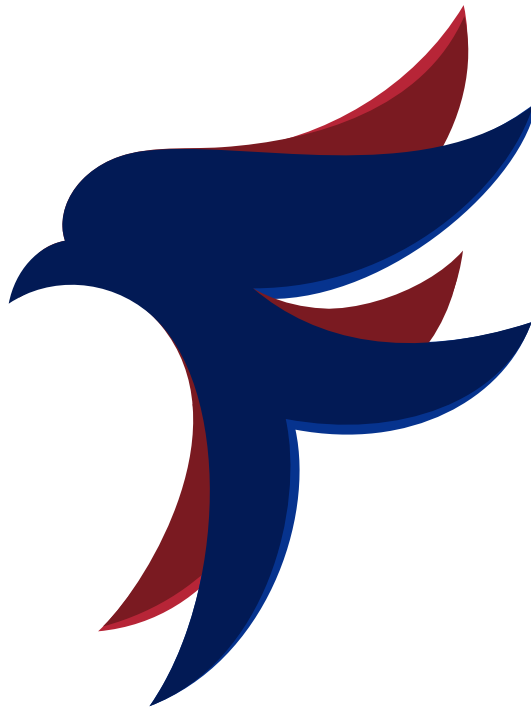


THE FUTURE OF THE POPULAR MOBILIZATION FORCES AFTER THE ASSASSINATION OF ABU MAHDI AL-MUHANDIS

Inna Rudolf





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THE FUTURE OF THE POPULAR MOBILIZATION FORCES AFTER THE ASSASSINATION OF ABU MAHDI AL-MUHANDIS

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Inna Rudolf is a Research Fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), pursuing her PhD at the War Studies Department of King's College London. Her research analyzes the hybridization of security sector governance, focusing on Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces and their relationship with the state. She is also a partner at the Candid Foundation in Berlin.

ABSTRACT

By depriving the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) of its leading strategist, the assassination of Abu Mahdi Muhandis, the chief of staff of the PMF, delivered a significant blow to what U.S. officials regard en masse as Iran's Trojan Horse in Iraq. Building on interviews with PMF commanders and Iraqi officials, this chapter seeks to identify the imminent organizational hazards that arise for the still-amorphous paramilitary structure. Furthermore, the author explores the long-term opportunities for an incremental security sector reform tailored to the specificities of the Iraqi context. For that purpose, the author illustrates the instrumental role of the so-called resistance factions in the formative stages of the PMF, elaborating on the vision of Muhandis for institutional consolidation and concentration of systemic capabilities. In the aftermath of the assassination and subsequent leadership vacuum, the PMF's main shareholders must act in concert to safeguard the group's systemic gains. The different centers of gravity had to identify—and most importantly impose—a unifying figure with the authority and credibility to manage the inherited patronage networks. The intra-organizational diversity of opinions along with the factions' often contradictory agendas would require the newly appointed successor to appease those that are less well-connected and eager to renegotiate their hand within the contested PMF Commission.

UNKNOWN CONSEQUENCES

Never one to shy away from a bold and aggressive move, on the night of January 2, 2020, U.S. President Donald Trump authorized the assassination of Iranian Quds Force Major General Qasem Soleimani. The missile that hit Soleimani's convoy near the Baghdad airport also killed Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the chief of staff of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), known in Arabic as *al-hashd al-sha'abi* (*hashd* for short). Whether the American leadership considered eliminating Muhandis, one of the highest-ranking security officials of Iraq, beneficial or collateral damage remains unknown. Nevertheless, his legacy as an icon of the resistance, especially one designated as a terrorist by the United States, is likely to shape the institutional future of the PMF project.

What is clear is that, at least initially, the killings appeared to work against American interests in Iraq because they temporarily united a broad array of pro-Iranian factions, who are often in fierce competition for turfs and spoils, under the banner of anti-Americanism. Seizing the momentum of an immense wave of outrage over the U.S. violation of Iraqi sovereignty, these *muqawamist*¹ ("pro-resistance") factions then united nearly all political forces that represent Iraq's Shiite population into supporting, however reluctantly, their agenda of ending the American military presence in Iraq. On January 5, the Iraqi parliament passed a non-binding resolution calling on the government to cancel

the agreement to host U.S. troops in Iraq, and caretaker Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi has since repeatedly vowed to implement this decision.

As illustrated, the killings seemingly ushered in a (potentially short-lived) honeymoon period within the habitually fractious section of Iraq's "axis of resistance."² Nevertheless, the cost of bringing closer the resistance-themed factions has not outweighed the serendipitous benefit to the United States.³ By depriving the PMF of its leading strategist, the strike delivered a significant blow to what U.S. officials regard en masse as Iran's Trojan Horse in Iraq.⁴ Building on interviews with PMF commanders and Iraqi officials, this chapter seeks to identify the imminent organizational hazards that arise for the still-amorphous paramilitary structure. Furthermore, the author will explore the long-term opportunities for an incremental security sector reform tailored to the specificities of the Iraqi context.⁵ Moving beyond the Westphalian state-centric conceptualization of security will allow for reducing the tension between the ideal type of a state monopoly on the use of force and its flawed application on the ground.⁶ For that purpose, the author will focus on the instrumental role of the so-called resistance factions in the formative stages of the PMF, elaborating on the vision of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis for institutional consolidation and concentration of systemic capabilities.

1 Daniel Gerlach, "Are Shia Militias Jihadist?," Zenith, December 20, 2017, <https://magazine.zenith.me/en/politics/jihadism-vs-muqawamism>.

2 Elijah J. Magnier, "Fragmentation in the 'Axis of Resistance' Led to Soleimani's Death," Centre for Research on Globalization, January 5, 2020, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/fragmentation-in-the-axis-of-resistance-led-to-soleimanis-death/5699939>.

3 Rufat Ahmedzade, "With Soleimani Gone, Iran's Regional Hegemony Faces Setbacks," LSE Middle East Centre Blog, February 12, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/02/12/with-soleimani-gone-irans-regional-hegemony-faces-setbacks/?fbclid=IwAR2hZ1yF4mPVsSRRiD0OeCnvYyBlrd5JVn6mDCqbOIqa--fxKPf170V8Hzs>.

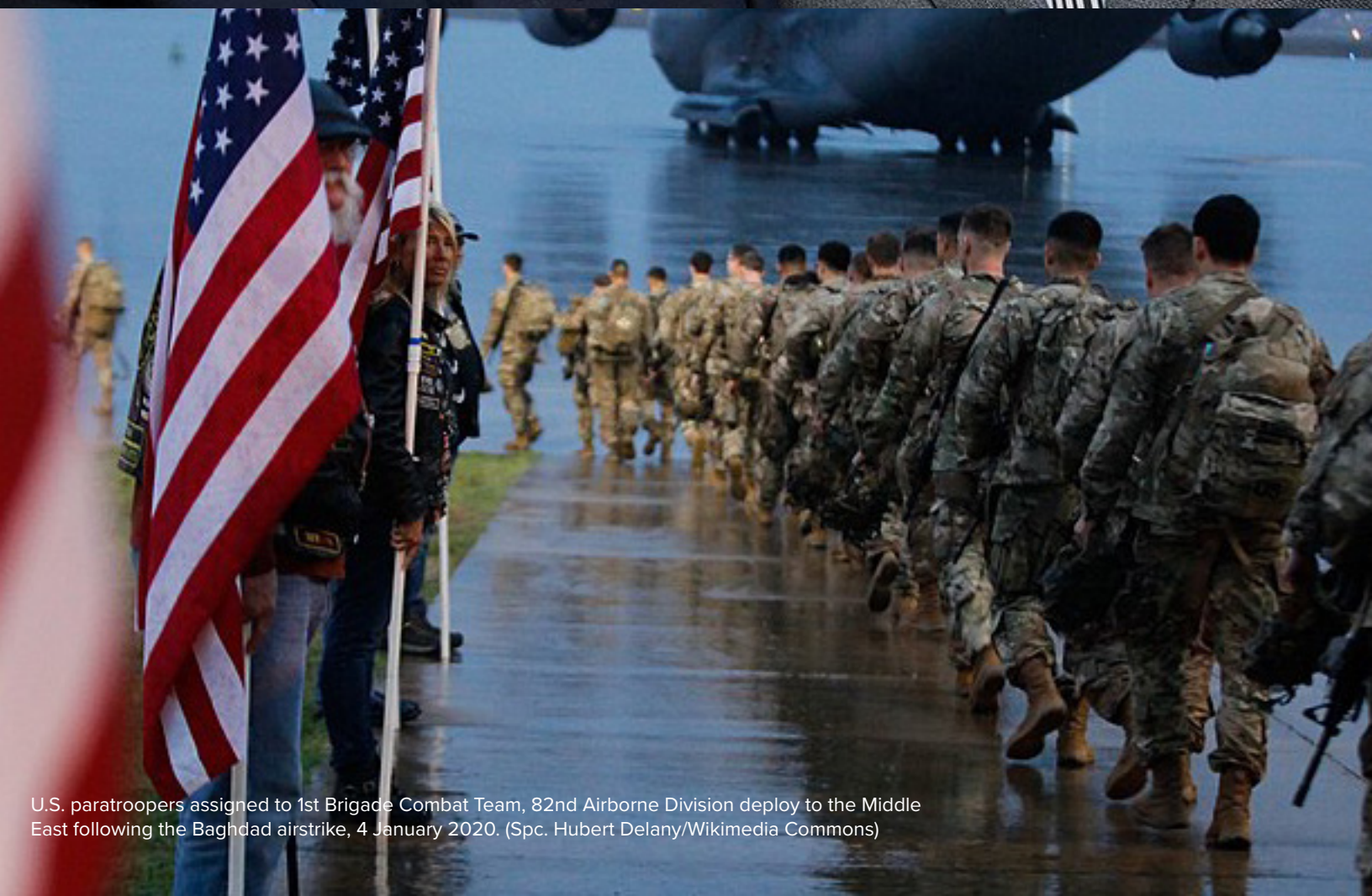
4 Ranj Alaaldin, "What will happen to Iraqi Shiite militias after one key leader's death?" Monkey Cage Blog *Washington Post*, February 29, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/02/29/what-will-happen-iraqi-shiite-militias-after-one-key-leaders-death/>.

5 Inna Rudolf, "The Hashd's Popular Gambit: Demystifying PMU Integration in Post-IS Iraq," ICSR Report, November 12, 2019, <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/ICSR-Report-The-Hashd's-Popular-Gambit-Demystifying-PMU-Integration-in-Post%E2%80%99IS-Iraq.pdf>.

6 Ursula Schroeder & Fairlie Chappuis, "New Perspectives on Security Sector Reform: The Role of Local Agency and Domestic Politics," *International Peacekeeping* vol. 21 (June 2014); and Nadine Ansorg and Eleanor Gordon, "Co-Operation, Contestation and Complexity in Post-Conflict Security Sector Reform," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* vol. 13, no. 1 (January 2019): pp. 2–24.



Qasem Soleimani (left) with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (right) at a 2017 ceremony commemorating the father of Soleimani, in Musalla, Tehran. (Fars News Agency/Wikimedia Commons)



U.S. paratroopers assigned to 1st Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division deploy to the Middle East following the Baghdad airstrike, 4 January 2020. (Sp. Hubert Delany/Wikimedia Commons)

RIISING FROM THE SHADOWS

While the creation of the PMF is primarily associated with the collapse of the Iraqi army in the face of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS) and its ragtag militias in summer 2014, the original plans for setting up structures for popular mobilization predated the fall of Mosul to Islamic State fighters in early June of that year. According to discussions held during a strategic meeting of the Shia-led National Alliance in April 2014, a blueprint for creating so-called popular defense units had long been in the making.⁷ Aware of the alarming state of Iraq's internally polarized security forces, then-Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki had given the green light for the creation of so-called *mujahideen* wings. This breed of militants was to be grounded in the spirit of the transnational Islamic Resistance movement and to act as an insurance policy for the survival-driven Shia-led state project.

As Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis indicated in an interview with the author, the raw material for this experiment was to be provided by the abundant cadres of Shia resistance veterans who had been formally, though never effectively, demobilized.⁸ While the majority of the units reactivated in 2014 had accumulated insurgent know-how while fighting American forces during the post-2003 invasion period, others such as the Badr brigades, could look back on decades of guerrilla experience resisting Saddam Hussein's Ba'th Party regime with Iranian support.

Therefore, despite omitting Shia-specific references and calling upon the entire able-

bodied population to enlist in the ranks of Iraqi security forces, the historic fatwa by the supreme Shiite religious authority, Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, bestowed moral legitimacy upon a scheme for security sector hybridization already in motion. The debilitating vacuum following the disintegration of the Iraqi army justified the envisioned popular mobilization, whose advocates were keen on resorting to those pre-existing factions. Due to the groups' experience with logistics, procurement, and administration, their reactivated units were tasked with managing the overflow of volunteers, eager to respond to Al-Sistani's call to arms.

Moreover, the intended ambiguity of the catchphrase '*fasa'il*' (factions)—used widely within the Iraqi public discourse—allowed PMF-affiliated figures and *hashd* proponents to shrug off responsibility by implicating a semi-anonymized collective of autonomously operating warlords. The latter were then held accountable for the PMF's track record of sect-coded human rights violations.⁹ Claiming on numerous occasions that these factions' leadership did not exceed 10% of the overall PMF membership, representatives of the now state-sanctioned agency argued that the externally driven preoccupation with the veteran militia elements should, by no means, eclipse the sacrifices of the thousands of young volunteers who had given their lives to defend Iraq.¹⁰

Despite the patriotic touch, such whitewashing attempts fail to conceal that despite their perhaps limited quantitative representation,

7 Nibras Kazimi, "The Origins of the PMUs," *Talisman Gate*, July 1, 2016, <https://talisman-gate.com/2016/07/01/the-origins-of-the-pmus/>.

8 Author interview with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Baghdad, April 22, 2018.

9 "Iraq: Possible War Crimes by Shia Militia," Human Rights Watch, January 31, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/31/iraq-possible-war-crimes-shia-militia>; "Iraq: Turning a Blind Eye: The Arming of the PMU," Amnesty International, March 1, 2017, <https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/iraq-turning-a-blind-eye-the-arming-of-the-pmu/>; and "Iraq: Fleeing Civilians Being Punished for Daesh's Crimes," Amnesty International, February 16, 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/iraq-isis-is-daesh-crimes-revenge-attacks-fleeing-civilians>.

10 Inna Rudolf, "From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualising the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Units," ICSR Report, May 30, 2018, <https://icsr.info/2018/05/30/battlefield-ballot-box-contextualising-rise-evolution-iraqs-popular-mobilisation-units/>.



Mourners in Azadi Square, Tehran. (Maryam Kamyab, Mohammad Mohsenifar/Wikimedia Commons)

battle-hardened resistance factions, such as Kata'ib Hezbollah (Hezbollah Brigades), Badr, and their various outgrowths, still dominate key directorates under the cosmetically reformed command and control structure of the PMF.¹¹ Pursuing his reading of a Nash equilibrium (a competition wherein which no participant can gain by a unilateral change of strategy if the strategies of the others remain unchanged), Muhandis established a complex system of selective power redistribution.¹² Access to state funding and the veneer of legality that came with the institutionalization of the PMF incentivized these factions' commanders to

keep one foot in the newly created Popular Mobilization Commission (PMC) under the token leadership of Chairman Faliḥ Al-Fayyadh. The informal arrangement allowed the groups to preserve underground facilities, scaling up their clandestine military operations unimpeded, and enhancing extralegal economic activities.¹³

11 Michael Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups," *CTS Sentinel*, vol. 12, no. 7, August 2019, <https://etc.usma.edu/irans-expanding-militia-army-iraq-new-special-groups/>.

12 Mustafa Hasan, "Abu Mahdi's Legacy and the Future of Sunni-Shi'a Relations in Iraq," LSE Middle East Centre Blog, March 4, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/03/04/abu-mahdis-legacy-and-the-future-of-sunni-shia-relations-in-iraq/>.

13 Tim Eaton, Christine Cheng, Renad Mansour, Peter Salisbury, Jihad Yazigi, and Lina Khatib, "Conflict Economies in the Middle East and North Africa," Chatham House Report, June 2019, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2019-06-21-Conflict-Economies-MENA_0.pdf; and Mac Skelton and Zmkan Ali Saleem, "Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries after ISIS: Heterogeneous Actors Vying for Influence," London School of Economics, February 2019, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100100/>.

THE MAKING OF A POPULAR ARCHITECT

Delving into Muhandis' biography, this section will track his evolution into an icon of the armed resistance, which granted him unparalleled leverage over the majority of the aforementioned Iran-aligned militia factions. When discussing a sequence of public disagreements between Al-Fayyadh and Muhandis, a prominent commander from the resistance factions' camp attributed the clash of opinions to the following critical distinction between the two profiles: "Falih Fayyadh is, after all, an official figure, while Abu Mahdi is a warrior (*mujahid*), a revolutionary (*tha'ir*). You can't expect him to engage in diplomacy."¹⁴ Muhandis' jihadist legacy had earned him a competitive advantage vis-à-vis his nominal superior, who lacked his militaristic charisma. Born in 1954 in Basra, Jamal Ja'far Mohammed Ali Al Ibrahim, a.k.a. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, graduated in 1977 from the Baghdad School of Technology. After completing his mandatory service, he worked as a civil engineer at the Basra Iron and Steel Factory, earning himself his popular *nom du guerre* Muhandis (the engineer/architect). As he recounted in an interview for the Persian language platform *Raja News* in 2010, he joined the Da'wa Party in the early 1970s, when prominent party leaders were severely persecuted by the Ba'th regime.¹⁵

Upon being implicated in anti-regime activities following the arrest and execution of Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir Al-Sadr, the ideological godfather of the Islamic Da'wa Party, Muhandis fled to Kuwait in 1980, where he was later accused of having co-orchestrated the 1983 bombings of the American and French embassies—an act of terrorism he persistently denied. Wanted by Saddam Hussein at the same time, Muhandis relocated to Iran. Leaving the Da'wa Party to

dedicate himself to the armed resistance, he then entered the Iraqi Mujahideen circle, which had consolidated around the figure of Abu Hussein Al-Khalisi in the conviction that jihad and violent confrontation with the Ba'th regime were "the only way forward." Establishing a reputation within the Badr Corps, Muhandis rose to the rank of commander, joining the organization's Supreme Assembly in 1985 and attaining a position in the eight-member Command Council headed by Sayyid Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim.¹⁶

Despite relinquishing his position with the Badr Corps in 2002 over reported "differences in opinion," Muhandis underlined that he maintained a constructive exchange both with his comrades in arms and the leadership of Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), renamed the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI or SIIC) in 2007. After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, he returned to Iraq, where he proudly claimed to have navigated the negotiations around the formation of the Iraqi Interim Government headed by Ayad Allawi, also supposedly contributing to resolving disputes with Muqtada al-Sadr. According to his account in the *Raja News* interview, the Americans never came to terms with the role he played in facilitating the National Iraqi Alliance and sought, therefore, during the term of then-U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad to marginalize his influence by releasing a row of allegedly fabricated accusations.¹⁷

In January 2008, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated Muhandis "for threatening the peace and stability of Iraq and the Government of Iraq," condemning his ties with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

¹⁴ Author interview with a PMF Commander, Najaf, October 2019.

¹⁵ "Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes kist? [Who is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis?]," *Raja News*, March 19, 2015, <http://rajanews.com/news/205949>.

¹⁶ "Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes kist? [Who is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis?]," *Raja News*.

¹⁷ "Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes kist? [Who is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis?]," *Raja News*.



Ali Khamenei and other Iranian officials mourn Soleimani (Wikimedia Commons)

and the Lebanon-based Hezbollah.¹⁸ Without downplaying his longstanding relations with the IRGC and his friendship with Qasem Soleimani, Muhandis underlined that these ties and the mutual trust had evolved during an intense period spent as a regime dissident on Iranian soil: “I have lived in Iran for 20 years, how can I not have relationships? I was a military and political official in the Iraqi opposition, and I wanted to establish connections with different sides, but to think Iran works in Iraq through me is stupid.”¹⁹ More importantly, Muhandis never ceased to frame his engagement with the Iran-backed pro-resistance factions as a conscious act of alliance-building, serving Iraqi national interests first, which he, in turn, defined and interpreted per his own cognitive biases.²⁰

His self-perception as a devout patriot with at least a proclaimed preference for a representative

political system accommodating all of Iraq’s ethno-sectarian identities is also reflected in his strategic push for greater inclusivity within the PMF’s rank and file.²¹ Despite emphasizing the authority of Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in his video testament released after his death, Muhandis implied in first-person plural narration that the goal of the PMF’s volunteers (to which he proudly counted himself) is to serve all segments of Iraqi society, “no matter if those are Sunnis, Shiites, Christians or Yezidis.”²² As this author has argued elsewhere on the roots of Sunni participation in the PMF, Muhandis understood the added value of projecting a cross-sectarian image, especially with PMF-majority Shia factions standing accused of the violent repression of their compatriots in liberated areas.²³ Muhandis, therefore, did not hesitate to reach out to Sunni tribal elements and minority communities, offering their leaders

18 “Treasury Designates Individuals, Entity Fueling Iraqi Insurgency,” U.S. Department of the Treasury Press Center, January 1, 2008, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp759.aspx>.

19 “Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes kist? [Who is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis?],” *Raja News*.

20 Daniel Gerlach, “The Man Who Died by Suleimani’s Side,” *Zenith*, January 14, 2020, <https://magazine.zenith.me/en/politics/iraqi-militia-leader-abu-mahdi-al-muhandis>.

21 “Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes kist? [Who is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis?],” *Raja News*.

22 “The will of the martyr Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis,” *Al Alam TV*, January 3, 2020, <https://www.alalamtv.net/news/4652496/دهاش-بردن-ممل-ای-دهم-وب-ادی-هش-ای-صو-و-یدی-فل-اب>.

23 Inna Rudolf, “The Sunnis of Iraq’s ‘Shia’ Paramilitary Powerhouse,” The Century Foundation, February 13, 2020, <https://tcf.org/content/report/sunnis-iraqs-shia-paramilitary-powerhouse/>.



Iraqi women attend the funeral of Qassem Soleimani, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and eight others in Baghdad. (Middle East Online)

a lucrative entry point into the PMF parallel economy, access to funding, and a rubber-stamped mandate to defend their hyper-local interests and assets. Nevertheless, as pointed out by the former head of the Anbar Salvation Council Hamid al-Hais, the extent of institutional inclusion remained heavily dependent on those leaders' loyalty and did not entail veto powers.²⁴ And yet, the overall bonus package tied to a formalized PMF affiliation seemed attractive enough to brush off the shortcomings, as well as the implied reputational damage of being perceived as a Muhandis lackey—regardless of whether one was self-driven, bought off, or coerced.

The unmatched ability to forge connections with unlikely allies helped Muhandis to win over political opportunists and long-neglected underdogs, who granted him, if not their heartfelt trust, then at least the benefit of the doubt in the hope that cooperation with him would eventually be beneficial for their self-interests. The emotional outpouring of condolences after his recent death from his most devoted Sunni mourners, such as Iraqi cleric Khaled al-Mulla and PMF commander Yazan al-Jabouri, is a testimony

to Muhandis' undisputed charisma, which often transcended all sorts of sectarian, tribal, and ethnic cleavages.²⁵ This hard-won confidence, along with his battlefield credibility recognized across the various units, allowed him to pursue unchallenged his game plan for institutional consolidation. His systemic approach was aimed at concentrating decision-making power and core operational capabilities in the hands of tried, proven, and trusted cadres of the so-called Islamic Resistance factions. Brought to prominence by Muhandis in 2007, one of these primary beneficiaries has remained Kata'ib Hezbollah. The Kata'ib Hezbollah brand stands for a nebulous network-like organization with multiple spin-offs and a fluid chain of command.²⁶ Designated in July 2009 by the U.S. Department of State as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, Kata'ib Hezbollah belongs to the "syndicate" of Iran-sponsored Shi'ite militant "special groups," which have been held responsible for the death of at least 603 American troops serving in Iraq.²⁷

²⁴ Author interview with Hamid al-Hais, Baghdad, December 4, 2018.

²⁵ Inna Rudolf, "The Sunnis of Iraq's 'Shia' Paramilitary Powerhouse;" and @yazanjaboury, Twitter (in Arabic), January 3, 2020, <https://twitter.com/yazanjaboury/status/1213150894801539074/photo/1>.

²⁶ Official Arabic Homepage of Kata'ib Hezbollah, <http://www.kataibhezbollah.com/>; Walter Posch, "Shiite Militias in Iraq and Syria," Report for the Austrian Ministry of Defence, December 2017, https://www.academia.edu/34182023/Schiitische_Milizen_im_Irak_und_in_Syrien; and "Kata'ib Hezbollah: We're Ready to Fight American Troops in Iraq," Middle East Institute, September 15, 2017, <https://www.mei.edu/content/io/kata-ib-hezbollah-we-re-ready-fight-american-troops-iraq>.

²⁷ Kyle Rempfer, "Iran killed more US troops in Iraq than previously known, Pentagon says," *Military Times*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2019/04/04/iran-killed-more-us-troops-in-iraq-than-previously-known-pentagon-says/>; and "Treasury Designates Individual, Entity Posing Threat to Stability in Iraq," U.S. Department of Treasury, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg195.aspx>.

SELECTIVE INSTITUTIONALIZATION

This section investigates how different steps paving the PMF's path towards institutionalization fed into Muhandis' vision for a self-governing, yet state-endorsed, security agency with a distinct ideological underpinning. Keen on codifying the status of the fledgling Popular Mobilization Commission in accordance with the Iraqi constitution, on February 22, 2016, then-Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi released Executive Order No. 91, stipulating that the PMF should be organized along the model of Iraq's renowned Counter-Terrorism Services (CTS).²⁸ Accordingly, the PMF should be "an independent military formation," while remaining embedded within the Iraqi armed forces, answering directly to the prime minister as Commander-in-Chief. In its original text, the order subjected the PMF body to the same legislation applied to any regular military branch, "except concerning age and education requirements."²⁹ In its fifth article, the order emphasized that its members were obliged to cut ties with all sorts of socio-political or partisan formations.³⁰ The enforcement remains problematic as even in the case of a formally announced dissociation from the military wings of their political movements, leaders like Qais al-Khazali have still preserved a level of influence over their PMF-registered brigades.³¹

Building on Executive Order No. 91, the Iraqi parliament passed in November 2016 the

highly debated Hashd law.³² Following a similar structural logic, the law stipulated that the PMF is to remain "an independent military formation and part of the Iraqi armed forces," answering to the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. Accordingly, its members will continue to be subjected to the aforementioned existing military regulations and are further prohibited from maintaining any links to political, partisan, and social organizations.³³ The legislation's wording cemented the duality already licensed through the designedly ambiguous executive order.³⁴ By bestowing upon the PMF a veneer of legality without curtailing the prerogatives of their state-sanctioned "independence," the law has allowed the majority of the infamous Iranian-backed factions to interpret this ambivalence to their advantage. Preserving their presence within the PMF Commission has thus enabled them to selectively play the state actor card with hardly any strings attached, let alone standardized penalties.³⁵

Follow-up efforts to enforce binding disciplinary measures included, among others, former Prime Minister Al-Abadi's March 2018 decree.³⁶ In exchange for equalizing salaries with members of the Iraqi security forces, the decree once again sought to impose upon all PMF members the same military code of conduct as the one observed by employees of the Ministry of the Interior and

28 "Al-Abadi orders the restructuring and reorganization of the Popular Mobilization," *Al-Nasriya*, July 26, 2016, <http://www.nasiriae.com/2016/07/89972>.

29 "Al-Abadi orders the restructuring and reorganization of the Popular Mobilization," *Al-Nasriya*.

30 "Al-Abadi orders the restructuring and reorganization of the Popular Mobilization," *Al-Nasriya*.

31 Author interview with a PMF Commander, Karbala, October 2019.

32 "The Hashd al-Sha'bi Law," full text in Arabic, *Al Sumaria*, November 26, 2016, <https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/187029/> -قانون تشكيل الجيش الشعبي.

33 "The Hashd al-Sha'bi Law," *Al Sumaria*.

34 "The Hashd al-Sha'bi Law," *Al Sumaria*.

35 Inna Rudolf, "From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualizing the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Units," ICSR Report, May 30, 2018, <https://icsr.info/2018/05/30/battlefield-ballot-box-contextualising-rise-evolution-iraqs-popular-mobilisation-units/>.

36 "Iraq's Abadi Inducts Iran-Linked Militias into Security Forces," Middle East Eye, March 9, 2018, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraqs-abadi-inducts-iran-linked-militias-security-forces-1660597837>.

the Ministry of Defense.³⁷ Nevertheless, the prospect of government-funded entitlements did not seem to tempt any of the staunch pro-resistance figures into contemplating scenarios of a formalized assimilation within the Iraqi Ministry of Defense, let alone dissolution within the structures of the Iraqi army.³⁸ Preserving an autonomous standing vis-à-vis conventional state security bodies was perceived as an absolute must to protect the PMF's mission-driven volunteers from the corruptive influences that had allegedly "compromised the military morale and integrity of the armed forces' rank and file."³⁹ And yet, Muhandis acknowledged that greater institutional independence also required more efficient practices of self-regulation.

Responding to pressure to rein in undisciplined elements and clear the organization's reputation, in March 2019, the PMF Commission launched an ambitious policing campaign targeting so-called "fake units" accused of running sham offices without any formal PMF authorization.⁴⁰ Among those targeted was the head of the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Forces (to be differentiated from Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas LAFA), Sheikh Aws al-Khafaji, referred to by Al-Tamimi as a "Sadrist splinter" following his clash with Muqtada Al-Sadr.⁴¹ Despite having gained prominence by mobilizing Iraqi Shi'ite fighters on the side of the Syrian regime, Al-Khafaji had not refrained from harshly criticizing Bashar Al-Assad's Iranian allies

for their interference in Iraq's domestic affairs.⁴² In interviews with the author, Iraqi security analysts have pointed out that Al-Khafaji's open condemnation of Iranian policies in the country has to an extent invited the PMF's leadership to send a warning reminding that certain unwritten red lines are not to be crossed.⁴³ As Al-Khafaji's scarecrow episode demonstrates, the publicized arrests were not merely limited to improving the cohesion within the heterogeneous and internally divided umbrella. Moreover, the punitive measures were designed to curb bureaucratic infighting and tighten further Muhandis' administrative grip on the PMF Commission.⁴⁴

Any further steps undertaken by then-Prime Minister Mahdi could therefore hardly impede Muhandis' march towards greater authority. On July 29, Mahdi had released Executive Order No. 237, which was prematurely celebrated as a decisive move towards reining in the "troublemakers" within the PMF.⁴⁵ Despite some initial wishful interpretation of the content by Iraq watchers as an overture to comprehensive military integration, one could infer that Muhandis' grand design for a semi-autonomous and institutionally entrenched PMF had now been rubber-stamped by the Commander-in-Chief, with some fixable stipulations.⁴⁶ Indeed, the document prohibited the pursuit of commercial interests as well as any involvement in the political process. Nevertheless, neither of the two requirements

37 "Iraq's Abadi Inducts Iran-Linked Militias into Security Forces," Middle East Eye.

38 "PMF Rejects Being Merged into Iraqi Security Institutions," Asharq al-Awsat, March 10, 2018, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1200331/exclusive-pmf-rejects-being-merged-iraqi-security-institutions>.

39 Author interviews with PMF Commanders, Baghdad, March and September 2019.

40 "Al-ḥashd al-sha'abi mustamirrati bi-ghalaq al-maqarrat wa- 'itiqāl al-ashkhās al-ladhīna yad'ūn 'intimā'ihim zawran li-hay'ati l-ḥashd al-sha'abi [The Popular Mobilization Security Directorate continues to close headquarters and arrest people who falsely claim to belong to the Popular Mobilization Commission]," Twitter @teamsmediawar, February 10, 2019, <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/1094704515796869121>.

41 Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The Arrest of Aws Al-Khafaji: Looking at the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Forces," Blog of *Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi*, April 2, 2019.

42 "Tribe of arrested IMIS's Khafaji threatens to close crossing with Iran," *Baghdad Post*, February 11, 2019, <https://www.thebaghdadpost.com/en/Story/36211/Tribe-of-arrested-IMIS-s-Khafaji-threatens-to-close-crossing-with-Iran>.

43 Interviews with Iraqi security analysts and members of parliament conducted in Baghdad in March 2019.

44 Renad Mansour, "Why Are Iraq's Paramilitaries Turning on Their Own Ranks?," *Washington Post*, February 18, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2019/02/18/why-are-iraqs-paramilitaries-turning-on-their-own-ranks/>.

45 "ra'īs majlis al-wuzāra' al-qā'id al-'āmmu li-l-quwwāt al-musallaha al-sayyid 'Adil 'Abdul Mahdy yuṣḍiru al-'amr al-diwāniyy al-muraqqam 237 [Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Adel Abdul Mahdi issued Diwaniya Order No. 237]," Twitter @IraqiPMO, July 1, 2019, <https://twitter.com/iraqipmo/status/1145735482518724608>.

46 "ra'īs majlis al-wuzāra' al-qā'id al-'āmmu li-l-quwwāt al-musallaha al-sayyid 'Adil 'Abdul Mahdy yuṣḍiru al-'amr al-diwāniyy al-muraqqam 237 [Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Adel Abdul Mahdi issued Diwaniya Order No. 237]," Twitter @IraqiPMO, July 1, 2019, <https://twitter.com/iraqipmo/status/1145735482518724608>.



Flag of the Popular Mobilization Forces (Wikimedia Commons)

stood a realistic chance of jeopardizing the PMF's lion share in Iraq's post-conflict economy, even in case its formal franchises in urban areas were to be closed indefinitely.⁴⁷

A comparatively more emboldened attempt at curtailing Muhandis' executive power was reflected in Executive Order No. 331, issued in September 2019. The new organizational structure outlined in the official release completely abolished the role of Vice Chairman of the PMF, occupied by Muhandis as Faleh al-Fayyadh's Deputy.⁴⁸ Instead, the order created the position of a Chief of Staff, envisioned to take the lead on the following issues: Intelligence, Procurement, Administration and Human Resources, Fighters Affairs, and Operations, thereby coordinating with five designated assistants—ideally graduates from one of

Iraq's military colleges.⁴⁹ Despite this cosmetic reshuffling of the responsibilities, interviews with PMF Commanders and security sector officials in October 2019 in Baghdad signaled that Mahdi's experiment to diminish the leverage of Muhandis and neutralize the footprint of partisan, tribal, ethnic, and sectarian affiliations within the PMF has yet to yield results.⁵⁰

But even though the amended mandate had not managed to weaken Muhandis' position within the PMF,⁵¹ his prominence as a champion of the Islamic resistance among Iran-backed Khamenei loyalists was at risk. The more entangled he became in bureaucracy, the less confidence he could project vis-à-vis his revolutionary peers, some of whom had started to look upon him as “a state servant”—be it one instrumental for the common cause.⁵²

47 Inna Rudolf, “The Hashd's Popular Gambit: Demystifying PMU Integration in Post-IS Iraq,” ICSR Report, November 12, 2019, <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/ICSR-Report-The-Hashd's-Popular-Gambit-Demystifying-PMU-Integration-in-Post-IS-Iraq.pdf>.

48 Media Directorate of the Popular Mobilisation, “ra'īs al-wuzāra' al-qā'i'id al-'āmmu li-l-quwwāt al-musallaha yuṣādiqū 'ala l-haykal al-tanzīmiyy li-hay'at al-ḥashd al-sha'bi [The Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces approves the organisational structure for the PMU Commission],” *Al-Hashed*, September 21, 2019, <http://al-hashed.net/2019/09/21/مارزولاسيىر-ماغلادىئاقل-مارزولاسيىر>; and “ra'īs al-wuzāra' yuṣādiqū 'ala l-haykali al-tanzīmiyy li-hay'at al-ḥashd al-sha'bi [The Prime Minister approves the organisational structure for the PMU Commission],” *Iraq News Agency*, September 21, 2019, <http://www.ina.iq/94603/مارزولاسيىر-ماغلادىئاقل-مارزولاسيىر>.

49 “ba'd 'inhiyāz 'Abdul Mahdy li-l-Fayyād... haykala al-ḥashd taqṣī Al-Muhandis [After Abdul Mahdi sided with Fayyadh: The structure of the PMU moves away from Al-Muhandis],” *Al Arabiya*, September 21, 2019, <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/iraq/2019/09/21/مارزولاسيىر-ماغلادىئاقل-مارزولاسيىر>.

50 Author interviews with PMF Commanders, Baghdad and Najaf, October and November 2019.

51 “Sulaimany fi Baghdād sirran [Sulaimany on a secret visit to Baghdad],” *Al Arabiya*, September 18, 2019, <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/iraq/2019/09/18/مارزولاسيىر-ماغلادىئاقل-مارزولاسيىر>.

52 Author interview with PMF Commanders and resistance factions' leaders, Baghdad, October 2019.

THE RESISTANCE AND ITS FRONTRUNNERS

This section evaluates more recent dynamics within the resistance current, commenting on their immediate positioning following the assassination of Muhandis. Recovering from the initial shock of the deaths of Soleimani and Muhandis, leaders of the Islamic resistance factions did not hesitate to channel their thirst for revenge into political action. Paradoxically, the blood of their beloved icons unlocked long-awaited momentum to push forward one of Iran's main security priorities regarding Iraq: the expulsion of all U.S. troops from the country.⁵³ The United States' blatant violation of Iraq's sovereignty prompted Iran-aligned militia elements and their state counterparts to ramp up their aggression against the protest movement that has been challenging the Iraqi political elite since October 2019.⁵⁴ Previously criticized for unwittingly enabling the agendas of 'evil foreign powers', protesters were now more than ever vilified as traitorous elements seeking to undermine Iraq's stability and territorial integrity.

As Iran's IRGC staged a retaliatory strike on military bases in Erbil and Ain al-Assad in the first week of January, different protagonists of the so-called "resistance axis" opted to freeze their rivalries and power games, gathering opportunistically around the godfather of the Mahdi army: Shia

cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Al-Sadr's ability to tie up all the loose ends and impose himself as a credible patron of the paramilitary umbrella has proven limited. To begin with, Al-Sadr's position vis-à-vis the institutional future of the PMF project has remained ambivalent. Despite having repeatedly advocated for the dissolution of the PMF,⁵⁶ his loyalist *Saraya al-Salam* fighters, registered officially within the PMF under Brigade 313 and Brigade 314, are unlikely to voluntarily give up their access to state-funded employment benefits.⁵⁷ Moreover, shortly after the aforementioned resistance factions' reunion meeting in Qom following Muhandis' assassination, Al-Sadr once again resorted to his usual call for dismantling the PMF as an independent body. Having successfully staged what was branded as a "million-man march" against the U.S. presence in Iraq on January 24, Al-Sadr used his concluding remarks to declare that the PMF should be integrated under the structures of Iraq's Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Interior.⁵⁸ As to be expected, arguing in favor of PMF's assimilation and appealing for a truce with "the occupying force" did not play to Al-Sadr's advantage among Iran-aligned circles who were growing weary of his tactical double-dealing.⁵⁹

53 Hamdi Malik, "Iran rallies religious leaders to expel US forces from Iraq," *Al Monitor*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/iraq-protests-iran-us-resistance-axis.html#ixzz6G0iUBu76>.

54 Mac Skelton, Hamzeh Al-Shadeedi, and Zmkan Ali Saleem, "The US Presence in Iraq: Emerging Positions of Iraqi Political Parties," LSE Middle East Centre Blog, January 22, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/01/22/the-us-presence-in-iraq-emerging-positions-of-iraqi-political-parties/>.

55 Mustafa Saadoun, "What's in store for Iraq's PMU after death of top commander?," *Al Monitor*, January 21, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/01/iraq-iran-pmu-muhandis-sadr.html#ixzz6EWvUn>; and "Iraqi militias meet in Iran as splits appear," *Baghdad Post*, January 14, 2020, <https://www.thebaghdadpost.com/EN/Story/45458/Iraqi-militias-meet-in-Iran-as-splits-appear>.

56 "Abadi Rejects Al-Sadr Call to Dissolve Hashd Al-Shaabi," August 5, 2017, *Al Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/abadi-rejects-al-sadr-call-dissolve-hashd-al-shaabi-170805153517075.html>.

57 Al-Tamimi, "Hashd Brigade Numbers Index."

58 Yasser Al-Jubouri, "Al-Sadr calls for a temporary halt on resistance operations," Twitter @YasserEljuboouri, January 24, 2020, <https://twitter.com/YasserEljuboouri/status/1220618251052503040/photo/3>.

59 Renad Mansour and Ben Robin-D'Cruz, "After Latest Turn, Is Muqtada al-Sadr Losing Influence in Iraq?," Chatham House, February 12, 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/after-latest-turn-muqtada-al-sadr-losing-influence-iraq>.

Reportedly facilitated through mediation by Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah, the rapprochement was meant to bring all these individual actors under the common cause of protecting the Shia-led Iraqi state project and the PMF's hard-fought institutional assets within it.⁶⁰ And yet, the most pressing issue requiring the PMF's main shareholders to act in concert was the choice of Muhandis' successor, who would then be responsible for safeguarding the systemic gains.

The different factions had thus to identify—and most importantly impose—a unifying figure, with the authority and credibility to manage the inherited patronage networks. The intra-organizational diversity of opinions along with the factions' often contradictory agendas intuitively call for a “digestible” enough leadership profile, who could funnel rights and privileges among the different groups and individuals, without utterly alienating those that are less well-connected. Though in the first weeks, none of the names discussed behind closed doors ended up convincing the main veto players to take a leap of faith—not even the head of the Fatah Alliance and the leader of the Badr Organization, Hadi Al-Ameri. In comparison to Muhandis, who had consciously sought to steer away from politics, Al-Ameri had been marketing himself for the past two years as a politician who took a sabbatical from the battlefield, rather than a non-partisan military technocrat.⁶¹ His proven ability to navigate between the military barracks and the hallways of parliament did not seem to qualify him to fill in the vacuum left by Muhandis.

On February 20, 2020, Muhandis' replacement as Chief of Staff of the PMF was finally chosen. Following a special committee meeting, including senior figures such as Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada commander Abu Alaa Al-Wala'i, Laith Al-Khazali (the brother of Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haqq leader Qais Al-Khazali), and former PMF spokesperson Ahmed Al-Asadi, Associate Deputy Chairman of the PMF Abu Ali al-Basri announced that Abdul Aziz Al-Muhammadawi, alias “Abu Fadak,” was chosen to succeed Muhandis.⁶² Known also under his notorious nickname “Al Khal” (the uncle), Abu Fadak has been treading upon the path of resistance since the 1980s, asserting himself as an aide to Al-Ameri within the ranks of the Badr organization, assigned with intelligence operations.⁶³ Refusing to disarm after 2004, Abu Fadak became engaged with Muhandis and Imad Mughniyah, Hezbollah's international operations chief. Committed to terminating the U.S. military presence in Iraq, Abu Fadak is said to have supported Muhandis in the process of establishing Kata'ib Hezbollah, which Abu Fadak temporarily headed as the group's secretary-general.⁶⁴

Whether Abu Fadak's battle-hardened profile can adequately empower him to push forward Muhandis' vision remains questionable. Despite Abu Ali Al-Basri's statement to the *Iraqi News Agency* (INA) that the appointment of Abu Fadak is expected to be signed off by the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces through an Executive Order, four of the PMF formations aligned with Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani and Iraq's Holy Shrines (Al-'Atabat al-'Aliyat) rejected the decision in a statement published on February 22, 2020.⁶⁵

60 “Hezbollah Steps in to Guide Iraqi Militias after Soleimani Killing,” *Asharq Al-Awsat*, February 12, 2020, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/2127421/report-hezbollah-steps-guide-iraqi-militias-after-soleimani-killing>.

61 Author interview with Hadi Al-Ameri, Baghdad, April 25, 2018.

62 “The Popular Mobilization Commission appoints ‘Abu Fadak’ to succeed the martyr,” *Al Mayadeen*, February 20, 2020, <http://www.almayadeen.net/news/politics/1381529/فل-خ-كفدوبأ-ن-ي-ي-ع-ت-ت-ر-ق-ي-ب-ع-ش-ل-ا-د-ش-ح-ل-ا-ة-ي-ن-ي-د-ا-ي-م-ل-ا-ل-س-ا-ر-م>.

63 “The Intelligence Man... Who is Abu Fadak, the successor of Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis in the Popular Mobilization?,” *Raseef 22*, February 21, 2020, <https://raseef22.net/article/1077289-ي-ب-ع-ش-ل-ا-د-ش-ح-ل-ا-ي-ف-س-د-ن-م-ل-ا-ي-د-م-و-ب-أ-ش-ر-ا-و-ك-ف-د-و-ب-أ-و-ن-م-ت-ا-ر-ب-خ-ت-س-ا-ل-ا-ل-ج-ر>.

64 “#Al-Khal Abu Fadak Al-Muhammadawi,” Twitter @hushamalhashimi, February 22, 2020, <https://twitter.com/hushamalhashimi/status/1230744753387388929>.

65 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Four factions of the Popular Mobilization deny having been informed of the appointment of a new vice-chairman of the PMU,” Facebook, February 22, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10162944482675363&set=a.10155425973555363&type=3&theater>; and “Imam Ali Combat Division, Al-Abbas Combat Division, Ali Al-Akbar Brigades and Ansar al-Marjaiya Brigades: There is no legal context for the appointment of Abu Fadak as a successor to Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis,” *Al Iraq Net*, February 23, 2020, <https://aliraqnet.net/اولو-ع-ي-ل-ا-ت-ق-ل-ا-س-ا-ب-ع-ل-ا-و-ي-ل-ع-م-ا-م-ا-ل-ا-ق-ر-ف>.

The factions commonly referred to as *Hashd al-Marji'i* due to their affiliation with Iraq's Shiite religious authorities (marja'iyya) denied having been previously informed of, let alone consulted on, the inauguration of Abu Fadak, questioning the legality of such an appointment "in the context of two governments, one of which being a caretaker government, and the other one still lacking an official mandate."⁶⁶

Increasing the pressure onto the Iran-leaning current, the Middle Euphrates Operations of the Popular Mobilization revealed on March 19 details of a meeting between Grand Ayatollah Al-Sistani's Representative Sayyed Ahmad Al-Safi and the leaders of the aforementioned "shrine brigades": Ali Al-Hamdani, heading the Ali Al-Akbar Brigade; Maytham Al-Zaidi, leading the Abbas Combat Division; Hamid Al-Yasiri, the commander of the Ansar Al-Marja'iyya units; and Taher Al-Khaqani, the commander of the Imam Ali Combat Division. According to a summary published on the social media channels by the Ali Al-Akbar Brigade and the Abbas Combat Division, Ahmed Al-Safi had discussed with the four commanders the necessity to preserve the PMU as a military body serving national interests first.⁶⁷ Moreover, Al-Safi had encouraged the leadership of the shrine brigades to stand their ground vis-à-vis those seeking to exclude them from the governance structure of the PMF: "The fighters who fought, and won victory have the full right to occupy high administrative positions within the commission."⁶⁸

In his criticism, Al-Safi had also addressed the problem of favoritism and the unequal distribution of monetary compensation and resources among the different brigades.⁶⁹ Experiences of loyalty based discrimination have been repeatedly raised by Al-Abbas Combat Division Commander Maytham Al-Zaidy.⁷⁰ Demonstratively exploring the path of partial integration into the Iraqi army, Al-Zaidy had facilitated in 2017 the official registration of 1,000 of al-Abbas' fighters with the Iraqi Ministry of Defence.⁷¹

Most importantly, with the patience in Najaf running low, Al-Safi's critical remarks regarding the state of affairs had left the door open to many options—including the possible split-up of the shrine brigades from the increasingly polarized PMF structure.⁷² The four commanders had been especially keen on implying such a scenario—not least by advertising their recent talks with members of the Ministry of Defence.⁷³ The threat of dissociating themselves from the PMF further raises the stakes for Muhandis' successor. The vocal discontent from unappeased elements of the PMF signals that an internal pain threshold has been reached. Those who have received less than what they thought they were entitled to in the scheme that the "engineer" devised now demand a reshuffling of the cards.⁷⁴

66 "Hashd al-Marji'i deny having been informed of the naming of a Vice President of the Popular Mobilization Commission: timing is not appropriate," *Nas News*, February 22, 2020, <https://www.nasnews.com/يؤزل-بئان-هي-مستتب-ممل-ع-ي-فن-ي-هي-ع-رج-مل-الدش/>.

67 Official Facebook Page of the Ali Al-Akbar Brigade, "Sayyid Al-Safi addressing Hashd leaders," Facebook, March 19, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/pg/ak.lewaa/posts/>; and Official Facebook Page of Al-Abbas Combat Division, "Sayyid Al-Safi: The idea - the mechanisms - the implementation – they all must be patriotic," Facebook, March 19, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/pg/alabbas.combat/posts/>.

68 "After the three No-s from Najaf: Will the PMF turn into an assembly of 'wala'i' (Iran aligned) factions?," *Nas News*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.nasnews.com/اقية-ي-ه-ل-وحتت-له-مقتال-ثل-اف-جنل-اتاء-الدع/>.

69 "After the three No-s from Najaf: Will the PMF turn into an assembly of 'wala'i' (Iran aligned) factions?," *Nas News*.

70 Bahaa Haddad, "A source tells the 'Al-Aalam Al-Jadid' details of the argument between Muhandis and Al-Zaidy," *Al-Aalam Al-Jadid*, March 2, 2018, <https://al-aalem.com/news/48508-اش-مل-ال-ي-صافت-دي-جل-ال-مل-ال-ي-وري-ردصم-48508>.

71 "“Akkada al-mushrif ‘alā firqat al-‘Abbās al-qitālīyya al-shaykh al-Maytham al-Zayyīdī al-‘ahad ‘anna al-firqat lam wa lan takhruj min hay’at al-hashd al-sha‘bi” [The supervisor of al-Abbas Combat division assured that the group has not and will not dissociate from the PMU commission], *Byarq News*, July 24, 2017, <http://byarqnews.com/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1834>.

72 "Marja'iya factions leaving the Hashd to join the ranks of the Ministry of Defense," NRT TV, March 19, 2020, <https://www.nrttv.com/AR/News.aspx?id=24221&MapID=2>.

73 "Marja'iya factions leaving the Hashd to join the ranks of the Ministry of Defense," NRT TV.

74 Suadad al-Salhy, "Iran and Najaf struggle for control over Hashd al-Shaabi after Muhandis's killing," *Middle East Eye*, February 16, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-and-najaf-struggle-control-over-hashd-al-shaabi-after-muhandis-killing>.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The aftermath of the PMF's succession crisis may also unlock opportunities for Iraq's Western and Gulf allies to address their concerns regarding the PMF's alignment with Iran. Nevertheless, the external sponsorship of the Iran-backed resistance factions should be extracted from the larger policy debate on Iraq's security sector reform. Drawing a clear line between the "proxy warfare" dimension and the administrative dealings of the paramilitary body would allow preempting the *whataboutism* often adopted by PMF leaders as an excuse to dismiss structural recommendations. Their main criticism directed at any Western advisers and diplomats so far has been their viewing of the PMF exclusively through the prism of the so-called "maximum pressure" strategy against Iran.

Perhaps counterintuitively, this would necessitate suspending (at least temporarily) the issue of the PMF's relations to Tehran, and instead require engaging in an open exchange on possible scenarios for sustaining the PMF's status as a state-sanctioned body. The anxiety regarding the survival of the five-year-old organization following the killing of Muhandis may, to an extent, incentivize its more pragmatic institution-builders to renegotiate the common denominator between the resistance-leaning, Iran-beholden elements and those advocating for assimilation under the structures of Iraq's Ministry of Defence.

With a conventional Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) approach remaining likely off limits, the aim of such talks should be to ensure a higher level of discipline across factions.⁷⁵ This would require the leadership to agree on binding measures able to dissuade any 'wanna-be-Hezbollah' elements from challenging the authority of the Commander-in-Chief and acting autonomously from Iraq's recently boosted Joint Operations Command. Financial penalties, legal procedures, and the threat of expulsion in case of violations should be implemented at the individual fighter level.

To illustrate, after the nomination of Kata'ib Hezbollah-affiliated Abu Fadak, the U.S. State Department sanctioned on February 26, 2020, Ahmad al-Hamidawi, one of the alleged current leaders of Kata'ib Hezbollah as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) under Executive Order No. 13224.⁷⁶ Shortly after the announcement, the military spokesperson of Kata'ib Hezbollah, Abu Ali Al-Askari, issued on February 29, 2020, a warning to all Iraqi citizens, including national security agencies such as the PMF and the CTS, to cease collaborating with U.S. forces by March 15, 2020.⁷⁷ Following this ultimatum, the group accelerated its provocation campaign by publicly accusing National Intelligence Agency Director Mustafa Al-Kazemi of being involved in the assassination of Soleimani and Muhandis.⁷⁸ The emboldened moves backfired, unleashing retributive action by

75 Nicole Ball and Luc van de Goor, "Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration: Mapping Issues, Dilemmas, and Guiding Principles," Clingendael Institute, August 2006.

76 "State Department Terrorist Designation of Ahmad al-Hamidawi," U.S. Department of State, February 26, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/state-department-terrorist-designation-of-ahmad-al-hamidawi/>.

77 Original Tweet by Abu Ali Al-Askari, Twitter @Saraa_Sepid, March 1, 2020, https://twitter.com/Saraa_Sepid/status/1233891167428907010/photo/1

78 "Hezbollah Brigade Intelligence: We are ready to provide information regarding the crime of assassinating victory leaders," Kata'ib Hezbollah, March 4, 2020, <https://kataibhezbollah.com/news/3072>; "#Iran-backed Iraqi Hezbollah Intelligence accuses Iraqi Intelligence Service Chief," Twitter @BaxtiyarGoran, March 4, 2020, <https://twitter.com/BaxtiyarGoran/status/1235262973561769984/photo/1>; and "The Hezbollah Brigades challenge the intelligence apparatus: available information confirms Al-Kazemi's involvement," Shafaaq, March 4, 2020, <https://www.shafaaq.com/ar/يـمـطـاـكـلـاـطـرـوتـحـكـمـتـمـتـاـمـولـعـمـتـارـبـاـخـمـلـاـزـاـهـجـيـدـحـتـلـلـاـبـزـحـبـئـاـتـكـنـم>.

Iraq's intelligence service, which then detained several senior members of Kata'ib Hezbollah.⁷⁹ Moreover, publishing an official statement, the Popular Mobilization Commission distanced itself from these statements against the Iraqi Intelligence Service, negating any affiliation of Abu Ali Al-Askari with the PMF in the function of a military spokesperson.⁸⁰ This sequence of miscalculations on behalf of Kata'ib Hezbollah in response to what the group's media narrative has framed as "the devil's accusations" has thus demonstrated the utility of separating the resistance agenda of the factions' leaders from the institutional fate of the PMF as a catch-all conglomerate.



Similar to the sanctions against Al-Hamidawi, any further penalties issued by the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) against units implicated in human rights violations should be designed in a manner that allows to differentiate between fighters registered with the PMF Commission and individuals merely affiliated with a militia that has a formal presence within the PMF. When infractions occur, all those on the PMF payroll should be prosecuted according to Iraq's military law, as applied to other state-sanctioned entities.

79 “Iraqi Intelligence Launched A Campaign of Arrests Against The Hezbollah Brigades,” *Al Seyassah*, March 4, 2020, <http://al-seyassah.com/التاثيراتعسكريةقواتالاستخباراتالعراقيةعنهزبلل/>.



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