

The Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq: A Political Bargaining Chip?

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Brief Analysis

Political tensions in Iraq have escalated amid ongoing disagreements on government formation as two main political blocs vie for power, with Iraq's constitutional deadline for electing a president expiring earlier this week.

The Sadrist bloc [hopes \(https://shafaq.com/ku/Iraq-News/Sadrist-and-Sunni-delegations-to-meet-Kurdish-leader-Masoud-Barzani\)](https://shafaq.com/ku/Iraq-News/Sadrist-and-Sunni-delegations-to-meet-Kurdish-leader-Masoud-Barzani) to form a national majority government by aligning with some of the Sunni and Kurdish political leaders. On the other hand, the Iranian-aligned Shia Coordination Framework forces are working with the [Sunni al-Azm Alliance and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan \(https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/cross-sectarian-bloc-emerges-iraq\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/cross-sectarian-bloc-emerges-iraq) to form a rival political faction.

These opposing forces plan to achieve their political ambitions regardless of the costs entailed by prolonging Iraq's political crisis. The two sides have exchanged threats, engaged in political smear campaigns, and committed assassinations, the worst of which occurred in the [Maysan governorate in February \(https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220223-drugs-tribes-politics-a-deadly-mix-in-iraq-border-province\)](https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220223-drugs-tribes-politics-a-deadly-mix-in-iraq-border-province). There have also been attempts to exploit the decisions of the [Federal Supreme Court \(https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/opinion/27484-The-Federal-Supreme-Court-of-Iraq-from-interpreting-to-amending-the-constitution--KRG%25E2%2580%2599s-oil-judgement-as-an-example\)](https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/opinion/27484-The-Federal-Supreme-Court-of-Iraq-from-interpreting-to-amending-the-constitution--KRG%25E2%2580%2599s-oil-judgement-as-an-example) of Iraq in order to thwart the other side's efforts.

There are no signs that the conflict will end any time soon. Moreover, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) have increased their engagement, fueling other politicians' desires to dissolve the military group.

Calls to Dissolve the Popular Mobilization Forces

Last November, the leader of the Sadrist movement, Muqtada al-Sadr, called to disband and [disarm](#)

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/11/sadr-calls-majority-government-liquidation-iraqi-militias>)

the PMF to limit its activities to the terms stipulated in its founding *fatwa* (<https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Holy-Mobilisation-The-Religious-Legitimation-behind-Iraq%25E2%2580%2599s-Counter-ISIS-Campaign.pdf>), which was issued by Shia religious authority (*marja*) Ali al-Sistani. In 2017, Sadr had called to *reintegrate* (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/02/iraq-shiite-sunni-national-reconciliation.html>)

PMF forces into the Iraqi national military, but the November statement went further—likely a result of the political gains Sadr achieved in the October 2021 elections.

The Sadrists have a significant presence within the PMF in the form of the *Peace Companies* (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/holy-shrine-units-announcement-will-change-rules-game-iraq>), comprised of three military brigades and over 100,000 fighters (<https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/master-iraq-edited-volume-.pdf>). However, the Sadrists understand that the other PMF factions pose a significant threat to the Sadrists' political ambitions. This understanding is the primary motivation driving the Sadrists' call to dissolve to PMF.

Political analyst Mohamed al-Ezzi has argued that the Sadrists are also opposed to the PMF because they want to gain international support to assist with government formation. They hope to do so by indicating a shift in foreign policy away from Iranian influence and denouncing the military operations that some armed PMF have carried out against the U.S. in Iraq.

The Sadrists are not the only group calling for the dissolution of the PMF. Sunni politicians have also expressed their support for this on several occasions, particularly because they believe that some PMF factions were involved in the kidnapping of Sunnis during operations to liberate Sunni areas from terrorist control, as well as arson, property theft, and the systematic *targeting of Sunni* (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/02/03/new-vulnerabilities-for-iraqs-resilient-popular-mobilization-forces/>) political figures.

The *most recent* (<https://earthiq.news/archives/51136>) example of PMF factions targeting Sunnis occurred in February when Kata'ib Hezbollah security official Abu Ali al-Askari leveled threats against the current speaker of the Council of Representatives, Mohamed al-Halbousi. Al-Askari called for increasing the number of PMF forces in western Iraq in order to undermine Halbousi's efforts to install a "mercenary for the Zionist entity as president of Iraq," a reference to Kurdistan Democratic Party candidate Rebar Ahmed.

Such threats attest to the ties between Iran and certain PMF factions. Iran targeted the capital of the Kurdistan Region at the beginning of *March* (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/multiple-rockets-fall-erbil-northern-iraq-state-media-2022-03-12/>) with 12 ballistic missiles. It claimed to be targeting an Israeli strategic center though reports indicated that the actual target was a businessman's house in Erbil.

This attack was not the first of its kind—it was preceded by several others near the U.S. embassy and airport in Erbil. As a result, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and its leader Masoud Barzani have also become proponents of the dissolution of the PMF, according to Kurdish political analyst Omer Berzinji. This development builds on a long history of tension between the Kurdish Peshmerga forces and PMF factions on the southern and western edges of the KRI.

Efforts to Dissolve the PMF: A Political Game

The efforts to dissolve the PMF are not only the product of its aforementioned actions, but part of broader political dealings among these rivals. Both sides are aware of the danger that the PMF poses, and therefore take turns doubling down on their efforts to win this political battle.

Some of those trying to dissolve the PMF are demanding that the PMF split off from the Office of the **Prime Minister** (<https://1001iraqithoughts.com/2019/07/11/interpreting-the-iraqi-prime-ministers-pmf-decree/>), which still oversees the PMF's funding despite its inability to control the group as it expanded in recent years. The PMF has now developed an autonomous presence, operating in a similar fashion as today's Quds Force does in Iran and as the Fedayeen Saddam militia acted in Iraq under Saddam Hussein.

The Coordination Framework has opposed efforts to do away with the PMF, according to a source close to the political process, and remains committed to the PMF for two main reasons.

The first relates to domestic affairs: The Coordination Framework realizes that abandoning PMF military factions would be akin to giving up their political power and would leave them exposed to various pressures. This is a risk the Coordination Framework is unlikely to take, especially given their losses in the last elections.

The second reason is the influence of external factors— primarily, Iran's grip over these factions, which support Iran's economic and military presence in Iraq.

The decision to dissolve the PMF does not fall within the purview of the Coordination Framework leaders insofar as they depend upon Iranian approval in decision-making. A source explained that the armed PMF factions have caused a great deal of international embarrassment for the Coordination Framework, and that it has been unable to compensate for this because it fully subscribes to Iran's foreign policy objectives. It is therefore unlikely that any stipulation to dissolve the PMF will succeed in the near future.

As a result, the prevailing view is that the political crisis will continue and potentially surpass the political sphere. The conflict may spill further into the streets amid intensified targeting of political figures. ❖

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