

The Role of the Popular Mobilization Forces in the Iraqi Political Process

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Brief Analysis

Wars do not break out in developing countries without armed groups appearing alongside regime forces, and Iraq is no exception. However, the fact that armed Shia factions have united under one banner as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) has been an unexpected development in Iraqi politics. Although adhering to the same school of Islamic thought, Shia groups affiliated with political parties and movements with deeply different teachings have operated as a functional, cohesive military force.

Over the last three or four years, the PMF have consequently occupied a prominent place in Iraq's political and media consciousness. Today, the PMF cannot be separated from the country's political landscape, and one might go so far as to categorize it as a de-facto official military institution—operating within the same context as Iraq's army and other security and military institutions. As is the case with Iraqi politics, the factors behind a group's direction, actions, and impact often overlap and intertwine.

However, domestic opposition to the PMF has escalated over the last few months as the marathon negotiations to form a government have dragged on. During this time, two main focal groups—Sairoon and Fateh—have emerged concerning the selection of the new prime minister. The latter is affiliated with the PMF, while the former, though not connected with the group, does not reject it outright either.

Today, with the war against the Islamic State (IS) nearing an end, political tensions have been mounting over the blueprint for the next era of politics, especially in light of the surprising results of May's parliamentary elections. Given its growing presence in Iraqi life, the PMF is now at the forefront of discussions on the next era of Iraqi politics.

Indeed, the group finds itself at a crossroads, caught between those striving to exclude and remove it from its current position of power, those attempting to invest in and exploit it politically, and those hoping to keep the identity, role, and achievements of the PMF far removed from political squabbles and their “negative” consequences. As such, it is not difficult to trace the developing ‘politics’ of the PMF in recent statements on government formation, which shed light on what role the PMF will play in politics once the government is formed.

The first is the tension between the PMF and political statements on the forces' deployment patterns. Despite a decree issued by the PMF's Vice President Jamal Jaafar Ibrahim (also known as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis) ordering the [withdrawal \(http://www.kurdistan24.net/ar/newsreader/f7bd02ef-5a14-4782-ac9d-7ea06d890421\)](http://www.kurdistan24.net/ar/newsreader/f7bd02ef-5a14-4782-ac9d-7ea06d890421) of PMF forces

from some liberated cities and regions, along with the removal of all its headquarters within cities, Haidar al-Abadi rejected this measure. Instead, the Prime Minister issued directives instructing the PMF forces to remain in the liberated cities and regions.

During his visit to PMF headquarters in Baghdad, [al-Abadi](#)

<https://www.alsumaria.tv/mobile/news/245358/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AC-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%AC%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%84%D8%A7-%D9%8A%D8%AE%D8%B6%D8%B9-%D9%84%D8%B6%D8%BA%D8%B7-%D8%B3/ar> confirmed that

“removing the PMF from big cities should not be subject to political pressure. We have expelled and defeated IS gangs, but they have sleeper cells and an ideology that we must continue to fight. A sudden withdrawal of forces will give terrorist groups an opportunity to attack civilians. Moreover, the constitution and the law forbid mixing military, security, and intelligence business with politics.”

Those who welcomed the removal of the PMF from cities included members of the local government and councils in both Saladin and Nineveh Governorates; both had previously called to remove PMF forces. The head of the Saladin Governorate Council had presented a [list](#)

<http://almasalah.com/ar/news/51565/%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%B5%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%84-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AC-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%AF> of thirteen demands to the federal government. These included

“removing PMF brigades from the city, handing security matters over to the federal police, and returning displaced peoples, who,” according to the list, “are forced to stay in camps because armed factions insist on preventing them from returning home.” Perhaps one of the most prominent reasons underlying the Saladin and Nineveh provinces’ refusal to maintain PMF presence is that despite the latter’s contribution to the expulsion of the Islamic State in multiple areas of these regions, there is still underlying concern regarding the PMF’s sectarian affiliations in the minds of the people of those provinces.

Some voices have also called for dissolving the PMF entirely on the basis that they are no longer needed given the end of the war on IS. Indeed, these same voices have asked the Shia religious authority Ayatollah Al-Sistani, who had issued the fatwa calling for compulsory jihad against IS that helped form the PMF, to announce an end to the PMF’s mission. As a result, Al-Sistani responded to these calls, and stressed in one of the Friday sermons in mid-December 2017 the need to integrate the popular mobilization forces into the Iraqi military and security apparatuses. Moreover, head of the parliamentary Solution bloc (Al –Hal), hailed Sistani's call and called for the integration of the popular mobilization forces into the state security institutions. However, things have not changed since the war on ISIS has not yet reached an end; pockets of ISIS still exist in different areas in Iraq, and these require continuous military and security preparedness.

Of course, the pressure to dissolve the PMF, or even reconsider their assigned roles and tasks, is nothing new. One aspect of this has already been in the works for months. Some of these pressures are external, directed largely by Washington, some are regional, led by Riyadh, while others are internal. Though their means, methods, and sources may differ, these multi-level pressures converge on a single point: removing Iran from Iraqi politics as much as possible, if not completely. Moreover, there is a general perception and impression within the international community that the PMF in Iraq is linked to Iran. But here the crucial truth is different: the PMF are not one homogenous entity and thus cannot be categorized as such.

The regional and international actors interested in reducing Iranian influence in Iraq must realize that the PMF is not a homogenous Shia militia. In this way, any policy adopted regarding the PMF must deal with its constituent factions

on an individual basis, especially those groups loyal to Iran that have religious ties to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. These forces should be treated differently from groups founded by the Shia religious authority Ayatollah Al-Sistani and those under the command of the Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, which call for the merging of the PMF with the regime's forces.

Consequently, enhancing the capabilities of the Iraqi army and placing it under the Iraqi government's control is key to mitigating the PMF's increasing influence, especially of those forces loyal to Iran. Further, there is a need to reactivate the [PMF's law](#)

<http://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/events/2016/11/27/%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B1%D9%81-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%A6%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%8A>—which called for the institutionalization of the Iraqi army—originally enacted by the Iraqi parliament in November 2016.

Thus, merging these Shia forces with the regime's military institution is the first step to isolating them from Iran. Moreover, the process of merging these forces should be carried out on an individual rather than collective basis in order to confront the issue of these groups' multiple allegiances, as well as to prevent new members from dividing their loyalties between the government and their former military affiliations. ❖

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