

Iraq's PMF Law Is No Substitute for Real Security Reform

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Brief Analysis

The Trump administration should not be duped by the supposed “reforms” that militia leaders are considering in parliament, which threaten to turn the PMF into another Iranian “Revolutionary Guard” and keep U.S.-designated terrorists in key posts.

On March 11, the Iraqi parliament withdrew a draft “PMF Service and Retirement Law” from consideration, in the latest—but surely not the last—chapter for a hotly debated bill regarding the structure and funding of the Popular Mobilization Forces. Avowedly focused on reforming the PMF, the law is really about rival militia commanders trying to outmaneuver each other while grabbing a bigger slice of the national budget for the pro-Iran paramilitary organization.

Since its formation in 2014, the PMF has posed a conundrum for U.S. policymakers. On one hand, the all-volunteer force was originally raised with the blessing of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani to serve the vital mission of wresting Iraqi territory back from the Islamic State, and was later put on the government payroll and recognized as a formal branch of the security forces. On the other hand, PMF bases, equipment, and personnel have repeatedly been involved in killing Americans and Iraqis alike, with little accountability, and the force is predominantly led by commanders from Iran-backed, U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations. The current PMF chairman is Faleh al-Fayyad, designated by Washington for serious human rights abuses; the force’s operational commander, Abdul-Aziz al-Mohammadawi (aka Abu Fadak), is a senior member of the U.S.-designated organization [Kataib Hezbollah \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-hezbollah\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-hezbollah) (KH), one of whose

many attacks killed three Americans and injured many more in January 2024.

Following regional setbacks to Iran's "axis of resistance" during the latest wars in Gaza and Lebanon, the PMF has become more worried about the risk of U.S. or Israeli attacks on its senior officials. Accordingly, it has sought to give the impression of "reforming" its structure, retiring certain commanders, and appointing less objectionable leadership. In pushing Baghdad on security reform, however, Washington must be careful to differentiate between cosmetic changes and real measures that reduce the threat posed by malign actors within the PMF.

A Fight for Control of the PMF

Iraqi militias are regulated by [PMF Commission Law No. 40 of 2016](#)

(<https://archive3.parliament.iq/ar/2016/11/26/%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%8A/>), a brief piece of legislation consisting of just three

articles with minimal details on the force's employment terms and administrative structure. To address this gap, the PMF Commission, led by Fayyad, initiated efforts to draft a new Service and Retirement Law in 2019. Yet passing the legislation has proven challenging, as various Shia militia and political groups seek to shape it in a way that enhances their influence. An initial 39-article draft was announced in 2020, then ballooned to 113 articles in 2023 before being presented in parliament last year.

It speaks volumes that the PMF—avowedly part of the Iraqi security forces—has spent years crafting its own dedicated law on these matters when Iraq already has a general Military Service and Retirement Law on the books (Law No. 3 of 2010). PMF leaders refuse to accept that this extant law applies to them, in keeping with the force's unofficial mission of serving as a parallel military for Iraqi groups supported by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Iran's parallel military.

The draft PMF law is currently deadlocked, but not because militias balked at real reform; rather, they have been sparring over potential leadership change. Some Shia blocs in parliament, including those belonging to militias, have pushed to institute a retirement age of sixty for PMF members (currently there is no mandatory retirement age). This effort is being spearheaded by al-Sadiqoun (formed by the U.S.-designated terrorist organization [Asaib Ahl al-Haq](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-asaib-ahl-al-haq-0>), or AAH) and the State of Law Alliance (led by former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki), with support from Harakat Hoquq (formed by KH). The primary goal of this provision is plain—to force the retirement of Fayyad, who is sixty-eight. If the law passes in its current form, it would also result in the retirement of approximately 180 high-ranking PMF personnel, including the heads of various brigades and regional operations commands.

For now, Fayyad has successfully blocked versions of the law containing these provisions, with support from Hadi al-Ameri (head of the Iran-backed [Badr Organization](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-badr-organization>)), Abu Ala al-Walai (head of the U.S.-designated terrorist group [Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-sayyid-al-shuhada>)), and Ammar al-Hakim (head of the Hikma Movement). Fayyad's most senior political ally, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, is also "fighting tooth and nail to prevent the law from passing," [according](#) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ld-wQXLp1PI>) to influential Sadiqoun member Ali Turki. On February 18, Fayyad [traveled to Iran](#) (<https://mfa.gov.ir/portal/newsview/761709>) in a presumed bid to garner Tehran's support for blocking the legislation; three weeks later, the draft law was withdrawn from consideration, at least in its current form.

U.S. Policy Implications

The United States has a clear national interest in preventing the consolidation of another Iran-backed “Revolutionary Guard” in the Middle East. Allowing the PMF’s unchecked growth and corruption to continue under the leadership of designated terrorists is the easiest way to lose Iraq to Tehran.

Indeed, state allocations for the PMF’s budget and personnel have increased dramatically in recent years. According to the parliamentary finance committee, its official force size surged by 95 percent in the 2023 budget (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/extraordinary-popular-mobilization-force-expansion-numbers>), from 122,000 personnel to 238,000. Some of these slots are almost certainly fictitious, enabled by years of deliberate opacity in the PMF’s registered manpower that enable militias to systematically exploit state funds. Meanwhile, the force’s budget surpassed \$3.4 billion (<https://iq.parliament.iq/blog/%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%A7-%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B1-%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A8%D8%AB-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AB-%D8%BA%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D9%82/>) in 2024, up from \$2.8 billion in 2023, and \$2.16 billion in 2022. Enacting the PMF Service and Retirement Law would likely increase this budget even further, as it would require the government to allocate funds for new expenditures.

More important for U.S. interests, using the new law to remove Fayyad without mandating other deep reforms would merely open the door for a younger set of Iranian-controlled, U.S.-sanctioned commanders drawn from rival terrorist factions. Like previous PMF “professionalization” initiatives, the current law has nothing to do with bringing the force under state control—it is just another power play by terrorist groups like AAH and KH. For example, AAH leader Qais al-Khazali recently stated (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NF97PflN6is>) that the PMF chairman should be selected from within and embody the force’s “values” and “culture.” His colleague Ali Turki allowed for the option of appointing “experienced officers from outside the PMF,” but only if they “share an ideological affinity with the PMF.” This suggests that AAH is laying the groundwork to replace Fayyad with an Iraqi military commander who has a history of supporting the “axis of resistance”—and close ties to AAH, of course. This is why sacking Fayyad is not enough to spur real change. Yes, he should go, but so should all of the other U.S.-designated terrorists and human rights abusers in the PMF leadership.

As Baghdad continues to discuss cleaning up its security sector, the Trump administration should ignore fake “reform” initiatives like the PMF Service and Retirement Law, instead focusing on the following lines of effort:

- **Sustain “maximum pressure.”** The fact that Iraqi politicians can even openly debate PMF reform today is a testament to Israel’s weakening of Iran’s “axis” over the past year and the heightened threat of U.S. sanctions under the Trump administration. To sustain this momentum, Washington should energetically implement the newly issued National Security Presidential Memorandum 2 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/02/national-security-presidential-memorandum-nspm-2/>), which includes provisions for reimposing “maximum pressure” on Iran and its proxies.
- **Sanction the PMF’s economic arm.** The Muhandis General Company (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-muhandis-general-company>) is the PMF’s equivalent of the IRGC’s Khatam al-Anbia construction arm, serving as a front for Tehran and its local terrorist proxies to filch billions of dollars in contracts out of Iraq’s oil-rich government. Sources have indicated to the authors that the U.S. Treasury Department has extensive evidence of these activities; it should use this information to sanction the firm and its shell companies. This could help prevent malign actors from partnering with international investors on major contracts related to oil field services and renewables, which is already starting to occur. New sanctions could also limit the number of non-compete contracts that the company receives from the Iraqi government, leveraging Baghdad’s keen desire to avoid negative attention from Washington.
- **Demand leadership changes.** Regardless of what the retirement law says, both Fayyad and Abu Fadak should be

removed, and whoever replaces them as PMF chairman and commander should be expected to adhere to the principle of bringing all military weapons under true state control, as repeatedly espoused by Sistani and other key figures. Toward that end, the United States should condition future security assistance and cooperation on concrete Iraqi measures to uphold the state's monopoly on the use of force. This includes pushing for new PMF commanders who are willing and able to gradually reduce the influence of groups beholden to Iran and subject to U.S. terrorist designations.

- **Define the PMF's role and missions.** The PMF essentially duplicates (or "triplicates") the roles already played by Iraq's army and Federal Police. Formulating a national definition of each service branch's missions is a vital first step in eliminating wasteful replication of effort. It would also help prevent the PMF from encroaching further into the operational spaces of the primary service branches and increasingly overshadowing them.

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<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight>. ❖

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