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# Exposing and Sanctioning Human Rights Violations by Iraqi Militias

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Brief Analysis

## As new protests and further government crackdowns loom, Washington should call out abuses by Iran-backed entities and sanction the key offenders.

In responding to the October 1-6 demonstrations in Baghdad and various southern towns, the Iraqi government used unprecedentedly severe repressive measures against protestors. A cabal of Iran-backed militia and security officials worked with Iranian advisors to design this tougher approach, which included assassinations, sniper fire, drone attacks, intimidation, illegal detentions, and Internet blackouts. When Baghdad released its findings regarding these human rights abuses on October 22, it identified only junior officers, avoided key violations such as sniper attacks and assaults on television stations, and refrained from naming any of the Iran-backed militia leaders involved. In the absence of a credible Iraqi government investigation, the United States should expose and sanction these officials for attacking civilians—not only to punish past crimes, but also to deter further abuses as new protests loom following the religious festival of Arbain.

## MILITIA ABUSES AGAINST CIVILIANS

During various protests earlier this month, Iraqi authorities perpetrated mass shootings against Shia Muslim civilians. By official accounts, 165 civilians were killed and 6,100 injured, though leaked government estimates suggest that as many as 400 may have been killed, as many as 257 “disappeared,” and 6,200 wounded. Due to the

location of the incidents, a very high proportion of these casualties were undoubtedly Shia. The crackdown included the following measures:

- **Internet blackout.** After completely shutting down all Internet services on October 2-6, the government has suspended them for various periods since then, with ongoing blockages of Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, and similar applications.
- **Illegal detention.** At least 923 people were arrested, including at least 35 removed from hospitals; many were forced to sign pledges not to take part in future protests on pain of prosecution. The Iraq High Commission for Human Rights reported on October 10 that 257 people were still unaccounted for after the government released detainees. Many of the missing are believed to be in Jurf al-Sakhar and other secret prisons run by Iranian-backed militias operating within the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).
- **Intimidation.** Journalists and civil society activists report intensive profiling, listing, and physical intimidation of dissidents, causing many to flee north to the Kurdistan Region or leave the country altogether. Protestors have been inaccurately branded as foreign-backed agitators, with some accused of either serving as the “digital army of the U.S. embassy” or seeking normalized diplomatic relations with Israel.
- **Sniper attacks.** Interior Ministry security forces and masked militiamen used live fire on protestors on October 1-3. And beginning October 4, protest ringleaders were individually targeted by sniper fire. According to Iraqi media reports, these snipers were deployed by Iran-backed PMF militias; one sniper from Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada (PMF Brigade 14) was detained. On October 17, Reuters reported that the sniper operations were coordinated by Abu Zainab al-Lami, head of the PMF Central Security Directorate (CSD) and a member of the U.S.-designated terrorist group Kataib Hezbollah (PMF Brigades 45, 46, and 47).
- **Attacks on television stations.** Six stations—Al-Arabiya, Dijlah, Al-Ghad, NRT, Al-Hadath, and TRT—were ransacked and taken off the air by militiamen from Saraya Talia al-Khurasani (PMF Brigade 18) and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (PMF Brigade 12) for continuing to broadcast imagery of the protests. Human Rights Watch noted that the attacks came immediately after the central government’s Communications and Media Commission warned the stations to shut down. NRT was overrun after airing an interview with a protestor who identified PMF militias responsible for sniper attacks. When a seventh station, Al-Forat, proved too well guarded to overrun, Asaib Ahl al-Haq (PMF Brigades 41, 42, and 43) bombed the building on October 6 with either a hand-placed explosive or a drone, damaging cars and other buildings in the area.

## SANCTIONABLE MILITIA LEADERS

**A**ccording to Reuters and other outlets, a group of Iraqi militia and security leaders joined with officers from Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to form a crisis cell in Baghdad on October 3. Based at two operations rooms—a covert safe house in Jadriyah and a PMF Commission building near Ibn Sina Hospital—Iranian liaison officers provided advice based on their counter-activist experience back home, as well as intelligence material on activists and secure communications for the snipers. Reuters noted evidence that the snipers reported directly to their militia commanders “instead of the chief commander of the armed forces...They belong to a group that is very close to the Iranians.”

Individuals identified as working with the crisis cell include:

- **Qasem Soleimani.** The commander of the IRGC-Qods Force and a U.S.-designated terrorist, he arrived in Baghdad on October 4 to refine the government’s counter-protest activities.
- **Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (birth name Jamal Jaafar Ibrahim).** The PMF’s operational leader, he was designated as a terrorist by the U.S. government in 2009.

- **Faleh al-Fayyad.** Iraq's national security advisor and PMF chairman, Fayyad returned home on October 4 after meeting with U.S. officials in Washington. He then immediately worked with the Iranian cell while his administrative assistant, Hamid al-Shatri, provided support.
- **Abu Jihad (birth name Mohammed al-Hashemi).** The chief of staff to Iraqi prime minister Adil Abdulmahdi, he began working with the cell after returning from a visit to Britain on October 5.
- **Qais al-Khazali.** The head of Asaib Ahl al-Haq, he has fully supported the IRGC-aided crackdown and the vilification of protestors as foreign-backed agitators.
- **Abu Zainab al-Lami (birth name Hussein Falah al-Lami).** As mentioned previously, he coordinated sniper operations against protestors, while two of his assistants, Abu Baqir (the CSD's director for the Rusafa district of Bagdad) and Haji Ghalib (CSD head of interrogations) helped manage the crackdown.
- **Abu Muntadher al-Husseini (birth name Tahseen Abid Mutar al-Abboudi).** A former PMF chief of operations and current advisor for PMF affairs to Prime Minister Abdulmahdi, Abu Muntadher was a key figure in pulling all these actors together in the crisis cell.
- **Abu Turab al-Husseini (birth name Thamir Mohammed Ismail).** A longstanding figure in the Iranian-backed Badr Organization, Maj. Gen. Ismail now heads the Interior Ministry's Rapid Response Division (aka Emergency Response Division). During the protests, he deployed sharpshooters to target civilians.
- **Hamid al-Jazayeri.** Commander of Saraya Talia al-Khurasani (PMF brigade 18), he helped coordinate the attacks on television stations.
- **Abu Ala al-Walai (birth name Hashim Bunyan al-Siraji).** Commander of the Iran-backed militia Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada (PMF Brigade 14), he worked with the crisis cell and provided shooters for the crackdown.
- **Abu Iman al-Bahali.** The head of the PMF Intelligence Directorate, he is the liaison with IRGC cyber-intelligence officials, collating hit lists of civil society activists and journalists.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

**T**o prevent Iran from further compromising the Iraqi government or fomenting violence around the country, Washington must demonstrate that it stands with the next generation of Iraqis, particularly the reformists and supporters of free expression who have taken to the streets despite facing the real threat of death. On July 18, the first round of U.S. Global Magnitsky Act sanctions against Iraqi elites sent a notable shudder through the country's leadership, many of whom send their money, property portfolios, and families to foreign jurisdictions that U.S. sanctions can reach. This experiment should be repeated with multiple rounds of new sanctions and exposure of crimes against the Iraqi people:

- **Sanction key officials for human rights violations.** The above list provides a number of targets for Global Magnitsky sanctions. Even in cases where individuals are already sanctioned for terrorism offenses, it would be worthwhile to list them for violating human rights, a charge that may have more resonance with the Iraqi people. Senior and mid-level leaders should be designated, with a clear message that sanctions can be removed quickly if these officials change their behavior during future protests. Meanwhile, Britain should be encouraged to impose parallel human rights sanctions given the significant exposure that officials such as Abu Jihad have in that jurisdiction.
- **Closely monitor human rights abuses after Arbain.** New protests will probably unfold on October 25, the first Friday after the major Shia religious festival. Large demonstrations are particularly likely now that the government has taken the expected route of whitewashing its collusion in the IRGC-aided crackdown. The United States should focus intently on the actions, words, and communications of Iraqi officials during the next wave of protests, generating additional evidence of human rights violations should they occur.

- **Highlight the role of Iranian forces.** Iran’s counter-protest actions in Iraq should be revealed in detail, even at the cost of exposing some information collection opportunities. Similarities between past counter-protest tactics in Iran and current militia tactics in Iraq should be highlighted, especially in the Internet and cyber arenas.
- **Refocus on Kataib Hezbollah detentions.** Washington should urge human rights organizations and other international actors to pay more attention to the group’s illegal detention of hundreds of civilians at its secret prisons, most importantly Jurf al-Sakhar.

*Michael Knights is a senior fellow with The Washington Institute. Since 2003, he has conducted extensive on-the-ground research in Iraq alongside security forces and government ministries. ❖*



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