

Washington Keeps a Watchful Eye as the PMF Consolidates Its Dominance in Iraq

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Articles & Testimony

The Biden administration’s low-key, patient approach with Prime Minister Sudani has produced some positive results, but the lesson of Hezbollah and the Houthis is that Iranian proxies tend to cement their grip over a state when left unchecked.

Three years ago, Iranian-backed militias in Iraq were raining rockets and mortars on the US Embassy in Baghdad. To protect US personnel, in the summer of 2020 the Trump Administration took the unprecedented step of moving a Counter Rocket, Artillery, and Mortar system or C-RAM into the diplomatic compound. In subsequent months, the C-RAM, which fires up to 4,500 5-inch long bullets per minute, shot down dozens of incoming projectiles.

This dynamic changed with the Biden administration, which shortly after inauguration shelved Trump’s so-called maximum pressure campaign against Iran and engaged the theocracy in negotiations with an eye toward reentering into a nuclear deal. Consequently, over the past year, the targeting of the US Embassy in Baghdad—and the 2,500 US troops stationed in Iraq—largely subsided. Notwithstanding the recent veneer of improved security, however, the threat to US personnel and interests emanating from Iraq again appears to be on the rise.

The latest warning signs emerged in mid-May after President Biden declared the continuation of a “national emergency” in Iraq under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act or IEEPA. His pronouncement, and an earlier television interview with US Ambassador to Iraq Alina Romanowski—in which she asserted innocuously that the US would “not leave the region”—have had a dysregulating effect on at least some of these pro-Iran militias known as the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF).

In the aftermath of these announcements, a PMF-related group, Ashab al Kahf, issued a statement urging renewed military operations against American “occupation forces,” including bases and convoys, in Iraq. “We only need you in the right place,” the militia later threatened, but “all times are appropriate.” The organisation also called on its forces via a message on Telegram to “silence the demon,” a menacing reference to Ambassador Romanowski.

The PMF is also agitated by Washington’s productive working relationship with the Iraqi premier, Mohammed Shia’ Al Sudani. Not only has Al Sudani supported the continued US military presence as part of the coalition against the Islamic State (IS), he has worked to reduce Iraq’s energy dependence on Iran. Worse perhaps for the PMF, Al Sudani and Romanowski meet incessantly.

Prime Minister Al Sudani presides over a government led by the Iran-backed Coordination Framework coalition, the political wing of the PMF, and to date, he has not lived up to the militias’ expectations. Accordingly, Ashab al Kahf has urged its followers to “embarrass” Al Sudani’s government and “prepare the ground for his overthrow.” Harakat al Nujaba, another, more prominent PMF militia, warned of increasing US influence in Iraq and lamented Al Sudani’s “appeasement” of the US.

PMF Expansion Under Al Sudani

While Al Sudani has frustrated the PMF and now finds himself in the bad graces of these organisations, it’s not clear that he has actually taken many actions to limit the growing strength and influence of these groups. Indeed, since he became premier last October, the prerogatives of the PMF have expanded dramatically.

In November 2022, for example, Al Sudani approved the establishment and provided nearly \$70 million in capital from the Iraqi budget to the Muhandis Company. Owned and operated by the PMF—many of whose leaders and component militias have been designated as terrorists by the US government—this engineering and contracting firm is poised to win billions worth of non-competitive bid deals with the Iraqi government. Like the Revolutionary Guard Corps in Iran and its Khatim al-Anbiya subsidiary, this arrangement will help ensure the PMF’s financial well-being in perpetuity, even in the unlikely event the Iraqi government eventually decides to quit funding the organisation’s salaries directly.

The Iraqi government has already provided the Muhandis Company with land grants, allegedly to plant trees, in large swaths of agriculturally inhospitable territory near the borders of Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The land transfer and the prospect of new militia bases and airstrips in these areas are no doubt concerning for Amman and Riyadh, whose airspace has been repeatedly violated by PMF drones.

In addition to prospering financially under Al Sudani, the PMF has increased in size during the premier’s tenure. Only two years ago, the PMF’s estimated end strength was 100,000 militiamen. According to the 2023 Iraqi budget, today the PMF boasts some 238,000 men under arms, a force nearly half the size of the Iraqi army. Baghdad will allocate \$2.7 billion this year to fund these Iran-aligned forces. In February, it was announced that Al Sudani’s government would underwrite the construction of a new, dedicated military academy for PMF militiamen, and the troops would be eligible for pensions upon retirement.

Targeting of US Personnel in Syria

Meanwhile, although the PMF hasn’t been actively targeting US personnel in Iraq, it is doing so abroad. Most recently, in late March, an Iranian manufactured one-way drone US officials say was launched from Iraq by a front group of the PMF militia Harakat al Nujaba (HAN) hit a US base in north-eastern Syria.

An American contractor was killed and two dozen US troops were injured in the strike. Three months earlier, another HAN militia cutout called Tashkil al-Waritheen fired three drones from Iraq targeting the US base at Al Tanf, Syria. One of the drones injured two soldiers serving in the local US-backed counter-IS partner force known as the

Syrian Democratic Forces.

US View of Al Sudani

Less than a year into his premiership, the Biden administration is giving high marks to Al Sudani for his strides toward energy independence and for making concrete improvements in service provision to the Iraqi people. Yet in terms of Washington and Baghdad's consensus-articulated policy priorities—stability, security, and sovereignty—Al Sudani is not making sufficient progress. Indeed, despite the relative calm in Iraq these days, recent PMF gains suggest a problematic trajectory.

Like his predecessors, Al Sudani may judge it too dangerous for his personal safety to take bold steps to rein in the PMF. While the prime minister should be given credit for the steps he's taken to curtail corruption and money laundering, and to end his country's dependence on Iranian energy, his failure to address PMF military expansion does not bode well for the future.

Since Al Sudan's election in October, the Biden administration has taken a low-key and patient approach with the premier that has borne some modest results. Regrettably, however, the lesson of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen is that left unchecked, the Iranian proxy PMF will continue to grow and consolidate its dominance over Iraq.

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and former assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs at the State Department. This article was originally published [on Al Majalla's website \(https://en.majalla.com/node/293156/politics/washington-keeps-watchful-eye-pmf-consolidates-its-dominance-iraq\)](https://en.majalla.com/node/293156/politics/washington-keeps-watchful-eye-pmf-consolidates-its-dominance-iraq). ❖

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