



Dirasat

What future for Iraq's PMU?

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Abstract

The Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units has recently completed its transformation from a loose coalition of militant group groups to a semi state actor, entrenched in Iraqi state institutions thanks to the large victory of a number of its leaders in the recent Iraqi elections under the label of the Fateh Coalition. The PMU emerged in 2014, when it conglomerated a number of substate armed groups under the banner of the Hashd al-Shaabi at the behest of then prime minister, Nouri Malikial-Maliki and after a call by the country's highest Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Ali Sistani, to fight the escalating terror of the so-called caliphate. The emergence of this new non-state armed actor in a country where sectarian rivalries are historically high and where power centers are traditionally weak triggered a large debate within the think tank world, with many experts labeling the PMU as an Iranian proxy. However, this report will show that while a segment of the PMU falls within Iran's larger regional security program, a Hezbollahization as a whole of the PMU will represent a challenge for Iran due to local Iraqi dynamics, the financial and ideological independence and new found pragmatism shown by influential Iraqi figures and the competition within the pro-Iran militant groups. Based on series of interviews with PMU commanders in Iraq and local and international experts, this report will look at the evolution of the PMU and the impact of its integration within the state apparatus.

Introduction

Under the banner of the Fateh coalition, the Iraqi Hashd al-Shaabi, also known as the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) or Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), garnered 47 seats during the 2018 Iraqi parliamentary elections, in which several prominent PMU leaders participated, namely, Qais al-Khazali, leader of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH); Hussein al-Kaabi a leader from Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) who fought in Syria; Hadi al-Amiri, leader of the powerful Badr Organization; and Ahmad Assadi, the PMU official spokesperson.¹ With the entry of these leaders on the political arena, the PMU has not only succeeded in institutionalizing itself militarily but has also managed to secure a political bloc, with the group completing its transformation from a loose coalition of militant groups to a semistate actor entrenched in Iraqi state institutions.

The PMU emerged in 2014, when it conglomerated a number of substate armed groups under the banner of the Hashd al-Shaabi at the behest of then prime minister Nouri al-Maliki. At that time the Iraqi security forces (ISF) had been given a severe blow by the so-called Islamic Caliphate (ISIS), which had seized a large portion of Iraqi territory, including the northern governate capital of Mosul. The PMU was bestowed with religious legitimacy following the fatwa issued by the country's highest Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Sistani,² who called on Iraqi volunteers to fight against terrorism. The PMU has since played a pivotal role in rolling back the influence of ISIS in Iraq.

(1) Baraa Shamri, "A Large Coalition of the PMU in Preparation for Iraqi Elections," *Al-Araby Jadeed*, Jan. 12, 2018, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2018/1/11/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%AD-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B6%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B6%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9>.

(2) "Iraq Conflict: Shia Cleric Sistani Issues Call to Arms," BBC, June 13, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27834462>.

The rise of the PMU has been at the root of a regional and international controversy, with many experts labeling it an Iranian proxy that is allowing Tehran to consolidate its hold on Iraq. However, this narrative is grossly reductive, as it does not take into consideration the diversity of PMU forces, which embody various ethnic and sectarian agendas, and more importantly, the wide ideological divisions existing within the dominant Shiite force. Of course, one cannot discount the reality that PMU factions suffer from a systemic inequality when it comes to manpower, training, and access to weapons, and that some factions are more loyal to their parent organizations than to the state's institutions. Interviews conducted with PMU commanders and Iraqi experts also show that up until now, the new organization does not appear to have had a clear chain of command, which begs the question of whether internal PMU rivalry could arise and trigger a rift within the state institutions.

This report is based on on-the-record and anonymous interviews with commanders within the PMU and military and political experts in Baghdad, Iraq during the month of March. In the first part, it describes the organization's history and legal framework. In the second part, it analyzes the structure of the organization, its financing, and its relations with the Office of the Prime Minister (PMO) and the Iraqi forces. In the third part, it examines the multifaceted nature of the PMU, its main currents, and the ideological and political divisions within the organization, as well as the debate spurred by its institutionalization. In the fourth part, it traces the Hezbollah-ization of some of the pro-Iran "resistance" segments of the PMU segments, and in the fifth part, it speculates on the organization's future evolution.

At the crux of the matter is the following question: Will the PMU be further integrated into the state institutions and contribute to reinforcing them, or will the organization remain largely autonomous and thus pose a threat to the state? This issue hinges to a great extent on the ongoing power struggle between pro-Iran loyalists and the more independent Shiite factions that make up the largest

PMU fighting forces and on the integration of important militant to the State apparatus which could make them stakeholders in the integrative process.

I. The PMU: History and Formation

Since 2003 and the occupation of Iraq by the United States, leading to the toppling of the regime of Saddam Hussein and the destruction of the state institutions, Iraqi militias have extended their power, thus compensating for the deficiency in the central government's legitimacy and credibility. Following Hussein's downfall, the subsequent vacuum was quickly filled by Shiite militias, most notably the Mahdi Army (MA), which was also known as the Jaysh al-Mahdi and the Badr Corps. The Badr Organization, the military arm of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), broke away from its parent organization in 2012,³ while Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) splintered off from the MA,⁴ and the MA rebranded itself as Saraya al-Salam thereafter.

The role of the militias only increased in the post-2010 period, as Prime Minister al-Maliki increasingly relied on Iranian support to contain the influence of the powerful Sayed Muqtada al-Sadr. According to a paper by Iraq expert Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar and published by the Carnegie Middle East Center,⁵ Tehran worked on building up small splinter groups loyal to Tehran. In that context, al-Maliki began working with seven paramilitary groups, namely, the Badr Organization, AAH, KH, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Kata'ib al-Imam Ali, and Kata'ib Jund al-Imam.

According to Mansour and Jabar, al-Maliki relied on these paramilitary forces, believing they could be useful to advance his agenda as they ensured that

(3) "Badr Organization of Reconstruction and Development," Mapping Militant Organizations, Nov. 13, 2016, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/435>.

(4) "Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq," Mapping Militant Organizations, Mar. 24, 2017, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/143>.

(5) Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future," Carnegie Middle East Center, April 2017, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_63_Mansour_PMF_Final_Web.pdf.

the MA and Muqtada al-Sadr did not become overly strong. The paramilitary forces were also used in transnational operations, such as in Syria, where they were deployed under the aegis of Iran to protect the holy mosque of Sayyidah Zaynab in Damascus, an important pilgrimage site for Shiites. The Iraqi prime minister also used these groups to crack down on Sunni areas, which were witnessing large protests against Baghdad, according to an influential former Baathi known as Abu Abas who spoke with the author on condition of anonymity.⁶ “By 2013, these groups started to officially take the name of PMU and started fighting ISIS Sunni areas,” according to Mansour and Jabar.

The PMU was nonetheless only officially established by al-Maliki after the fall of Mosul, in the wake of the army collapse there in June 2014. Al-Maliki used an official decree to form the Commission for the Popular Mobilization Forces (Hayat al-Hashd al-Shaabi). Yet PMU factions prefer to base the foundation of the PMU on a religious edict, which was nearly concomitant. “The PMU was formed after a fatwa by Sayed Sistani who called to fight terror,” says a high official from the pro-Iranian faction Abu al-Fadhal al-Abbas. The Fatwa granted the PMU religious legitimacy, although Ayatollah Sistani had actually called on all Iraqi citizens, not just Shiites, to volunteer to join the security forces.

Al-Maliki was replaced in 2014 by prime minister Haider al-Abadi, who, in February 2016, issued Office Order 91,⁷ which ruled that the PMU was a permanent and a separate military formation that was a part of the Iraqi armed forces and under the control of the armed forces general commander. The order stated that the PMU was to act “in a manner comparable to the current [counterterrorism apparatus], in terms of organization and affiliation.”

(6) Interview with Abu Abas, Mar. 26, 2018, Erbil, by Mona Alami.

(7) Bill Roggio and Amir Toumaj, “Iraq’s Prime Minister Establishes Popular Mobilization Forces as a Permanent ‘Independent Military Formation,’” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, Jul. 28, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/07/iraqs-prime-minister-establishes-popular-mobilization-front-as-a-permanent-independent-military-formation.php>.

In March 2018, Prime Minister al-Abadi issued another decree⁸ formalizing the inclusion of the paramilitary groups into the country's security forces. According to that decree, members of the PMU would be granted many of the same rights as members of the military. Paramilitary members would be granted salaries equivalent to the military, under control of the Ministry of Defense. They would also be subject to the laws of military service and would gain access to military institutes and colleges. "The Prime Minister worked on professionalizing the PMU. He is making sure it is prepared for the next phase, and knows there is not enough manpower to secure borders or Baghdad, and engage in [a] counter-terrorism effort, [so] the PMU and its locally recruited forces [are] needed," says Sajad Jiyad,⁹ director of the Baghdad-based Al-Bayan Center. For a commander within the Badr Organization, constraints such as on the retirement age of officers and the need for obtaining certain diplomas were one step in institutionalizing the PMU. "However, the PMU has to take into account the experience gained by fighters in the war which is equivalent to having a diploma in military studies," argued the Badr commander.

The legal framework also ruled that PMU members could not engage in any political activities, which was an attempt by al-Abadi to sever the link between the PMU and their political parent organization as well as to block the participation of PMU leaders in the 2018 elections. Al-Abadi's attempt to abort the politicization of the PMU was nonetheless circumvented with the formation of the Fateh coalition, which included prominent members of the PMU who had resigned from the organization prior to the elections. For Nate Rabkin, managing editor of *Inside Iraqi Politics*,¹⁰ the current disconnect between PMU figures such as its commander, Hadi al-Amiri (who is running

(8) "Iraq's Shi'ite Militias Formally Inducted into Security Forces," Reuters, Mar. 9, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-militias/iraqs-shiite-militias-formally-inducted-into-security-forces-idUSKCN1GK354>.

(9) Interview with Sajad Jihad, Mar. 2018, Baghdad, by Mona Alami.

(10) Interview with Nate Rabkin, Apr. 2018, by Mona Alami.

in the 2018 elections) and the paramilitary umbrella is fictional. “Even if these commanders are not taking salaries from the PMU, they are still influential within the organization,” says Rabkin.

II. The PMU’s Structure, Financing, Military Power, and Institutional Relations

According to Iraqi expert Hisam Hashemi,¹¹ the PMU currently includes 120,000 troops, with a number of factions: 66 Shiite, 43 Sunni, 6 Christina, 4 Yazidi, 2 Turkmen, 2 Shabak, and 1 Kakai. “Within the Shiite PMU about 44 factions are pro-iranian or ‘walaii’ [allied to Wilayat Fakih, which translates in English as the guardianship of the jurist located in Iran], and 7 report to the Shitte Marjaiya [the highest level of Iraqi Shiites, as embodied by Ayatollah Sistani].” These factions have different degrees of importance in terms of manpower according to Hashemi, who underlines that, as an example, Badr boasts about 24,000 troops while Muqtada al-Sadr’s Saraya al-Salam is comprised of some 120,000, according to a commander within the organization who spoke on condition of anonymity.¹² “The Hashd following the Sistani Marjaiya is affiliated directly to the Ministry of Defense and has over 20,000 fighters,”¹³ says sheikh Mazen Tamimi,¹⁴ a member of the Marjiya PMU. Other factions from smaller religious constituencies were less well represented, with Mansour and Jabar estimating that Sunni fighters amounted to a maximum of 15,000 and Hashemi underscoring that each Sunni brigades generally tended to range between 300 and 1,000 fighters.

The paramilitary umbrella is overseen by the PMU Commission, which is under direct control of the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO), and thus reports to al-Abadi as commander-in-chief. “Its chairman is national security adviser

(11) Interview with Hisham Hashemi, Baghdad, Mar. 22, 2018, by Mona Alami.

(12) Interview with a commander of Saraya al-Salam, Mar. 2018, Baghdad, by Mona Alami.

(13) Interview with sheikh Mazen Tamimi, Mar. 23, 2018, Baghdad, by Mona Alami

(14) Ibid.

Falih Fayad,” explains Tamimi. The role of Fayad, who is a former Dawa Party member, appears to be administrative and does not provide him with much power within the military structure, which lies elsewhere, in the hands of the deputy commander, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (Jamal Jaafar Ali Ebrahimi), leader of Kata’ib Hezbollah (KH), a pro-Iranian militant group. The powerful Badr leader Hadi al-Amiri is assistant commander, although his official title is head of the Northern Sector, explains Rabkin¹⁵. “The Hashd has one senior Sunni figure, Thamir al-Tamimi, who is the Assistant Commander for Tribal Affairs,” as noted in an article published by *Inside Iraqi Politics*¹⁶s. The same article pointed out that other prominent PMU figures include Sadrist figures such as Kathim Abu Dua Isawi, who is al-Sadr’s commander in the shrine city of Samarra.

Generally, pro-Iranian factions, as well as the Sadrist Saraya al-Salam, operate large units with proper military designations within the PMU. According to the *Inside Iraqi Politics* article, “in addition, the al-Maliki Dawa Party has fighters called the First Martyr Forces, although the PMU has other Dawa-aligned factions, most of them loyal to the al-Maliki wing of the party; the group’s nominal commander is Karim Ghizzi.

The breakdown of forces among the various Hashd factions is very difficult to determine in the absence of PMU official statistics, and given the unreliable estimates by group leaders and people interviewed for this report. “Badr, AAH and the Peace Companies (Saraya Salam of Sadr) are definitely the three largest and most important groups with the widest reach within Iraq,” explains Rabkin¹⁷.

In addition, PMU divisions have unequal access to weapons, with Hashemi underlining that the pro-Iranian paramilitary are generally better equipped than other factions. According to Hashemi,

(15) Interview with Nate Rabkin, April 2018

(16) *Inside Iraqi Politics*, July 2015, <http://www.insideiraqipolitics.com/Files/Inside%20Iraq%20No111.pdf>

(17) Interview with Nate Rabkin, April 2018

There were 9 Abraham tanks in the hands of the Badr organization, [and] another one was with AAH, but these were given back because they caused a big problem with the Pentagon. Hezbollah is still holding another Abraham tank it has refused to surrender. Most of the weapons currently held by PMU were bought from Iran, with Iraqi government money. The PMU took over as well [an] ISIS arsenal amounting to over \$3 billion.

Sunni Marjaiya factions are believed to be less well equipped than pro-Iranian factions, which enjoy preferential treatment from the commission, according to a PMU source¹⁸.

For Rabkin, the PMU structure is unique in that it is constituted in political formations with a very loose command hierarchy and lacks properly established procedures. “Very often the formal title of people in power does not reflect the actual division of responsibility that is very fluid and which depends to a great extent on political and personal relations between the PMU commanders,” remarks this expert¹⁹.

The PMU also operates in parallel with other Iraqi military structures, with which it nonetheless collaborates during military operations. As an example, a high official within the AAH²⁰ told the author that the PMU fell directly under PMO supervision and that collaboration was generally during battles, with PMU and other military structures joined in one common operations room. The supervision of the PMU is nonetheless qualified, according to an Iraq-based journalist, who spoke on condition of anonymity, as nominal only, with relations with the PMO tainted by clashes or cases of direct insubordination. It is no secret that Iran’s Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), has supervised military

(18) Interview with a PMU source, March 2018, Baghdad.

(19) Interview with Nate Rabkin, April 2018.

(20) Interview with an official of AAH, Mar. 24, 2018, Baghdad, by Mona Alami.

operations led by pro-Iran factions in Iraq, which often prioritized Iranian interests over Iraq's national interests.

A case in point is the storming, in June 2016,²¹ by over 200 militants from pro-Iranian militias of the Balad base, by order of Iran, according to the Rawabet Center. According to the center, the incident was significant because of the presence of U.S. forces and U.S. companies that serviced F-16 aircraft located there. In December 2016,²² Reuters reported as well that in the early days of the assault on ISIS in Mosul, "Iran successfully pressed Iraq to change its battle plan and seal off the city." According to the newswire, the original campaign strategy called for Iraqi forces to close in around Mosul in a horseshoe formation, blocking three fronts but leaving open the fourth—to the west of the city, leading to ISIS territory in neighboring Syria—which would have made the Mosul battle shorter and simpler. Iran lobbied for Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization fighters to be sent to the western front to seal off the link between Mosul and Raqqa, the two main cities of the Islamic State's self-declared cross-border caliphate, noted the article.

"Other controversial issues are linked to the control of barracks, weapon reserves and prisons still falling under PMU factions supervision and outside that of Iraqi forces. These prisons are located in the areas of Razaza, Abu Gharaga, and Jerf Sakhar," explains Hashemi²³.

Finally, the Iraqi state and the PMO appear to have very little supervision over the PMU's financial resources. "The 2018 Iraqi budget allocated 1,682,989,544 thousand dinars, an equivalent of about [U.S.] \$1.42 billion, to the PMU," says Rakbin. The PMU allocation of funds is generally decided by

(21) "What Happened in the 'Balad Base,'" Rawabet Center for Research and Strategic Studies, June 8, 2016, <http://rawabetcenter.com/en/?p=794>.

(22) Dominic Evan, Maher Chmaytelli, and Patrick Markey, "How Iran Closed the Mosul 'Horseshoe' and Changed Iraq War," Reuters World News, Dec. 7, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-mosul/how-iran-closed-the-mosul-horseshoe-and-changed-iraq-war-idUSKBN13WIH1>.

(23) Interview Hisahm Hashemi, March 2018, Baghdad.

Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. According Mansour and Jabar, the PMO generally passes a lump sum to al-Muhandis, who decides how to allocate the money. Sources within the al-Sadr movement and the pro-Sistani movement remarked that often it was the pro-Iranian groups that received preferential treatment when it came to resource allocation, a statement that the author could not independently confirm. “In February 2016, Abadi attempted to retake some administrative control by replacing Muhandis with retired Iraqi general Muhsin al-Kaabi. However, although Muhandis lost his official PMF job title, he has remained a prominent figure and still has influence over resource allocation,” remark Mansour and Jabar.

III. A Multifaceted PMU

One mistake made by Iraq pundits has been to indiscriminately lump the PMU under one cohesive banner, which is far cry from reality. The paramilitary umbrella as a whole is divided along religious and ethnic lines, namely, Sunni, Shiites, Christians, and Yazidis, and between Arab, Yazidi, Turkmen, and Kakai factions, among others. The various identities of these groups translate into different ideological views and political affiliations. At the level of the Shiite group, another subdivision exists, with groups defining themselves as *walai*, meaning followers of the Iranian Wilayat Fakih, who are also known as *Muqawim* (resistant); *Marjaiya* PMU, assembling groups that are financially supported by the endowments of the Shia shrines and thus loyal to Ayatollah Sistani; and finally *Hezbi* (with an allegiance to parties), and including groups affiliated with Ammar al-Hakim’s Hakim National Wisdom Movement, which branched out in 2017 from ISCI,²⁴ and *Saraya al-Salam*. “The largest groups in terms of manpower are those affiliated to parties,” says a commander from *Saraya al-Salam*, who spoke on condition of

(24) AbbasKadhim, “A Major Crack in Iraqi Shia Politics,” *HuffingtonPost*, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/a-major-crack-in-iraqi-shia-politics_us_59766ab6e4b01cf1c4bb72bd.

anonymity. Yet those with access to better funding, training, and equipment are the pro-Iranian walai factions.

A. The Shiite PMU

According to Fanar Hadad,²⁵ a recent survey of Shiite pilgrims to the shrine city of Karbala showed that 96 percent of Iraqi respondents chose the PMU when asked to choose a cause to which to donate, and over 99 percent of Iraqi respondents saying they supported the PMU.

The walai PMU pledges spiritual allegiance to Wilyat al-Faqih and Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei and includes several organizations with historical links and close coordination in matters of foreign policy and security issues with Tehran. This pro-Iran group includes a number of paramilitaries, such as AAH, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Harakat Nujaba, Kata'ib Abu al-Fadhl al-Abbas, and Saraya al-Khorasani, among others. "They are known as the resistance," elaborates a commander in AAH. Many of these groups act as proxies for Tehran and are believed to cooperate closely with Iran's IRGC. Their military resources, including heavy armor, drones, and military advisers, were bought from Tehran and paid for by the Iraq government. A high commander in Abu al-Fadhal al-Abbas admits that the walaii faction has triggered a regional debate, underlining that "every freedom movement is initially considered as controversial."

The second Shiite PMU faction includes several paramilitary groups that swear allegiance to Ayatollah Sistani. They were formed in the wake of Sistani's fatwa to defend Shiite holy sites. They are known as Hashd al-Ataba and their names are those of Shiite shrines in Iraq namely Saraya al-Ataba al-Abbasiya, Saraya al-Ataba al-Alawiya, and Saraya al-Ataba al-Hussainiya. According to

(25) Fanar Hadad, "Understanding Iraq's Hashd al-Sha'bi: State and Power in post-2014 Iraq," Report: Arab Politics beyond the Uprisings, Century Foundation, Mar. 5, 2018, <https://tcf.org/content/report/understanding-iraqs-hashd-al-shabi/>.

sheikh Mazen Tamimi, who is a member of the Hashd al-Ataba, the majority of these formations fall under the control of the Ministry of Defense.

The third PMU is known as Hashd Hezbi and includes factions falling under Ammar al-Hakim, a former member of ISCI, or under al-Sadr's Saraya al-Salam. According to Mansour and Jabar, in 2007 Hakim made "a tactical shift away from Iran, in an effort to revive its waning popular support." After the Badr Organization left the ISCI as a result, Hakim formed new paramilitary units, including Saraya el-Jihad, Saraya el-'Aqida, and Saraya 'Ashura, which are included in the PMU, according to the Mansour and Jabar. al-Sadr's Saraya al-Salam was the result of a rebranding of the MA that was undergone in 2008. Saraya al-Salam was able to strengthen the MA with wide insurgent expertise, as the group had fought against the U.S. occupation as well as engaging in sectarian war with al-Qaeda and Sunni groups in the period up to 2008 and being involved in many cross-sectarian killings. Yet al-Sadr has been known for adopting more pragmatic positions in recent years, leading massive demonstrations against the Iraqi political elite for corruption and taking a strong anti-Iran stance.

These three groups are divided by diverging and often opposing views on various topics, such as the integrations of the PMU into the security apparatus, the participation of PMU leaders in the electoral process, and the transnational and ideological role of the PMU, which is addressed in the next section.

According to Hashemi, one of the main problems within the PMU is the autonomy of fighters in regard to the decision-making and integration processes within the PMU. "Fighters will generally go back to their parties leaders before implementing a decision taken by the PMU official leadership. Even if the fighters end up disregarding a decision by Ameri or Muhandis, they can't really fire them," agrees Rubkin. This problem expands to the actual merger of the various militant groups within the PMU. "All factions within the PMU should be merged with one another at the level of the brigades," advises sheikh

Mazen Tamimi. This would allow the PMU ideology and identity to dilute while producing a more harmonious and cohesive formation, a development generally opposed by pro-Iranian militant groups. It is interesting that a high official within AAH has said the organization would not fight such a plan as long as the PMU remains an independent structure from other Iraqi forces. This constitutes the other point of contention with the Hashd al-Walii and the al-Ataba Hashd, which believe that the PMU should not be a parallel structure within security forces but rather should be integrated into both the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior. “That is our preferred course of action,” says a high commander within Saraya al-Salam. In the opinion of another source within the PMU, an autonomous PMU would become too powerful on its own and could hijack state institution if it disagrees with the government decisions.

Another point of contention lies in the March PMU law ruling that fighters should obtain diplomas from recognized military academies, something most fighters disagree with. A commander from Saraya al-Salam explains that the field experience of its fighters is much greater than that of most fighters in military institutions. For Dr. Naim, who spoke with the author in a previous interview for *Al-Monitor*, the duty of the next prime minister should not only be to enlist all of the paramilitary forces in the official PMU organization, but also he “should keep their military ranks and titles and no new officers should be brought in from outside the PMU.”

Another point of contention lies in the participation of PMU leaders in the 2018 parliamentary elections. For the Saraya al-Salam commander, politics and the duty of defending Iraq do not mix well together, an opinion strongly opposed by the Walii PMU, which has many contenders in the race, namely Sayed Hadi Al-Amiri among many others. “It is our opinion the PMU commanders should be thanked for their sacrifices in the war on ISIS,” explains a Badr member who spoke to the author on condition of anonymity.

B. Sunnis and Minorities in the PMU

Prime Minister (PM) al-Abadi has attempted to integrate Sunni volunteers into the Hashd. According to *Inside Iraqi Politics*, the Sunni integration effort was initially overseen by Thamiir al-Tamimi (“Abu Azzam”), a former Sahwa leader from Abu Ghayb who was appointed by PM al-Abadi as the assistant chairman of the Hashd. The Sunni Hashd cannot serve to balance the political influence the Shiite parties have gained. According to Rabkin, the only serious attempt has been that by the Nujayfis and their camps in Ninawa, which have Turkish trainers. Some Christians groups, such as the Bailyoun, have also joined the PMU. Rayan Kildani²⁶ told the author that his formation had joined the sacred PMU because the battle against ISIS was one of existence. The [Babiliyoun] faction²⁷ is generally believed to be linked to the Imam Ali Brigades and has been engaged in fighting IS as well as ensuring the protection Christians in Baghdad. “However these PMU, whether Christians or Sunnis do not have a large margin of maneuver and are highly dependent when it comes to financing or training on more powerful Shiite militias,” explains Rabkin.

IV. A Hezbollahization of the PMU?

The anti-ISIS campaign highlighted the strong influence and cooperation between the IRGC and pro-walail paramilitary within the PMU. Relations between the two factions date back to the early 1980s and 1990s, when Iran played a primary role in shaping Iraqi armed internal resistance to Saddam Hussein’s regime. Today the IRGC expeditionary wing, the Quds Force, is using these historical links to influence the future PMU.

This has translated into an attempt at the Hezbollah-ization of specific—and not all—factions within the PMU and the rise of an Iraqi “Muqawama”

(26) Interview Rayan Kildani by Mona Alami, March 2018.

(27) Statement by Babiliyoun, linked to the Imam Ali Brigades, You Tube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pp2RsY1uGRY>

akin to the Lebanese Hezbollah version. This effort, which was inspired by Iran's playbook, has taken several forms, namely, in the emergence of a resistance ideology based on Islam, the reliance on jihad, and the belief in Wilayat al-Faqih, an expansion of outreach programs within these factions, the creation of a martyrdom society, and close collaboration with the Iranian proxy, Hezbollah, as well as transnational interventions at the behest of Iran, such as into Syria.

"The PMU is ideological; it is rooted in the Islamic idea of struggle and in the defense of one's country and pride. Islamic ideology is what makes it so effective," remarks a commander in the Badr Organization, who spoke to the author on condition of anonymity. The PMU pro-walaih factions believe that a core tenet of their beliefs is the Islamic belief of jihad and the principle of Wilayat al-Faqih, which are uncannily similar to Hezbollah's main doctrine, as argued in the book by sheikh Naim Qassem, *Hezbollah: A Story from Within*. The jihad and Wilayat al-Faqih forms are at the crux of contemporary Shiite political thought in factions aligned with Tehran. Jihad is the sacred duty to wage war on the enemies of Islam while Wilayat al-Faqih is a guardianship-based political system, which relies upon a just and capable jurist to assume the leadership of the government in the absence of an infallible imam, as epitomized by the leadership of Iranian faqihs in Tehran.

Like Hezbollah in Lebanon, pro-Walaih factions have related the importance of winning the hearts and mind of their constituents. A case in point is AAH. The political organization, which started as a militant group fighting the U.S. occupation of Iraq has morphed into a large network including a social outreach program. "We are building schools and universities as we see the importance of creating a religious culture and more awareness among people," according to Dr. Naim al-Aboudi in a previous interview with the author for *Al-Monitor*.

The war on ISIS with its heavy death toll has also pushed the militant group to bolster its martyrs' program. "AAH leaders decided that every martyr

family should have a house, or a piece of land to build a home. We have succeeded [in this endeavor] and we will be reaching this goal by the end of the year,” Dr. al-Aboudi explains.

Similarly to Hezbollah, AAH came to realize the importance of promoting the culture of martyrdom in Iraqi society and the vital role women play within this framework. “We are currently developing a social and political program and major projects targeting women. Unlike Lebanon, we did not have the culture of martyrdom, given wars launched by [ousted president] Saddam Hussein were very unpopular and were deemed futile because of his destructive policies,” says Dr. al-Aboudi. The AAH spokesperson underlines the prominent role played by women in the war on ISIS. “Men who fought against ISIS were driven by religious belief and a feeling of nationalism, and the role of mothers in that regard was very instrumental,” explains Dr. al-Aboudi, who cites a visit conducted by the organization’s leader, sheikh Qais al-Khazali, to a martyr’s family in the city of Basra. “At the end of the visit, the martyr’s mother said she wanted to greet sheikh Khazaali and we expected her to ask him for help. She told him instead that she had another son she wished to send to fight ISIS, to replace her martyred son,” explains Dr. Aboudi.

The emergence of the culture of martyrdom is not the only common point pro-Walii PMU shared with Lebanese Hezbollah, an organization that has helped train and advise these groups since 2003. According to Hezbollah expert Nicolas Blandford, Hezbollah has a past history of clandestine involvement in Iraq. During the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Hezbollah sent teams to Iraq and Iran to help the Revolutionary Guard form Shiite paramilitary cells that staged numerous attacks on coalition troops. In his article, Blandford explained that

Ali Musa Daqdouq, a veteran Hezbollah commander, was the party’s senior representative in Iraq and worked closely with Asaib Ahl al-Haq. He was accused of involvement in an attack on a US base in 2007 in which five American soldiers were abducted and subsequently

executed. Mr. Daqdouq was arrested by British forces in Basra in March 2007, but an Iraqi court released him in 2012, to the dismay of the Obama administration. He has since returned to Beirut.

In 2014, Hezbollah dispatched around 250 fighters to assist the PMU in its fight against ISIS. The Hezbollah's Iraqi unit advised and trained Iraqi Shiite militias and was engaged in reconnaissance work, according to previous interviews with Hezbollah fighters by the author.

Hezbollah appear to maintain strong relations with "resistance" factions in the PMU. "Martyr commander Imad Moughnieh played an active role in promoting and developing resistances forces engaged in fighting the U.S. occupation in the post-2003 phase and we have special relations with Hezbollah; they influence us as we influence them," says the AAH official.

Pro-Iranian PMU factions have also defended Tehran's interest elsewhere in the region. According to Hashemi, there are about 8,000 Iraqi Shiite fighters belonging to current PMU deployed in Syria. For the AAH official, fighting in Syria was part of a larger security war on ISIS. "ISIS used Syria and Iraq as Ard Tamkeen [land of consolidation]; the fight could only take us there, it was our strategic interest," says the commander. This opinion was also shared by a high-ranking member of the Abu al-Fadhal al-Abbas, who explains that his group's origin is rooted in Syria, from the time when Iraqi fighters were deployed in Damascus to protect the pilgrimage site of Sayeda Zeinab, and took the name of Abu al-Fadhal al-Abbas.

The fight on Syria is not the only Iranian interest defended by pro-Walaili PMU factions, as illustrated by several statements made by prominent figures in the PMU. The first was made on December 8, 2017, by the leader of Iraq's Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Qais al-Khazali,²⁸ who highlighted from Lebanon the organization's readiness to stand side by side with the Lebanese people and

(28) Mona Alami, "Hizballah's New Alliances on Show in Calculated Media Stunt," Al-Araby Jadeed, Dec. 15, 2017, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2017/12/15/hizballahs-new-alliances-on-show-in-calculated-media-stunt>.

the Palestinian cause against the Israeli occupation. Another was made by sheikh Akram Kaabi, head of the powerful Iraqi militia Harakat al-Nujaba, who pledged to stand alongside its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah, in the event of a new war with Israel. “These are internal and external messages that the Iraqi Muqawama is sending, showing its readiness to fight against the zionnist entity,” the AAH official told the author.

Yet the fight against Israel is not the only conflict Iraqi groups are willing to engage in alongside Iran and Syria. Last April, Aws al-Khafaji, secretary-general of the Abu al-Fadhl al-Abbas Brigades, stated, following the U.S.-led missile strike on Syria, that the United States and Israel were “the cause of all the problems of the region,” and added that “if they attack Syria, I have a religious and national duty not to just stand idly by.”

Iran’s Iraqi allies have also threatened Saudi Arabia for its role in the Yemeni conflict. In a recent issue of *Iran Observed*,²⁹ its director, Ahmad Majidiyar, noted the Iraqi groups’ vows of retaliation for the death of Houthi leader Saleh al-Sammad in Yemen. Iraqi Hezbollah said the Houthi leader’s assassination would open a new chapter in the fight against Saudi Arabia, while Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis emphasized, in a letter of condolence to the Houthi leadership, that al-Sammad’s killing “will fuel the flames of Yemen’s national resistance” against Saudi Arabia, according to Majidiyar.

With the support of so-called resistance factions in Iraq, Iran is working on completing a security arc stretching continuously from Iran to Lebanon, and passing through Iraq and Syria. In the last few years, Iran has successfully built a cross-border semi-military and ideologically cohesive belt that extends from Iraq to Lebanon. With the buildup of ideologically like-minded and highly trained proxies, Iran is strengthening the network of foreign factions that is

(29) Ahmad Majidiyar, “Iran’s Regional Allies Threaten Saudi Arabia and US after Houthi Leader’s Death,” *Iran Observed*, Middle East Institute, Apr. 27, 2018, <http://www.mei.edu/content/io/iran-s-regional-allies-threaten-saudi-arabia-and-us-after-houthi-leader-s-death>.

essential to the indirect subversive warfare that has been favored by Tehran in the past two decades, allowing it to project influence across the region while limiting the economic and political downfall at home.

V. What Future for the PMU?

The evolution of the PMU will greatly depend on the dynamics that shape the postelectoral 2018 phase and on who wins the ideological debate within the organization. To this date, members of the PMU's diverse factions appear to be divided on the role and place of the paramilitary within the state.

For the Saraya al-Salam commander, two visions are currently in competition in Iraq: whether the PMU should remain an independent structure under PMO supervision or whether it should merge with the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior, which is the preferred course of action for both the al-Sadr and the Sistani camp.

AAH appears to favor the institutionalization of the PMU as an autonomous body. According to one of its official's, who spoke on condition of anonymity, unlike in Lebanon, Shiites in Iraq are the majority, which allows them to place their weapons in the hands of the state, under an autonomous body under the PM office. "The Walaiin within the PMU believe the organization should become the equivalent of the IRCG in Iraq, a sort of deep state," says Hashemi. On the other hand, "Iran's attempt to extend its security arc in Iraq is real, but in my opinion, it will be difficult for Tehran to achieve it as there too many players involved in the process," argues the Saraya al-Salam commander.

These statements underline the larger rift within the PMU that lies between the Walaii PMU and that of parties such as Sadr's Saraya al-Salam and the Ataba factions within the PMU. The Walaii faction remains close to Iran and appears to share Tehran's vision of a strong paramilitary structure that would have a strong say over the state institution's while protecting Iranian interests in Iraq and in the region. Conversely, both Ayatollah Sistani and Muqtada al-

Sadr endorse a more autonomous narrative than the Walaii factions, which puts them at odds on several issues, such as the transitional expansion of PMU factions and, as previously stated, participation in the 2018 elections. While Sistani has maintained an ambiguous position as to the politicization of the PMU, al-Sadr has openly criticized the Fateh coalition for exploiting the PMU victories and warning electors not to vote a second time for members of parliament whose factions have been involved in corruption of the state. Sistani factions are also wary of the transnationalization of the involvement of PMU fighters in the fight on Israel, as has been argued for by the so-called resistance PMU factions.

This debate aside, Rabkin argues that “the PMU will have to decide whether it wants to be an institutional movement or a popular movement, as it cannot be both.” The expert adds that “Pro-Iranian factions are also naïve to believe they can follow the footsteps of Lebanese Hezbollah, as the PMU is divided, with rivalries trickling down to pro-Iran factions.”

The shape of the future PU will largely be determined by the willingness and capability of the next prime minister and government to impose and enforce further legal constraints on the PMU and equally by the decision of Najaf Marjaiya to continue supporting the organization. Currently, the vision of the pro-Iranian factions, of a PMU comparable to the IRCG, is incompatible with the secular schism defended by Sadrists and Sistanis, and it complicates the transformation of the PMU into one cohesive body sharing a nationalistic Iraqi agenda. “An autonomous PMU with a large parallel military power means that independent loyalties within the organization can end up posing a threat to the state,” says a PMU commander.

Yet as Iraqi expert Fanar Haddad remarked in a paper for the Century Foundation,³⁰ it remains “possible that the PMF’s fractious makeup—its

(30) Fanar Haddad, “Understanding Iraq’s Hashd al-Sha’bi,” Century Foundation, Mar. 5, 2018, <https://tcf.org/content/report/understanding-iraqs-hashd-al-shabi/>.

sundry groups with sundry objectives—may serve as a safety valve to ensure that the organization is not used to take over the state.”

The 2018 electoral results, which were marked by the victory of Moqtada al-Sadr’s Sairoun bloc, with 54 seats,³¹, followed by the PMU Fateh list, with 47 seats, confirm Sadr’s weight, not just on the next PM and government, but on the future evolution of the Iraqi PMU. The groups under Sistani and al-Sadr will work to make sure that the PMF’s al-Maliki-allied leadership does not use the sacredness of the PMF brand to retake the state.” After all, the PMU’s legitimacy is largely derived by the tacit approval of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. If Sistani should condemn the PMU’s actions at any time, this would strip them of their popular constituency. Other considerations may impact the evolution the PMU, the pragmatism of newly minted pro-Iranian leaders into Iraqi politics, internal rivalries within that particular branch as well as with Sadr. These factors will all come to shape the future of the PMU.

(31) Raya Jalabi and Michael Georgy, “Cleric Moqtada al-Sadr’s Bloc Wins Iraqi Election,” Reuters, May 19, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-election-results/cleric-moqtada-al-sadrs-bloc-wins-iraq-election-idUSKCN1IJ2X0>.

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