

## Contesting Facts on the Ground in Iraq

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



#### [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



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**Far away from the exaggerated debates of misguided pundits, Western officials have moved on from past mistakes and are making grownup policy choices on Iraq that are reasonably good under the circumstances.**

**T**wo recent articles on the conflicts of the Middle East by a pseudonymous author touched a nerve with their core message that "poor policy choices" on Syria and Iraq are flowing from exaggerated "Western" characterizations of Sunni persecution and Shia militia excesses. I'm not qualified to talk about Syria, but I found the author's portrayal of the conflict in Iraq to be deeply unconvincing, particularly its treatment of the Hashd al-Sha'abi (Popular Mobilization Forces or PMF). The author claims stewardship of "facts on the ground" but those "facts" did not line up with what I've seen in Iraq, especially on some important points of detail and emphasis.

That's not to say that I disagree with everything in the piece. For instance, I think the author is spot-on when they complain that "Western" characterizations of Iraq's PMF can be exaggerated and shrill. In particular the author makes a valid point that "many Western analysts seem to think that just because a security force is majority-Shia that it will somehow be unable to resist killing and persecuting Sunnis." What "Cyrus" fails to note is that the above truths are quite well appreciated by the U.S. officials actually making policy on Iraq. All the senior U.S. policy makers and soldiers I know understand the above complexities pretty well. Where U.S. policy has been lacking, it was not because of illusions on these points, but rather because of a mental block that saw the Obama administration under-resource Iraqi stability until mid-2015...

**[Read the full article on the publisher's website. \(http://warontherocks.com/2016/08/contesting-facts-on-the-ground-in-iraq/\)](http://warontherocks.com/2016/08/contesting-facts-on-the-ground-in-iraq/)**



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