

The al-Abbas Combat Division Model: Reducing Iranian Influence in Iraq's Security Forces

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Brief Analysis

One large faction of Shia volunteers demonstrates how the PMUs can function under Iraqi -- not Iranian -- control, offering a model that coalition forces should support.

On August 20, Iraq's security forces began the battle for Tal Afar, a satellite city of Mosul still under Islamic State control. One of the most controversial aspects of the battle will be the role played by the predominantly Shia Popular Mobilization Units. Indeed, the PMUs holding parts of the Tal Afar perimeter include Iran-backed militias such as Kataib Hezbollah, a U.S.-designated terrorist group that killed hundreds of Iraqis, Americans, and other coalition forces prior to 2011. But the Tal Afar battle will also be fought by predominantly Shia PMU forces that have only existed since June 2014, when they were raised by a religious fatwa from Iraq's senior Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Units loyal to Sistani offer a better model for Iraq's volunteer forces than do the Iran-backed PMUs, and the international community -- including the United States -- should support and promote this model.

The al-Abbas Combat Division

The main Sistani-loyalist PMU formation is the al-Abbas Combat Division (*Firqat al-Abbas al-Qitaliyah*), which has been formalizing its structure ever since it began fighting the Islamic State in June 2014. According to administrators in al-Abbas contacted by the authors, the division includes 7,310 active-duty members and a reserve contingent of between 35,000 and 40,000 members. The active-duty division is now organized into a somewhat typical Iraqi military structure, including:

- A divisional staff, with an intelligence section that operates drones and other specialized equipment (e.g., long-range electro-optical cameras)
- An artillery brigade, with one tube artillery battalion (equipped with 130-millimeter M-46 towed field guns and 122-millimeter D-30 towed howitzers) and one rocket artillery battalion (equipped with 107-millimeter BM-14 multiple rocket launchers [MRLs] and newly made 240-millimeter Raad-1 MRLs), as well as some 155-millimeter M-109 self-propelled howitzers
- A mechanized divisional commando battalion mounted in wheeled armored personnel carriers (APCs)
- A mechanized infantry brigade (called "Kafil"), with a variety of salvaged Saddam Hussein-era armored vehicles
- Two motorized infantry brigades (called al-Alqami and Umm al-Banin), with more salvaged Saddam-era transportation
- A reserve brigade consisting of 3,000 high-readiness reserve members (not included in the 7,310 active-duty members)

The al-Abbas Combat Division has proven one of Iraq's most effective volunteer forces. One reason is that the division has consistently taken orders from the Iraqi national command authorities -- Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and the Joint Operations Command -- whereas many PMU forces instead answer to Iran-backed militia commanders such as Badr Organization leader Hadi al-Ameri and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, tagged by the United States as a Special Globally Designated Terrorist. The al-Abbas Combat Division has likewise consistently stated that it works fully under Ministry of Defense authority; receives its heavy weapons from the government, to which it will return them upon request; will not seek arrest powers; and is committed to dissolving at the government's request.

By integrating with the national battle plan and with supporting coalition forces, the al-Abbas Combat Division has provided Iraq with military capability at moments when the Iran-backed PMU factions were absent or unusable because they could not work productively with the coalition or Kurdish forces. For instance:

- In Tikrit in March 2015, al-Abbas forces stayed in the urban fight when Iran-backed PMUs withdrew after the government requested coalition airstrikes.
- In Baiji in the last quarter of 2015 and early 2016, al-Abbas forces built strong relationships with area Sunni tribes, thereby suppressing the Islamic State's ability to operate.
- In Bashir in April 2016 and Tuz Khormatu in June 2016, al-Abbas forces were sufficiently trusted by Kurdish forces that they were effectively enlisted to calm ethnic tensions and operate against the Islamic State in partnership with coalition airpower.
- In early 2017, al-Abbas deployed to west Mosul city alongside the 35th Iraqi army armored brigade and coalition airpower, the only Shia PMU to openly fight in Mosul city.
- In the coming weeks or months, al-Abbas will fight in Tal Afar, boosted -- as noted -- by 3,000 additional troops mobilized from the division reserve.

Iranian Proxy Efforts to Defund al-Abbas

The al-Abbas Combat Division is resourced through a combination of funding from the Iraqi Defense Ministry, religious shrine foundations (*atabat* in Arabic), and the prime minister's PMU Commission, in operation since

June 2014. Of the 7,310 active-duty members, the largest portion (4,203, or 57%) are paid their monthly stipends from *atabat* financial reserves -- coming to a \$2.52 million monthly bill for the force, if all 4,203 volunteers received the typical \$600 for pay and life support.

A smaller tranche of al-Abbas active-duty members (2,107, or 28%) is paid by the PMU Commission, which received a \$1.63 billion slice of the 2017 national budget. Twice, Prime Minister Abadi tried and failed to get all 7,310 al-Abbas Combat Division members registered on the PMU payroll. To the contrary, Maytham al-Zaidi, who leads the al-Abbas division, claims that the PMU Commission instead plans to *unregister* 153 al-Abbas veterans of the Mosul battle from the PMU payroll. Of \$98.5 million in salaries and operating expenses covered by the PMU Commission each month, the al-Abbas Combat Division only receives \$1.37 million. This means that while the division provides 6 percent of the authorized PMU fighting strength (of 122,000 fighters in total), it receives just 1 percent of PMU Commission salaries.

The explanation for this inequity is that Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the earlier-mentioned U.S.-designated terrorist, serves as the PMU Commission's deputy commander and administers its allocation of paid billets. Muhandis sees the al-Abbas fighters as a threat and beyond his control. By comparison, he funds 100 percent of the 2,723 Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS) fighters registered with the PMU Commission. KSS is an Iran-backed movement led by Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani, one of Muhandis's old colleagues in Badr and another Special Globally Designated Terrorist, according to Washington. (On August 8, KSS falsely claimed that the United States had undertaken airstrikes against its troops in Syria the previous day). In June 2016, officials from another Sistani-loyalist volunteer unit -- the Imam Ali shrine brigade -- accused Muhandis and the PMU Commission of seizing control of its men and confiscating all its military equipment.

Coalition Support to the al-Abbas Model

Although the Iraqi government is slowly beginning to support the al-Abbas model, the division has historically received very little of the annual PMU procurement budget -- which reached \$441 million in 2017 -- and does not receive in-kind donations of equipment from Iran. Instead, al-Abbas has scavenged the tank graveyards of Taji and Basra to reactivate vehicles abandoned in the 1991 Gulf war. The division now operates a number of salvaged T-55 main battle tanks; tracked MT-LB and M113 APCs; and wheeled EE-9 Cascavel, Panhard VCR, and BDRM-2 APCs. New self-propelled support weapons have been made by grafting together tank hulls and 57-millimeter anti-aircraft guns. Al-Abbas has likewise recently produced new 240-millimeter MRLs in its workshops.

Now, the Iraqi Defense Ministry has begun transferring U.S.-built Hummers, M113 tracked APCs, and Badger MRAP vehicles to the division. To begin to offset this payroll inequity, the Defense Ministry has added an initial 1,000 al-Abbas division troops (13% of active-duty members) to its payroll, providing \$1 million of support each month. The Counter-Terrorism Service has also trained al-Abbas's commando battalion.

The U.S.-led coalition cannot interact directly with the al-Abbas Combat Division, which was instructed by Sistani to avoid all such contact with foreigners -- mostly to keep Iranian intelligence organizations at arm's length. Instead, U.S. and coalition assistance should be given indirectly, including through additional funding and provision of equipment to the Iraqi Defense Ministry, which can then transfer it to allied volunteer forces such as al-Abbas and other *atabat* units, plus Sunni, Christian, and Yazidi units that answer to the national command authorities rather than Muhandis or other Iran-backed leaders.

The demobilization of the PMUs is not the coalition's business, and there are many positive aspects of the popular mobilization initiative. The problem with the PMUs is the leading role played by Iran-backed terrorists within the PMU Commission. The more PMU-registered as well as non-PMU volunteer units that are detached from the PMU Commission, the easier it will be for the government to reduce the commission's scope in 2018, removing forces and

budget funding from Muhandis's aegis.

Michael Knights is a Lafer Fellow with The Washington Institute and author of its study [How to Secure Mosul](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-to-secure-mosul-lessons-from-2008-2014) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-to-secure-mosul-lessons-from-2008-2014>). He has worked in all of Iraq's provinces and spent time embedded with the country's security forces. Hamdi Malik is a contributor to Al-Monitor and BBC Persian whose doctoral thesis investigated the sociopolitical developments of post-Saddam Hussein Iraq. ❖

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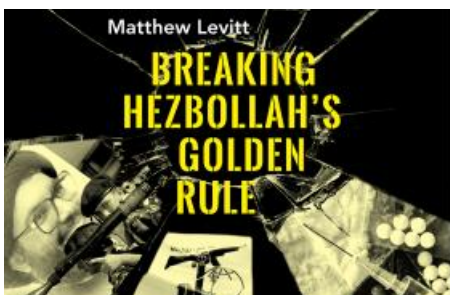
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