

Iraq's Militia Balancing Act Gets Trickier Amid Deadlines and Saudi Attacks

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 Linda and Tony Rubin Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Brief Analysis

As the September 30 disarmament deadline for PMF militias approaches, Washington should support the Zaidi government's efforts and ensure that the militias' concessions are real.

On September 10, Iran-backed factions of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) attacked Saudi Arabia's Yanbu oil pipeline, suspending the export of up to 4-5 million barrels of oil a day through the Red Sea. The PMF drone barrage was just the latest reminder of the regionally and locally destabilizing role of these militias.

Months ago, Iraq's new premier, Ali al-Zaidi, designated September 30 as the deadline for these groups to disarm. On the same day, the remaining U.S. forces stationed in Iraq as part of the Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State are slated to depart per a June 2024 agreement. The confluence of the disarmament deadline and U.S. departure date was at one time seen as a moment of opportunity for Baghdad to reassert state sovereignty. However, while U.S. forces are on track to leave, it now appears that the militias will endure after the deadline. The persistence of these Shia armed groups constitutes a serious challenge for Zaidi, but also for the Trump administration, which is seeking to transform the bilateral relationship.

Drawing a Line?

Zaidi assumed the premiership on May 14, less than three months after the start of the U.S.-Israel war on Iran. Only days after he took office, Iran-backed PMF factions, most prominently Kataib Hezbollah (KH), Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HAN), and Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS), launched drone salvos into Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. These U.S.-designated terrorist organizations—established in 2014 to fight the Islamic State—were attacking U.S. diplomatic and military personnel in Iraq for years. After the war started, however, they enlarged their target set to include Iraqi Kurds, Iraqi security installations, and U.S. bases and oil infrastructure in the Arabian Peninsula and Jordan. From February through April, these factions launched an unprecedented number (<https://ctc.westpoint.edu/standing-with-iran-the-integrated-combat-performance-of-iraqi-militias-during->

operation-epic-fury/) of attacks against such targets.

Recognizing the threat that these unilateral militia actions pose to Iraq and to good relations with Arab Gulf states, Zaidi listed as pillar one of his new government program (https://www.gop-iraq.org/promise_officials), released on May 17, “restricting weapons in the hands of the state and enforcing the rule of law.” He reiterated this policy during his July 14 Oval Office meeting with President Trump, adding (<https://amwaj.media/en/article/us-packs-up-last-iraqi-air-defenses-as-withdrawal-deadline-looms>) that after September 30, “we will never accept any entity carrying weapons outside the control of the state.”

Early in Zaidi’s tenure, his government engaged in a dialogue on disarmament with Iran-backed PMF factions and other militias. With the ostensible support of Supreme Judicial Council head Faeq Zaidan—perhaps the most influential figure in Iraq today—Zaidi made some progress. In early June, Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), a leading PMF faction and U.S.-designated terrorist organization, agreed to turn over its weapons. While AAH has not been particularly active militarily of late, its ostensible concession is nonetheless significant; Qais al-Khazali, who leads the group, controls twenty-eight seats in the Iraqi parliament through his al-Sadiqoun bloc. Another U.S.-designated PMF militia—Kataib al-Imam Ali, which has also been relatively dormant recently—joined AAH in agreeing to disarmament. Influential cleric and erstwhile politician Muqtada al-Sadr likewise consented to integrate his Saraya al-Salam militia, which is not beholden to Tehran, into the Iraqi military.

Not surprisingly, government disarmament discussions with the most active terrorist factions of the PMF have not been as productive. This summer, Esmail Qaani, chief of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force, traveled to Baghdad to meet with the leaders of these terrorist factions and reinforce their rejection of disarmament. In the absence of progress, the government took the bold but short-lived step of arresting some militiamen affiliated (<https://thenewregion.com/posts/6338>) with KH, HAN, and KSS. Unfortunately, these detainees were subsequently handed over to the PMF Central Security Directorate and quickly released.

Dictating Conditions

Since the first Trump administration, and particularly since the January 2020 U.S. targeted killing of Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani and PMF chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Iran-backed factions have demanded the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq, making it a condition for disarmament. In August, however, the factions added several additional conditions, among them the withdrawal of Turkish forces, an end to the presence of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) on Iraqi territory, the passage of legislation enshrining PMF salaries and perquisites, an end to U.S. financial influence in Iraq, and the disbanding of Kurdish Peshmerga forces.

Zaidi’s government will not entertain these maximalist demands; the existence of the Peshmerga, for example, is guaranteed by the Iraqi constitution. In any event, PMF concessions to date have been limited. In August, Baghdad reportedly (<https://www.newarab.com/news/iraqi-factions-propose-weapons-freeze-instead-disarmament>) rejected a PMF offer to “freeze” military activities for two years and store the militias’ weapons in their own depots rather than handing them over to the state. Another problematic option floated (<https://aawsat.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/5316050-%D9%86%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A5%D9%85%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%86%D9%82%D9%84-%D9%88%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%B2%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86>) by the factions is to store some of their heavy weapons in Iran.

Ironically, these factions, which openly profess their loyalty to Tehran, present their conditions as an attempt to secure

the “sovereignty” of Iraq. As a KSS spokesman described

(<https://shafaq.com/ar/%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B5%D8%A7-%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%B0%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD>) it, their demands are geared toward “protecting the Iraqi

people, land, and skies.” In keeping with this claim, these militias—which have repeatedly targeted Iraq’s neighbors and their Kurdish countrymen with drones and missiles—have also insisted that Baghdad purchase and install air defense systems.

U.S. Policy Recommendations

The Iran war and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz have strained Iraq’s energy export-dependent economy. Baghdad has declared a “crisis” and is struggling to meet its enormous public-sector payroll, including the \$3.6 billion it annually allocates to KH, HAN, KSS, and the rest of the PMF. These financial pressures—which could endure after the war ends—provide a modest incentive for militias to negotiate. Meanwhile, AAH leader Khazali appears to have opted for disarmament at least in part in the hope of participating in the highly corrupt and profitable world of Iraqi politics. But financial inducements alone are unlikely to end these factions’ proxy relationship with Iran. Furthermore, Washington should not delude itself that disarmament will last: during this year’s war, Iran has rearmed the militias (<https://ctc.westpoint.edu/standing-with-iran-the-integrated-combat-performance-of-iraqi-militias-during-operation-epic-fury/>) with three tranches of advanced missiles and drones.

Given Iraq’s sensitive economic position—and the high hopes for Zaidi—Washington should be cautious about implementing broad sanctions to force action on these militias. Nevertheless, the Trump administration should maintain some pressure in order to support Zaidi in his disarmament efforts and ensure that any militia concessions are not merely cosmetic or reversible. In the coming months, Washington should do the following:

Take kinetic opportunities. Continue to work closely with Riyadh to track and strike the senior leaders of KH, HAN, and KSS. This would help deter further devastating strikes on Saudi oil sites, weaken militias, and strengthen the hand of the Iraqi government.

Consider individual sanctions. Two leading officials representing Iran-backed PMF factions in negotiations with Baghdad are Hadi al-Ameri, leader of the Badr Organization, and Nouri al-Maliki, head of the State of Law Alliance. Together, they control forty-seven seats in parliament and are key members of the ruling Coordination Framework bloc, which is aligned with Iran. Both men are sticking to their maximalist demands so far and do not appear inclined to disarm. Instead, Maliki is talking (<https://hathalyoum.net/articles/4224282>) about engaging in a process to “contain” militia weapons—a euphemism frequently employed by the Lebanese government to defer the disarming of another top Iranian terrorist proxy, Hezbollah. The first Trump administration reportedly (<https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iraq/2021/07/26/ex-iraqi-pm-nouri-al-maliki-narrowly-escaped-us-sanctions/>) considered designating Maliki; if he and Ameri continue obstructing the state’s attempts to establish a monopoly on weapons, Washington should sanction them.

Reengage with CTS. Iraq’s Counter Terrorism Service played a critical role in defeating the Islamic State and remains one of the few security services not completely infiltrated by Iran-linked groups. In Zaidi’s first 100 days, he used these forces to arrest PMF personnel and will likely need to rely on them in the future. Washington should offer to assist Zaidi’s government in vetting the senior CTS leadership in order to cleanse it of militia-affiliated personnel (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-washington-can-salvage-iraqs-counter-terrorism-service>) and salvage this once highly professional, apolitical, Iraqi nationalist force. U.S. authorities should also provide the Iraqi government with the operational intelligence it needs to apprehend the cells that attacked Saudi Arabia.

Target direct militia funding. Given that the PMF has 238,000 men on the payroll, it would be too difficult for Baghdad

to completely disband it. If no progress is made toward disarmament, however, Washington could consider sanctioning Iraqi government officials who approve funding for U.S.-designated PMF factions.

Maintain support for Iraq’s Kurds. The United States is departing Iraq and removing its Patriot air defense systems from Erbil—the only protection the Kurds had as militias launched more than 800 missiles and drones into their areas of control in the north during the Iran war. September 30 marks the end of the memorandum of understanding between the Pentagon and the Peshmerga, raising the possibility (<https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-906957>) that \$61 million per year in aid will be cut. While Washington should not be responsible in perpetuity for underwriting the security forces of a state with the world’s fifth-largest proven oil reserves, the current moment of heightened Kurdish vulnerability seems an inappropriate time to slash their funding.

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its Rubin Program on Arab Politics. ♦

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