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# How the U.S. Government Should Think About Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces

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### Brief Analysis

**A** spirited policy debate is underway within the corridors of power in Washington D.C. over the manner in which the United States should view and treat the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), Iraq's web of paramilitary organizations. It takes a great deal of concern to elevate such a niche issue to the level of attention that the PMF currently enjoys; there are no similar debates about the Iraqi Police Service or the Iraqi Air Force. However, the reason for this focus is clear. There is deep concern that the PMF—led by U.S. designated terrorist Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis—has the potential to quickly evolve into a permanently funded force of equivalent manpower to the Iraqi Army. As long as the PMF contains U.S. designated terrorists, the future of the organization will justify a special level of concern and policy attention in Washington.

### **The U.S. Policy Debate over the PMF**

Two schools of thought exist on how the United States should address its concerns regarding the PMF. One school counsels patience and downplays the incremental danger posed by the PMF as an institution. This school suggests that the Iranian-backed militias within the PMF should not be seen as a game-changer; these militias existed prior to the PMF's formation in 2014 and will continue to exist whether within the PMF or outside it. If removed from the PMF, many will find jobs in Iraq's other security forces, again as they did before 2014. It is further argued that the 'bad PMF' will eventually discredit themselves in the eyes of the Iraqi people.

The patient school views U.S. security cooperation with the Iraqi Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Interior, Counter-Terrorism Service and intelligence community as the keystone of U.S. influence in the country. Arguing that the size and budget of the PMF is unlikely to grow, this school largely agrees with Iraq's government that the Iranian-backed elements of the PMF will slowly be dissolved into the broader state structure and "normalize" over time. Many PMF

members may choose to return to civilian life if Iraq stabilizes and grows more prosperous. This broad approach to the PMF is encapsulated in the phrase used by Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdalmahdi, who wants the PMF to be both “honored and contained.”

A second school of thought instead argues that the PMF is in reality a potential game-changer in Iraq. They fear that the PMF will grow in size and funding to eclipse the regular Iraqi security forces, much as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Iran eclipsed the regular Iranian armed forces. This activist school within the U.S. government assesses that there is little time to change the trajectory of the PMF itself and believes that U.S. security assistance to Iraq’s regular armed forces should be partially or fully withheld until U.S. concerns about the PMF are addressed. The Iraqi government is viewed as sleep-walking towards a precipice, driving the activist U.S. camp to take a more extreme position in order to urgently focus Iraqi attention on the perceived risks posed by Muhandis’ loyalist elements in the PMF.

At heart, these activists are dismayed and hurt to see Iraq select a U.S.-designated terrorist as the leader of the PMF, and to see U.S. designated terrorist groups like Kata’ib Hezbollah (KH) and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HaN) drawing salaries from Iraq’s state budget. In the view of the activist school, the PMF could be the first steps towards an IRGC-style impregnable parallel state. Accordingly, no effort should be too great to minimize this risk.

### **The State of the PMF Today**

So which is the PMF: honored and contained or an impregnable parallel state? To assess the validity of each model and the future trajectory of the PMF, one needs to look closely at the reality of the organization. This analysis breaks down into the following themes:

**Size and Budget:** The PMF is not a ministry. Consequently, its finances and manpower are set year-by-year in the annual budget. In the 2019 Iraqi budget, the PMF is currently authorized to employ 128,000 personnel and has a budget of \$2.17 billion. This compares to an authorized strength of 583,666 and a budget of \$9.43 billion for the Ministry of Interior, and authorized strength of 288,979 and a budget of \$7.58 billion for the Ministry of Defense.

**Cohesion and Command:** Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and the pro-Iranian Badr Organization each have an outsized influence over how the PMF distributes resources within the organization. Even taking this into account, however, the PMF is still a much decentralized force. This decentralization reflects the extraordinary political, tribal, ethno-sectarian and geographic diversity within the institution and its lack of a strong, unified command structure. The divisions within the PMF would have to be overcome for it to represent a unitary full-strength threat to U.S. interests.

**Military Tasks:** Only a minority of PMF troops are actually in combat, perhaps numbering at most 30,000 at any given moment. However, the bulk of PMF combat forces are made up of the groups that the United States is most concerned with, such as KH and HaN (plus their spin-offs) and Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH). These parts of the PMF play an outsized role on the Iraq-Syria border, where they are able to effectively coordinate with pro-Iran militias on the Syrian side. The combat services and the rear-area security provided by the PMF allow the regular Iraqi security forces to direct more combat power against the Islamic State.

**Infrastructure and Services:** The PMF has very rudimentary base facilities and logistics support, even compared to the Iraqi security forces. They are under-served and under-funded for a force of their size, receiving only six percent of Iraq’s security-related spending despite providing 28 percent of the country’s frontline armed strength. This could be used in Iraq as an argument for increasing their funding and access to military properties, or it could be used as an argument to fold many PMF fighters within the regular security forces, which have established (if ragtag) logistics and military housing.

**Public and Elite Support:** Public support for the PMF remains strong and the institution itself is still highly revered by the country’s Shiite majority. This public support underlines the low likelihood of the PMF being demobilized or

disestablished wholesale, particularly as a result of U.S. pressure. Concern is growing within Iraq, however, that the PMF should not be as visible or active in cities as the forces currently are, and that it contains “bad apples” engaged in criminality.

### **Scenarios for PMF Evolution**

It is not helpful to imagine a fantasy where the PMF is promptly demobilized. However, there are more credible scenarios. Looking to the future through the lens of U.S. interests, there are four main plausible scenarios for the PMF.

**Negative Expansion:** In this scenario, the PMF becomes a ministry and attracts per capita funding equal to the other security ministries. Every year, stable resources are automatically budgeted for the PMF based on its manpower, which might expand. Like the IRGC in Iran, the PMF could also receive a procurement budget to gain access to heavier weapons (short-range ballistic missile systems and tanks) and even air mobility and aerial strike platforms, including helicopters, drones, and aircraft.

**Negative Status Quo:** Alternately, the PMF could stay roughly where it is now, but with potential advantages for the Iran-backed PMF as long as they retain leadership of the movement. The PMF would stay as a poorly-funded force (on a per capita basis), with its budget set year-by-year, but Iran-backed groups would continue to receive a disproportionate share of the budget and control key infrastructure. State control over the force would remain weak.

**Positive Contraction:** If Iraq’s “honored and contained” model works, then the PMF might slowly reduce in size and budget, which would continue to be set year-by-year. If the cuts occur evenly across the force—and if Muhandis’ logistical dominance is lessened—the Iran-backed PMF units would also experience a reduction in state-subsidized capabilities.

**Negative Contraction:** “Honored and contained” could also fail to address the root problem of Muhandis and Iran-backed groups. If these groups control the PMF leadership, they can channel declining resources to the Muhandis core of KH, HaN, AAH and their spin-offs. Sunnis, moderate Shiites, and minorities may be the first out of the door, giving the PMF a much more negative—and less national—character than it possesses today. Pending the resolution of factional differences, Muhandis would essentially create a “second Badr” under his control.

### **Principles to Guide U.S. Policy**

No one knows the future, and thus no one can know which scenario will unfold for the PMF. However, some common themes do stand out from the narratives of both camps within the U.S. government and from the arguments about the current and future trajectory of the PMF. These provide some guiding principles for future U.S. policies towards the PMF.

First, whether Iraq has an institution called the Popular Mobilization Forces is none of our concern. The movement itself has a cherished place within the hearts of millions of Iraqis. Every time a U.S. leader publicly references the Popular Mobilization Forces as a whole, they set back our overall policy in Iraq, especially if these references are negative. Instead, the United States should only discuss our legitimate and *specific* concerns as a security cooperation partner and donor to Iraqi counterparts behind closed doors.

Second, the United States should focus on encouraging Iraq to strengthen existing Iraqi security ministries. We should note that our support for those ministries is contingent on Iraq not wasting its resources by establishing a new PMF ministry with a permanent line item in the budget. As long as Iraq is debating how to fund the PMF on an annual basis, there is no guarantee of an Iraqi revolutionary guard in perpetuity. Moreover, the formation of new security ministries is a red line that the United States can detect and prevent. This line will be popular with Iraq’s NATO and Australasian security cooperation partners, as well as with international organizations such as the IMF.

Third, privately engage in a “blue-skies” dialogue with the Iraqis on what their price would be to remove Abu Mahdi

al-Muhandis from the PMF as well as the removal of all KH and HaN entities from the PMF. Many, though not all, of the security threats associated with the PMF come from these actors, and their removal could shift the PMF in an entirely new direction. If Iraq concludes that removing these actors is impossible, then tougher steps (such as sanctioning AAH or even Iraqi political leaders who are providing material support to Muhandis) may prove necessary, but such coercive measures should not be our first resort.

Fourth, the United States and its partners should support the Iraqi government and regular Iraqi security forces to contest and prevent exclusive PMF control of any facility, infrastructure, or mission. The only way to ensure that Iran-backed PMF are not acting counter to Iraqi interests is to submit them to the same oversight requirements that U.S. forces work under within Iraq, namely that a significant number of regular Iraqi security forces from a variety of ministries are present at all PMF locations. In particular, the PMF should not be permitted to exclusively control lucrative missions such as offshore oil terminal security, critical infrastructure facilities protection, highway control, and customs control. The Iraqi Ministries of Interior and Defense are vital to many of these missions, so the United States should funnel its support to the parts of those organizations that protect key sites.

Finally, if the PMF does start to trim down, the United States and its partners should support the smooth incorporation of military manpower into the security ministries, which themselves need more manpower. This will mean aiding with the transfer of the Sunni Tribal Security Forces, shrine militias, and micro-minority units into the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Interior, and other forces. The United States should strengthen its friends in the Iraqi Security Forces in ways that are highly visible to all, including support for their personal security arrangements.

Washington should also continue to strongly support key counter-weights to Iran-backed militias such as the Counter-Terrorism Service; the Iraqi National Intelligence Service and Kurdish intelligence services; the Baghdad Operations Command and Combined Joint Operations Center; the PUK Counter-Terrorism Group and the KDP Counter-Terrorism Unit; and select local security forces and police intelligence units.

### **Muhandis' PMF Is a Symptom, Not a Cause of Iran's Influence**

Yet even if all these steps are taken, the United States needs to be realistic and recognize that there will always be a powerful core of Iran-backed militias in Iraq—a network that could morph into a ‘Shiite Liberation Army’ if Iran is threatened. Iran-leaning groups like Badr have around one-third their strength in the PMF and probably two-thirds in the other security forces, such as the army, federal police, and intelligence services. Whether inside or outside of the PMF structure, and more likely half-in and half-out, Iran’s proxies will constitute a couple of mini-IRGCs (Badr and Muhandis’ PMF) and a couple of mini-Hezbollahs (HaN, Sadrists, and AAH) for the foreseeable future, until true stability exists in Iraq for a sustained period. The United States cannot fix this basic problem now: two mini-IRGCs and a couple of mini-Hezbollahs is as good as it gets. Our policy should be aimed at preventing one big Iraqi IRGC or Hezbollah, in essence preventing things from getting worse than they are today. ❖



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