

Making Sense of Iraq's PMF Arrests

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Brief Analysis

By highlighting the hypocrisy of recent ‘housecleaning’ campaigns, Washington can show the Iraqi public that Iran’s Shia militia networks offer no genuine solution to rampant corruption.

On February 8-12, the central office of Iraq’s militia umbrella organization al-Hashd al-Shabi (the Popular Mobilization Forces) launched the latest phase in its ongoing anticorruption campaign, arresting various militia leaders and shutting down 100 “fake” PMF groups. The move highlighted continuing tensions within Iraq’s Shia-dominated, Iranian-backed militia network, and these issues extend into Syria.

IRAQ’S UN-UNTOUCHABLES

Despite their claims of being incorruptible, many PMF brigades have rap sheets loaded with fraud, theft, and other criminal activities. In March 2018, officially recognized PMF militias were given salaries equal to those of army personnel, which many elements took as a cue to siphon off state funds. PMF groups have also sold special IDs and paperwork allowing purchasers to carry small arms.

Even the largest PMF militias regularly turn to crime. Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) has stolen equipment from the Bayji oil refinery, then had the audacity to try selling it back to the government. And in February, Reuters reported that Shia PMF groups had cornered the scrap metal market near Mosul, impeding local reconstruction efforts while helping the militias earn millions of dollars.

The PMF launched their first campaign to curb such activities last September. According to Iraqi news site Al-Sumaria, an unnamed figure was arrested amid great fanfare and sentenced to ten years in prison; he was charged with opening a bogus headquarters for a group he claimed was under PMF control, then using it as a front to sell fake identity cards. The aim of that arrest and subsequent crackdowns was to convince the public that criminality is limited to “fake” organizations, while simultaneously demonstrating the PMF’s commitment to their core

anticorruption message—even as top PMF groups continue their fraudulent activities.

BRAND LOYALTY

Many Iranian-backed militias have struck a careful balancing act between cultivating fear and respect on the one hand, and integrating themselves into Iraq's social and political fabric on the other. Protecting their image and name is extremely important to those goals.

One such militia is Kataib Hezbollah, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization with three PMF brigades (the 45th, 46th, and 47th). In 2014-2015, it posted lists of “fake” KH groups on its television networks and social media, asserting that they were improperly using its name and directing Iraqis to verify all affiliates with KH officials by phone.

In April 2015, KH claimed to arrest a “spy” named Karim al-Shahmani near Jurf al-Sakhar. The militia accused him of receiving money from the CIA and Kuwaiti intelligence to start the group Kataib Hezbollah al-Khaledoun, with the aim of harming KH’s reputation. True or not, the accusation showed the tensions created by militia branding issues.

Among the 100 “fake groups” raided this February, one claimed to represent Kataib al-Imam Ali (the PMF’s 40th Brigade), another marketed itself as part of the KH-controlled Saraya al-Difa al-Shabi (the 47th Brigade), and yet another claimed to represent Harakat al-Abdal (the 39th Brigade). These brigades form core Iranian-controlled sections of the PMF.

SADRI ST SPLITTERS ARE SPLINTERED

From AAH to Kataib al-Imam Ali, splinters from Shia leader Muqtada al-Sadr’s camp have been particularly attractive for Iran. By cultivating them, Tehran has sought to weaken a major Iraqi religious and political competitor, cement its influence and its recruiting networks, and further its regional goals.

Even so, the latest PMF crackdown targeted two smaller Sadr splinter groups that were previously under Iran’s wing: Quwat Abu Fadl al-Abbas (QAFA) and Jaish al-Muwamal. Both groups had been accused of criminality in 2017-2018, but the PMF did not follow up on those charges at the time. Although neither of the groups was as large as the top PMF militias, they maintained an outsize presence on social media and established the earliest networks of Iraqi Shia fighters to enter the Syria war at Iran’s behest.

QAFA, THE “IMAGINARY” PROXY

Once a top figure in Sadr’s camp, Sheikh Auws al-Khafaji saw his reputation begin to change in 2012, with Sadr publicly distancing himself from the commander. By year’s end, Khafaji was engrossed in creating a loose network of Iraqi Shia fighters for deployment to Syria. This network became more formalized after the Islamic State’s conquest of Mosul. In June 2014, Khafaji announced the creation of Qaeda Quwat Abu Fadl al-Abbas (the “Qaeda” was eventually dropped). At its height in late 2014-early 2015, QAFA boasted around 2,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria. While the militia never received an official PMF brigade designation, Khafaji has been widely featured as a PMF spokesman and commander during television appearances.

On February 7, Khafaji took to the airwaves and blamed Iran for the February 2 assassination of Iraqi novelist Alaa Mashzoub by “unknown gunmen.” A day later, PMF personnel arrested Khafaji; as of this writing, he is still being held incommunicado at an unknown location. Following his arrest, members of his namesake Shia Arab tribe protested in Baghdad and southern Iraq, warning that they may use force if he is not freed.

Previously, Khafaji had been quite outspoken about his links to Tehran. During his December 2018 visit to Lebanon, he met with officials from Iran’s [top regional proxy \(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-iran-dynamics-a-proxy-not-a-partner>\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-iran-dynamics-a-proxy-not-a-partner), Hezbollah, and praised the group for its support.

Afterward, he received a glowing review in the Hezbollah news outlet al-Ahed. Following his arrest, however, such links were quickly forgotten. Karim al-Nouri, a senior figure in the Iranian-controlled Badr Organization, told *Asharq al-Awsat* that the arrest was one of many aimed at shutting down “fake headquarters” that engage in extortion, provoke the populace, and otherwise create problems.

Whether or not the criminal accusations are true, the claim that QAFA and its office were “imaginary” seems blatantly hypocritical. Nouri himself once posed for a photo with Khafaji in the same “fake” headquarters he cited as the reason for the arrest. QAFA supporters have also posted photos of Khafaji being warmly greeted by top PMF leaders, including Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (a U.S.-designated terrorist who founded KH and serves as the PMF’s second-in-command) and Ahmed al-Asadi. Complaints about Khafaji’s arrest and the PMF’s perceived hypocrisy continue to appear in QAFA messaging, primarily in Syria.

JAISH AL-MUWAMAL, THE LOST BRIGADE

Also reportedly swept up in the February PMF arrests was Saad al-Suwar, head of the group Jaish al-Muwamal (though some social media sources claim he was detained the previous month). His arrest spurred some members to double down on their praise for Iran, while others actively distanced themselves.

During and after the 2003 Iraq war, Suwar led Iranian-backed radical Shia cells in northern Baghdad and was arrested by American and Iraqi forces. Following his escape from jail in 2011, he sought refuge in Iran and expanded his links there. In 2012, he traveled to Syria and became a recruiter and commander for a number of loosely connected Sadrists splinters, including the Damascus-based Rapid Reaction Forces and Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas. After returning to Iraq in 2014, he established Jaish al-Muwamal in summer 2016. The group soon received training from the established network of Iranian-controlled Shia militias in Iraq. Like Khafaji, Suwar’s connection to Iranian proxies was an open fact—photos of him posing with Muhandis and AAH leader Qais al-Khazali can be easily found on Facebook.

Jaish al-Muwamal was eventually given official PMF designation as the 99th Brigade. Yet by 2018, leading members of the group had left Iraq and set up shop in Syria, where many had previously fought as part of other groups. A large portion of these fighters and commanders reintegrated themselves with Shia militias ostensibly controlled by the Syrian army (e.g., Liwa Dhulfiqar; Liwa al-Imam al-Hussein).

Despite their strong connections with Iranian networks, Jaish al-Muwamal and QAFA were essentially dissolved after the February crackdown. The situation has created a great deal of bad blood between their supporters and their former benefactor.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

At first glance, the recent PMF arrests seemed like further evidence that the militias are simply formalizing their role as a unified national organization by cleaning house, eliminating uncontrollable elements, and taking action against fraud. The PMF have also attempted to demonstrate their utility and protect their brand by helping with police work, social service provision, and infrastructure projects. Yet when it comes to the core Iranian-controlled groups that run the PMF, criminality remains widespread, conveying the message that corruption is acceptable for Tehran’s favorites.

Meanwhile, the continued presence of Iraqi Shia fighters in Damascus may indicate that the Assad regime is beginning to chafe at how much access and power Iran has acquired there. The regime’s relationship with Tehran is still very close, but Syrian officials could be seeking to develop a more ideologically diverse Shia presence in order to reestablish some level of equilibrium with Iran.

The PMF arrests also give the U.S. government another way to demonstrate that Iran is an unreliable patron for Iraqi

Shia. Tehran's unyielding approach to its proxies allows for no dissent, encourages rampant corruption that stunts Iraq's development, and treats even dedicated foreign Shia who promote its ideology as sacrificial lambs to be discarded on a whim. Playing on these themes could help Washington isolate problematic groups, pressure Tehran, and reiterate U.S. commitment to Prime Minister Adil Abdulmahdi's anticorruption drive. The State Department's [recent listing of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-might-tehran-respond-to-irgc-designation>\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-might-tehran-respond-to-irgc-designation) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization might also be leveraged toward those ends, since the designation announcement mentions Kataib Hezbollah by name.

To be sure, some of these Shia groups would be happy to be on the receiving end of direct U.S. criticism. Washington should therefore focus on encouraging regional media outlets to get this message across, in addition to advancing it via social media and U.S. meetings with Iraqi officials. Corruption is hardly a new phenomenon in Iraq, but the criminal activities being carried out by Iranian-backed militias tap into major concerns held by much of the Iraqi public. Spreading information about these activities far and wide is a great way to drive wedges between Iran, its regional network of fighters, and average Iraqi citizens tired of rampant corruption. By highlighting the hypocrisy of PMF housecleaning campaigns, Washington can definitively show that Iranian proxies offer no genuine solution to Iraq's most pressing problems.

Phillip Smyth is a Soref Fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in Shia militias and Iranian proxy groups. ♦

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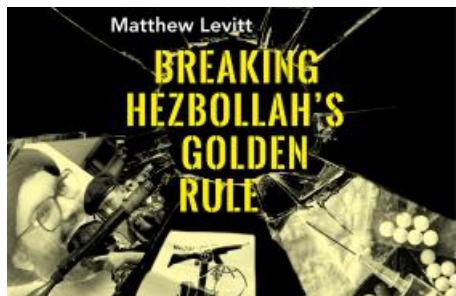
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