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# THE POPULAR MOBILIZATION FORCES AND IRAQ'S FUTURE

Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar

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Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar

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## Summary

In the fight against the self-proclaimed Islamic State, Iraq's fledgling security apparatus has fragmented into groups under, parallel to, and apart from the state. The largest organization outside direct government control is the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)—over 60,000 fighters who stepped in to secure Iraq after state forces collapsed in 2014. Yet this organization remains divisive, poorly understood, and plagued by internal divisions, as it is both recognized by the state and at the behest of nonstate leadership figures. Key challenges involving the PMF will shape Iraq's political and security future.

### Setting the Record Straight About the PMF

- The PMF contains three distinct factions, based on various subgroups' respective allegiances to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and Muqtada al-Sadr.
- The PMF was central to early efforts to roll back the Islamic State; however, the state's security apparatus has since regrouped, reducing the PMF's role in subsequent battles, including the ongoing campaign in Mosul.
- Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's government is in a struggle to control the PMF. Rather than integrate it into existing state military forces, he has thus far recognized the PMF as a legitimate, state-affiliated entity.
- The PMF has become part of a growing intra-Shia power contest. This pits Nouri al-Maliki, considered the "godfather" of the PMF, against Sadr, who calls for disbanding the "imprudent militias," and Abadi, who advocates reducing and controlling the PMF.
- Some PMF subgroups have assumed political roles and will seek to leverage their roles in combatting the Islamic State to win votes in Iraq's 2018 elections. They will focus on key battles in Tel Afar and Hawija, where the PMF is on the front line.

### Policy Implications for Like-Minded Allies

- Understanding subgroups is pivotal. The PMF is not a monolithic Shia militia. Policy recommendations must separately address Iranian proxy; right-wing, pro-Khamenei Iraqi; pro-Sistani; and pro-Sadr subgroups.

- Supporting the Iraqi government's move to reduce the authority of pro-Maliki, right-wing PMF subgroups will better facilitate eventual integration. Sadr and Sistani claim to be willing to be integrated.
- Integrating fighters on an individual, not a group, basis will better address the problem of multiple affiliations. Rather than assigning entire groups to new divisions, any integration of the PMF and Iraq's security forces should be based on individual admission, so as to avoid divided loyalties between the government and new members' former paramilitary affiliations.
- Continuing to provide needed support for the Iraqi government's attempt to separate security and political institutions and its decision to deny the PMF's bid to become an electoral entity. Attempts by any party to leverage the PMF's popularity and symbolism to win electoral votes should be discouraged.

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## Introduction

In 2014, the so-called Islamic State took over about one-third of Iraq's territory, including Mosul, the country's second-largest city. At the time, there was a genuine fear that the predominantly Sunni fighters of the Islamic State were close to capturing Baghdad. Since then, the Iraqi government—backed by a diverse cast of allies, including Iran and the United States, as well as Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish fighters—has worked to win back the territory. To accomplish this, tens of thousands of Iraqis have volunteered for military service.

When the war against the Islamic State began in 2014, Iraq's security apparatus collapsed, leading many volunteer fighters to join paramilitaries rather than the weakened military or police forces. These substate forces were grouped under an umbrella organization called the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), or al-Hashd al-Shaabi in Arabic. Although the PMF's size is heavily contested, the group includes over 60,000 fighters.<sup>1</sup> Others estimate that the number ranges from 60,000 to 140,000. According to a PMF spokesman, for instance, as of the end of 2016, the organization includes around 142,000 fighters in fifty or so groups.<sup>2</sup> Despite the confusion over numbers, in the absence of a strong state security apparatus, the group has helped successfully liberate most of Iraq's towns and cities since it was formed.

Yet the PMF remains divisive. For many Iraqis, particularly Shia Muslims (but other groups as well), the PMF is a set of religiously sanctioned paramilitaries—some refer to it as al-Hashd al-muqadis (the Sacred Mobilization Units). As one fighter from the city of Amarah stated, “You can criticize any politician or even religious cleric, but you cannot speak against the Hashd and its martyrs.”<sup>3</sup> To many, these martyrs have given up their lives in defense of their country. Iraqi society is now full of popular songs, commercials, and banners that honor the leaders and martyrs of various PMF military groups.

For other Iraqis, however, the PMF is a group of problematic militias neither accountable to the state nor under the rule of law. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reports, for example, have accused it of committing war crimes.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, to many critics, the PMF symbolizes Iranian and Shia efforts to exercise supremacy over Iraq. Tehran has had a clear hand in coordinating with the PMF leadership, which frequently meets and consults with Qassem Suleimani, the commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Even Muqtada al-Sadr, whose paramilitary unit falls under the PMF, has referred to the PMF as *al-militiat al-waqiha* (the Imprudent Militias).<sup>5</sup> Clerics from the Najaf Hawza (the Najaf Seminary),

including Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who is Iraq's leading Shia religious leader, also criticize the monopolistic conduct of certain PMF leaders, particularly Abu Mehdi al-Muhandis.

The PMF is now as much part of the problem as part of the solution. Many who perceived the PMF to be a security asset and a savior in the struggle against the Islamic State in 2014, when the Iraqi army was in shambles, now view it as more of a liability and menace to the country's political and security status quo moving forward. Following the battle to retake Mosul, Iraq faces key challenges involving the PMF that will profoundly shape the country's future.

Iraq is in the midst of an internal Shia political struggle over control of the state between former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, who wants to return to power; current Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who is trying to main-

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tain the power of the state; and cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who is bent on ensuring that the Maliki faction does not return to power. A crucial factor that will help determine who gains an advantage in this struggle will be whether the PMF paramilitaries are integrated into the state's existing security apparatus and used to reinforce the country's political status quo, or if instead these paramilitary groups are retained as a separate parallel and independent military force that can be used to reshape Iraq's current political and security landscape.

The PMF remains divisive and reinforces the uncertainty surrounding Iraq's future after the battle for Mosul, sparking a debate fueled by misunderstanding and even sectarianism. Part of this confusion, however, is because observers have yet to sufficiently address the PMF as an organization and as a movement.<sup>6</sup> One way to analyze the complex umbrella organization is by describing the three distinct factions that compose it, each of which pledges allegiance to a different figure: the supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei; the leader (*marjaa*) of the Shia in Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani; and the Iraqi populist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. This analysis also addresses how ordinary Iraqis and the PMF's different leadership factions perceive the organization and what disagreements divide its competing groups.

It remains possible that the PMF's fractious makeup—its 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 groups under Sistani and under Sadr will work to make sure that the PMF's Maliki-allied leadership does not use the sacredness of the PMF brand to retake the state. These factions' differences inform the ongoing struggle for the Iraqi state, as Prime Minister Abadi seeks to make the PMF a formal part of the existing state security apparatus, while former prime minister Maliki attempts to use the PMF as an independent vehicle to revive his faction's political power.

The implications of the PMF on the country's internal politics and institutional checks and balances are profound. Analyzing the divisive and uncertain

nature of the organization is fundamental not only to understanding the group and its place in Iraqi society but also to understanding the future viability of governance in Iraq. In 2018, citizens will go to the polls to vote for a new national parliament. The results of this election will indicate the direction the country is moving in, and by extension, what the future holds for the PMF.

## Baghdad's Policy Shift on Paramilitaries

Former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein used to boast that the Iraqi army was the fourth-strongest military force in the world.<sup>7</sup> By 2014, many Iraqis had begun claiming that it is lucky if it can be considered the fourth-strongest army in Iraq—behind the PMF, Kurdistan's peshmerga forces, and Iraqi tribal fighters. Since 2003, the Iraqi government has faced ups and downs in its attempt to rebuild the security apparatus following the near collapse of Iraq as a unitary state and the disbandment of the army—this has affected the government's ability to claim a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. Since then, a fundamental theme has been the relationship between Iraq's central government and substate or nonstate military actors.

### Dawa's Historical Stance on Militias

At times, Baghdad has been hostile to paramilitaries, and at other times it has worked alongside armed groups. The Dawa Party, the only political party to govern post-2003 Iraq, traditionally viewed nonstate militias as problematic. Historically, it was the only major Shia political party not to employ a military wing—unlike counterparts such as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), which had the Badr Corps as a military wing until 2012, and the Sadrism movement after 2003. The Dawa Party's lack of a military wing stems from the ideology of Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr, its founder, who believed that such militias were problematic. In the 1970s, a senior Dawa member was about to assassinate Iraq's then vice president Saddam Hussein, but could not because Sadr had not approved the killing.<sup>8</sup> Despite periodic clandestine violence, in general, the Dawa's party line was against nonstate violence for decades.

Similarly, Nouri al-Maliki, who took over the Dawa Party and held the Iraqi premiership from 2006 to 2014, was initially against nonstate militias. During this time, the state still perceived paramilitaries as problematic and illegitimate. In his first term (2006–2010), Maliki championed the phrase "State of Law" (Dawlat al-Qanoon) as the name of his electoral bloc. Against Iran's will, he began targeting paramilitaries, including the Mahdi Army (Jaysh al-Mahdi or JAM), a Shia militia affiliated with Muqtada al-Sadr, as well as al-Qaeda in Iraq, a Sunni militia affiliated with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

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With the support of the U.S. military in Iraq, Maliki also oversaw attempts to integrate paramilitaries, such as the Badr Organization,<sup>9</sup> into Iraq's Ministry of Interior (MOI).

### Maliki's Change of Mind

By early 2014, this stance had shifted 180 degrees. By then, prime minister Maliki had begun working with and supporting seven paramilitaries, allowing them to officially operate in Iraq. At that time, they were primarily focused on supporting the fledgling Iraqi state's efforts to resist the Islamic State in the vicinity of Baghdad, including Jurf al-Sakhar and Abu Ghraib. These original seven groups included the Badr Organization, Asaib ahl al-Haq (AAH), Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Kata'ib al-Imam Ali, and Kata'ib Jund al-Imam. Maliki used these predominantly Shia forces, referred to loosely as the PMF as early as 2013, to combat the emergence of Islamic State fighters and maintain his influence in predominantly Sunni areas.

What accounts for this fundamental shift in policy? Several domestic and international factors informed Maliki and some of his Dawa Party colleagues' decision to gradually move away from the party's traditional opposition to paramilitaries.

One domestic political factor that led to the emergence of paramilitaries in Iraq was the failure of state building in the security sector amid the rise of the Islamic State. The fall of Mosul in the summer of 2014 very dramatically created additional pressure to allow paramilitaries to develop. Maliki

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and his inner circle seemed to have lost faith in the Iraqi military following its defeat at the hands of the Islamic State in Mosul in early June. Former intelligence minister Mohammad Ghabban confided in an interview that "the Hashd [PMF] was born out of necessity. One-third of Iraq was occupied at the time."<sup>10</sup> Maliki found the state's large bureaucracy inefficient, given its mandate under a sectarian quota system (*muhasasa ta'ifiya*), which included members from all major Kurdish, Shia, and Sunni political parties. Having loyal Shia militias, rather than the shaky cross-ethnic makeup of the Iraqi army, seemed a much more reliable way to secure a tighter command and control structure.

Immediately after the Iraqi army's collapse in June 2014, Maliki signed an official decree to form the Commission for the Popular Mobilization Forces (Hay'at al-Hashd al-Shaabi). This decree was in direct violation of Article 9 Paragraph B of the Iraqi constitution, which states that "the formation of military militia outside the framework of the armed forces is prohibited."<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Maliki was able to pursue this unconstitutional move due to his increasing control over the judiciary and the weakness of the country's constitutional adherence. The decree brought the different paramilitaries, which

he had been relying on for some time, together under one body separate from the collapsed state security apparatus. The state's inability to cope with the Islamic State threat led many to rely on the paramilitaries without questioning Maliki's move.

Another domestic factor that legitimized the paramilitaries was Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's *wajib al-kifai* fatwa, which his most senior clerical representative, Abdul Mehdi el-Karbalai, conveyed in June 2014. Paradoxically, the legitimization this fatwa furnished was an unintended consequence of Sistani's order, which had called on all Iraqi citizens to volunteer to join the "security forces," a reference to the army and federal police, rather than the seven militias that had been operating alongside Maliki's government.<sup>12</sup> The fatwa was in fact bereft of any communal exclusivity; it was an appeal to Iraqis as a national community rather than to particular sectarian subcommunities. It steered clear of invoking sectarianism by not mentioning Shiism. The problem, however, was Sistani's inability and apparent unwillingness, as expressed by his representatives, to effectively enforce the fatwa's clearly worded caveat.

Despite Sistani's intentions, Maliki and his allies—including Hadi al-Ameri and Qais Khazali—took the fatwa as a ruling for all to join their paramilitary allies, which included the seven groups that had been active for the past few years. It soon became apparent that the PMF Commission allowed Maliki to work around Sistani's carefully worded fatwa. Using the fatwa's message, Maliki and his allies pursued a wide-ranging campaign to recruit volunteers through hundreds of centers and offices. This recruitment was predicated on a smear campaign against the very Iraqi army that they had created—the same army that the fatwa had supposedly demanded the volunteers join.<sup>13</sup> For Maliki and his supporters, the fatwa allowed the original seven paramilitaries, along with other groups created thereafter, to emerge from clandestine or semi-clandestine anonymity. It gave them legitimacy, which gave them access to the public through their own radio and television networks, as well as Facebook and Twitter accounts; these groups now had their own legitimate names, logos, and publically displayed photographs. In short, Maliki used Sistani's fatwa to give official sanction to these groups for the first time and allowed them to operate out in the open with full state funding.

Sistani's office felt compelled to issue a clarification and elaborated on the fatwa by claiming it carefully restricted recruitment to only as many fighters would be needed to combat the Islamic State. His office claimed subsequently that "we called on those who are able to take up arms to volunteer, provided that they do so under the auspices of security agencies, and only in a legal way . . . volunteering should be legally and meticulously governed to avoid chaos and illegal acts, such as granting militias a role."<sup>14</sup> Several sources in Sistani's office have corroborated the claim that the fatwa was not meant to send fighters to militias, but rather to encourage fighters to join the state's security apparatus.<sup>15</sup> Sistani's office has since refused to mention the PMF by name, instead referring to them as "volunteers."

### Maliki's Reliance on Iran

Meanwhile, the influence of Iran also contributed to Maliki's reversal of the traditional Dawa party line. Long before Mosul fell and Sistani announced his fatwa, Maliki, in his second term as prime minister, already had slowly begun reversing his previous opposition to paramilitaries. Working with paramilitaries was a key demand Iran made of Maliki.<sup>16</sup>

Given their converging interests, Maliki had already relied on Iranian support to fight off Sadr's JAM. Tehran began funding small splinter groups that could be more loyal to Tehran, such as KH and AAH. To ensure the survival of his government against all opponents—including an influential Sadr and the JAM (the single largest Shia militia)—Maliki accepted Iranian aid, particularly after the U.S. troop withdrawal in December 2011. Essentially, circumstances forced him to allow Iran to groom militiamen like Qais Khazali and Abu Mehdi al-Muhandis, who would later become influential figures in Iraqi politics and Maliki allies. For Maliki, these groups could ensure that the JAM did not become the single most powerful Shia military and political force in Iraq and that the Sadrists, increasingly a foe of Iran's regional ambitions, did not grow too strong. He thus began tacitly recognizing these splinter militiamen as allies so as to counter the JAM.

Maliki, who had lost the 2010 elections to a rival political coalition called al-Iraqiyya, was further indebted to Iranian brinkmanship for supporting the post-election government formation process that allowed him to keep the premiership. Prior to this, Maliki had gone against Iranian wishes and had formed the State of Law Coalition in the lead-up to provincial elections in 2009 and national ones in 2010. The loss humbled Maliki, who began to increasingly rely on Iran for external support—particularly after U.S. forces departed.

It soon became clear that the Iraqi prime minister was focused on pursuing Iranian policies in the region—much more so than in his first term. After 2011, it was critical for

Iran that Iraqi Shia paramilitaries support the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria's emerging civil war, which also helped reshape the structure of Iraq's military. Maliki became Iran's point man who could execute this policy. This involved both establishing militias that could go fight in Syria and sending Iraqi fighters to join Syrian militia groups, such as Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas.

According to one parliamentarian, billions of dollars were unaccounted for in Iraq's 2012 budget.<sup>17</sup> There was not a single receipt or explanation given as to where this purported intelligence budget was actually spent. Several lawmakers believe these funds were spent on the paramilitaries.

This policy reversal was even more shocking, as many had been accusing Assad of sending Salafi-jihadi militants into Iraq to destabilize Maliki's government during the 2006–2008 civil war. Overnight, however, Assad and Maliki became defenders of Shiism. Under Iranian military command but with Iraqi

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money, Maliki began assembling or supporting militant groups. Maliki's pretext for this decision was to protect the holy mosque of Sayyidah Zaynab, an important figure in Shiism, located in Damascus. When asked about the policy reversal, many Dawa members confided to the author that they could not control Iraqi jihadists who felt the urge to defend their faith and their landmarks from Sunni Salafists who were looking to exterminate the Shia.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, the PMF paramilitaries also proved vital to Maliki's efforts to acquire and maintain domestic legitimacy. Long before the fall of Mosul or the Sistani fatwa, Maliki had begun relying on paramilitaries to stop protesters from rising up in Sunni townships. In effect, he used the unofficial military outfits to do "the dirty work," as one insider confided, of working against political rivals at home or even attacking civilian protesters.<sup>19</sup> From 2011 onward, Maliki used unofficial armed groups to weaken his opponents and interrogate opposition movements, particularly the Sunni *harak al-shaabi* protesters.

### Maliki's Resignation

Paramilitaries become even more important for Maliki after he was ousted from the premiership in August 2014.<sup>20</sup> Originally, he had intended for these groups to not fall directly under the ministries of defense or interior. As long as he remained prime minister and represented the state himself, he wanted them to fall under his purview. That is why the PMF Commission was directly attached to the prime minister's office (PMO).

But a few months after Sistani had legitimized the PMF, and after the Islamic State had captured major Iraqi cities, Sistani asked Iran to stop backing Maliki as prime minister. Iran complied, and Maliki had to step down. Although the 2014 election was the only time that Maliki had won outright, he was still indebted to Iran and had to follow orders and resign. The 2010 elections had already shown Maliki that Iraq's Shia electoral majority was not as certain as he had initially believed. Al-Iraqiyya's victory symbolized the influence of Gulf state financing and the emergence of the Sunnis, who he had thought would forever be a minority. Given these considerations, Maliki needed Iranian support to ensure that the Shia remained in power.

Maliki wanted the strongest groups within the PMF—notably the original seven paramilitaries that he had been working with for several years—to stay close to him. As such, he successfully granted the PMF an autonomous structure and jurisdiction. Working with Iran, he maintained his influence over the militias by providing funds, military hardware, and other equipment to the groups. He also echoed the pro-Shia ideology that governed many of these militias. This new arrangement created an additional power base for Maliki to potentially help organize pressure to remove his successor, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, when the time was right. Maliki's aim was restoration of his own rule.<sup>21</sup> At a minimum, these groups would serve as a way for him to maintain a stake in the political system.

### Abadi and the PMF

When Abadi took office as prime minister in August 2014, he faced an important decision: what to do about the PMF. Back in 2013, he had expressed to the author his unhappiness with the emergence of paramilitaries in Iraq—toeing the traditional Dawa line against his party's leader, Maliki.<sup>22</sup> For Abadi, the trouble was that Maliki remained influential and maintained control over the PMF. Maliki was also unhappy about being deposed, and he looked to delegitimize Abadi by consistently portraying the new prime minister as a weak leader. In short, he served as a direct challenge to Abadi's fledgling rule.

Abadi could not simply get rid of the powerful paramilitaries or integrate them into Iraq's existing military forces. The same internal considerations that led Maliki to change the Dawa policy line on paramilitaries were still

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present—namely, the power of Iran and the weakness of the Iraqi state security apparatus. The state was unable to handle the Islamic State, which was seeking control of the entire country, including Babylon, Baghdad, and the holy Shia city of Karbala. As such, the weak Prime Minister Abadi was inclined to accept the status quo concerning the PMF, as dictated by his predecessor, rather than com-

promising Iraq's security. Moreover, Sistani's interference had made the PMF a sacred institution in the eyes of the Iraqi population. As such, the new prime minister had no choice but to endorse Maliki's decree and continue the policy of legitimizing the PMF—despite his distaste of militias.

Nonetheless, he wanted to gain control of the nonstate actors. At this point, Maliki's original decree to legitimize the PMF had changed after he had left office—making the groups nonstate actors again. After a difficult process, in February 2016, Abadi finally managed to pass Executive Order 91, which states that “the PMF will be an independent military formation and a part of the Iraqi armed forces, and attached to the general commander of the armed forces.”<sup>23</sup> This was an attempt to bring the PMF groups back under the state's institutional jurisdiction. Paradoxically, the decree was not released until July, which indicates the behind-the-scenes power struggles that took place between the state represented by Abadi and the powerful paramilitaries over limits on and the jurisdiction of the PMF.

### The Popularity of the PMF

A major reason why neither Abadi nor any other leader is able to challenge the PMF groups is because of their broad popularity among Iraqi society. The paramilitary outfits are particularly popular among the country's Shia population. An August 2015 poll claims that 99 percent of Shia respondents support the use of the PMF to fight the Islamic State.<sup>24</sup> Abadi's chief intelligence officer has stated that up to 75 percent of men between eighteen and thirty

years old living in Shia-majority provinces had signed up to enlist in the PMF by the spring of 2016.<sup>25</sup> Since there are more volunteers than the state needs or can fund, most of these recruits remain inactive and not on the official list of active fighters.<sup>26</sup> As volunteers flocked from all of Iraq's Shia provinces to enlist, the PMF recruited roughly ten times more volunteers than the Iraqi security forces.<sup>27</sup>

Why did the masses decide to join these paramilitaries rather than the Iraqi army or the police forces?

Part of the reason is the poor legacy of the Iraqi army, particularly after it collapsed and lost face in Mosul in June 2014. Throughout that year, many did not trust that Iraq's security apparatus could protect the country's Shia towns. Some recruits cited the June 2014 Camp Speicher massacre, when Islamic State militants killed over 1,700 (mainly Shia) air cadets linked to the Ministry of Defense (MOD), a tragedy that was seen as further evidence of the faulty nature of the state security apparatus.<sup>28</sup> Stories of corruption also tarnished the state's image. For instance, a case of some 50,000 ghost soldiers listed on the army's payroll revealed the extent of corruption, leading many to lose trust and to seek alternative ways to combat the Islamic State.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, an official in the Interior Ministry (and a senior Badr figure) told the author that "the Hashd [PMF] was able to fight in the first months following June 2014 better than the military with less equipment."<sup>30</sup> This effectiveness drew Iraqis to the groups.

For the emerging volunteers, it was also easier to sign up via political party structures than through the PMF Commission, which was still part of a fledgling state and lacked recruitment offices. In contrast, almost all Shia Islamist parties and even individual clerics or members of parliament had established registration centers. Because the state itself did not have enough offices to register volunteers for the Iraqi army and police forces, volunteers joined paramilitary groups, many of which, including the original seven, enjoyed preexisting recruitment mechanisms.

Institutional support from Sistani and the Shia seminary in Najaf he oversees made the paramilitary recruitment efforts easier as well. Even Sistani's office began supporting certain groups in the PMF. Although he favored recruitment into the state forces, Sistani could not control the masses lining the streets to enlist. Several paramilitaries were established to protect Shia holy sites as well as Iraqi cities, such as Karbala. Sistani and Iraq's Shia religious establishment, the *marjaiya*, decided to compromise and provide institutional support to the PMF, though not political support or overt legitimization. It should be noted that the lines remained blurred. Sistani's office continued to refer to them as "volunteers" rather than use the PMF's name for fear of legitimizing the paramilitaries. Despite Sistani's limited support, many who decided to take up arms were guided by a religious duty to abide by Sistani's fatwa and to protect religious Shia sites.<sup>31</sup> One recruit emphatically said that he doesn't think about his wife or his children, but only concentrates on his religious duty to testify under the fatwa.<sup>32</sup>

Because the PMF is an umbrella organization that includes a wide array of diverse groups, most Iraqis can relate to one of its groups or another. As such, it embraces a wide range of volunteers loyal to all major Shia political parties. These volunteers also include Iraqi Christians, Sunni Arabs, and Shia Turkmen. These groups have different motivations. For instance, many of the Shia Turkmen have sought PMF patronage to increase their local autonomy vis-à-vis the Kurds and to counter other fellow Sunni Turkmen who have joined the Islamic State.

The failure of Sunni members of parliament to pass the National Guard Act (Qanoon al-Haras al-Watani), which would have brought fighters under local military units, meant there was no state force to absorb these volunteers; this

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**Between the political pressures and broad popularity that gave rise to the PMF, then, the floodgates had been opened and there was no going back.**

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led Sunnis who wanted to fight the Islamic State to initially join the PMF. They were consequently called al-Hashd al-ashaire (or the tribal PMF). The Sunni Awakening, a group of Sunni tribes that from 2008 began re-engaging and collecting revenue from the central government, also turned to the PMF for funding and support. The only exception to this was Mosul's Sunnis, who worked more closely with Kurdistan's peshmerga. This included, for instance, the Shammar tribe.<sup>33</sup> However, by the end of 2016, even Nineveh's former governor Athil al-Nujaifi had gone to the PMF to fund and arm his paramilitary force. Yet the relationship that joins Sunni tribal and political leaders with the PMF is a marriage of convenience based on a common need to fight.

Between the political pressures and broad popularity that gave rise to the PMF, then, the floodgates had been opened and there was no going back.

## What Groups Make Up the PMF?

As of December 2016, the PMF leadership appears to have roughly 140,000 men under arms.<sup>34</sup> The Iraqi parliament, for budgetary requirements, has recognized 110,000 fighters.<sup>35</sup> The PMF's fifty or so groups vary in size from a few hundred to tens of thousands combatants each.

To better understand the amorphous and enigmatic PMF, it is necessary to classify its constitutive groups based on their ideological underpinnings. This includes their views on questions such as whether it was necessary to intervene in Syria, whether to cooperate with the Iraqi government, whether to ultimately integrate into the state apparatus, whether to support and spread Iranian influence in Iraq, and whether their members should become political actors. The groups that compose the PMF fall into three distinct major clusters: pro-Khamenei, pro-Sistani, and pro-Sadr.<sup>36</sup> The groups are mostly distinguished by the question of what comes next: the pro-Sistani and pro-Sadr groups call for the disbandment or integration of the paramilitaries, whereas the pro-Khamenei group calls for state recognition of the PMF as an independent institution. Abadi, representing the state, is stuck between these forces.

### The Pro-Khamenei Faction

The most powerful groups in the PMF are those that maintain strong links with Tehran and pledge spiritual allegiance to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. As such, they have been groomed by Iran as reliable political and military allies; they, therefore, benefit from greater funding and more supplies from Tehran than other groups in the PMF.

This pro-Khamenei group includes a number of relatively small paramilitaries that Iran has created, which serve as proxies for Tehran. Their leaders publicly take pride in such affiliations, professing religious allegiance to Ayatollah Khamenei and his notion of *vilayat al-faqih* (the guardianship of the jurists), rather than to Grand Ayatollah Sistani of Najaf. These groups include, for example, Saraya Khurasani, KH, and Kata'ib Abu Fadhl al-Abbas, among many others. In fact, they are arms of Iran's IRGC and the Iranian foreign intelligence agency, Itilaat. This faction serves to advance Iranian interests in Syria as well as to protect Iran's border areas. It also wishes to build a corridor for Iran to extend its influence into the Levant.<sup>37</sup> Mostly drawn from Iraq's outlying Arab provinces extending from Basra in the south to Diyala in the north, these groups serve as a kind of border guard—a sort of Iranian insurance policy against threats on its immediate border.

But the better known elements of the pro-Khamenei faction consist of local right-wing Iraqi militant wings that have also become political actors. Their military resources—including heavy armor, drones, and military advisers—all come from Tehran. Their cash and political legitimacy come from Baghdad. These paramilitaries are either full-fledged political parties or in the process of establishing political representation in the lead-up to Iraq's planned 2018 provincial and parliamentary elections. These actors are very close to Maliki, who confided during a March 2016 interview that “the Hashd [PMF] are already politicians.”<sup>38</sup> This group includes, for example, the Badr Organization and AAH, both of which already have representatives in the Iraqi parliament.

Working with Iran, Maliki convinced these groups to become political actors and join his State of Law Coalition in Iraq's 2014 parliamentary election. Although originally set up as military organizations, these militias have now transformed into full-fledged political parties under Maliki's guidance. Hadi al-Ameri and the Badr Organization, which had been the military wing of the ISCI since its inception in the 1980s, split from Ammar al-Hakim's ISCI and became its own independent political entity in 2012. The main reasons for the split were an ideological dispute with the ISCI, which had turned from Khamenei to Sistani in 2007, as well as an internal power competition between Hakim and Ameri, who increasingly developed his own personal ambitions. Under Maliki's courtship, Badr eventually decided to split with the ISCI. In 2014, Badr ran under the banner of Maliki's State of Law Coalition and won twenty-two parliamentary seats (out of 328).<sup>39</sup>

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Likewise, AAH was encouraged to split from the Sadrist JAM and to eventually pursue its own political ends. AAH fell out with the Sadrists because Muqtada al-Sadr became increasingly critical of Iranian influence in Iraq. AAH ran under the electoral name Sadiqun (the Truthful) and received one seat.<sup>40</sup> Another similar paramilitary is Kata'ib al-Tayyar al-Risali, which is headed by former Sadrist and current Maliki ally Adnan al-Shahmani.

This group of political paramilitary outfits, in sum, can be termed the right-wing movement within the PMF. This faction is restorationist in that it seeks to restore Maliki's rule. Its members pay lip service to Sistani, but in reality they swear their allegiance to Khamenei.

### **The Pro-Sistani Faction**

The second PMF faction includes several apolitical paramilitaries that swear allegiance to Sistani. They were formed strictly by Sistani's fatwa to defend Shia holy sites and lands from the so-called Islamic State. At the time, there was genuine fear that the Islamic State could destroy sacred Shia sites in Baghdad and elsewhere. There are four major groups organized by Najaf: Saraya al-Ataba al-Abbasiya, Saraya al-Ataba al-Hussainiya, Saraya al-Ataba al-Alawiya, and Liwa 'Ali al-Akbar. Each of their names coincide with one of the four major holy shrines in Kadhimiya, Karbala, and Najaf. According to several of these groups' leaders and members, they will disband as soon as the threat of the Islamic State subsides.<sup>41</sup> Their priority is to keep Shia areas safe and to obey Sistani's will—this includes a willingness to eventually disband or be integrated into the Iraqi armed forces.

The ISCI, too, swears allegiance to Sistani. In 2007, it 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.

### **The Pro-Sadr Faction**

Muqtada al-Sadr's Peace Regiments (Saraya al-Salam) were founded right after the notorious June 2014 massacre at Camp Speicher. In effect, this was a rebranding of the JAM, which had been suspended in 2008 but had kept many of its cadres, expertise, and social networks intact. They were easily remobilized because Sadr had more experience with paramilitaries than other paramilitary leaders.

According to conversations with leading Sadrists, Saraya al-Salam has a virtual capacity to build a 100,000-strong army, and the number of those registered on the Sadrists' volunteer list may exceed that number.<sup>42</sup> According to the faction's leaders, their actual capacity is constrained not by the number of volunteers but by a lack of resources—specifically money and military hardware.

This is because, unlike the groups in the pro-Khamenei faction, the Sadrists have largely been cut off from Iranian funding.<sup>43</sup>

The Sadrist movement, and by extension its paramilitary, derives legitimacy from its presence on the ground in Iraq before 2003. Unlike many other political parties and military wings, the Sadrists were not part of the diaspora elite that returned to Iraq following the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. The movement has stayed close to ordinary Iraqi citizens rather than the country's elites. It weds nationalism with homegrown clerical authority from the Sadr family name and is now portraying Muqtada as a theological authority rather than a political leader.

Sadr has charted his own course, much to the dismay of Iran's leaders, who had invested much in the JAM from 2003 to 2010 and were even rumored to have labelled Sadr as Iraq's Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah in Lebanon.<sup>44</sup> Today, Sadr and his paramilitary maintain an anti-Iran stance and oppose the presence of any other foreign troops in Iraq. Sadrists have boasted, for instance, that they were the first to organize protests against the presence of Turkish troops in the town of Bashiqa in September 2016.<sup>45</sup>

This independent spirit, though, leaves some confusion over Saraya al-Salam's role in the PMF. At times, Sadrists claim to be part of the PMF, and at other times they claim to not be part of the umbrella organization. This is in part due to Sadr's rejection of the PMF's pro-Khamenei groups and more generally his rejection of Iranian influence and Maliki's role in Iraq. At the same time, Sadrists sometimes find it useful to describe themselves as part of the PMF because of the organization's popularity among Iraqis.

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**The Sadrist movement weds nationalism with homegrown clerical authority from the Sadr family name and is now portraying Muqtada as a theological authority rather than a political leader.**

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## Disputes Among PMF Factions

The very creation of the PMF was a result of polarization following Iraq's 2014 elections and the emergence of the Islamic State in several towns and cities. A divided Dawa Party with an outgoing prime minister bent on restoring his rule created this environment. Once established, the PMF further polarized the political environment for both ideological and administrative reasons. These disputes split the abovementioned clusters apart.

### Strategic Fault Lines

A series of political and ideological fault lines divide the PMF's three main factions on fundamental questions, such as whether to engage with the Abadi government, intervene in Syria, or accept being integrated into Iraq's existing security forces after the battle with the Islamic State concludes.

On the question of engagement with the central government, the PMF's pro-Khamenei groups remain wary of dealing with Abadi. They believe and spread the idea that he is a weak prime minister unable to ensure the country's security. On a number of occasions, Maliki has criticized Abadi's inability to govern and ensure Iraq's security and political stability.<sup>46</sup> His goal is to discredit Abadi in an effort to return to power himself.

Other pro-Khamenei figures have made similar statements against the premier. Hadi al-Ameri, who was upset that Abadi did not choose him to be the interior minister, often criticizes the prime minister's war planning. For instance, in the lead-up to the battle for Fallujah in June 2016, Ameri claimed that Abadi was betraying the people of Fallujah (in Anbar Province) by shifting his focus and instead sending armored vehicles to Makhmour for the battle for Mosul (in Nineveh Province). Ameri also has voiced disapproval of Abadi's plans more broadly, claiming they would sideline the PMF from the battles of Ramadi, Fallujah, and Mosul, in favor of the army instead.<sup>47</sup> On many occasions, Ameri has criticized Abadi's reform packages and his attempts to establish good governance.<sup>48</sup> Abu Mehdi al-Muhandis, who became the PMF's administrator, also has often critiqued the prime minister on fiscal and administrative grounds. In October 2015, he sent a damning letter to Abadi complaining that the prime minister was not paying the PMF and as such was jeopardizing the war against the Islamic State.<sup>49</sup> Khazali, for his part, has put forward the group's own political conception of a strong presidential regime with a new, strong leader.<sup>50</sup> In short, pro-Khamenei PMF affiliates believe that Abadi is not only weak but also misguided, so they are not very willing to work with the central government and have actively criticized it.

The pro-Sistani and pro-Sadr factions, by contrast, have remained more in line with Abadi's efforts. Most of this support stems from their desire to ward off the restorationist drive of Maliki and his allies, as both Sistani and Sadr are wary of increased Iranian influence in Iraq. More critically, they believe that Maliki's premiership resulted in the near collapse of the state and are concerned that a return of the same leadership could lead to further problems. A leading Sadrist member of the parliament, for instance, said in the fall of 2016 that Sadr would support Abadi on his reform package.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, Sadr supported Abadi's former defense minister Khaled al-Obeidi before Obeidi was impeached by Maliki's parliamentary allies.<sup>52</sup> Hakim's advisers, too, have confided that they would be willing to work with the central government if their terms are met.<sup>53</sup> Their terms would include maintaining certain ministerial posts and civil servant positions connected to ISCI. More critically, they have shied away from the direct and aggressive criticisms of Abadi that have become common among pro-Khamenei figures.

Another fault line is the intervention in Syria. The pro-Khamenei faction remains close to Iran, and is pro-intervention. Many of these groups, particularly the original seven paramilitary groups, remain sympathetic to the Bashar

al-Assad regime and are willing to help defend Damascus. Supporters of Sistani and Sadr, however, have resisted intervening to defend the Assad regime. Sadr even criticized Hassan Nasrallah and Hezbollah for its official intervention in Syria in 2014.<sup>54</sup> He argued that Shia movements and parties should stick to their own jurisdictions rather than complicating their political activities by intervening in the affairs of other countries. He has similarly criticized Iraqi Shia militias for their presence in Syria. Many pro-Sistani groups, meanwhile, are more concerned with defending Shia lands and holy sites in Iraq than with intervening in Syria.

The integration of the PMF into Iraq's existing security apparatus is another contentious issue. The pro-Khamenei faction remains the most wary of simply being integrated into the Iraqi army or police forces. According to many of these groups, the post-2014 state is still too weak. More critically, however, these groups are not willing to give up their current positions of power to centralize under a leader, like Abadi, that they do not trust. The nongovernmental space they currently occupy affords them greater autonomy. For its own part, Iran prefers to keep a strong set of paramilitary allies that could check the Iraqi state if Baghdad ever were to pursue anti-Iran policies. Most groups affiliated with Sistani and Sadr, however, have expressed a willingness to integrate into the state apparatus, or even to disband all paramilitaries. On numerous occasions, Sadrist parliamentarians have indicated Sadr is willing to disband his Saraya al-Salam paramilitary if the state is strong enough.<sup>55</sup> Although it would be hard to hold him to that commitment based on words alone, he has at least verbally acknowledged that militias are not good for state building.

An additional fault line among PMF groups has been the protest movement in Iraq, which began in the summer of 2015; it grew rapidly after Sadr began taking part in September 2015 and once he fully joined in the spring of 2016. The protesters are expressing grievances over the government's inability to provide basic services, which may be the start of a shift toward issue-based politics in Iraq. Pro-Khamenei groups, in contrast, have showed clear signs of opposition to the protesters, calling for a heavy-handed response to these "rebellions"—a common term used by several figures affiliated with this faction.<sup>56</sup> Maliki, Ghabban, and others have confided that Abadi's soft attitude toward the protest movement is a grave mistake. In certain instances, Maliki and his allies have issued a barrage of criticism against the protesters, calling them infidels, rebels, or foreign agents.<sup>57</sup> Pro-Khamenei PMF leaders visited Medhat al-Mahmood, Iraq's chief justice, to express their support for him when protesters were calling for his removal. By contrast, groups associated with Sistani and Sadr have shown much more sympathy for the protest movement.

An underlying fault line in many of the issues described above is Iranian influence. Pro-Khamenei groups clearly remain close allies that help Tehran

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**The PMF further polarized Iraq's political environment for both ideological and administrative reasons.**

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influence events in Iraq and Syria. Many of these right-wing groups profess theological (and by extension political) allegiance to Ayatollah Khamenei (*taqlid*, or the emulation of the supreme leader) as a religious authority that transcends community and national affiliations. Another figure is Abu Mehdi

al-Muhandis, who serves as the PMF's chief administrator, and who began his career with the IRGC in 1983. He is alleged by Interpol to have been active in operations in Kuwait at the time.<sup>58</sup> Today, he maintains good relations with the IRGC. In 2006, Sami al-Askari, a Maliki adviser, criticized Muhandis for sitting on the Iranian side rather than the Iraqi side of a delegation during an official Iraqi state visit to Tehran.<sup>59</sup> Muhandis would later set up KH in

Iraq. In Baghdad, where rumors are rife, many believe that Muhandis is actually originally of Iranian stock. The broader point, however, is that Muhandis has become a clear ally of Iran in Iraq.

The pro-Sistani and pro-Sadr factions, however, remain wary of Iran's role in Iraq. Both the Sadrists and Hakim's ISCI have at times fallen out with Tehran. During the Sadrist protests in the spring of 2016, men were yelling, "Iran, out, out" (Iran, *barra, barra*).<sup>60</sup> Through street demonstrations, Sadr's supporters embrace Iraqi nationalism and are pushing for change, including, for instance, reforms of Iraq's identity-based quota system in the civil and armed services and of the Hashd itself.

### Administrative Fault Lines

The PMF has also given rise to an administrative dilemma. Abadi endorsed the PMF Commission that Maliki established to be responsible for recruiting, paying, and communicating with the PMF paramilitary groups. Following Muhandis's damning letter to Abadi, the prime minister declared that his office would begin paying the salaries of the PMF, promising \$1 billion per year.<sup>61</sup> According to one parliamentarian, this money comes from a 3 percent deduction in civil servants' salaries that provides funds for both internally displaced people and the PMF.<sup>62</sup> Before this, much of the paramilitaries' budget came from Iran.<sup>63</sup> Now, the commission is responsible for overseeing these portfolios.

Officially, the PMF Commission falls under the PMO. On entering office, Abadi was interested in taking control of it away from pro-Khamenei leaders. To do this, he appointed Faleh al-Fayadh to head the commission, while relegating the pro-Khamenei Muhandis to deputy head. Like Muhandis, Fayadh is also friendly to Iran, and in the past he has praised the role of Qassem Suleimani and the Quds Force in defending Iraq.<sup>64</sup> However, Fayadh is close to Ibrahim Jaafari. For several years, Jaafari has had a rivalry with Maliki in the Dawa Party, so this was a chance for Abadi to counter Maliki's influence.

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**Pro-Khamenei groups clearly remain close allies that help Tehran influence events in Iraq and Syria... while the pro-Sistani and pro-Sadr factions remain wary of Iran's role in Iraq.**

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Despite this attempt, Abadi was largely unable to fend off the influence of pro-Khamenei Iraqi leaders. Although the commission is meant to fall under the PMO, many advisers have told the author that the real power lies in the commission's relations with the Ministry of Interior (MOI), which is managed by the Badr Organization—a leading right-wing group in the PMF. Due to this Badr link, the influential pro-Khamenei actors in the MOI carry more weight than the PMO.<sup>65</sup> One MOI official claimed that more than 70 percent of MOI personnel are now loyal to paramilitaries—especially the Badr Organization.<sup>66</sup> This allows Tehran to continue to exert considerable sway over the commission.

Moreover, the pro-Khamenei faction's influence over the PMF means that Muhandis has remained the commission's most powerful figure, despite Fayadh being its head. Since 2014, most of the communiqués and declarations (*bayanat*) that the PMF has sent out have referred to Muhandis rather than Fayadh.<sup>67</sup> Since it became clear that the commission's leadership—particularly Muhandis—is pro-Khamenei, each paramilitary purporting to be part of the PMF began sending names of recruits for approval in order to have the salaries of their fighters paid. These names are first approved by the MOD, and then sent to the MOI, before final approval is given by the commission.

Because there are more potential fighters than available PMF salaries, the question has become: Who determines how to distribute these limited funds?

Since Muhandis and Ameri largely control the commission, they also have emerged as the PMF administrators in charge of salary distribution. Abadi has been unable to gain control over the allocation of funds. All he has been able to do is send the promised money to the commission. This became clear when Muhandis's criticism of Abadi for slow payments surfaced. Abadi was forced to capitulate. The legitimacy of the commission, and the popularity of the PMF in general, hampers Abadi's ability to act independently. He cannot risk a direct confrontation with the PMF while the group is supporting the Iraqi security forces in the battle against the Islamic State. Moreover, pro-Khamenei leaders such as Maliki remain powerful, and thus far Abadi has refused to take up the issue directly.

As such, rather than a monthly distribution of salaries directly from the state, the PMO sends a lump sum to Muhandis. According to multiple PMF sources, Muhandis has the final word on whom to pay. By being in charge of dividing the lump funds designated for the PMF from the PMO, then, pro-Khamenei leaders such as Ameri and Muhandis are in a position to control the flow of volunteers by allocating funds to their preferred groups.<sup>68</sup> The prime minister has little knowledge of how precisely these financial resources are managed within the commission.

This creates tension with pro-Sistani and pro-Sadr groups, which feel that they are not being treated equally under this system of resource distribution. Top clerics associated with Sistani have accused Muhandis of “manipulating”

the recruitment policies and funds for his own partisan ends.<sup>69</sup> A Sistani representative confided that only 13,000 of the 14,500 recruits they requested salaries for were approved by the MOD to receive salaries. Then, after the MOI's review, Muhandis, as the final decisionmaker, only agreed to pay 4,800 fighters.<sup>70</sup> In effect, it seems that Muhandis denied more than 8,000 would-be volunteers from the pro-Sistani faction their salaries, weapons, equipment, and provisions.<sup>71</sup>

The same is true for the Sadrists. According to their sources, Saraya al-Salam sent the state over 20,000 recruits for approval, but PMF administrators only accepted 3,000.<sup>72</sup> The rest were left underfunded like the pro-Sistani factions. Hakim al-Zamili, a Sadrist who heads the Defense and Security Commission in the Iraqi parliament, claimed that out of 14,000 fighters from the city of Samarra alone, the PMF only paid 3,000.<sup>73</sup> He went on to say that he had sent a list of twenty martyrs from his bloc to the PMF Commission to receive funding for their families, but was not given anything.

It is difficult to corroborate these accusations, particularly since (pro-Khamenei) senior PMF spokespeople reject these pro-Sistani and pro-Sadr claims. In a sense, each side presents their own evidence. However, these accusations

reflect the perceptions of the latter two groups, which often point to administrative mishandling and corruption to criticize the powerful pro-Khamenei group. Therefore, while the facts are disputed, critics' use of these claims indicates a significant rift inside the PMF over this administrative question.

Consequently, paramilitary groups that are not directly allied with Muhandis or Ameri feel that the PMF administration does not represent their fighters. This means that both Sistani's assistants and Sadr's lieutenants have had to do a great deal of fund raising to support the remaining recruits. This has deepened divisions in the PMF. It even led the Sadrist leader Hakim al-Zamili—citing administrative problems—to claim at one point that Saraya al-Salam, although allied with the PMF, is not a wing of the PMF.<sup>74</sup>

## Abadi's Efforts to Gain Control of the PMF

Prime Minister Abadi thus far has not been able to wrest control of the PMF's funding from Muhandis and Ameri. 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. Muhandis is able to maintain this influence due to support from the pro-Khamenei group, including powerful figures such as Maliki and Ameri. In fact, the PMF Commission's website continues to report declarations and news from Muhandis, without much mention of Kaabi at all. Instead of "deputy head," though, it refers to him as "PMF leader."<sup>75</sup>

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**Paramilitary groups that are not directly allied with Muhandis or Ameri feel that the PMF administration does not represent their fighters.**

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Caught between the various factions of the PMF, Prime Minister Abadi and his supporters seem to be taking a centrist line. In the face of sundry pressures, their middle-of-the-road course has thus far proven practicable in the short run. Abadi's goal is to exert influence over the PMF's many autonomous paramilitaries in order to put the state back in control—as noted in Abadi's Order 91, which defines the PMF as a state security institution. He also told the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015 that he considers the PMF to be part of what he refers to as the Iraqi security forces.<sup>76</sup> However, Abadi has faced difficulties asserting his influence over the paramilitaries—his Order 91 notwithstanding.

From when he took office until April 2015, Abadi did little to interfere in the finances or recruitment policies pursued by the PMF. He also did not insert himself into the operational activities of the PMF to dislodge the Islamic State from Diyala Province, from the northern tiers of Babylon, or from Balad and the surrounding areas in southern Salahuddin Province. In fact, for a time the PMF had a free hand, and even army units in Babylon, Diyala, and Tikrit reluctantly submitted to its will.

A turning point came in April 2015, as the army gradually grew stronger and PMF atrocities were uncovered in Diyala and Salahuddin. The crucial issue, at this point, was the nature and extent of U.S. involvement in the war against the Islamic State. Then staff general Abdul Wahab al-Saidi, operational commander of the Salahuddin forces, called on the United States to conduct airstrikes.<sup>77</sup> The pro-Khamenei group of the PMF, however, was against this move—since a potential increase in American influence worried both Iran and its Iraqi allies. Ultimately, the group managed to replace Saidi with Staff General Jima 'Inad, who Ameri chose—this turn of events exemplified the weakness of Abadi.

To try and win back some authority, Abadi requested that the U.S. military again get involved in Iraq—a measure to circumvent unbearable Iranian pressure on his government.<sup>78</sup> This changed security conditions in Iraq. In the words of one mid-ranking military commander, “Iran controls the ground, the United States the skies”—this new reality would go on to define the war against the Islamic State.<sup>79</sup>

Abadi subsequently sought to increase his influence vis-à-vis the PMF. In April 2015, the prime minister established a special operational room at his office under Staff General Talib Sheghati to monitor the PMF theater operations. This is when he appointed General Muhsin al-Kaabi to become head of the operations and deputy to Faleh al-Fayadh, in an attempt to limit Muhandis's influence. The pro-Khamenei PMF leadership protested both moves and threatened mutiny. Ultimately, however, Kaabi's appointment has done little to minimize Muhandis's de facto control over the administration of the PMF. Yet although Muhandis still controls the PMF budget, Abadi increasingly has begun controlling the security strategy against the Islamic State.

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**Abadi's goal is to exert influence over the PMF's many autonomous paramilitaries in order to put the state back in control.**

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Since then, Abadi has tried to take advantage of growing opposition to the pro-Khamenei PMF leadership arising from the United States, the Iraqi military, international human rights watchdogs, pro-Sistani and pro-Sadr paramilitary groups, and local leaders in Iraq's Sunni provinces. U.S. denial of air support to the PMF, for instance, empowers Abadi at the expense of Maliki and the pro-Khamenei leadership of the PMF.<sup>80</sup> For the United States, supporting the PMF is problematic because it supports Iranian-backed groups and it weakens the state security institutions, the latter being those Washington prefers to support.

Moreover, the Iraqi military is bent on regaining its dignity. Another aspect of Abadi's efforts has been making Iraq's Counterterrorism Service, or the Golden Divisions, the frontline fighters against the Islamic State. These forces fall under the PMO, rather than the defense or interior ministries, and this gives Abadi more military oversight.<sup>81</sup> On the battlefield itself, Ramadi was the turning point when Abadi began to gradually sideline the PMF's frontline involvement in favor of the Golden Divisions. In return for giving the PMF a free hand in Baiji (north of Tikrit), Abadi changed plans from targeting Fallujah (as previously demanded by the PMF leaders), to liberating Ramadi in January 2016. Thereafter, he began pursuing gradual control rather than appeasement, and he began keeping the PMF relatively in check. With consistent Golden Division victories, his position became stronger and the more he seemed bent on putting more checks and controls in place. So although he has been unable to control the PMF administration, he has successfully pushed the PMF aside in major battles, such as the battle for Mosul, where the PMF's role is limited to Tel Afar, unlike the Golden Divisions and state police, which are on the front line and increasingly gaining favor among Iraqis.<sup>82</sup>

Achieving a quick victory in Fallujah in the summer of 2016, without resorting to the militias, allowed Abadi to create a fighting model to combat the Islamic State while maintaining some control over Iraq's paramilitary forces. The successes of this Fallujah model further elevated Abadi's position vis-à-vis the pro-Khamenei PMF leaders. In July 2016, Abadi was able to retake the city, the longest-held city under Islamic State control, by using the Golden Divisions. The PMF paramilitaries were only allowed into the city after the Golden Division commandos had broken through the Islamic State's defenses and liberated the city.

## Future Plans for the PMF

Meanwhile, as the conflict in Mosul continues, the various leadership factions in Baghdad have different plans about what to do next with the PMF paramilitaries. These divergent plans reveal a fierce struggle for full authority over the security of Iraq.

On one side is the pro-Khamenei, right-wing, bloc of Ameri, Maliki, and Muhandis. They seek to create a formal and legal dual structure in the Iraqi security apparatus, akin to the separation between the IRGC and the regular Iranian army. For Maliki and others, the multi-ethnic makeup of the Iraqi army and police forces make these bodies susceptible to various influences and thus another collapse. As such, these leaders want to keep the largely Shia PMF effective and loyal to them.

Yet Abadi, his wing of the Dawa Party, and many other Iraqi powers—including the pro-Sistani and pro-Sadr segments of the PMF, various Sunni leaders, and Kurdistan’s leaders—all prefer for the state to integrate the PMF into existing military units under Order 91, which rules that PMF members cannot be part of a political party or engage in any political activities.<sup>83</sup> This is Abadi’s attempt to stop Maliki, Ameri, and Muhandis from further politicizing the PMF. Their attempt to register the PMF as an electoral entity was immediately denied. According to former Iraqi defense minister Khaled al-Obeidi, the best course of action is to “integrate the Hashd [PMF] at the soldier level, not the leadership level.”<sup>84</sup> According to a spokesman, “The process of transforming the PMU [or PMF] into an organization according to the law passed by parliament requires the prime minister to form specialized committees to sort and classify the fighters. Such a process needs time and cannot be finalized before the end of the battle of Mosul.”<sup>85</sup>

If integration is not possible at the moment, the prime minister has hinted at another move: curtailment, which could also bring down the powerful pro-Khamenei group. In a March 2016 meeting with the author, Prime Minister Abadi disclosed his plan to include some 20,000 to 25,000 PMF fighters in the armed forces—this would potentially represent more than an 80 percent cut.<sup>86</sup>

Between the options of state recognition and curtailment or complete integration is the option of maintaining the current PMF structure while changing how the militias operate. A PMF spokesman has claimed that the plan is to bring the paramilitaries under a PMF wing of the state’s security apparatus. He has claimed that the groups will lose their names and logos and be simply given numbers. For instance, AAH would become the Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth Divisions of the Iraqi army.<sup>87</sup> As for the question of integration, Abadi’s Order 91 recognizes the PMF as “independent” but subsumes it under the military’s disciplinary regulations and jurisdiction as part of the armed and security forces. Despite the order’s wording, then, Abadi continues to desire to incorporate the PMF into the Iraqi military.

Whether the PMF is integrated into the rank and file of the existing armed forces or retained as a separate branch of the military will have implications not only for Iraq’s future security, but also for the country’s political outlook. If Abadi is able to take back control and effectively integrate the groups, he

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**As the conflict in Mosul continues, the various leadership factions in Baghdad have different plans about what to do next with the PMF paramilitaries.**

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will make a compelling case for the strength of his leadership. However, if he is unable to fend off the pro-Khamenei group, then the likes of Maliki and Ameri will continue to maintain influence over the state. With an election coming up next year, the PMF is bound to become a political tool used by all sides in their pursuits of legitimacy.

## The Next Stage of Shia Politics in Iraq

In the end, post-Mosul Shia power relations will decide the direction and strength of the state. With the battle for Mosul raging, the intensifying Shia conflict for power at the top will continue to grow and overshadow post-Mosul Iraqi politics.<sup>88</sup> This conflict includes the relationship between Sadr and Maliki and that between Abadi and Maliki.<sup>89</sup> The PMF will be a key feature of this intra-Shia struggle for power in a post-Islamic State Iraq. At the center, and representing the state, Abadi faces two main Shia challengers.

The first main challenge is a top-down push from his predecessor, Maliki, and the pro-Khamenei leadership. These figures are very clear about their political stance: the PMF should pursue power at the center. The PMF has thus become active on several fronts apart from the military battle to defeat the Islamic State. The leadership opposes the popular protest movement, obstructs the National Guard Act, and calls for a strong, centralized, presidential regime, while they criticize Abadi. Maliki is now looking to make the PMF a political entity under his leadership. In September 2016, he submitted a request to the Independent High Electoral Commission to establish a PMF electoral bloc, which would replace his old State of Law Coalition, but he was shut down by the courts.<sup>90</sup>

This group believes that Iraq requires a strongman to take charge of the central government to replace the feeble Abadi. Oddly enough, Maliki is more convincingly making the point that he is a strongman, despite having lost one-third of Iraqi territory, whereas Abadi is unable to make similar claims despite having won back most of this lost territory. Many leaders in the pro-Khamenei group demand that the leader of Iraq be a strongman. For instance, Maliki is gearing for a return—led by either himself or a trusted ally—by using his control over the pro-Khamenei faction of the PMF. He has stated, “If I were prime minister, the state would reassert its authority.”<sup>91</sup> His plan, then, is to return to power and use his position to strengthen the state and its institutions. If this return proves impractical, then the alternative would be for a trusted Maliki ally to emerge as an interim leader. However, he is only willing to bolster state institutions if he or his allies are in power—as long as Iraq is ruled by alternative leaders, this group will not seek to strengthen the state.

The PMF Act, however, prohibits the organization's involvement in politics. Behind the symbolism of Maliki's efforts to rebrand by capitalizing on the PMF's popularity stands the fact that he needs the public's sacred regard for the

PMF and its martyrs to gain political capital and win enough votes to return to power. A good number of Iraqis believe that the PMF should have a political future because it took part in the war against the Islamic State.<sup>92</sup> It seems there is little doubt that Maliki will continue to use his role as the “godfather of the PMF”—a phrase used by a civil servant in the MOD—to stage a comeback.<sup>93</sup>

In the meantime, the right-wing group will continue targeting the government under Abadi. The forced resignations of Abadi’s former defense and interior ministers, for instance, were meant to create a security vacuum, tarnish the army’s reputation, and present the PMF as the only alternative.

The second source of pressure that Abadi faces comes from the Sadrists, who have also pressured the premier to change his cabinet. They have thus far successfully lobbied for five ministry heads to be replaced. Sadr’s main ambition is to halt the potential return of Maliki or his allies. Sadrists often agree with Abadi’s speeches and policies, but they tend to believe the prime minister is too weak to enact his ideas. However, Sadr has expressed his interest in supporting Abadi or a like-minded leader as long as he or she is strong enough to combat Maliki.

The Sadrists will also act as the main check against Maliki and the pro-Khamenei leadership. Sadr’s reaction to Maliki’s attempt to form a new electoral bloc reveals this looming battle between Sadr and Maliki. In a note, the Shia cleric claimed that “using jihad and mujahideen for electoral and political ends must be prohibited . . . otherwise jihad will be slaughtered at the altar of politics, and government in Iraq will become a military or warlord’s rule.”<sup>94</sup> A chief Sadr spokesperson told the author that he is looking to form an alternative political bloc that would not allow Maliki and his allies to re-emerge.<sup>95</sup>

Yet following the 2010 elections, Sadr was forced against his will to join with Maliki’s bloc after Iran exerted severe pressure. In Iraq’s 2018 parliamentary elections, Iran will likely push Sadr to again keep the Shia house (*beit as-Shi’i*) united. The question, then, is whether the Sadrists’ plan to form an alternative coalition can withstand Tehran’s pressure come election season. Current indications seem to suggest this election may be different. Shia clerics close to Iran, including Sadr’s former teacher Kazim al-Haeri, have issued fatwas against the protests. In the past, Sadr would have capitulated, like he did when he backed Maliki again in 2010. This time, however, Sadr is firing back and defying the clerical authority’s fatwas.<sup>96</sup>

In short, post-Mosul Iraqi politics will be defined by a contest pitting Maliki and his supporters against Sadr and his protest movement. Abadi and the state will be stuck in the middle trying to leverage both sides to form a compromise government. Yet if the center is unable to reach a compromise and take back control of governance and representation due to these intra-Shia disputes, Iraq’s state-building project will not come to fruition and the PMF will remain a military check on the state security apparatus.

## Conclusion

In the end, much depends on the post-Mosul situation. If Abadi is able to exert his influence by using the state's security forces to fully retake the city—while the PMF serves in the background, akin to the battle in Fallujah—then the centrists will fare a better chance of success in their state-building project. The future of the PMF as a political entity, meanwhile, will become clearer after Iraq's upcoming provincial and parliamentary elections in 2018.

The PMF is at the heart of this greater battle for power inside the divided Shia camp. The winner of this battle will likely control the executive in Iraq,

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**The winner of this battle will likely control the executive in Iraq, and will largely guide the post-Islamic State rebuilding of the state and Iraq's national identity.**

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and will largely guide the post-Islamic State rebuilding of the state and Iraq's national identity. Maliki and his pro-Khamenei allies will seek to use the sacredness of the PMF to win popularity and thus votes. Abadi, however, will attempt to use the victories of Iraqi military forces inside Mosul to elevate his position as commander in chief. He is already perceived by most Iraqis to be stronger than he was in 2014, as evidenced by his relationship with the PMF.

Finally, Sadr will attempt to use growing grievances among the Shia against corruption and failed governance to call for a change from the same Maliki-allied cast of characters who have been governing Iraq, officially or unofficially, since 2003.

## Notes

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