

Iraq's PMF: An Entity Beyond Suspicion or a Mirage of Deception?

by [Sadiq Hassaan \(/experts/sadiq-hassaan\)](#)

Jan 28, 2021

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/kyan-fwq-alshbhat-am-jsd-mn-alakadhyb\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Sadiq Hassaan \(/experts/sadiq-hassaan\)](#)

Sadiq Hassaan is an Iraqi specialist in the affairs and intellectual backgrounds of Shia militias. He is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

Shia militias in Iraq are losing control of their own narrative, and their true motives are becoming visible.

In mid-2018, a great number of individuals expelled from the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) contacted me asking for support getting their jobs back. Most of them had degrees and had worked in administrative and logistical functions. They were independent—not connected to any party, militia, or faction—and had not joined the PMF through a tribe or at the recommendation of a cleric or influential leader.

Rather, what drove them to join the PMF was [Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's fatwa \(https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27834462\)](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27834462) and their desire for a monthly salary to help them make a living, with many looking to support a wife and children. I inquired about their circumstances and found that they had not received any government appointment, neither during the periods when al-Maliki or al-Abadi served as prime minister, because at that time jobs were divvied up by parties and political blocs and required political connections.

These same people played a major role later on during the October 2019 uprising. They felt they had been cast out of the PMF, while the institution retained those it trusted with loyalty, obedience, and commitment to the militia's instructions. I stood with these young men and reached out multiple times to convey their grievances to influential parties in the government, the PMF, and religious authorities. I also spoke about their suffering in a number of television and radio appearances, and posted a great number of publications on my Facebook page explaining the importance of redress for them, to no avail. The decision had been made against them, and they were expelled without recourse. This was these young men's first doubt about an entity that they had previously seen as beyond suspicion—a growing trend suggesting fissures in the once unassailable reputation of the PMF.

Those who insist upon the sanctity of the PMF have wanted everyone to view the militias thus: as an entity beyond suspicion, and as a sanctified, blessed, and even infallible body. It was not to be critiqued, nor any obstacle directed at its leaders or members. This entity was to be supported, in any case and in all ways, even if it used inhumane and

illegal methods.

In this narrative, the PMF was the entity that protected Iraq, defending the wronged and subjugated Shia community. From this base, they have created a parallel state, erasing the electoral state representing the people, along with an alternative creed claiming legitimacy and taking the role of Shia religious authority. This has all been part of a systematic process of deception, supported by a series of media outlets focused on psychological pressures, and discrediting anyone who has tried to critique them in order to correct their false claims, as well as those directing harsh criticism of inhumane practices or sarcastic criticism of unimportant behaviors. The goal of producing an entity beyond suspicion was to protect the militias, to guarantee that their reputation remained uncompromised, especially from accusations of murders and systematic corruption. These efforts became reality between 2014 and 2019 as PMF slogans spread. The phrase “protectors of honor” became synonymous with the militias shielded by the sanctity of the PMF.

The Sustained Message of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis

On 13 January 2019, I met with the since-deceased Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the Deputy Chairman of the Popular Mobilization Commission (PMC) at a meeting that included the late Hisham al-Hashemi among its attendees. I personally spoke with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis about problems in the PMC, such as the formation of economic bodies by several factions in the liberated areas that competed with parallel efforts to reestablish rule of law. I mentioned the issue of those PMF members who had been expelled without cause and reminded him of their sacrifices. But he did not care, and seemed to consider these points to be small issues not worthy of discussion. He called instead for a focus on protecting the PMF, and standing with it as the body that protects Iraq.

This conversation is emblematic of a larger issue: all direct and indirect attempts to put the PMF under the microscope of objective critique, professional evaluation, and productive assessment have failed. Instead, its attempts to brainwash Iraqis have intensified. The [PMF Media Directorate \(https://www.facebook.com/WarMediaTeam/\)](https://www.facebook.com/WarMediaTeam/) has helped sanctify the PMF by adding creative touches: making sure to include actors, poets, athletes, human rights and humanitarian figures, media professionals, and bloggers in its media and propaganda programs. Actress Awatif Salman, soccer player Bassam Raouf, director of Safe House for Orphans Hisham al-Thahabi, and a number of other known personalities have joined in projects to strengthen the reputation of the PMF’s militia wing. This is a unique mechanism to protect the militias. A number of liberal notables have also benefitted from financial donations, distributed by PMF Media Director Mohaned Aleqabi to whoever he wants to entice into the mass indoctrination project.

Liberal-Tinged Satellite Channels Serve the Militias

Running parallel to the open work to create an entity beyond suspicion, there was a plan that relied upon two pillars. The first pillar was to preserve the efforts of electronic armies and add new personnel to their ranks. Some of those individuals are called ‘the repentant,’ those who learned and found their way to the truth. Among the ‘repentants’ is the writer and blogger Asaad al-Basri, who went from attacking the PMF and Shia to praising them and meeting with their leaders and cadres. The writer Yahya Alkubisi almost slipped in this direction, attending a meeting of the Building Alliance, the political arm of the PMF.

As for the second pillar, it focused on the establishment of progressive channels wrapped in a liberal or secular framework that are nevertheless fronts for militias. Examples include the *iNEWS* channel, affiliated with the Sayyid of Martyrs Battalions (Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada), which split off from the Hezbollah Brigades (Kata’ib Hezbollah), and *Alwala*, which later became the *Watan* channel affiliated with Abu Turab al-Tamimi, who is tied to the

Hezbollah Brigades and defected from the Badr Organization. Both channels contain media cells and electronic armies directed by Jawad al-Halfi and Abdulameer al-Abudee.

Yet this work to create an entity above suspicion, involving large amounts of money and effort, began to suffer painful blows, causing its reputation to stagger. This started with the PMF leadership's poor judgment, overseen by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, on issues of control over the shrine factions, as well as U.S. pressure's lack of impact on Iraqi political reality, extending through the militias' adventure to support the Abdul-Mahdi government, and ending in direct participation in beating down popular protests. In the aforementioned meeting, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis put it clearly: "We are with the government, and we will not allow anyone to bring it down. We will not allow the Popular Mobilization Forces to be dissolved, frozen, or have their funding stopped. The Americans cannot control our activities." He added, "We have developed missiles and deployed them in western Iraq. If the Americans strike us, we will respond. But I doubt that America would strike the PMF or the factions."

These statements were all based on the PMF being an untouchable entity, with popular and religious support, and enjoying legal cover and political weight. But the reality is that the PMF has turned into a body of lies, exploited by the militias to further their projects and carry out their interests independent of the needs of the Iraqi people. Many people—including those within the PMF—are now aware of this reality, but consciousness of the truth is accompanied by the fear of repression, downfall, and the loss of their livelihoods.

Options Fade for Iraqi Militias to Preserve Themselves

Iraqi militias have employed many critical factors to defend their presence in Iraq and to protect their leaders and personnel. But in the midst of a conflict between the militias and honorable Iraqis longing for a real national victory to return to them the feelings of belonging, these militias have gradually lost the sources of their power.

The first line of defense for these militias to protect their mobilizations had been to promote how they contributed to driving out foreign forces and realizing Iraqi sovereignty at the beginning of 2012. However, Iraqis later found out that their goal in removing foreign forces was to expand Iranian influence in Iraq. The mask of patriotism worn by these militia groups therefore dissolved.

Then came the second wave of justification for their armed presence, focusing on a sectarian angle. They proclaimed their protection of Shia Iraqis against an Arab and Sunni assault, and openly stated their desire to attack the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. But this subjective justification quickly fell away when they aligned themselves politically with Sunni figures such as Khamis al-Khanjar and Ahmed Abu Risha, whom they had previously accused of terrorism and harming Shia strategic interests.

To Shia Iraqis, it became evident that the leaders of these militias were bargaining with their cause, and were ready to sell out Shia interests for the benefit of Iran. This attempted justification fell away completely when the October uprising broke out. The uprising's true depth and natural spread was in the Shia areas, where these militias beat Shia protestors and struck them down before the eyes of the entire world.

The militias also found a justification by hiding under the guise of the PMF, formed by Sistani's fatwa. However, this was quickly exposed. Many Iraqis know that the militias' joining the PMF is nothing but deception and duplicity, with the goal of expanding their activities and reducing criticism. This justification collapsed completely when the PMF separated into the shrine brigades—close to religious authorities and known for their nationalist leanings—and whose leaders criticized Iran and the militias' symbols.

Currently, one of the largest and strongest militias, the Hezbollah Brigades, is using a new tactic to protect its leaders and members: seeking cover with the clans and using tribal threats. In this, every leader in the brigades is making

efforts to entice the head of the clan to which he belongs and becoming close to him in order to gain his good will. The idea is that the clan head will then defend him from an attempt by the government, judiciary, or another militia to arrest or harass him. He also threatens members of the tribe who criticize the Brigades through the head of the tribe. This was done by Abu Hussein al-Hamidawi, Secretary General of the Hezbollah Brigades, by threatening the men of his clan through its head, Sami al-Hamidawi. This is the latest option that the militia mentality has invented in Iraq.

It has become clear that, ironically, the militias hiding under the umbrella of the PMF do not recognize Sistani's fatwa and are acting in Iran's interests. They are prepared to harm state institutions and security forces. This is especially evident after their new divisions—such as the Qasim al-Jabbarin group and Ashab al-Kahf—threatened that the Counter Terrorism Service should stay away from [civilian trade convoys \(https://shafaq.com/en/Iraq-News/Qasim-Al-Jabbarin-claims-responsibility-for-targeting-the-international-coalition-supplies\)](https://shafaq.com/en/Iraq-News/Qasim-Al-Jabbarin-claims-responsibility-for-targeting-the-international-coalition-supplies) transporting the logistical needs of the international coalition. Thus, the militias have lost many of the justifications for their power, and options for protecting their presence are diminishing. It is only a matter of time now for this lack of justifications to become a topic of more public discussion, especially among those who joined the PMF due to a sense of nationalism and the need for employment. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Targeting the Islamic State: Jihadist Military Threats and the U.S. Response](#)

February 16, 2022, starting at 12:00 p.m. EST (1700 GMT)

◆
Ido Levy,
Craig Whiteside

[\(/policy-analysis/targeting-islamic-state-jihadist-military-threats-and-us-response\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Challenges to Taliban Rule and Potential Impacts for the Region](#)

Feb 9, 2022

◆
Mohamed Mokhtar Qandil

[\(/policy-analysis/challenges-taliban-rule-and-potential-impacts-region\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The Middle East at the Olympics: Six Countries Compete While Great Power Politics on Display

Feb 9, 2022



Carol Silber

(/policy-analysis/middle-east-olympics-six-countries-compete-while-great-power-politics-display)