁶

The counter-protest crackdown was not the quick and easy operation that al-Muhandis and the Iran-backed militias had anticipated. The clashes drew the militias into intense fighting with protestors, followers of Moqtada al-Sadr, and tribal forces.⁴⁷ Of interest, the samurai sword-wielding Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali celebrity fighter Abu Azrael^h was badly wounded by protesters in Baghdad,⁴⁸ though it is unknown whether Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali openly took part in suppression activities. New U.S. Global Magnitsky sanctionsⁱ were imposed on Qais al-Khazali, his brother Laith al-Khazali (who led the AAH actions on the ground), and Abu Zainab al-Lami.⁴⁹ IRGC-QF and militia control of the PMO, carefully crafted over the prior year, began to unravel in the face of strong domestic criticism by the Shi'a religious leadership, Sadrists,^j and protestors, plus international condemnation.⁵⁰ Prime Minister Adel Abd'al-Mahdi's resignation was accepted by parliament on December 1, 2019.⁵¹ Even if Abd'al-Mahdi's resignation gets rescinded, he is unlikely to have the same authority as before the protests.

Militias Choose to Engage the United States

Against this backdrop, al-Muhandis' militias also appear to have decided to intensify their harassment of coalition bases in Iraq, even at the risk of killing international personnel, a line they had been careful not to cross until November 2019.^k Within the inner circles of the Iraqi and U.S. governments, it was the understanding that IRGC-QF (working through al-Muhandis) had placed a prohibition on attacks likely to kill U.S. forces^l in response to U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's warning on May 7, 2019, that retaliation would strike Iranian interests in Iraq.⁵² In the first 10 months of 2019, 32 attacks were undertaken by Iran-backed militias on U.S. bases but no U.S. casualties were caused due to the rocket salvos being limited

in size (one or two 107mm rockets) and usually "aimed-to-miss."^m

Something seems to have changed in militia calculations from November 2019 onward, perhaps related to the seriousness of the political crisis in Iraq, Lebanon, and increasingly within Iran itself.ⁿ According to the author's interviews with Iraqi officials of cabinet level and below, the prevalent impression with the government is that Iranian and Iraqi militia leaders genuinely viewed the protests as a foreign plot,^{53 o} and they may have been trying to shock the United States into ceasing some imagined support for the demonstrations. From November 2019 onward, Iran-backed militia attacks on U.S. bases became more reckless, including a heavy rocket attack (involving at least 17 munitions) on coalition forces at Qayyarah West airbase on November 7⁵⁴ and later two attacks on coalition forces in Baghdad on December 9 and 11, 2019, that (unusually) used large 240mm rockets.⁵⁵ On December 27, 2019, another large 15-rocket salvo killed a U.S. contractor at K-1 base in Kirkuk.⁵⁶ U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff General Mark Milley announced that the attack was assessed as having been a deliberate effort to kill Americans.⁵⁷

On December 29, 2019, the United States unleashed what was likely a pre-vetted "response option" of airstrikes against five Kata'ib Hezbollah sites, including three in Iraq's Anbar province and two in adjacent areas of Syria.⁵⁸ The sites appear to have been sites that Kata'ib Hezbollah used for the transfer of missile or rocket forces to Syria, located along known smuggling routes west of the formal border crossing points in Al-Qaim.^{59 p} (On August 25, 2019, an apparent Israeli airstrike hit vehicles moving between two of the sites targeted on December 29, 2019, underlining the intense focus on the chain of bases.⁶⁰) Twenty-five Kata'ib Hezbollah members were killed and over 50 wounded on December 29, 2019, with the dead including four mid-level leaders.⁶¹ This was the heaviest single-day casualties taken by Kata'ib Hezbollah throughout its decade-plus existence.^q

On December 31, 2019, the Iran-backed militias mounted a show of force at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, where nearly all the major

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

i The Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act is a U.S. law that enables the U.S. government to target perpetrators of serious human rights abuses and corruption. The Global Magnitsky Act prevents entry to the United States, complicates visa issuance by other countries, and may be flagged by automated screening systems at airlines. See "Frequently Asked Questions, Global Magnitsky Sanctions," U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 21, 2017.

j The term "Sadrism" nowadays refers to the followers of Moqtada al-Sadr, the populist Shi'a Iraqi leader.

k Until November 2019, militias seemed to deliberately avoid killing Americans. "Aim to miss" dynamics are discussed in Michael Knights, "Washington Should Reverse Its Retreat in Basra," *PolicyWatch* 3025, October 2, 2018. Both the U.S. Embassy complex in Baghdad and the U.S. Consulate in Basra are large enough that highly experienced militia rocketeers do not have to entirely miss these facilities unless they intend to do so.

l The author's interviews repeatedly turned up unprompted mention of an order passed by IRGC-QF to seek approval before taking actions that would kill Americans. Author interviews, multiple coalition officers and Iraqi contacts, 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

m The author maintains a count of rocket attacks on U.S. bases, including detailing of munitions used and the size of salvos. This dataset uses open source and interviews with multiple Iraqi and U.S. contacts (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

n This is the author's supposition. In the summer and early fall of 2019, Iran and her proxies were careful not to kill Americans. The only proximate change in local conditions between the non-lethal and lethal phases of rocket attacks on U.S. bases was the worsening of demonstrations and their spread to Iran.

o The author undertook a wide sampling of views to ensure a good degree of confidence that militias really did view the protests as foreign backed. To give an open source reference, as early as three days into protests, just as the Iran-backed security cell activated, a member of the PMO publicly speculated on the involvement of "the electronic army of the US embassy" in the protests. See Suadad al-Salhy, "Third person dies as protests continue in Baghdad," Arab News, October 4, 2019.

p During the pre-2011 period, the author spent time on the ground in the exact area of the strikes. The ranches in this area are traditional smuggler staging bases that appear to have been taken over by Kata'ib Hezbollah and Liwa al-Tafuf (brigade 13). For detail on their operations in Anbar, see Michael Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups," *CTC Sentinel* 12:7 (2019): pp. 5-6.

q The author has been tracking Kata'ib Hezbollah operations since 2008. Neither the United States pre-2011, nor the Islamic State, nor Israeli strikes seem to have previously caused more than a handful of Kata'ib Hezbollah casualties in single battles or strikes.

Iran-backed militia leaders were present⁶²—for the last time ever, as it turned out. Secretary Pompeo identified al-Muhandis, al-Khazali, al-Fayyadh, and Badr leader Hadi al-Amiri as organizers of the attack on the embassy.⁶³ On January 2, 2020, U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper warned of pre-emptive U.S. strikes on Iranian and Iran-backed targets if the United States was again threatened.⁶⁴ On January 3, 2020, the U.S. government claims to have reacted to an ongoing stream of threat warnings, performing the drone strike⁶⁵ at Baghdad International Airport that killed Soleimani, al-Muhandis, and a number of IRGC-QF staff officers and PMF functionaries.⁶⁶ Also on January 3, the U.S. State Department designated AAH as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and designated Qais al-Khazali and Laith al-Khazali as Specially Designated Global Terrorists.⁶⁷ In a 24-hour period, some of the biggest policy quandaries facing the United States on IRGC-QF and Iraqi militia issues were suddenly resolved: after years of debating and hand-wringing, Soleimani and al-Muhandis were dead^r and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and its leaders were sanctioned as terrorists.^s Beyond Washington, the reverberations were even more consequential, upending the balance of power among Iran-backed militias and between Iran-backed militias and other political factions.

Ripple Effects in Iraq's Militia Scene

The simultaneous killing of the two giants of the Iraqi militia scene—Soleimani and al-Muhandis—was clearly deeply shocking to other militia leaders. As has been the case when faced with prior calamities, such as the successful counter-militia operations by U.S. and Iraqi military forces in 2008,⁶⁸ some key leaders fled to Iran. Abu Ala al-Walai of Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada and Akram Kaabi of Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba were photographed⁶⁹ with the new IRGC-QF commander, Brigadier General Esmail Qaani.⁷⁰ A range of militia leaders also met Moqtada al-Sadr and his military commanders^t in Qom, Iran, including Akram Kaabi, Abu Ala al-

Walai, Laith al-Khazali, and Sheikh Sami Massoudi (deputy Hajj and Umrah commissioner and Iraqi aide to Qassem Soleimani).⁷¹ Qais al-Khazali mostly kept a low profile and made no public appearances in the weeks following the January 3, 2020, airstrike.⁷² Perhaps underlining his desire to focus on business and distance himself from militia affairs, Shibl al-Zaydi was in Lebanon when the current crisis broke in late December 2019, and he only returned to Iraq for al-Muhandis' funeral and did not appear in any photographs at either the funeral or subsequently at the militia huddle in Iran.^{73 u}

The loss of both Soleimani and al-Muhandis at the same moment will cause deep and widespread disruption to the militia system in Iraq. The two men worked as a unit, one with day-to-day ground access and the other as the ultimate tie-breaker if al-Muhandis faced stubborn opposition. No Iraqi leader can now count on Soleimani's efficient and decisive support, backed all the way up to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.⁷⁴ Though IRGC-QF has powerful residual relationships in Iraq—run by Soleimani's informal deputies such as Iranian ambassador to Baghdad Iraj Masjedi^{75 v} and Colonel Haj Ali Iqbalpour (the long-standing Kirkuk area liaison⁷⁶)—no one has the unique combination of senior backing, Iraqi track record, and personal characteristics that Soleimani brought to his godfathering of the Iraqi militias. The new IRGC-QF commander, Brigadier General Esmail Qaani, knew Soleimani's playbook well, but he is less charismatic, a stranger to Iraqis, lacking in Arabic, and more knowledgeable about Iran's eastern front.⁷⁷ Iranian ambassador to Baghdad Iraj Masjedi, also an IRGC-QF veteran, will be the stop gap, and may gamble that he has significant freedom of movement due to his diplomatic immunity. A potential reinforcement could be Abdul Reza Shahlai, IRGC-QF's "man in Yemen" who has prior experience with Iraq's militias.⁷⁸ Also likely to take up some of Soleimani's duties in Iraq is General Muhammad Hussein-Zada Hejazi, whose promotion to IRGC-QF deputy commander was announced on January 20, 2020.⁷⁹ Hejazi has more experience in the Arab world, specifically Lebanon, than Qaani, and was designated by the United States for proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in 2007.⁸⁰

Nor does IRGC-QF have a ready-made replacement main interlocutor of similar quality in the Iraqi militias. Al-Muhandis was a unique individual and cannot be easily replaced. His stature far outweighed any other single militia or political leader, in part due to the strong backing he received from Soleimani but also due to his personal characteristics and history.⁸¹ Al-Muhandis was much more effective, intelligent, and intimidating than his closest contemporary, his old Badr subordinate Hadi al-Ameri.⁸² Al-Muhandis' seniority was grudgingly recognized by veteran fighters like Abu Muntadher al-Husseini, Abu Turab al-Husseini, and Abu Mustapha al-Sheibani, and respected by young guns like Abu Ala al-Walai,

r Lethal targeting of both Soleimani and al-Muhandis was actively considered for over a decade before they were killed, with a number of spurned opportunities. For a look at one exercise in which the costs and benefits were reviewed, see Michael Knights, "How Soleimani's Killing Could Make a Stronger Iraq," *Politico*, January 5, 2020. See also Carol E. Lee and Courtney Kube, "Trump authorized Soleimani's killing 7 months ago, with conditions," *NBC News*, January 13, 2020.

s AAH has long been a hotly debated special case. It was not designated as a terrorist movement in 2007-2011, despite numerous anti-U.S. actions, most notoriously the killing of five U.S. soldiers in the January 2007 "Karbala Raid." Until the present time, many observers have called for the sanctioning of AAH and its leaders. In 2019, three U.S. congressional bills were in process to get AAH sanctioned: U.S. House of Representatives, H.R.361 - Iranian Proxies Terrorist Sanctions Act of 2019, U.S. House of Representatives, H.R.571, Preventing Destabilization of Iraq Act of 2019; and U.S. House of Representatives, H.R.5276 - Iraq Human Rights and Accountability Act of 2019. For a discussion of the key issues, see Michael Knights and Frzand Sherko, "Can Asaib Ahl al-Haq Join the Political Mainstream?" *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 14, 2019. Eventually, Qais al-Khazali and Laith al-Khazali were sanctioned under Global Magnitsky for human rights abuses ("Treasury Sanctions Iran-Backed Militia Leaders Who Killed Innocent Demonstrators in Iraq," U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 6, 2019). Only on January 3, 2020, did they—and their movement—receive full designation as terrorists.

t Moqtada al-Sadr was accompanied by Saraya Salam commanders Abu Dua al-Issawi (a special advisor for security affairs) and Sayyid Yasir (personal bodyguard and aide). See Will Fulton, "Leaders of 'Iraqi resistance groups' met in Qom yesterday to discuss events in Iraq and their path forward" *Twitter*, January 14, 2020.

u Shibl al-Zaydi was reported by two of the author's contacts to have attended al-Muhandis' funeral.

v Masjedi has handled a lot of stakeholder engagement with provincial governors and Sunni groups, but like al-Muhandis, he always previously had the figure of Soleimani standing behind him, bringing added authority, Iraq knowledge, and senior leader relationships. For an example of Masjedi's meetings, see Ahmad Majidiyar, "Tehran's envoy to Baghdad meets Iraqi leaders in run-up to parliamentary vote," *Middle East Institute*, April 6, 2018.

Akram Kaabi, and the Sadrist leaders.^{83 w} Neither Hadi al-Ameri nor Moqtada al-Sadr is skilled enough, feared enough, or well-respected enough to marshal the 50-plus factions of the PMF.⁸⁴

The consolidation plan being designed by al-Muhandis and Abu Jihad was built around the unique Soleimani-Muhandis powerbase and may now grid to a halt.⁸⁵ As the author's August 2019 *CTC Sentinel* article⁸⁶ explored, al-Muhandis had centralized the key directorates of the PMF—finance, administration, internal security, intelligence, religious affairs, and special weapons—under his own loyalists. His consolidation process within the PMF was heading toward success at the time of his death, with a budget exceeding \$2.1 billion and few obstacles to further expansion under his leadership, backed by Soleimani.⁸⁷ Now this harnessing and focusing of militia power is likely to give way to greater disharmony and disorder. There is no easy replacement for al-Muhandis and no Soleimani to call to designate a successor and enforce his judgment.⁸⁸

IRGC-QF's apparent reaching out to Moqtada al-Sadr in the aftermath of Soleimani's death⁸⁹ was a predictable step for an organization whose Plan A now lays in tatters. Overinvestment in Soleimani and his Iraqi clone al-Muhandis has left IRGC-QF and the PMF in disarray, perhaps temporarily or perhaps for a longer period. On paper, the incorporation of al-Sadr into a resistance front seems logical. He has steadfastly refused to meet with U.S. officials and has banned his followers from doing so, and he has consistently sought the removal of foreign forces from Iraq.⁹⁰ Less promisingly for IRGC-QF, al-Sadr is unpredictable, only partially in control of his followers, and notoriously difficult to work with.^{91 x} Al-Sadr may one day seek an informal version of the Iran-style *velayat-e faqih* (religious jurisprudence) system in Iraq, but under his own leadership,⁹² definitely not that of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei or Lebanese Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah.^y Al-Sadr views Iran-backed leaders such as Hadi al-Ameri as rivals,^{93 z} and others (such as Nouri al-Maliki and Qais al-Khazali) as bitter foes, an enmity that is entirely mutual.^{94 aa} Many protestors killed since October 2019 by Iran-backed militias were either young Sadrists within the protests or the relatives of Sadrists from east Baghdad, meaning that a lot of Sadrist blood has very recently been spilled by

w Al-Muhandis' closeness to Soleimani gave him added *wasta* (influence), but it was arguably earned, not only by al-Muhandis' efficiency and also long service alongside Soleimani and other IRGC-QF officers. Based on the author's interviews with Iraqi leaders in 2019, al-Muhandis' seniority was grudgingly recognized by Iraqi militia leaders. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts in 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

x Moqtada al-Sadr has proven to be a flighty and difficult partner, leaving and joining coalitions at a whim.

y Rumors flew in January 2020 that Hassan Nasrallah might be given some role in crafting cohesion between Iraqi militias. For a good rendition of this somewhat unlikely story, see Suadad al-Salhy, "Iran tasked Nasrallah with uniting Iraqi proxies after Soleimani's death," *Middle East Eye*, January 14, 2020. Most likely, Nasrallah's involvement would knock Moqtada al-Sadr out of any nascent Iraqi 'resistance front' due to their rivalry.

z Moqtada al-Sadr has a long history of competing with Badr and Hadi al-Ameri particularly.

aa Moqtada al-Sadr fought al-Maliki in the military operations of 2008 and has never forgiven his defeat then. Al-Khazali is a lifelong rival of Moqtada's, having challenged Moqtada for control of Moqtada's father's organization, the Office of the Martyr Sadr.

Iran's militia allies in Iraq.^{ab}

Militia Next Steps in Iraq

The above review of events since last summer is intended to illustrate that a series of very challenging circumstances befell al-Muhandis' network of Iran-backed militias just as they reached the apex of their control of the Iraqi state. In the view of the author, based on years of close observation of Iraqi leadership dynamics, with Soleimani at his back, al-Muhandis had become the single most important man in Iraq. Yet now Iran's military governor of Iraq is suddenly gone forever, and there is no apparent succession plan.

For the reasons outlined in the previous section, it may take some years for the power balance within the PMF to settle. As the author's August 2019 *CTC Sentinel* article described in detail, the command structure of the Iran-backed militias was extraordinarily complex and hard to manage at the best of times.⁹⁵ Even the very capable al-Muhandis with Soleimani at his back had a full-time job keeping the militias partially in line. There is strong potential for infighting.⁹⁶ Al-Muhandis had begun to splinter and cannibalize his alma mater, the Badr movement, moving his preferred factions (Kata'ib Hezbollah and Kata'ib al-Imam Ali) into historic Badr territories such as Kirkuk, Tuz Khurmatu, Tal Afar, and Diyala.⁹⁷ Now Badr might try to reclaim its pole position as the biggest militia in Iraq, reeling back in recalcitrant Turkoman militia leaders like Abu Ridha Yilmaz al-Najjar, the highest profile example of a breakaway to al-Muhandis.⁹⁸ Alternately, Hadi al-Ameri's rivals (Abu Muntadher, Abu Turab, and others) might continue the slow break-up of Badr into uncooperative camps.⁹⁹

Of the smaller militias, Kata'ib Hezbollah is likely to stay the closest to IRGC-QF and will likely be its most dependable proxy. Much more needs to be done to research the leadership and structure of Kata'ib Hezbollah, about which very little detail has been written. The events since October 2019 have shown Abu Ala al-Walail of Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada and Akram Kaabi of Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba to be preferred proxies. Large groups like Kata'ib al-Imam Ali and AAH, each of which has a nominal political wing^{ac} (including 15 AAH parliamentarians),¹⁰⁰ are in a tough position: they are clearly in the U.S. crosshairs and could be subjected to kinetic targeting if they threaten U.S. persons,^{ad} and they have much to lose if sanctions are energetically implemented against their business networks. It may be that IRGC-QF and Lebanese

ab Neither Moqtada al-Sadr's militias nor Sadrists within the protest movement were defeated in the street battles since October 2019, and they have much cause for grievance against the Iran-backed militias. See Phillip Smyth, "Iran Is Losing Iraq's Tribes," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, December 4, 2019.

ac Kata'ib al-Imam Ali has a nominal political wing called Harakat al-Iraq al-Islamiyah. See Matthew Levitt and Phillip Smyth, "Kataib al-Imam Ali: Portrait of an Iraqi Shiite Militant Group Fighting ISIS," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, January 5, 2015.

ad U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper noted on January 2, 2020: "There are some indications out there that they may be planning additional attacks." He added, "if we get word of attacks, we will take preemptive action as well to protect American forces, protect American lives. The game has changed." In combination with the Soleimani and al-Muhandis strike, fear of leadership targeting is likely to be high within militias. See Wesley Morgan, "The game has changed": Defense secretary warns of preemptive strikes on Iranian group," *Politico*, January 2, 2020.

Hezbollah partners choose to leave such elements with the latitude to gradually distance themselves from the anti-U.S. “resistance” factions.¹⁰¹ Alternately, as AAH is now sanctioned by the United States, they may go ‘all in’ with the resistance bloc. One indication of this was given on January 22, 2019, when al-Khazali called for a new uprising against the United States in the 100th year after the 1920 Iraqi revolution against the British.¹⁰²

Former parliamentarian al-Muhandis was personally very active in ‘whipping’ the Iraqi parliament on key votes, though he never did succeed in passing legislation to remove U.S. forces, a likely indicator of the difficulty of forcing consensus on this issue.¹⁰³ ^{ae} The January 7, 2020, parliamentary vote to remove foreign forces showed that Iran-backed militias still lack the ability to construct parliamentary majorities in the post-Soleimani and post-Muhandis period. In a 329-seat parliament, requiring 165 seats to reach quorum, the anti-U.S. bloc could only muster 130 MPs into the parliamentary chamber, despite having attempted physical threats against many of the Kurdish, Sunni, and other MPs who refused to attend.¹⁰⁴ Evidently missing was Soleimani and al-Muhandis’ ability to make up for the shortfall in raw numbers by policing unity within the Shi`a ranks, strong-arming Sunnis overawed by al-Muhandis’ toughness, and messaging the Kurds through Soleimani. This underlines the combined impact of killing both men on January 3; had either survived, the parliamentary vote might have gone differently.

Getting U.S. forces removed from Iraq by parliamentary action will likely continue to prove difficult in the future. The alternative way of removing foreign forces—striking back hard at U.S. forces—could trigger powerful new blows on militia leaders in Iraq and Syria. More likely, the militias will pepper U.S. bases with a desultory rain of non-lethal “aim to miss” rocket attacks and perhaps even roadside bombings of logistics convoys.^{af} Even groups like Kata’ib Hezbollah may hesitate to needlessly draw retaliation, having suffered painful strikes from Israel and the United States in the last six months. Preservation of strength may be the priority for Iran-backed militias in all scenarios short of a general war between

Iran and the United States.

The powerful political, economic, and military machine that crested in September 2019 will not disappear overnight and need not be shattered by the deaths of its two architects. Conscious and sustained effort by rival forces will be needed to do further, irreparable damage to the Iran-backed militias in Iraq. The bench of highly capable militia leaders is quite shallow. It can be confidently predicted that the militias will not cede their recent level of control without a fight. As outlined in the author’s prior August 2019 *CTC Sentinel* article, a range of Iran-backed militias have carved out expeditionary colonies in northern and western Iraq, far from their primarily southern Iraqi recruiting grounds, and they will not surrender them easily.¹⁰⁵

Whether under a weakened Prime Minister Abd’al-Mahdi or a new leader, al-Muhandis’ complete control of the PMO is unlikely to be replicated due to a lack of similarly skilled militia politicians. Protestors may prove difficult for the militias to openly drive from the protest sites due to ongoing Sadrist, religious establishment and international vigilance. Assassinations against journalists, civil society organizers, activists, and pro-Western personalities can be expected to increase,¹⁰⁶ particularly if Iraq does head toward early elections as the Sadrists and other factions are pushing for.¹⁰⁷ ^{ag} In those elections, the Iran-backed groups like Badr and AAH may be very vulnerable to electoral diminishment due to the well-publicized role they played in protestor deaths.¹⁰⁸ These factors may lead the militias to become very violent at the local level to eliminate and intimidate opponents in specific constituencies where their candidates are competing, which may drive further resistance to them in elections. Electoral fraud, as was evident in the much-criticized 2018 elections, may also become a more important priority for threatened militias.^{ah} The militias will also focus a great deal of effort on mafia-type defense of their economic powerbases—in banking, contracting, property, oil smuggling, and currency exchanges. All of the actions described above may hasten the reduction of open militia presence in Iraq’s cities, a measure that has broad political, religious, and public support.¹⁰⁹ **CTC**

^{ae} A former parliamentarian himself, al-Muhandis personally leaned on many politicians in an effort to deliver parliamentary majorities when needed.

^{af} On August 6, 2019, an Iran-backed group detonated a sophisticated passive infrared-triggered roadside bomb against an armored oil contractor vehicle in Basra. The claymore-type, ball-bearing warhead could not penetrate the armored vehicle but sent a message. Similar devices were found around a number of foreign-operated oilfields in southern Iraq. Previously, U.S. logistical convoys were hit in Basra by small roadside bombs on July 6, 2019. For details, see Michael Knights and Alexandre Mello, “Militias Are Threatening Public Safety in Iraq,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 14, 2019.

^{ag} The next scheduled elections will take place in May 2022, but protestors and religious authorities may push for early elections in late 2020 or more likely in 2021.

^{ah} The May 2018 elections were widely received as one of the worst elections, if not the worst, in terms of vote-rigging, voter suppression, and voter intimidation. See “UN Urges Probe into Alleged Fraud in Iraq Election,” Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), May 18, 2018, and Bilal Wahab, “Recount Will Test the Integrity of Iraq’s Elections,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 11, 2018.

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- 2 Qassim Abdul-Zahra, “Iran-backed Iraqi militia vows revenge to US strikes,” Associated Press, December 30, 2019.
- 3 Knights, “Iran’s Expanding Militia Army in Iraq.”
- 4 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political figures, 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). The author

interviewed Abu Jihad in the summer of 2019 and spoke to a range of other officials and politicians about his role and background. Abu Jihad (Mohammed al-Hashemi) is a long-term Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq politician, with historic ties to Adel Abd’al-Mahdi, Badr, and the Iran-based opposition. For an open source reference to him, see Muhammad Al-Waeli, “Is Iraq Finally Getting a Real Opposition?” 1001 Iraqi Thoughts, July 3, 2019.

- 5 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political figures, 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). The author visited the PMO on a number of occasions in 2018-2019, interviewing a range of officials. These officials were able to describe how the office functioned in this term of government and how its personnel were selected. As the author has interviewed persons in every PMO since 2005, there is good background understanding to make comparative assessments of the levels of IRGC-QF influence, which peaked in 2018-2019 in the author's view.
- 6 Ibid. The author's interviews in the PMO and amongst colleagues of the premier were very explicit on these issues. Interviews with Iraqi officials outside the PMO confirmed the data that the premier had been strongly influenced in favor of a regime protection effort designed to protect his administration from U.S.-backed forces.
- 7 Isabel Coles and Dion Nissenbaum, "U.S.: Saudi Pipeline Attacks Originated From Iraq," *Wall Street Journal*, June 28, 2019.
- 8 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political figures, 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). Multiple interviews conducted after the May 2019 incident confirmed that Abdal-Mahdi asked al-Muhandis if the Saudi pipeline drone attacks were launched from Iraq, and that the premier accepted his denial, even when U.S. officials and investigative reporting (see Coles and Nissenbaum) suggested otherwise.
- 9 "Treasury Sanctions Key Hizballah, IRGC-QF Networks in Iraq," U.S. Department of the Treasury, November 13, 2018.
- 10 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and business figures, 2019 and 2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). The author has worked with multiple interviewees in the Iraqi political and business scene to confirm details of militia figures placed at very high level within the ministry, and of corrupt deals in the telecommunications sector designed to benefit Lebanese Hezbollah. It will be recalled that Shibl al-Zaydi was sanctioned for his support to Hezbollah networks. "Treasury Sanctions Key Hizballah, IRGC-QF Networks in Iraq."
- 11 Ibid. The author received accounts from multiple Iraqi political and business figures of the widely known domination of militia leaders in seizing high-end vacant real estate in Baghdad and also in dominating the vacant housing rental markets in liberated areas.
- 12 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political figures, 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). In these interviews, the author was told that the Kawthrani brothers and other Lebanese businessmen associated with Hezbollah and Amal are very active nowadays in Iraq's business scene, with a "cut" of many large deals being directed to Lebanon. This is fertile ground for original research, investigating whether IRGC-QF may have earmarked Iraq to carry the burden of financially supporting Lebanese Hezbollah at a time of financial austerity in Iran.
- 13 "Treasury Sanctions Hizballah Leadership," U.S. Department of the Treasury, October 22, 2013.
- 14 "Treasury Sanctions Key Hizballah, IRGC-QF Networks in Iraq."
- 15 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political figures, 2019 and 2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). In these interviews, the author received multiple accounts of the ongoing Iranian efforts to secure hard currency through militia-allied bankers in Iraq. Four banks recurred multiple times in the interviews and their names and owners have been shared with U.S. agencies.
- 16 Ibid. The author is aware, through intelligence contacts, of one \$32 million per month scheme at an Iraqi ministry. Other ministries and security forces are also using QiCard and are likely to also be under pressure to allow militias to abuse the system, and the author has been told by contacts that this is the case. Iraq's pension system uses QiCard and is also open to abuse.
- 17 Ibid. Anyone who interviews Iraqi leaders understands this is an 'open secret' in Iraq. This issue is also covered in the discussion of militia areas of responsibility in Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq," pp. 6-10.
- 18 Ibid. Those who know Iraqi oil trading can readily provide lists of oil traders involved in exporting Iranian crude presented as Iraqi crude, the exact inverse of how Iraqi crude was smuggled in the 1990s while Saddam's Iraq was under sanctions. One of the only open source identification of such a trader is the United Against a Nuclear Iran (UANI) profile of Al-Iraqia Shipping Services and Oil Trading (AISSOT) owned by an Iraqi Kurdish magnate. See the UANI company profile of AISSOT at <https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/company/aissot>. Another profile can be found at Iranian Regime - Frauds, Manipulations, Atrocities, Human Rights Violations, Threats (IFMAT), Connected entities with AISSOT – networks, see <https://www.ifmat.org/connected-entities-with-aissot-networks/>
- 19 Ibid. The author received multiple accounts of militias controlling port berths, free trade zones, and border-crossing points, as well as internal customs monitoring points set back from land borders. This issue is also covered in the discussion of militia areas of responsibility in Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq," pp. 6-10.
- 20 For a news item mentioning Ali Taqqi, see "CAA launches a premium passenger card service at airports," *Iraq News*, January 30, 2019.
- 21 Ibid. The author received this information via multiple contacts, and the issue of overturning the ground handling contract is now being pursued by the U.S. and U.K. governments, underlining its veracity. The author has the contract in its original Arabic form. Of interest, as soon as the U.S. and U.K. investigations began, the Iraqi government transferred control of the Civil Aviation Authority from the PMO back to its usual placement under the Ministry of Transportation, probably to distance the PMO from militia activities at the Civil Aviation Authority, in which Ali Taqqi is also the deputy director and the dominant voice, multiple interviewees confirmed.
- 22 Author interviews, multiple coalition officers, 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). The author received multiple accounts of militia disruption of coalition involvement in operations.
- 23 Ibid. The author received multiple accounts of militia disruption of Falah al-Fayyadh's direct involvement in the cut-off of contact between coalition forces and tribal forces. The author also interviewed al-Fayyadh on the issue and confirmed the shut-down.
- 24 Ibid. As noted in the previous citation on the Civil Aviation Authority, multiple interviewees have explained Badr's takeover of CAA with the promotion of Badr member Ali Taqqi to the deputy directorship of CAA in early 2019, where he asserts the strongest voice.
- 25 Ibid. In March 2019, multiple U.S. government interviewees confirm, Iraq began to close airspace to coalition intelligence flights, particularly around Kata'ib Hezbollah's Jurf as-Sakr base but also in other places. After apparent Israeli airstrikes started in Iraq in July 2019, the militia-controlled CAA took additional steps to remove access. For an open source reference to this, see Suadad al-Salhy, "Iraqi government cancels permission for anti-Daesh," *Arab News*, August 16, 2019. The so-called Restricted Operating Zones requested by the Iraqi government initially included the whole of Iraq from Mosul south, which would have prevented any aerial support and was negotiated down to specific areas.
- 26 Michael Knights, "Responding to Iranian Harassment of U.S. Facilities in Iraq," *PolicyWatch* 3125, May 21, 2019.
- 27 Michael Knights and Alexandre Mello, "Reshuffling Iraqi Generals: Who Benefits?" *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 6, 2019; Michael Knights, "Helping Iraq Take Charge of Its Command-and-Control Structure," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, September 30, 2019.
- 28 Alissa Rubin, "'Our patience is over': Why Iraqis are protesting," *New York Times*, November 20, 2019.
- 29 Michael Knights, "Exposing and Sanctioning Human Rights Violations by Iraqi Militias," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 22, 2019. The author received multiple accounts of the locations of the crisis cell meetings, down to street addresses. As these meetings drew together high-level officials at well-known militia locations, the locations are quite widely known among Iraqi politicians.
- 30 Ibid. This piece was based on the author's interviews with multiple Iraqi political contacts in 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). The author received multiple accounts of the attendance of the crisis cell meetings. If a name was not multiple-sourced, it has not been included here nor in other pieces by the author.
- 31 Ibid. The author received multiple accounts of the attendance of the crisis cell meetings. If a name was not multiple-sourced, it has not been included here nor in other pieces by the author.
- 32 Ibid. The author received multiple accounts of the attendance of the crisis cell meetings. If a name was not multiple-sourced, it has not been included here nor in other pieces by the author.
- 33 Michael Knights and Frzand Sherko, "Can Asaib Ahl al-Haq Join the Political Mainstream?" *PolicyWatch* 3078, February 14, 2019. The author received multiple accounts of the attendance of the crisis cell meetings. If a name was not multiple-sourced, it has not been included here nor in other pieces by the author.

- 34 Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq," p. 9.
- 35 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political figures, 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).
- 36 Seth Frantzman, "Iraq investigating alleged rocket fire that landed near US forces in Camp Taji," *Jerusalem Post*, June 18, 2019.
- 37 Author interviews, multiple coalition officers, 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).
- 38 Knights, "Exposing and Sanctioning Human Rights Violations by Iraqi Militias."
- 39 "Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Mapping Militant Organizations," Stanford University, January 2020. For discussion of his presence and actions, see Knights, "Exposing and Sanctioning Human Rights Violations by Iraqi Militias."
- 40 For the earliest profile of STK, see Phillip Smyth, "Hizballah Cavalcade: Sariyya al-Tali'a al-Khurasani: A New Combat-Tested Shia Militia in Syria," *Jihadology*, October 29, 2013. For discussion of al-Jazayeri's presence and actions, see Knights, "Exposing and Sanctioning Human Rights Violations by Iraqi Militias." For video of al-Jazayeri directing militia and non-militia security forces during the protests, see "Al-Khorasani militias blocks protestors from reaching the Green Zone," Iraqi (IQ) Reporters, via YouTube, May 3, 2016.
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- 44 Ibid. Confirmed by multiple interviewees.
- 45 Ibid. Confirmed by multiple interviewees.
- 46 Ibid. Confirmed by multiple interviewees.
- 47 Phillip Smyth, "Iran Is Losing Iraq's Tribes," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 4, 2019.
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- 56 Ibid.
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- 66 "Statement by the Department of Defense," U.S. Department of Defense, January 2, 2020.
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- 73 Ibid.
- 74 The Washington Institute for Near East Policy held a conference in April 2019 that drew upon over a dozen experts on IRGCQF from inside and outside government, with the aim of deciding what would be the impact if Qassem Soleimani died. The author was the note taker. For a detailed treatment of the issue, based on this workshop, see Michael Knights, "How Soleimani's Killing Could Make a Stronger Iraq," *Politico*, January 5, 2020.
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- 76 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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- 78 Katherine Zimmerman, "Iran's man in Yemen and the al Houthis," *American Enterprise Institute*, January 16, 2020.
- 79 "General Hejazi named deputy chief of IRGC Quds Force," *Tehran Times*, January 20, 2020.
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- 81 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts in 2017-2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). The author has made a point of asking Iraqis from across the political and ethno-sectarian spectrum about their impressions of al-Muhandis over the years.
- 82 Ibid. Again, the author has asked over 60 Iraqi leaders with direct experience of al-Muhandis about their impressions of him and his contemporaries.
- 83 Ibid.
- 84 This is the author's assessment, based on his interviews with Iraqi leaders in 2017-2020 and reading of Iraqi events and some insight into the personalities in question. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts in 2017-2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).
- 85 This is the author's assessment, based on his interviews with Iraqi leaders in 2019 and his reading of Iraqi events, and having interviewed Abu Jihad in Baghdad in June 2019. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts in 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).
- 86 Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq," pp. 6-8.
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- 89 Fulton.
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- area, showing the unique blends of militia command and control in each.
- 96 For more CTC coverage on this issue, see Bryce Loidolt, "Iranian Resources and Shi'a Militant Cohesion: Insights from the Khazali Papers," *CTC Sentinel* 12:1 (2019).
- 97 Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq," pp. 4-5. The article gets into some detail on how al-Muhandis muscled his way into traditional Badr areas, particularly those with endangered Shi'a Turkmen communities.
- 98 Ibid. The author has held detailed biographical discussions of Northern Axis leaders with Iraqi stakeholders. The Northern Axis is a PMF operational command based in Tuz Khurmatu.
- 99 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts in 2018-2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). The author's takeaway from numerous leadership interviews is that Badr is indeed badly fractured into competing personal powerbases.
- 100 Phillip Smyth, "Iranian Militias in Iraq's Parliament: Political Outcomes and U.S. Response," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 11, 2018.
- 101 This is the author's assessment, based on his interviews with Iraqi leaders in 2018-2019 and his reading of Iraqi events. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts in 2018-2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).
- 102 "Shi'a Paramilitary Group Leader Rallies Iraqis to 2020 Revolution Against U.S.," SITE Intelligence Group, January 22, 2019.
- 103 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts in 2018-2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).
- 104 Bilal Wahab, "Here, Photo analysis of #Iraq parliament session on Sunday: 167 MPs needed for quorum; 130 were present ...," Twitter, January 7, 2020. Wahab stated that MPs received threatening SMS and WhatsApp messages to attend, yet still did not do so. This is credible from this author's point of view.
- 105 Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq," pp. 5-8.
- 106 John Davison and Ahmed Aboulenein, "Threats, arrests, targeted killings silence Iraqi dissidents," Reuters, November 29, 2019; Arwa Ibrahim and Azhar Al-Rubaie, "Iraqi journalists fear for lives after Basra reporters killed," Al Jazeera, January 12, 2020.
- 107 "Iraq's Sistani says early election only way out of crisis," Reuters, December 20, 2019.
- 108 Renad Mansour, Thanassis Cambanis, and Michael Wahid Hanna, "These Iraqi militias are attacking protesters and getting away with it: Here's why," *Washington Post*, November 18, 2019.
- 109 Author interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts in 2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). One point of consensus among all the author's pro-PMF reform and anti-reform interviewees was a willingness to see militias removed from Iraq's cities.