

Helping Iraq Take Charge of Its Command-and-Control Structure

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



Brief Analysis

Recent organizational shifts offer a glimmer of hope that Baghdad will stand up to Iranian influence, but implementation will be the test of their actual merit.

Facing pressure to assert more control over Iraq's military sector, Prime Minister Adil Abdulmahdi has issued a pair of potentially crucial executive orders in the past two weeks. The reforms come at a time when the **lawless activities (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/militias-are-threatening-public-safety-in-iraq>)** of various armed factions have put the state in growing danger. Since May, militias within the supposedly state-regulated Popular Mobilization Forces (al-Hashd al-Shabi) have attacked local diplomatic and energy targets, launched drone attacks into Saudi Arabia, and reportedly abetted Iranian missile proliferation to such a degree that they drew repeated airstrikes from Israel. Meanwhile, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis—the PMF's near-autonomous de facto leader and commander of the Iranian-backed, U.S.-designated terrorist organization Kataib Hezbollah—has threatened America, declared the extralegal formation of a PMF air force, and sent tank reinforcements to the very militia that Abdulmahdi unsuccessfully ordered **to vacate the Nineveh Plains (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/reshuffling-iraqi-generals-who-benefits>)**.

These and other rogue actions have spurred a cautious government effort to reestablish comprehensive command and control, with the eventual goal of placing all militia and military arms under state control. Yet the chances of this effort succeeding are by no means assured, especially without concerted diplomacy and advice from Washington.

UNIFYING A BIFURCATED SYSTEM

Under Article 78 of the Iraqi constitution, the prime minister is commander-in-chief of all armed forces, with day-to-day stewardship typically delegated to the Joint Operations Command in Baghdad, currently headed by Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations Lt. Gen. Abdul-Amir Yarallah. The JOC in turn sends orders to provincial-level Operations Commands, which exercise tactical control of units in the field.

Since June 2014, militias have been managed under a parallel system overseen by the PMF Commission. Although National Security Advisor Faleh al-Fayyad chairs this commission, in practice it is led by Muhandis, the vice chairman. In other words, a U.S.-designated terrorist currently has a direct line of control to almost every directorate of the PMF Commission, including vital functions such as finance, intelligence, internal affairs, and procurement. Muhandis also runs the provincial-level PMF Operations Commands that work in parallel to the like-named JOC structures, further splintering unity of command in each province.

On September 12, the politically powerful Shia religious establishment signaled its growing impatience with the government's minimal progress in integrating the PMF into the broader armed forces. Hamid al-Khafaf, the Lebanon-based director of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's office, pointed out that religious authorities "are waiting for this executive order to be enforced." Parliament first mandated such integration via a law passed in November 2016, and Prime Minister Abdulmahdi reiterated it this July via Executive Order 237.

Khafaf's message was apparently heard—two days after his statement, the prime minister's office issued Executive Order 328, which laid out how the JOC should be restructured. Most important, Abdulmahdi has assigned himself direct leadership of the JOC as commander-in-chief, sending an important signal that he is paying close attention to the issue and is willing to lend his political weight to PMF reform. The order also specifies that he or his alternate, General Yarallah, will exert operational control over all the formations commanded by JOC, now including the PMF. The security agencies will retain administrative control (i.e., recruitment, training, and equipping) of their separate forces. Finally, the order gives the JOC exclusive control of all military and PMF appointments at the rank of brigade commander or higher.

NEXT STEPS IN PMF REFORM

More key changes came on September 17 with the release of Executive Order 331. Citing "the public interest" and "the powers given to us from the constitution," Prime Minister Abdulmahdi mandated reorganization of the PMF leadership. Depending on how these changes are implemented, they may wind up diluting the powers currently wielded by Muhandis. Their fate hinges on three positions:

- **President of the PMF Committee.** The order calls for certain corporate functions to be split away from the vice chair position held by Muhandis and gathered under the PMF chairman, a post now titled "President of the Hashd Committee." These functions include overseeing the directorates of finance, administration, legal affairs, security, audit/monitoring, spiritual guidance, planning/procurement, and information. The order also indicates that the PMF inspector-general will be attached to this president's office, though presumably with a degree of independence.
- **Secretary-General to the President.** The order identifies a "secretary-general" role within the office of this committee president, described using the Arabic term "Amin al-Sirr al-Aam." This title has a venerable history in Iraq, connoting a very important surrogate to a top decisionmaker who speaks with said leader's full authority.
- **Chief of Staff.** All directorates not controlled by the committee president will now fall under the PMF chief of staff, a post that has been vacant since 2017. This chief has five deputies (covering intelligence, logistics, administration, welfare, and operations) and directly oversees eight operations commands. The executive order mentions that twenty-three PMF brigades will be included within these commands, suggesting consolidation of the sixty-plus brigades in existence today.

These changes are supposed to take effect in the coming months, with the JOC (and possibly parliament) tasked with ratifying new PMF appointments. The most crucial question is where Muhandis lands. Iran and its militia proxies would prefer that he take the committee's revived chief of staff position, allowing him to retain most day-to-day decisions regarding the PMF. Alternately, he or other pro-Iran militiamen (e.g., Abu Zainab al-Lami, Abu Muntadher al-Husseini, Salah Hantush) could take the new secretary-general post.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

The latest executive orders have the potential to strengthen the Iraqi state and reduce the influence of negative Iranian-backed actors and designated terrorists in the PMF. Yet the changes could prove counterproductive if the state acts meekly and allows such actors to shape implementation. Accordingly, U.S. policymakers should:

- **Pay attention.** When it comes to command and control, the devil is in the details of implementation. If Muhandis appears likely to become PMF chief of staff and another pro-Iranian militia figure is appointed secretary-general, then nothing will change for the better in the PMF. In that scenario, Washington should let Iraqi political and religious leaders know that they have missed a major opportunity to reform the armed forces.
- **Watch for indirect responses.** If Muhandis loses any influence in the PMF, Tehran's proxies may attempt to take control of other institutions. On September 28, Iraq's most revered military commander, Lt. Gen. Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi, was forced out of his role atop the Counter Terrorism Service, Washington's closest partner in the security forces—a move that fulfilled a long-term objective of Iranian-backed militias and their allies within corruption networks. Moreover, the Iran-backed Badr Organization has inserted PMF brigade commander Ziyad al-Tamimi as inspector-general at the Defense Ministry, despite his lack of qualifications for that post, while Abu Zainab al-Lami is still seeking a powerful deputy post within the Interior Ministry, despite the likelihood that he will be targeted by U.S. sanctions. Other groups will probably try to restaff the leadership of Iraq's National Intelligence Service and National Security Service.
- **Support PMF professionalization.** To institutionalize the underdeveloped PMF, Iraq needs to appoint a chief of staff with formal military experience. This and other senior commands are nominally reserved for staff college graduates, though Iraqi law allows the prime minister to make exemptions. In addition, the JOC must approve all appointments above brigadier general, and parliament must ratify those at major general and above (or their civilian equivalent). These mechanisms offer numerous opportunities for Iraq's leadership to vet the next candidates for PMF chief of staff and secretary-general with care. Baghdad should be encouraged not to rush into either appointment, but to leave them as acting positions under a fully empowered prime minister, JOC, and PMF committee president—a position that should be rapidly ratified, unlike the others.
- **Encourage unity of command.** Iraq's currently mandated reforms leave an unnecessary set of PMF Operations Commands in place, creating a scenario in which they may still undermine (or, at best, duplicate) the military's longstanding JOC Operations Commands. The JOC should dissolve the PMF commands, a decision that would aid the counterterrorism fight, among other benefits.

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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