

The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces

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Brief Analysis

Three experts examine one of the most sensitive problems facing Iraq's new prime minister: the future of militias that were mobilized to fight the Islamic State but have since balked at subsuming themselves to the government's authority.

On May 20, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik, and Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, coauthors of the recent study [Honored, Not Contained: The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/honored-not-contained-the-future-of-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/honored-not-contained-the-future-of-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces). Knights is a senior fellow with the Institute's Military and Security Studies

Program. Malik is a London-based Middle East analyst at IITV. Tamimi is an independent analyst and a doctoral candidate at Swansea University. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

MICHAEL KNIGHTS

The title of the report *Honored, Not Contained* was inspired by a conversation with an Iraqi official in Baghdad, who stated that the country's Popular Mobilization Forces should be "honored and contained." So far, only the first part of that formulation has been achieved. The best way to fulfill the second is through evolutionary security sector reform, with the acknowledgment that containing the PMF is a more practical near-term objective than demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration.

One of the biggest challenges posed by the PMF is command-and-control. The force has frequently exceeded its authority and conducted operations without the government's knowledge. In October 2019, key PMF leaders and units were involved in the killing and illegal detention of numerous Iraqi protestors. Some elements have also launched drone attacks against neighboring countries (e.g., Saudi Arabia) and targeted foreign missions inside Iraq, all while denying their involvement. Such attacks ultimately led to the U.S. strike that killed Iranian Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani and PMF chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis on January 3.

Earlier this month, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi's newly formed government [made an early show of resolve \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kadhimi-as-commander-in-chief-first-steps-in-iraqi-security-sector-reform\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kadhimi-as-commander-in-chief-first-steps-in-iraqi-security-sector-reform) by raiding a militia in Basra that was targeting protestors. He has also committed to finding the private prisons where some protestors have been detained and investigating the murder of others. Yet external observers should expect such progress to be gradual, since Kadhimi also has an [Islamic State resurgence \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-states-resurgence-in-the-covid-era-from-defeat-to-renewal-in-ir\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-states-resurgence-in-the-covid-era-from-defeat-to-renewal-in-ir), a [coronavirus pandemic \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/arab-health-ministers-discuss-fighting-covid-19\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/arab-health-ministers-discuss-fighting-covid-19), and a deep economic crash to cope with.

Ultimately, demobilizing the PMF altogether will be very difficult given its substantial military and political presence in Iraq. Yet there is room for reform, and Iraqis have already shown significant consensus on many of the relevant issues. The roadmap to reform consists of three crucial stages. First, more accountable PMF leadership is paramount in both facilitating the institution's success and ensuring that it falls under national command-and-control. Second, the PMF needs defined roles and missions, which can be established as part of a national defense review in collaboration with foreign donors. The third stage is more distant: a gradual redeployment process in which militia troops return from the field to undergo professionalization.

HAMDI MALIK

Iraq's Atabat units are paramilitary groups affiliated with Shia Muslim shrines. These four so-called "shrine units"—Liwa Ansar al-Marja'ia, Liwa Ali al-Akbar, Firqat al-Abbas al-Qitaliyah, and Firqat al-Imam Ali al-Qitaliyah—have no links with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and are instead affiliated with Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the Iraqi Shia leader whom they regard as their source of emulation.

In total, the Atabat have around 18,000 active soldiers and tens of thousands of reserves. Firqat al-Abbas is the most militarily capable of the four groups, with offensive capabilities boosted by logistical training and fire support cooperation with Iraq's Ministry of Defense.

Several characteristics distinguish the Atabat from pro-Iranian, IRGC-dominated units in the PMF. First, they work only with Iraqi national institutions and are forbidden to liaise with IRGC commanders or other foreign military figures. Second, they stay out of the political process, whereas pro-Iran groups have gone so far as to form their own political parties. Third, Atabat units do not consider the United States as an enemy. Although they have occasionally condemned U.S. actions (e.g., the March bombing of a construction site in Karbala International Airport), they

generally avoid expressing or acting on anti-American sentiments. Fourth, the Atabat have not been accused of human rights violations. In fact, they have no interest in maintaining a presence inside the Sunni Arab areas where many such violations have occurred. Their primary areas of interest are the Shia holy cities of Karbala and Najaf and the desert that links them to Anbar. The Atabat have not been accused of extortion either, unlike the many PMF groups that use such tactics to sustain themselves, thereby exacerbating grievances among the Sunni population.

These differences place the Atabat at odds with pro-Iran militias. Even before Muhandis was killed in January, the shrine units sought his removal from command of the PMF. After his death, they strongly opposed the successor put forward by his militia, Kataib Hezbollah, which tried to appoint pro-Iranian commander Abu Fadak as the new PMF head of operations. In the end, the Atabat withdrew from the PMF commission altogether and pledged to help other groups defect.

Among other consequences, their withdrawal has damaged the religious legitimacy of the pro-Iran groups. The Atabat created a precedent of paramilitary volunteers operating with Ayatollah Sistani's approval; when they defected, many saw it as his way of beginning to withdraw his endorsement of the PMF. In response, Hadi al-Ameri, Ahmed al-Asadi, and other senior figures from pro-Iran groups have met with Sistani's representatives in Karbala in an effort to persuade the Atabat to return.

More broadly, the shrine units represent a model for a better PMF. Apart from opposing Iranian dominance, they have created space for militia troops and like-minded Iraqis to express pride in their religion and nationality without the obligation to hate other sects or nationalities.

AYMENN JAWAD AL-TAMIMI

Several PMF factions—including top organizations Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) and Kataib Hezbollah—have a dual identity as both anti-American “resistance” groups and registered brigades within an Iraqi national military institution. In the first role, they have been quite vocal in denouncing the U.S. presence as an occupation and issuing threats. Yet their second role as official PMF brigades makes it risky for them to openly carry out attacks against U.S. targets. Regarding their [ties with Iran \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/qaanis-surprise-visit-to-baghdad-and-the-future-of-the-pmf\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/qaanis-surprise-visit-to-baghdad-and-the-future-of-the-pmf), they have adopted certain goals that align with Tehran's interests (e.g., maintaining a PMF presence on the border with Syria), but they are not micromanaged by the IRGC.

The posture of these “resistance” factions has remained largely unchanged since the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis. Some senior figures have reduced their public profiles, most notably AAH leader Qais al-Khazali, who curtailed his media presence for fear of being targeted by the United States. Yet the groups are still agitating against the U.S. presence and issuing threats, though their recent role in actual attacks remains uncertain. Some PMF brigades seem to believe that they cannot directly attack the U.S. presence because they are part of an Iraqi government institution. Various new entities have claimed this year's strikes (e.g., Usbat al-Thaireen), but it is difficult to tell if they are true splinter elements or just PMF resistance factions operating under a different name to create plausible deniability.

Some resistance factions also adamantly opposed Kadhimi's appointment, accusing him of complicity in the deaths of Soleimani and Muhandis. After becoming prime minister, he took action against the group Thar Allah in Basra due to its involvement in killing and wounding demonstrators. Yet this lone act should not be interpreted as a broader move against the PMF or resistance factions. For one thing, Thar Allah is just a minor group compared to Kataib Hezbollah and AAH. Moreover, the PMF made a display of Kadhimi's recent visit to militia headquarters, even giving him a PMF uniform to wear. It seems unlikely that the prime minister could order raids or similar actions against the larger resistance factions, since he is obliged to respect the PMF institution as a whole.

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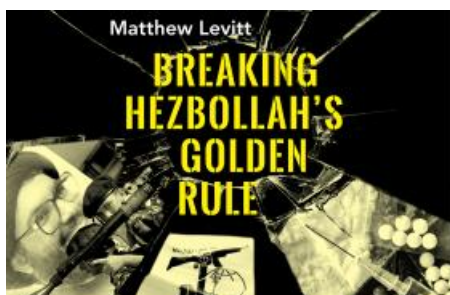
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