

How the United States Should View Iraq's Shrine Militias

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Brief Analysis

Despite welcoming the idea of separating the nationalist “shrine units” from the Iran-leaning Popular Mobilization Forces, Washington should lighten its touch on the issue.

On December 13, the Imam Hussein Shrine Foundation in Karbala, Iraq, announced its intention to sue the United States in unspecified “international courts” for the deaths of site guards and a civilian who were accidentally killed in a U.S. airstrike nine months earlier. The location of the strike was a facility at the incomplete Karbala Airport believed to be used for weapons storage by the U.S.-designated, Iran-backed terrorist militia Kataib Hezbollah (KH). At the time it was hit, however, the site was being guarded by the Atabat, a network of “shrine militias” who are formally part of Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) but answer primarily to the spiritual leadership of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

The deaths shocked the Atabat, in part because their prior relations with the United States were non-hostile. Although their personnel are not permitted to work with foreign trainers from any nation, they have consistently shied away from anti-American rhetoric in their official statements. Moreover, Atabat commanders have repeatedly opposed the installation of Iran-backed leaders atop the PMF, even holding a conference last December 1-3 to

explore administrative means of fully separating from that body. The Biden administration therefore needs to approach the Atabat issue with greater sensitivity and clarity than shown under the Trump administration, since it reflects so many of the complex dynamics driving Iraq's promising efforts at homegrown reform.

The Atabat and the PMF: It's Complicated

As a formal, paid service of the Iraqi armed forces, the PMF are nominally under the command of the prime minister and the civilian Popular Mobilization Commission (PMC). Yet the largely Shia militias are quite resistant to civilian control; instead, most answer to a military deputy chairman installed by a council of Iran-backed groups. KH's Abu Fadak currently holds this post (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/us-designation-kataib-hezbollahs-abu-fadak>) (albeit in a tenuous "acting" capacity that has been challenged by various actors).

Since 2014, however, the Atabat have tried to maintain some degree of operational and administrative autonomy. Commanding 15,000 of the PMF's overall 140,000-165,000 fighters, they consist of four brigades: Firqat al-Abbas al-Qitaliyah (aka al-Abbas Combat Division, formally the PMF's 26th Brigade), Liwa Ali al-Akbar (11th Brigade), and the much-smaller Firqat al-Imam Ali al-Qitaliyah (2nd Brigade) and Liwa Ansar al-Marjaiya (44th Brigade).

In response, PMF leaders—who are drawn from the Iran-backed Badr Organization and KH—have used their administrative control of the PMC to restrict salaries and support to the Atabat. They even managed to splinter off some Atabat members, who went on to form new PMF units with Iranian encouragement (e.g., the 13th and 20th Brigades). Yet by supplementing their diminished PMF funding with allocations from the Karbala and Najaf shrines, the Atabat managed to continue playing a role in the fight against the Islamic State, and remain cohesive enough to reject last year's effort to replace slain PMF deputy chair Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis with Abu Fadak (which is partly why his title is still "acting").

Future Scenarios for the Atabat

Under the Trump administration, the Atabat received outsize attention because they represented one clear area in which Iranian influence over the militias was meeting domestic Iraq resistance. If Sistani could not dissolve the PMF wholesale, peeling away the Atabat was the next best thing, since it would remove 15,000 troops from Abu Fadak's control and undermine the legitimacy of the PMC's compromised leadership. This tantalizing possibility was all the more welcome because it was a genuinely indigenous Iraqi initiative.

Yet by pressing too hard and too vocally, the administration arguably trampled this fledgling development, making any immediate move by Sistani appear to have been dictated by the United States. Iraqi nationalists seemed willing to take these steps on their own, but Washington grew impatient at their pace. Fortunately, the Iraqis have shown signs of making another run at Atabat reforms once the risk of appearing to do America's bidding has passed. The options include:

1. **Folding the Atabat into the Defense Ministry.** Once the shrine units are fully removed from the PMF, they could be turned into new Iraqi Army formations and deployed anywhere in the country. All this would require is Sistani's political approval, though shuffling salaries from the PMC to the Defense Ministry could become complicated.
2. **Making the Atabat an independent service.** The option favored by Atabat commanders—most notably al-Abbas Combat Division chief Maytham al-Zaidi—is to establish their units as a new armed service with a special remit for protecting the shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf (and perhaps providing security for religious pilgrimages as well). The Atabat are already deployed in a manner that screens these cities from threats in the adjacent Anbar province. At present, however, there is no legal basis or funding for a new service, and elements of parliament strongly oppose it.
3. **Giving the Atabat greater autonomy within the PMF.** This is already the de facto case with the Atabat taking operational orders from Iraqi Army chief of staff Gen. Abdul-Amir Yarallah, but it could be formalized by placing their

units under a special office within the PMC, much like the Sunni-led Tribal Mobilization Forces are treated. Yet this would still leave the Atabat vulnerable to financial coercion by Badr and KH.

4. **Giving the Atabat leadership of the PMF.** Another option that was initially discussed in 2019 is to install an Atabat commander as either the PMF's top civilian leader (replacing Faleh al-Fayyad) or its military deputy chair (replacing Abu Fadak). In theory, this would allow the Atabat to reform the PMF from the inside, but making such leadership changes would require concerted effort and risk taking by Sistani.

Implications for U.S. Policy

The Atabat might seem like a niche issue for the United States to focus on, but in Iraq such portfolios are where the rubber hits the road. The Biden administration also has an opportunity to show that it recognizes the complexity of the issue and can approach it with a lighter touch.

To be sure, none of the above Atabat options is ideal from a U.S. perspective—it would be unhealthy to create yet another new security institution in Iraq when existing agencies are struggling to survive, but it is also risky to remove strongly nationalist units from the PMF and leave Abu Fadak to rule the roost, uncontested and unmonitored. Yet all four options have some merit and could leave Iraq in a better place, thereby reducing the strain on U.S. attention and resources. Time is of the essence as well—Sistani is ninety-one years old, and the rival Shia leadership in Iran would love to undermine Karbala and Najaf as religious centers, so Sistani's followers need to be organized and armed soon if they hope to push back on Tehran's proxy militias.

In the end, Iraq must choose which option to pursue, not the Biden administration. The chosen policy will stand a better chance of succeeding if Iraqis drive the decision, while overt U.S. pressure may stall it, as arguably happened in 2020. If U.S., NATO, and coalition officials stick to quiet, behind-the-scenes encouragement of PMF reform, they can give Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi the leverage he needs to keep pushing for positive changes. Regardless of how the Atabat are handled administratively, U.S. offers of support to select units (e.g., nonlethal training and equipping) may eventually be accepted, and can be provided indirectly through the Defense Ministry in the meantime. Washington should also draw together partners such as the World Bank, NATO, the European Union, and the UN Development Programme to craft pilot projects that help “off-ramp” PMF members into civilian professions (e.g., vocational apprenticeships, medical rehabilitation).

The Biden administration's most immediate priority with the Atabat should be to proactively salve the hurt feelings caused by the March 13, 2020, Karbala airstrike. This could include privately paying some of the compensation requested by the Imam Hussein Shrine Foundation, or providing in-kind medical support and reconstruction. Either gesture could convince the foundation to shelve its lawsuit threat and avoid setting a problematic legal precedent. To support such efforts, the administration should consider paying diplomatic visits to Karbala to retain the goodwill of Sistani and the Atabat.

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