

Policy Failures Lead to a Kurdish PMF Battalion in Kirkuk

by [Yerevan Saeed \(/experts/yerevan-saeed\)](#)

Dec 23, 2020

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/akhfaqat-syasyt-twdy-aly-tshkyl-fwj-krdy-mrtbt-balshhd-alsbby-fy-krkwk\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Yerevan Saeed \(/experts/yerevan-saeed\)](#)

Yerevan Saeed is a Ph.D. candidate at the Carter School of Peace and Conflict Resolution, George Mason. He previously served as White House Correspondent for Kurdish Rudaw TV and has worked for news agencies including the New York Times, NPR, the Wall Street Journal, the Boston Globe, the BBC, and The Guardian as a journalist and translator.

Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces, and thereby Iran, have gained increased influence in Kurdish areas around Kirkuk.

On December 11, Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) formed their first-ever [Kurdish battalion](#) (<https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/1212202020>) in Kirkuk, a unit consisting of some 150 Kurds. The effort marks a major development of the PMF's long-term [project](https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/1212202020) (<https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/1212202020>) to recruit Kurds into its ranks in the disputed territories between the Kurdistan Regional Government and Baghdad, of which Kirkuk is a part. The PMF's success in forming such battalions and the resulting growth of Iranian influence in the Kurdish population indicate significant failures in the U.S. policy in Iraq. The Biden administration will need to reverse what is seen as a slow U.S. withdrawal if it hopes to slow the development of Iranian influence among Iraq's Kurdish population, which has traditionally been seen as supportive of the United States.

The background of some of these first members is of particular note. Ghazi Jabar, commander of the PMF Kurdish battalion located in the Dubis area of Kirkuk, is a former Peshmerga intelligence officer and said to be a former member of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP). In addition, the PMF is also reportedly conducting [negotiation](https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/1212202020) (<https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/1212202020>)s with the largest Kurdish tribes in the area, hoping to convincing them to join the militia force. So far, at least one key tribal leader—Chief Shaml Kwekha Ahmed Shwani of the Shwan tribe—has expressed his approval to join the PMF. These leaders' willingness to join the PMF, the same forces that took one of Iraqi Kurds' most culturally and politically important cities, Kirkuk, in 2017, suggests that the PMF has developed a convincing program of recruitment in Kurdish areas in the interim. And while the PMF chairman Faleh al-Payyadh has claimed the Kurdish battalion is not part of his organization, his statements could easily be typical PMF denial tactics.

Broadly, this development indicates an expansion of Iranian influence in the country. The effort by the Shia militia forces does not appear to be coordinated with the Iraqi government—the Iraqi Interior Ministry said that the Ministry was [unaware](https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/1312202013) (<https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/1312202013>) of any efforts by the PMF to recruit Kurds and form Kurdish PMF battalions. Instead, it is likely that the program of recruitment has ties with leaders in Iran. Kirkuk is a highly strategic location for the PMF. It sits on billions of barrels of oil, borders with the Kurdistan region, and provides a geographical link between Iran and the province of Nineveh. Oil bunkering has been quite a [lucrative business](https://diyaruna.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_di/features/2019/02/13/feature-01) (https://diyaruna.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_di/features/2019/02/13/feature-01) for the Shia forces to fund their project in Iraq recently, and Kirkuk is hardly lacking oil.

The PMF's and thereby Iran's effective penetration into the Kurdish population of these disputed areas represents the failure of the U.S. policy and diplomacy in Iraq under the Trump administration. It also exemplifies the way in which Trump's maximum pressure campaign against Tehran has yielded region-wide malice towards Washington and its friends.

More significantly, this development demonstrates how Trump's withdrawals from Iraq and cold aggression towards Iran have left Iraqi Kurds without a reliable partner in their self-defense, driving them towards the PMF as the only viable alternative to U.S. support. The U.S. failure to broker a deal between Baghdad and Erbil allowing for the deployment of joint Iraqi Army-Peshmerga forces in the areas around the KRG has meant the absence of protection for Kurds in these areas. It has also proved a golden opportunity for the PMF to present itself as a reliable force to protect the Kurdish population from ISIS and other terrorist organizations in the area.

This dynamic has manifested in the public statements of Kurds who have joined the PMF. Jabar has asserted that Kurds joined the PMF for self-protection from armed groups, and Shwan has said that the [formation](https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/1212202020) (<https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/1212202020>) of the Kurdish Battalion in the area was not against anyone, but to protect the area from terrorists. Furthermore, PMF advisor [Abu Emad](https://kurdistantv.net/ku/2020/12/12/kurdistan/%D9%84%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D9%83%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%88%D9%83-%D8%AD%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%B4%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%B4%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%B9%D8%A8%DB%8C-%D9%83%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%87%E2%80%8C%E2%80%8C%D9%87%DB%8E%D8%B2%DB%8E%D9%83%DB%8C-120-%D9%83%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D9%BE%DB%8E%D9%83%D9%87%DB%8E%D9%86%D8%B1%D8%A7) (<https://kurdistantv.net/ku/2020/12/12/kurdistan/%D9%84%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D9%83%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%88%D9%83-%D8%AD%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%B4%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%B4%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%B9%D8%A8%DB%8C-%D9%83%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%87%E2%80%8C%E2%80%8C%D9%87%DB%8E%D8%B2%DB%8E%D9%83%DB%8C-120-%D9%83%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D9%BE%DB%8E%D9%83%D9%87%DB%8E%D9%86%D8%B1%D8%A7>) Oglu

[https://kurdistantv.net/ku/2020/12/12/kurdistan/%D9%84%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D9%83%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%88%D9%83-%D8%AD%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%B4%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%B4%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%B9%D8%A8%DB%8C-%D9%83%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%87%E2%80%8C%E2%80%8C%D9%87%DB%8E%D8%B2%DB%8E%D9%83%DB%8C-120-%D9%83%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D9%BE%DB%8E%D9%83%D9%87%DB%8E%D9%86%D8%B1%D8%A7\)](https://kurdistantv.net/ku/2020/12/12/kurdistan/%D9%84%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D9%83%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%88%D9%83-%D8%AD%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%B4%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%B4%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%B9%D8%A8%DB%8C-%D9%83%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%87%E2%80%8C%E2%80%8C%D9%87%DB%8E%D8%B2%DB%8E%D9%83%DB%8C-120-%D9%83%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D9%BE%DB%8E%D9%83%D9%87%DB%8E%D9%86%D8%B1%D8%A7))—a Shia Turkmen fluent in Kurdish who is leading negotiations with Kurdish tribes—has [said \(https://www.nrttv.com/AR/News.aspx?id=36135&MapID=2\)](https://www.nrttv.com/AR/News.aspx?id=36135&MapID=2) that more Kurdish battalions will be announced soon to protect Kirkuk. According to Shwan, the PMF numbers [31,000 fighters \(https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/12122020\)](https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/12122020) just in Kirkuk already, excluding Kurdish fighters. Such a high PMF presence makes their demands difficult to ignore and positions them as a more effective protection force than any other in the region.

The need for protection is clear: in the [village of Palkana \(https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/09122020\)](https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/09122020), the Kurdish population has been subjected to harassment and oppression by Iraqi forces and the Arab population for over two years. Backed by the [PMF and the Iraqi Army \(https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/09122020\)](https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/09122020), the so-called “brought-in Arabs” are trying to seize control over lands belonging to Kurds in Kirkuk.

To be sure, the two main Kurdish parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, also bear responsibility for the fate of Kirkuk. The parties that control provincial seats have failed to agree on the appointment of a governor to Kirkuk since 2017. This lack of leadership has allowed Baghdad to a free hand in decision making, [replacing Kurds \(https://www.basnews.com/en/babat/597892\)](https://www.basnews.com/en/babat/597892) with Arabs and Turkmen in the senior military and government positions in the last three years.

The PMF has therefore demonstrated its ability to capitalize on open diplomatic space not occupied by the United States. Furthermore, the PMF’s success in forming Kurdish battalions demonstrates not just the military capabilities of the paramilitary force, but also its diplomatic influence and the depth of its ambitions to become the most powerful force in Iraq. A PMF victory over Iraq would be the final blow to the civic government and democracy for which the United States has already spilled so much blood and treasure.

It might be too late for the Trump administration do anything meaningful in stemming increasing PMF and Iranian influence. The hope is therefore that the Biden administration can use the knowledge of its seasoned foreign policy officials to assess the severity of the Iraqi situation and make efforts to restore some balance of power between Erbil and Baghdad. Such a balance is crucial for a stable, peaceful Iraq. Otherwise, the rising power of the militia forces may condemn Iraq to perpetual conflict and instability for unforeseeable future. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



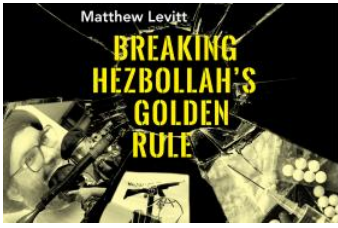
BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022

◆

Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)