

Injecting New Blood into Militias: The Gradual Takeover of Iraqi Higher Education by the Popular Mobilization Forces

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Brief Analysis

By firmly resisting the takeover of higher education by pro-Iran faculty and students, the United States can prevent the militias from recruiting the next generation of fighters.

Since the government of Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani came to power, the [Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-asaib-ahl-al-haq-0) (AAH) movement has engaged in a persistent campaign to control the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, which oversees more than a million students in Iraq.

Even though the group is [designated](https://2017-2021.state.gov/state-department-terrorist-designations-of-asaib-ahl-al-haq-and-its-leaders-qays-and-laith-al-khazali/index.html) by the United States as a terrorist organization—and its leader Qais Khazali is subject to sanctions—AAH enjoys powerful privileges, extensive influence, and financial benefits as it operates within parts of the Iraqi government. Previously, AAH affiliates controlled the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Antiquities, and the group relinquished control of this ministry in exchange for higher education, despite the greater financial powers of the former.

AAH's abandonment of these financial proceeds—collected from the trade of alcoholic beverages and the issuance of tourism and investment licenses—is a calculated move apparently intended to trade wealth for influence. The group's new position in higher education gives them the opportunity to compensate for a shortage of young cadres within the militias and to undermine the youth reform movements active on Iraqi college campuses, which tend to have positive attitudes towards the international community. These student movements, as the main fuel for the 2019 Tishreen protests, have likewise contributed to undermining the militias' authority and putting them in direct confrontation with Iraqi society—especially in the central and southern regions with a Shia majority. Student movements have over the past five years articulated the legitimate aspirations of Iraqi citizens for a better life and a state free from Iranian influence.

Thus, militia groups have worked to reduce the influence and voice of these student groups by providing their own narratives. After the assassination of Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in 2020, factions hoping to emulate the Iranian model known as Wilayat al-Faqih worked to entrench the image of al-Muhandis as a "national hero" in various public domains in Iraq, starting with images in streets, squares, public parks, government offices, and now in the education sector. The **Sons of al-Muhandis Group (https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=103247855969237&id=100088520677607&mibextid=oFDknk&rdid=rMXOmsbjmKhYfitW)** was established to primarily work within universities and colleges, attempting to win over the youth to various causes of the Wilayat al-Faqih project and create new social bases for armed militias under the pretexts of resisting U.S. occupation and countering Western attempts to spread its culture in Iraqi society.

Initially, the Sons of al-Muhandis Group did not elicit a noticeable response among university students, and their actions seemed to lack funds and organization. Yet the situation changed when Naeem al-Aboudi, the ideological guidance officer for Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, assumed the position of Minister of Higher Education in 2022. Al-Aboudi empowered the Sons of al-Muhandis Group by providing the necessary governmental cover for its activities along with the financial and political support needed to attract new elements.

The Sons of al-Muhandis Group

This group initially organized activities similar to those of civil society organizations in Iraq, sponsoring training workshops, public and private sessions, festivals, and conferences. These events, however, focused on **establishing (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2bTbm94y0s>)** the image of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) against other state security institutions, **promoting (<https://youtu.be/SLFc1OSjSAg>)** supposed achievements of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, and emphasizing religious jurisprudence topics. All of this outreach carries an overt political message, one that casts the United States, European nations, and their Arab allies in the region in a negative light. In contrast, Iran is marketed as the sole protector of the Shia, and Shia Iraqis are urged to sympathize with the Islamic Republic as it "confronts global arrogance." In addition to this deluge of traditional Wilayat al-Faqih propaganda, the Sons of al-Muhandis Group hosts politicians and PMF leaders with Wilayat al-Faqih orientations, introducing university students to them.

Since liberal, secular, or religiously uncommitted students are unlikely to be open to such a message, the Sons of al-Muhandis Group aims to influence the conservative Shia demographic, who follow the Najaf Marja'iyya in their religious imitation. Consequently the religious institution in Najaf one of the most affected by the continued activities of the militias among university students, as the Sons of al-Muhandis Group gradually distances conservative Shia students from Najaf's religious institutions by advocating for the Iranian model.

The Relationship Between the Popular Mobilization Forces and the Sons of al-Muhandis Group

There is a direct relationship between the PMF and the Sons of al-Muhandis Group as a student association. Influential members of the Sons of al-Muhandis receive salaries from the PMF as its employees. There are financial resources provided by the PMF as an institution to cover the activities of the Sons of al-Muhandis, but the extent of these resources remains unknown due to the lack of oversight or monitoring of PMF expenditures by the state or independent observers.

The most prominent of the students involved in this group is **Thorgham Qayssar (<https://web.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=597908934905985&set=ecnf.100040606509158>)** from the Civil Engineering Department at the University of Technology, Baghdad, who is known for his pictures holding PMF slogans and **raising images (<https://web.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=675970310433180&set=ecnf.100040606509158>)** of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Some University professors also provide support and cover for the activities of the Sons of al-Muhandis in their colleges. Notable among them is

Hassan Hammoudi Jouni, former supervisor of the Civil Engineering Department at the University of Technology, and Saad Shaheen, chancellor of Basra University, who is known for carrying pictures (<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/bAdtwTdjUQMWKHdA/?mibextid=oFDknk>) of Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis at various events, and for facilitating (<https://t.me/abnaalmuhandis/2520>) the activities of the Sons of al-Muhandis at Basra University.

Additionally, the Sons of al-Muhandis Group regularly hosts PMF leaders on campuses, most notably Abu Ali al-Kufi (<https://youtu.be/zGQGfSJ-Mss>), who is involved in corruption activities related to the Baghdad Municipality. They also host pro-Wilayat al-Faqih clerics like Hashim al-Haidari, representative of Ali Khamenei in Iraq and Secretary-General of the Ahd Allah Movement (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/ahd-allah-movement-another-iranian-proxy>), as well as pro-Wilayat al-Faqih MPs like Faleh Khazali (<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/iarTXNup8qExuYxi/?mibextid=oFDknk>).

In various incidents, the PMF has provided a means for the Sons of al-Muhandis to exploit state resources illegally for their activities. These incidents include facilitating the entry of images of Qasem Soleimani and other political symbols into university campuses (https://youtu.be/P2yydC4_gRU) and pressuring for the use of college lecture halls to host workshops, courses, and private sessions for the Sons of al-Muhandis.

In return, the Sons of al-Muhandis Group provides the PMF with a suitable window to identify outstanding students in engineering fields and attract them to work on projects related to the Engineer Construction Company, as well as projects for building missiles and drones for the militias.

Political Developments: Ministers of Higher Education

One of the factors that helped the Sons of al-Muhandis perform their activities occurred long before the group was established. Former Minister of Higher Education, Ali al-Adeeb, replaced all security forces responsible for protecting universities with militia fighters. At the time, this move aimed to counter the increasing civil and liberal movement among university students, restrict public freedoms within the university, and eliminate civil manifestations, in addition to providing financial cover for militia elements through state salaries, as there was no institutional cover for them like the PMF enjoys today.

Although this takeover by the militias was not designed to create a group like the Sons of al-Muhandis, it formed the perfect environment for such an organization to thrive down the road. The same faction members have continued to be present since Ali al-Adeeb's time until now, and they have high sympathy for the cause of the Sons of al-Muhandis and the goals they seek to achieve.

During the final months of Mustafa Al-Kadhimi's government, Nabil Abdul Sahib served as Minister of Higher Education. In the last days of Al-Kadhimi's government, when it was evident that his term would not be renewed, Nabil attempted to curry favor with pro-Wilayat al-Faqih elements to remain in his position by allowing them to take several positions within universities. The most significant gain for pro-Wilayat al-Faqih elements was their control over the position of Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs, which allows the holder to approve or disapprove any activity within colleges, as well as to punish students or decide not to punish them if they engage in behaviors contrary to university regulations. By seizing this key position, pro-Wilayat al-Faqih elements were able to control activities in several colleges and to provide carte blanche to pro-Wilayat al-Faqih students conducting illegal behavior.

After Naeem Al-Aboudi assumed the role of Minister of Higher Education as part of Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani's government, the largest administrative changes in the ministry's history in favor of the pro-Wilayat al-Faqih elements took place. Naim Al-Aboudi, known for his affiliation with the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq militia, being its spokesperson and deputy, as well as overseeing the ideological supervision of the movement, supported the

behaviors of the Sons of al-Muhandis and continued their administrative and student approaches.

| Position | Individual | Notes |
|---|-------------------------------------|--|
| Deputy Minister for Scientific Research Affairs | Haider Abdul Zahid Kassed Al-Rubaie | Pro-Wilayat al-Faqih collaborated with the Sons of al-Muhandis while serving as Assistant President of the University of Technology. Appointed after he assumed the ministry and has a personal relationship with him. |
| Deputy Minister for Administrative Affairs | Ali Hamid Kazem Al-Shakri | Belongs to Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq |
| Director General of the Administrative and Financial Department | Aqaad Ghani Jihad | Political agreement with the PMF |
| Director General of the Department of Private University Education | Hussein Ali Hamid | Political agreement with the PMF |
| Director General of the Department of Scholarships and Cultural Relations | Hazem Baqir Tahir Al-Ali | Al-Fatah Alliance – Hadi Al-Amiri's wing |

Table 1: Administrative and Political Changes in the Ministry of Higher Education after Naim Al-Aboudi's Assumption

Student Interaction with PMF Projects

Despite the significant gains made by pro-Iranian elements within university administration, the general mood of the student body on most campuses is one that firmly rejects the Sons of al-Muhandis or any other related group. In one recorded example, the Sons of al-Muhandis held a celebration at Wasit University—College of Dentistry. Out of 83 students in one stage of the college, only 3 attended. Non-participation is likewise visible in various provinces and universities, with student rejection manifesting in non-attendance, boycotting, and sometimes attacking and sabotaging events. One instance of student rejection of Wilayat al-Faqih ideology occurred in the Civil Engineering Department at the University of Technology, where a picture of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis was hung at the department's gate, only to be defaced by students who drew a large X on the picture and wrote anti-Iran slogans.

However, the danger lies in two main factors:

- Formation of a Network:** The activities of the Sons of al-Muhandis facilitate the formation of a network of pro-Wilayat al-Faqih students, allowing a higher level of organization compared to other intellectual trends despite their small numbers. This means the group can more easily perform larger and potentially more dangerous activities in the future, especially given the movement's access to members' personal information.
- Influence on Female Students:** The activities of the Sons of al-Muhandis affect the female demographic, with lessons by pro-Wilayat al-Faqih female students promoting a culture of strict veiling (niqab and hijab) within university campuses to other female students. These female student groups become isolated from the rest of the student body, causing disruption within the university community.

Scientific Research According to Militia Guidelines

At a research level, AAH control of the education ministry is restricting and weaponizing certain areas of research. As Minister of Higher Education, Naeem Al-Aboudi reinstated the "Intellectual Safety" system, a **relic** (<https://alarab.co.uk/%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D8%AB%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A1>) from the days of Saddam Hussein's dictatorial regime. This system, simply put, requires the Ministry of Higher Education's approval on the content of doctoral and master's theses and all forms of research, ensuring their "intellectual safety." Practically, this system prevents any research that contradicts Iranian ideologies and imposes sanctions on researchers in Iraqi

institutions who may defy the ministry's ideologies. This system is **codified** (<https://qu.edu.iq/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%AD%D8%AB-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9.pdf>) in many public institutions and has affected scientific research in fields like politics, economics, and social sciences, **reinforcing** (<https://www.facebook.com/DrYahyaAlkubisi/posts/%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B6%D9%88%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AD%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%B7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7/4994415000632429/>) the image of the militias academically and sidelining independent researchers from working.

In addition to the intellectual safety system, the ministry recently approved the implementation of what is known as the "**scientific whip** (<http://al-nnas.com/ARTICLE/Albrahim/16h0.htm>)." This requires sending an envoy from the headquarters of the Ministry of Higher Education in Baghdad (often a pro-militia individual) to monitor all scientific discussions in the provinces, ensuring that even debates—supposed to be free and objective—do not contradict the ideology approved by the ministry.

The Need for American Pressure

The United States must recognize the strategic threat posed by the militias' control over young student communities in Iraq, which undermines U.S. efforts to establish healthy and constructive long-term relationships with Iraqi society. This militia control threatens the Iraqi youth's desire to be open to the world and maintain balanced relationships with the United States and its Western allies. It also restricts current allies from reaching young activists, imposing sanctions on them through their work or studies in Iraqi institutions.

However, traditional U.S. sanctions packages cannot succeed in confronting this militia wave. The U.S. government needs to adopt new strategies, including:

1. **Preventing Militia Control Over Higher Education**: The U.S. government should prioritize preventing militias from taking over the Ministry of Higher Education in the future. It should exert real pressure on the current Prime Minister to limit militia activities within the ministry and ensure that competent, non-militia individuals are appointed to lead the ministry. The potential impact of the Ministry of Higher Education on Iraqi society should be recognized, and it should not be handed over to militias easily.
2. **Countering Militia Influence Among Youth**: It is crucial to counter the militias' influence and projects among the youth by supporting larger American student exchange programs with Iraq. These programs should introduce Iraqi students to American culture, democratic lifestyles, and the importance of Iraq having balanced positions with the international community. Programs like the Iraqi Young Leaders Exchange Program (IYLEP), sponsored by the U.S. State Department, should be expanded to include more beneficiaries. New projects

targeting Iraqi students and youth should also be added, as this holds long-term strategic importance for U.S. interests in Iraq.

3. **Highlighting Militia Influence in Universities:** Pressure should be applied to research centers and media institutions inside and outside the United States to shed light on the growing influence of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and other militias within Iraqi universities. Increasingly embarrassing the Iraqi government is necessary to stop and undermine this influence.

By firmly resisting the takeover of higher education by pro-Iran faculty and students, the United States can prevent the militias from recruiting the next generation of fighters. Supporting intellectual freedom on Iraqi campuses will not only serve U.S. political interests in the long-term, but it will allow for a healthier, more rigorous academic atmosphere for the country's youth as they prepare to enter the workforce and strive to build a more stable, secure Iraq. ❖

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