



# From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualising the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Units

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# Executive Summary

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- Following the Iraqi elections on 12 May the ambitions of one particular group of actors have captured international attention – the controversial Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU) known by their Arabic name as *al-Hashd al- Sha'abi*.
- Embraced by some for their role in military efforts against Islamic State, and looked upon with distrust by others for their foreign ties, the current and future role of this state-sanctioned paramilitary force remains one of debate and uncertainty.
- The PMU are often portrayed in black and white terms, but these elections also highlight how they are in fact distinctly nuanced and diverse, with some of its members giving up their military affiliations to participate in the political process.

## The Birth and Institutionalisation of the PMU

- Following the unprecedented collapse of the Iraqi army in Mosul and elsewhere in 2014, coupled with fears that Baghdad itself might fall to insurgents, Sistani's *wajib al-kifai fatwa*, published in 2014, bestowed an unforeseen moral legitimacy upon the PMU. In its original wording, the *fatwa* deliberately refrained from adopting explicitly Shiite references, addressing all Iraqi citizens – irrespective of their confessional background.
- However, plans for the establishment of additional security units appear to precede Islamic State's intrusion into Mosul, and date back to the spring of 2014.
- Having united diverse forces under the umbrella of a multi-layered paramilitary body, the PMU were officially integrated into the Iraqi security forces through the so-called Hashd law in 2016. However, the chosen wording, framing the PMU as part of the country's security forces while simultaneously labelling them as "independent", has left much room for interpretation. This ambiguity is what enables some of the more notorious factions of the movement to chart a path between an identity of state and a non-state actor depending on social context, audience, and short-term objectives.
- The current lack of a sustainable roadmap for the integration, professionalisation and/or re-qualification of the 140,000 individual fighters is what feeds the fear that the PMU might exploit the grey zone described above, drawing both on their operational legality and acclaimed ideological legitimacy.

## Organisational Structure and Leading Formations

- Set up as an umbrella organisation, the PMU comprise approximately forty distinct entities.
- The PMU therefore exhibit a high-degree of diversity, while accounting for a range of internal tensions and divisions along strategic fault lines. Showcasing these often-conflicting ideologies, allegiances and interests on the ground requires dissecting the paramilitary outgrowth, and identifying its fundamental units.
- Analysts tend to differentiate entities within the PMU between pro-Khamenei, pro-Sistani, and pro-Sadr clusters. Nevertheless, personal testimonies and statements by PMU-affiliated leaders reveal subtle nuances and gradations, manifesting themselves both within and between these roughly outlined clusters. This report does not seek to put forward a substitute-typology approach, but rather to magnify some of the specific groups, sensitising the reader to the challenge, and at times folly, of categorising them as belonging exclusively to one of the three ideological camps.
- According to high-ranking PMU representatives, Western misperceptions of the PMU derive largely from the apparent dominance of pre-existing Iran-aligned formations. The role of those armed factions (which they refer to in Arabic as *fasa'il*), has been claimed to be of an essentially “administrative” nature due to the lack of battle proof cadres capable of training and organising the overflow of volunteers who answered Sistani’s *fatwa*.
- This report provides an overview of the main concerns linked to the PMUs from the proclaimed Iran-aligned camp, focusing on some of the groups most often criticised: *Badr*, *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq* (AAH), *Kata'ib Hezbollah* (KH), *Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada*, *Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba*, *Saraya al-Khorasani*, and (according to some sources) *Kata'ib Tayyar al-Risali*. Furthermore, this report elaborates on Muqtada al-Sadr’s *Saraya al-Salam* Peace Brigades and the so-called *Hashd al-Marji'i*, referring to the pro-Sistani formations financed by the country’s shrine authorities.

## The Hashd and Election Manoeuvring

- The May 2018 parliamentary elections reflected Iraq’s highly fragmented political landscape.
- One of the most noticeable examples of a victorious cross-sectarian pact has remained Sadr’s unexpected coming to terms with the secularists and the weakened Iraqi Communist Party. With his newly formed political party *Istiqama* (Integrity), he has been branding the rather unorthodox alliance *Sa'iroun* (On the Move) as a non-sectarian and inclusive march toward reform and social justice.
- With none of the registered forces having been able to achieve a majority of parliamentary seats, experts have identified five major contenders after the release of the election results with the potential to affect Muqtada al-Sadr’s government formation efforts. These five are: Hadi al-Ameri’s *Fatah* (Conquest Coalition), Haider al-Abadi’s alliance *Nasr* (Victory), Nouri al-Maliki’s *Dawlat al-Qanun* (State of Law Coalition), Ayad Allawi’s *al-Wataniya* (National Alliance), and Ammar al-Hakim’s *Tayyar al-Hikma al-Watani* (National

Wisdom Movement). Although all of the above listed factions seem to generally agree upon the importance of state's monopoly on violence, the tolerance threshold regarding PMU's degree of autonomy within the state's armed forces will strongly depend on the leverage and decision-making power of every one of them within the soon-to-be-composed coalition government.

## **Conclusion**

- Ambiguities within the existing legislation meant to strengthen the state-actor character of the PMU have left a loophole, allowing the PMU to take on multiple roles, benefiting equally from the established operational legality, and acclaimed ideological legitimacy.
- The lines are blurred and the allegiances – at least those that have been verbally professed thus far – are prone to shift according to the target audience and the immediate operational advantages pursued by the groups' carrier political forerunners.
- Regardless of any potential electoral gains PMU-affiliated leaders have been able to achieve to this point within and outside the established Fatah alliance, the PMU as an umbrella organisation requires the firm institutional embrace of the Iraqi authorities.
- With Islamic State regrouping slowly in the background, the Hashd needs to gradually develop into a disciplined and agile state organisation.
- This transformation process, alongside continued security sector reforms in a fragile yet hopeful democracy, will take time. It will also require a high level of manoeuvrability on behalf of Iraq's future government, its frequently competing neighbours, and its foreign allies.



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# List of Key Terms and Actors

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- AAH – Asa’ib Ahl al-Haqq (the League of Righteous People)
- al-Hashd al-Asha’ir ( the Tribal Mobilisation Forces)
- al-Wataniya – Ayad Alawi’s National Alliance
- Al-‘Atabat al-‘Aliyat – holy shrines of Shi’a Imams in Iraq including Najaf, Karbala, Kadhimiya, and Samarra
- Basij (the Mobilisation) – the Organisation for Mobilisation of the Oppressed, referring to one of the five forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
- Dawlat al-Qanun – Nouri al-Maliki’s State of Law Coalition
- Fatah – Hadi al-Ameri’s Conquest Coalition
- Fatwa – an opinion on a point of law, the term “law” applying, in Islam, to all civil or religious matters.
- Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (Movement of the Party of God’s Nobles)
- IHEC – Iraq’s High Electoral Commission
- IRGC – Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
- ISCI or SIIC – Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq
- JAM – Jaysh al-Mahdi (the Mahdi Army)
- Kata’ib al-Imam Ali (the Imam Ali Brigades)
- Kata’ib Jund al-Imam (the Jund al-Imam Brigades)
- Kata’ib Tayyar al-Risali (the Missionary Movement Battalions)
- KH – Kata’ib Hezbollah ( the Hezbollah Brigades)
- KSS – Al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya – Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (The Islamic Resistance – The Battalions of the Lord of the Martyrs)
- Liwa’ ‘Ali al-Akbar (the Ali al-Akbar Brigade)
- Marji’iyya – Iraq’s Shiite religious authorities
- Munazzamat Badr (Badr Organisation) – an Iraqi political party, previously known as the *Badr* Brigades
- Nasr (Abadi’s Victory Alliance)
- PMU – Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU), known by their Arabic name as al-Hashd al-Sha’abi



- Saraya al-'Ataba al-'Abbasiya (the Brigades of Al-Abbas Holy Shrine), also known as al-Abbas Combat Division
- Saraya al-'Ataba al-'Alawiya (the Brigades of the Imam Ali Shrine)
- Saraya al-'Ataba al-Hussainiya (the Brigades of the Imam Hussain Shrine)
- Saraya al-Khorasani (the Khorasani Brigades)
- Saraya al-Salam (the Peace Regiments)
- Sa'iroun – Muqtada al-Sadr's Marching Forward (On the Move) Alliance
- SCIRI – Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq
- Tayyar al-Hikma al-Watani – Ammar al-Hakim's National Wisdom Movement Party



# Introduction

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On May 12, Iraq held its first parliamentary elections since securing a nominal victory over the self-proclaimed Islamic State.<sup>1</sup> In the midst of growing disillusionment and social discontent, low rates of voter turnout delivered a somewhat surprising victory to Muqtada al-Sadr whose loyalist support base appears to have maintained its enthusiasm for him whilst support for other candidates melted away.<sup>2</sup> Widely referred to as a “firebrand” cleric, Sadr has so far succeeded in rebranding himself as the best hope of those in both the West and Gulf who want to curb Iranian influence in Iraq. However, memories of the Mahdi Army – which Sadr led – and its violent insurgency against Coalition troops following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, gives rise to ongoing concerns over his ability to deliver stability to Iraq and to maintain its relationships with the complex series of external powerbrokers who have strong interests in the country.<sup>3</sup>

Running on a campaign platform focused on rooting out corruption and tackling Iraq's systemic challenges, the question remains how Sadr will deliver on his pledges. From preventing the re-emergence of Islamic State, to the continued professionalisation of state security forces, to rebuilding key infrastructure and addressing sectarian divisions, the future of Iraq remains fragile and uncertain. The challenges for Sadr are complicated further by the success of Hadi al-Ameri and his *Fatah* (Conquest) list, which came second in the elections – and just seven seats behind Sadr overall.<sup>4</sup> Al-Ameri is a long-standing veteran of Iraqi politics and leads the *Badr* organisation, which is strongly influenced by Iran and is a key player within the country's controversial Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU), known by their Arabic name as *al-Hashd al-Sha'abi*.

Legitimised through a 2014 *fatwa* by Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani that inspired a nationwide enlistment movement, the PMU represent a state-sanctioned paramilitary force consisting of some forty predominantly, but not exclusively, armed Shiite groups comprised of approximately 140,000 active fighters.<sup>5</sup> Key to the state's campaign against Islamic State, some view the PMUs positively, recognising their notable efforts in military operations, and praising their perceived sacrifice for the country.<sup>6</sup> However, others have accused the PMUs of engaging in sectarian violence, human rights violations and even war crimes.<sup>7</sup>

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1 Tamer El-Ghobashy, “Iraq Declares Complete Victory in the War against Islamic State – The Washington Post,” accessed March 21, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iraq-declares-complete-victory-in-the-war-against-islamic-state/2017/12/09/9a0c5ea6-dce3-11e7-8e5f-ccc94e22b133\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.42249b0e7f2f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iraq-declares-complete-victory-in-the-war-against-islamic-state/2017/12/09/9a0c5ea6-dce3-11e7-8e5f-ccc94e22b133_story.html?utm_term=.42249b0e7f2f).

2 Kirk Sowell, “Understanding Sadr's Victory,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed May 20, 2018, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/76387>.

3 Thanassis Cambanis, “Can Militant Cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr Reform Iraq?,” The Century Foundation, May 1, 2018, <https://tcf.org/content/report/can-militant-cleric-muqtada-al-sadr-reform-iraq/>.

4 MUSINGS ON IRAQ, “Seat Allocation Announced For Iraq's New Parliament,” accessed May 21, 2018, <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.de/2018/05/seat-allocation-announced-for-iraqs-new.html>.

5 PMU Commission Representatives. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal Interview. Baghdad, April 26, 2018. In this interview, PMU Commission representatives point out to the existence of 40 groups under the PMU umbrella, underlining the trend towards reducing the number of distinct divisions. Others dispute this figure, as illustrated further below.

6 FRANCE 24 English, Exclusive: On the Frontline with Shiite Militias in Iraq, January 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wDWr60DQMhs>.

7 This has been documented by HRW and Amnesty international in the following reports: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/07/31/iraq-ban-abusive-militias-mosul-operation> <https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/iraq-turning-a-blind-eye-the-arming-of-the-pmu/> <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/907641/download>

Having found a loophole to circumvent the legal framework that was intended to prevent the militarisation of the elections, a number of prominent PMU-affiliated leaders have opted to disengage from their respective armed brigades in order to compete officially in the electoral process and participate in the May parliamentary elections. Whether foreseeable or not, the socio-political ascendancy of the PMU as an indispensable agenda-setter in post-Islamic State Iraq has so far given rise to multiple worst-case scenarios, including the imminent 'Hezbollah-isation' of the country, and its 'hollowing out' by Iranian installed puppets.<sup>8</sup> Given the announced U.S. withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear accord, and the diminishing prospects of restoring U.S.-Iranian cooperation, Iraq's Western allies and Sunni Gulf neighbours increasingly fear the willingness and capacity of Iran to secure its own "Shiite crescent" project from Beirut to Tehran.<sup>9</sup> Establishing this critical zone of dominance in Iraq would require Iraq's compliance or, at the very least, tacit consent. This underscores the significance of the May elections and the political leverage that Iran-backed factions running on what is referred to as the 'PMU ticket' currently hold. Regardless of the final electoral outcome, it is clear that the role and status of the PMUs will continue to be a focus for any future government.

Building on existing empirical research, this report seeks to challenge the oversimplified portrayal of the PMU as subservient Iranian proxies, interrogate the vast divergences and nuances of the various groups within the PMU, and analyse how their rising autonomy has empowered their front-runners to pave the way to the ballot box. The paper consists of four chapters. To discuss in depth the double-edged sword that comes with the politicisation of state-sponsored militias, the first chapter begins by providing a brief backdrop by discussing the emergence and evolution of the PMU. It revisits the regional and national power-dynamics that preceded the formation and coming-of-age of the PMU. In the context of existing legislation, it elaborates on their controversial hybrid character – having on the one hand encompassed a heterogeneous array of competing and cooperating paramilitary groups, while on the other representing a state-sponsored legal structure. The second chapter will elaborate on this structure, and particularly the early stages of the organisation. The profiles of some of the more prominent groups are highlighted in this section, and the broad diversity of those within the PMU is made evident. The third chapter explores prospective implications from the May elections – from a PMU-coloured government coalition, to a weaker representation of individual PMU-affiliated leaders in Iraq's parliament. Finally, the concluding chapter summarises the findings and touches on some of the challenges found in the future role, status and further integration of the PMU within state security forces – particularly those designed to hinder the mutation of the PMU into a parallel security apparatus or, as feared in some cases, a warlord-run franchise. Based on statements and insights collected during fieldwork conducted in multiple locations in Iraq in April 2018, the final chapter discusses the potential of the PMU to boost the fragile legitimacy of the Iraqi state as a semi-autonomous force. It also assesses their intention to challenge the state's efficiency and efficacy as the sovereign "guarantor" and provider of stability, security and rule of law.

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Knights, Phillip Smyth, and Ahmed Ali, "Iranian Influence in Iraq: Between Balancing and Hezbollahization?," accessed March 21, 2018, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraq-and-iranian-influence-between-balancing-and-hezbollah-ization>.

<sup>9</sup> Mohamad Bazzi, "The Growing U.S.-Iran Proxy Fight in Syria," *The Atlantic*, June 20, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/06/iran-syria-trump-saudi-arabia-escalation-isis/530844/>.

# Chapter 1 – The Birth and Institutionalisation of the PMU

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The unprecedented (though in many ways predictable) collapse of the nearly 600,000-strong U.S.-trained Iraqi army in the face of the Islamic State offensive on Mosul caught Iraq's officials off guard.<sup>10</sup> The breakdown of the Iraqi military came to be attributed to bureaucratic infighting, systemic corruption and sectarian clientelism, which were manifest following the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces in December 2011.<sup>11</sup> In view of the resulting military leadership vacuum and the publicly-fed fear of Baghdad falling to the insurgents, Sistani's call to arms on June 13, 2014, bestowed an unforeseen legitimacy on the PMU. Plans for the establishment of additional security units appear to precede the actual Islamic State intrusion of Mosul however, and date back to the spring of 2014. As reported by Nibras Kazimi, the content of a strategic meeting of Iraq's National Alliance addressing the advances of Islamic State in Fallujah held on April 7, 2014, indicated that the Shiite leadership bloc had been fully aware of the weakening capacity of the Iraqi army and was considering the option of creating so-called Popular Defence Brigades (*saraya al-dif'a al-sha'abi*).<sup>12</sup> Featuring a logo similar to that of the Lebanese Hezbollah, these units were also envisioned by General Qassem Soleimani, leader of Iran's Quds Force, to act as "a new auxiliary force"; and by former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who called for a force of home-grown "Sons of Iraq" groups [composed] of mujahideen" to conduct guerrilla warfare. By that time, Nouri al-Maliki was already relying on the backing of seven paramilitary units to counter the advances of emboldened Islamic State fighters in contested Sunni areas: *Badr Organisation*, *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq* (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*.<sup>13</sup>

Confronted with the structural collapse of the Iraqi army, and the failure to persuade the Obama administration to step in, al-Maliki issued an official decree launching the Commission for the Popular Mobilisation Forces (*Hay'at al-Hashd al-Sha'abi*) in June 2014. Regarded as a violation of Article 9, Paragraph B of the Iraqi constitution that stipulates that "the formation of military militia outside the framework of the armed forces is prohibited,"<sup>14</sup> this new institution would likely never have acquired the level of nationwide public support and credibility

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10 Ned Parker, Isabel Coles, and Raheem Salman, "Special Report: How Mosul Fell – An Iraqi General Disputes..." Reuters, October 14, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-gharawi-special-report/special-report-how-mosul-fell-an-iraqi-general-disputes-baghdads-story-idUSKCN0I30Z820141014>.

11 Keren Fraiman, Austin Long, and Caitlin Talmadge, "Why the Iraqi Army Collapsed (and What Can Be Done about It)," Washington Post, June 13, 2014, sec. Monkey Cage, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/06/13/why-the-iraqi-army-collapsed-and-what-can-be-done-about-it/>.

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

13 Renad Mansour, Jabbar Faleh A., "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future," Carnegie Middle East Center, accessed March 22, 2018, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810>.

14 Full Text of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution available under: [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq\\_2005.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005.pdf?lang=en)

without the external threat posed by Islamic State, and the religious endorsement from Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.<sup>15</sup>

In its original wording, Sistani's 2014 "*Wajib al-Kifai*" *fatwa* did not seem intended to encourage any form of Shiite militarism.<sup>16</sup> In an interview with *zenith* magazine, Nouri al-Maliki also claimed credit for ensuring the *fatwa* did not exhibit any sectarian character.<sup>17</sup> Underlining that the responsibility to confront terrorism does not fall upon one particular sect or subnational community, the language adopted in the *fatwa* deliberately refrained from using any discriminatory Shiite references. As underlined in talks with the representatives of the Supreme Religious Authority – Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani, Sheykh Mahdi al-Karbalai and Sheykh Ahmed al-Safi – the *fatwa* was directed at all Iraqi citizens – irrespective of their confessional background – to join the effort and volunteer in support of the security forces. However, as Renad Mansour states, Sistani's initial good will to mobilise fresh cadres for Iraq's army and federal police ended up benefitting the newly launched PMU Commission and its unprecedented recruitment campaign the most.<sup>18</sup> Utilising this opportunity to gain official legitimacy, some of the paramilitary units that had been conducting clandestine operations rapidly re-emerged with official branding, investing in radio and television channels and advertising their popular resistance narrative through Facebook and Twitter accounts.<sup>19</sup> In addition to those formally re-activated groups, Iraq's Shiite religious authorities (*marja'iyya*) facilitated the formation of additional brigades, which declared their loyalty to Grand Ayatollah Sistani and are financed through the Holy shrines (*Al-'Atabat al-'Aliyat*).<sup>20</sup>

Consequently, these 'genealogically' diverse forces (sometimes referred to as "contractors") became united under the umbrella of a multi-layered paramilitary body, which were officially integrated into the Iraqi security forces through the so-called *Hashd* law in 2016.<sup>21</sup> However, the chosen wording, framing the PMU as part of the country's security forces while simultaneously labelling them as an "independent" element, left room for interpretation. This ambiguity is what enables the more notorious Iranian-backed factions to navigate between a state and a non-state actor identity, depending on the social context, audience and their short-term objectives.

To address this problematic gap ahead of the parliamentary elections, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi issued an additional decree in March 2018 to emphasise the more sceptically viewed 'state character' of the PMU.<sup>22</sup> Within it, the PMU are repeatedly defined as a formal part of the Iraqi armed forces, entitled to the same privileges and monetary compensation as employees of the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defence, while also being subjected to the same rules and code of conduct that apply to all state security personnel. Even though PMU leadership has generally welcomed the prospect of equal salaries and access to military colleges and institutions, in a March 2018 interview

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15 Fanar Haddad, "Understanding Iraq's Hashd Al-Sha'bi," The Century Foundation, March 5, 2018, <https://tcf.org/content/report/understanding-iraqs-hashd-al-shabi/>.

16 The Arabic version of Sistani's *fatwa* can be accessed under <https://www.sistani.org/arabic/in-news/24908/>

17 Maliki, Nouri al-. Interview by Daniel Gerlach. Personal Interview. Zenith Magazine, 01/2018

18 Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future."

19 Jabar.

20 Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee, "The 'Formal' Marja': Shi'i Clerical Authority and the State in Post-2003 Iraq," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (February 2, 2018): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2018.1429988>.

21 The full text of the *Hashd al-Sha'abi* Law (Arabic), Al Sumeria News, November 26, 2016, <https://www.alsumeria.tv/news/187029/السومرية-نيوز-تنشر-نص-قانون-الحشد-الشعبي/>

22 "Iraq's Abadi Inducts Iran-Linked Militias into Security Forces," Middle East Eye, accessed March 21, 2018, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraqs-abadi-inducts-iran-linked-militias-security-forces-1660597837>.

with Asharq al-Awsat, the spokesperson of *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq* PMU division Naeem al-Aboudi, firmly rejected the often-advocated formal assimilation path. He stated, "We do not support merging the PMF [PMU] with the Iraqi Defence and Interior ministries, because such a move would dissolve the group and we do not want this."<sup>23</sup> In an announcement read by his representative Sheykh Abdul Mahdi al-Karbalai during the Friday sermon on December 15, 2017, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani also sided in favour of the integration of PMU fighters within "official and constitutional structures". Sistani appealed to PMU leaders not to get involved in the political arena, to avoid usurping the courageous achievements of the volunteers, and to avoid tarnishing their heroic reputation.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, speculation around the possibility of the high cleric revoking the 2014 *fatwa* given the declared defeat of the Islamic State have so far remained wishful thinking.

On the contrary, Sistani has highlighted that "the victory over Daesh doesn't mean the end of the battle with terrorism,"<sup>25</sup> suggesting that the security apparatus should gain the support of the fighters involved in the battle for Iraq's liberation. During the recent festivities around the birthday celebration of Imam Husain in Karbala in April 2018, al-Karbalai stressed that the seeds of Islamic State' extremist propaganda have not yet been eradicated, which is one reason the Iraqi army still needs the help of the PMU volunteers to tackle this unconventional security threat. Brookings Visiting Fellow Ranj Alaaldin suggests that Sistani would not risk a public backlash at Iraq's Shiite clerical establishment for dissolving an institution as strongly admired as the PMU.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, going beyond the implied economic aspect of depriving its numerous combatants of livelihood options, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis underlined the moral duty of Najaf's *marja'iyya* towards the volunteers as "it would be unjust to let go of those, who have risked their lives defending their homeland."<sup>27</sup>

This current lack of a sustainable roadmap for the integration, professionalisation and/or re-qualification of the 140,000 individual fighters is what feeds the fear that the PMU might exploit the grey zone described above, manoeuvring between their operational legality and acclaimed ideological legitimacy.

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23 "PMF Rejects Being Merged into Iraqi Security Institutions," Asharq Al-Awsat, "Middle-east Arab News Opinion," accessed March 23, 2018, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1200331/exclusive-pmf-rejects-being-merged-iraqi-security-institutions>.

24 "Khutbat al-nasr min Karbalā' al-muqaddasa" [Sistani's announcement from the Friday sermon in Karbala], Sistani.org, December 15, 2017, <https://www.sistani.org/arabic/statement/25875/>.

25 Nick Mastrovito says, "Top Iraqi-Shiite Cleric Endorses Incorporation of PMF into the State | FDD's Long War Journal," December 28, 2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/12/top-iraqi-shiite-cleric-endorses-incorporation-of-pmf-into-the-state.php>.

26 Ranj Alaaldin, "How Will Iraq Contain Iran's Proxies? – The Atlantic," accessed March 21, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/the-man-who-could-help-rebuild-iraq/553799/>.

27 Muhandis, Abu Mahdi al-. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal Interview. Baghdad, April 22, 2018





## Chapter 2 – Organisational Structure and Leading Formations of Key PMU Affiliates

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According to high-ranking representatives of the PMU Commission, the PMU umbrella organisation includes approximately forty distinct entities, even though some disputed sources record up to sixty officially recognised “militias” exist.<sup>28</sup> The PMU exhibit a high-degree of diversity, while accounting for a range of internal tensions and divisions along strategic fault lines. Showcasing these often-conflicting ideologies, allegiances and interests on the ground requires dissecting the paramilitary outgrowth, and identifying its fundamental units.<sup>29</sup> As reiterated by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Vice President of the PMU Commission, the PMU is not an exclusively Shiite phenomenon: “There are over 30,000 Sunni fighters in the PMU, Christian groups, including Rayan al-Kildani’s “The Lions of Babylon Brigades”, as well as Turkmen, Kurdish, Yazidi and Shabak members registered within the different formations.”<sup>30</sup>

The classification and distinction of these units is currently debated amongst analysts. The key to understanding this idiosyncratic plurality of perspectives, according to Mansour and Faleh, is to acknowledge them as part of a “growing intra-Shia power contest”.<sup>31</sup> The authors differentiate within the PMU between pro-Khamenei, pro-Sistani, and pro-Sadr clusters, specifying that the pro-Sistani and pro-Sadr groups are both in favour of a procedural demobilisation or integration, while the pro-Khamenei camp would insist upon keeping the PMU as a state-authorized independent entity. Applying a similar logic, Alaaldin also draws a distinction between the Iran-aligned, the Iraqi state-aligned, and the so-called “rebellious militias”. The last group refers to the Sadrist movement’s Peace Brigades, who have an inclination to challenge both the religious establishment and federal government.<sup>32</sup> Walter Posch has presented an additional approach to classification, outlining four currents within Iraq’s militant Shiite Muslim movement: “the Shiite resistance in Iraq and in exile”; “the Sadrist movement and the Mahdi Army”; “the Hezbollah family”; and the so-called “Apocalypticism”, which captures their millenarian rhetoric.<sup>33</sup>

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28 “Hādhi ‘asmā’ al-milishiyāt al-‘irāqīyyi al-lafī ‘itamadathā al-ḥukūma” [These are the names of the Iraqi militias, which have been recognised by the government], alaraby, February 9, 2017, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2017/2/9/هذه-أسماء-المليشيات-العراقية-التي-اعتمدها-الحكومة>.

29 For more expansive detail see: “ICSR Insight – Ruling with Hashd: The Good, the Badr and the Chameleon / ICSR,” ICSR, December 18, 2017, <http://icsr.info/2017/12/icsr-insight-ruling-hashd-good-badr-chameleon/>.

30 Muhandis, Abu Mahdi al-. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal Interview. Baghdad, April 22, 2018

31 Renad Mansour; Jabar Faleh A., “The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq’s Future,” Carnegie Middle East Center, accessed October 12, 2017, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810>.

32 Ranj Alaaldin, “Containing Shiite Militias: The Battle for Stability in Iraq,” n.d., 17.

33 In a detailed study for Austria’s Ministry of Interior Walter Posch elaborates on ideological legacies observed within Iraq’s militant Shiite Muslim movement.

The three more widely recognised blocs outlined above provide a useful orientation to make sense of the more pronounced distinctions observed within the PMU umbrella – namely in terms of their respective loyalty to Sayyid Ali Hosseini Khamenei, Muqtada al-Sadr and Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Nevertheless, personal testimonies and statements by PMU-affiliated leaders reveal further nuances and gradations that manifest themselves both within and between these roughly outlined clusters. Drawing on and contextualising the insights gained during the fieldwork, the author does not seek to put forward a substitute-typology approach, but rather to magnify some of the groups, sensitising the reader to the challenge, and at times folly, of categorising them as belonging exclusively to one of the three ideological camps. The lines are blurred and the allegiances – at least those that have been verbally professed – are prone to shift according to the target audience and the immediate operational advantages pursued by the groups' agile forerunners.

In a discussion with the author, Sheykh Adnan al-Shahmani, a member of the Security and Defence Parliamentary Committee, and the aforementioned Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, argued that Western misperceptions of the PMU derive largely from the overemphasis placed on the apparent dominance of pre-existing Iran-aligned formations. According to them both, the role of those armed factions (which they refer to in Arabic as *fasa'il*), has been of an essentially “administrative” nature due to the lack of battle proof cadres capable of training; and have concentrated instead on organising the overflow of volunteers who responded to Sistani's *fatwa* and joined the PMU. Pointing out the leadership vacuum after the collapse of the Iraqi army, al-Muhandis specified that veterans of his rank regarded themselves as having a responsibility to contribute their combat experience, obtained during years of fighting Saddam Hussein's forces, to the cause of defending the state. While openly declaring their gratitude for the support of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which earlier served as the main incubator of the Shiite armed resistance against the former regime, both leaders acknowledge that their longstanding ties to Tehran are, to put it mildly, regarded with suspicion.

Additionally, al-Shahmani and al-Muhandis insist on differentiating between the personal track record of those factions' leaders, and the PMU as an institutionalised people's movement built on the religious and patriotic fervour of its volunteers. In this regard, Shahmani reiterated that following the process of consolidation and professionalisation, the need for the operational assistance provided initially by the pre-existing factions has diminished. Indeed, the current efforts are allegedly aimed at strengthening the internal cohesion of the originally heterogenous organisation by gradually blurring the lines between the different divisions, while substituting their old brigade names with numbers for the sake of simplification and unanimity.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, as Renad Mansour highlights, these intentions have been circulating for some time now, without resulting in a significant change, as each leader has been benefitting from preserving the distinct societal profile of their own group.<sup>35</sup>

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34 Muhandis, Abu Mahdi al-; Shahmani, Adnan al-. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal Interview. Baghdad, April 22, 2018

35 Mansour, Renad. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Telephone Interview. May 7, 2018

## The Usual Suspects

This section provides an overview of the main concerns linked to the PMUs from the proclaimed Iran-aligned camp, focusing on some of the groups most often criticised: *Badr*, *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (AAH), *Kata'ib Hezbollah* (KH), *Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada*, *Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba*, *Saraya al-Khorasani*, and (according to some sources) *Kata'ib Tayyar al-Risali*. Analysing the distinct degrees of both purported loyalty to the Islamic Republic and dependence on the assistance by its Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC),<sup>36</sup> the author seeks to illuminate the different shades within this spectrum, which are often misleadingly regarded as one cohesive bloc and predominantly subservient to Iran.

### *Badr and its multi-vector policy*

Ignoring instructions from the religious establishment in Najaf to refrain from openly mingling with foreign actors,<sup>37</sup> *Badr's* leadership has remained extremely vocal about its long-standing relationship with Brigadier General Qassem Soleimani.<sup>38</sup> This display of devotion can be attributed to *Badr's* deep roots within the exiled Shiite resistance movement, where it's been plotting its activities, in one form or another, under the protective shield of the Iranian government since 1980. Even though *Badr* originated in 1982 as the armed wing of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), renamed in 2007 to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI or SIIC), its operational strategy as an armed wing has been dominated since the beginning by the IRGC.<sup>39</sup>

In 1984, the Iranians started mobilising and vetting volunteers among Iraqi prisoners of war (also called *ahrar*), bringing them together with loyalists from within the Iraqi Mujahideen Forces – *al-Mujahideen*.<sup>40</sup> A Shiite resistance group said to be founded in the 1980s, the group was further consolidated with the help of Jamal Ja'fer Mohammad Ali Al-Ibrahim, known under his nom de guerre Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.<sup>41</sup> Under the formal command of Abdulaziz Al-Hakim, succeeding the founder Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim, these joint forces formed the *Badr* battalion, which evolved into the "Independent Brigade No. 9 – *Badr*" (*faylaq Badr*).<sup>42</sup> Following the Iran-Iraq war, Hadi Farhan Abdullah al-Ameri,<sup>43</sup> an Iraqi commander with Iranian citizenship (and an Iranian wife), has been left in charge.<sup>44</sup>

In the years after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, both SCIRI and *Badr* – in contrast to other Shiite groups such as Sadr's Mahdi Army (*Jaysh al-Mahdi*) – have demonstrated a high level of cooperation with the U.S. forces on the ground, which has been rewarded with tacit consent

36 News portal of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, accessed March 26, 2018, <http://www.sepahnews.com/>.

37 Michael Knights and Hamdi Malik, "The Al-Abbas Combat Division Model," accessed October 10, 2017, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-al-abbas-combat-division-model>.

38 Akbar Shahid Ahmed and Ryan Grim, "What's Wrong With This Picture? For U.S. Fight Against Islamic State, Everything," *Huffington Post*, November 23, 2014, sec. Politics, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/11/23/obama-isis-iran\\_n\\_6165352.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/11/23/obama-isis-iran_n_6165352.html).

39 "Website of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq", accessed March 26, 2018, <http://almejlis.org/>.

40 Hanna Batatu, "Iraq's Underground Shi'i Movements | Middle East Research and Information Project," accessed March 26, 2018, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer102/iraqs-underground-shii-movements>.

41 Walter Posch, "Shiite Militias in Iraq and Syria," Report for the Austrian Ministry of Defence, December 2017, accessed March 26, 2018, [https://www.academia.edu/34182023/Schiitische\\_Milizen\\_im\\_Irak\\_und\\_in\\_Syrien](https://www.academia.edu/34182023/Schiitische_Milizen_im_Irak_und_in_Syrien).

42 Posch.

43 "Sepah Badr chegune sheki gereft? Hadi Farhan Abdullah al-Ameri kist? Komakha-ye mostashari-ye Iran," [How were the Badr Corps founded? Who is Hadi Farhan Abdullah al-Ameri?], Young Journalists Club, January 17, 2014, <http://www.yjc.ir/fa/news/5092278/>.

44 Alireza Nader, "Iran's Role in Iraq," Product Page, 2015, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE151.html>.

for *Badr*'s gradual encroachment into positions of influence, such as in the Ministry of the Interior.<sup>45</sup> By rebranding its military wing to the *Badr* Organisation of Reconstruction and Development (*Munazzamat Badr*), the SCIRI leadership is believed to have been avoiding its forceful disarmament.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, Hadi al-Ameri stated that *Badr* fighters have laid down their arms without any external pressure: "After the fall of Saddam in 2003, we volunteered to give up our weapons and started to engage in the political process instead. It was not until [the Islamic State] emerged, that some of the *Badr* cadres decided to answer Sistani's *fatwa* and go back to armed resistance".<sup>47</sup>

Regardless of what some experts perceive of as compromising ties to a foreign power,<sup>48</sup> *Badr* was not hindered from taking advantage of the personnel vacuum that incapacitated Iraq's security apparatus between 2003 and 2005. Thus, it has succeeded in inserting 16,000 of its Shiite fighters into the reinvented Iraqi Security Forces,<sup>49</sup> with many said to have received training from the IRGC in the 1980s and 1990s during the organisation's early years. Citing Iranian sources, Walter Posch points out Hadi al-Ameri's alleged role in building up the new Iraqi intelligence services.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, *Badr* official Qassem al-Araji still heads the Ministry of Interior,<sup>51</sup> leaving him in charge of the Federal Police brigades, including the Ministry of Interior Emergency Response Brigade.<sup>52</sup> Such a concentration of power cements the leverage of combat veteran and former Minister of Transportation Hadi al-Ameri,<sup>53</sup> maintaining an aura of indispensability around his highly adaptable organisation that is nowadays considered the backbone of the PMU.<sup>54</sup> *Badr* is often regarded as belonging to the Iran-aligned camp. Nevertheless, its representatives have also sought to maintain an image of patriotically motivated civil servants, who, while gratefully welcoming Iranian assistance, have done so only in the pursuit of Iraq's national interest (as they interpret it).

## The Taming of the "Special Groups"

### *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq – Righteousness with Benefits?*

Another important actor within the Iran-aligned spectrum is the *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq* (AAH) paramilitary group which was founded in 2006 by the followers of its current leader Qais al-Khazali.<sup>55</sup> Before the Shi'a uprising in 2004, Qais al-Khazali is reported to have served as military commander within Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, from which he had distanced himself after being allegedly encouraged by the IRGC to head

45 Posch, "Shiite Militias in Iraq and Syria."

46 "Badr Organization of Reconstruction and Development | Mapping Militant Organizations," accessed October 13, 2017, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/435#leadership>.

47 Ameri, Hadi al-. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal Interview. Baghdad, April 25, 2018

48 Phillip Smyth, "Should Iraq's ISCI Forces Really Be Considered 'Good Militias'?", accessed October 10, 2017, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/should-iraqs-isci-forces-really-be-considered-good-militias>.

49 Michael Eisenstadt, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali, "Iran's Influence in Iraq:," accessed October 13, 2017, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-influence-in-iraq-counterering-tehrans-whole-of-government-approach>.

50 "Sepah Badr chegune shekl gereft? Hadi Farhan Abdullah al-Ameri kist? Komakha-ye mostashari-ye Iran," [How were the Badr Corps founded? Who is Hadi Farhan Abdullah al-Ameri?], Young Journalists Club, January 17, 2014, <http://www.yjc.ir/fa/news/5092278/>.

51 "Iraqi Parliament Approves Araji, Hayali as Interior, Defense Ministers," accessed March 26, 2018, <http://www.thebaghdadpost.com/en/story/5559/Iraqi-parliament-approves-Araji-Hayali-as-interior-defense-ministers>.

52 Michael Knights, "The Long Haul:," accessed March 26, 2018, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-long-haul-rebooting-u.s.-security-cooperation-in-iraq>.

53 Susannah George, "Breaking Badr," *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed March 26, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/06/breaking-badr/>.

54 "ICSR Insight – Ruling with Hashd."

55 "Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq | Mapping Militant Organizations," accessed October 13, 2017, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/143>.

his own splinter group.<sup>56</sup> Funded and trained by the Iranians, AAH has so far claimed responsibility for over 6,000 attacks on American and Coalition forces,<sup>57</sup> leading to its designation by the American military as belonging to the so-called 'Special Groups' – the Iranian sponsored Shiite paramilitary organisations operating in Iraq, who Michael Knight has described as "militant Shi'a diehards."<sup>58</sup> Having kept a lower profile while marketing itself as an Iraqi nationalist political actor, AAH has used the nationwide campaign against the Islamic State to re-legitimize its armed resistance.<sup>59</sup> This time, however, it has become an integral part of the PMU, while growing in size to approximately 15,000 active fighters.<sup>60</sup>

Nevertheless, fighting on the same side as coalition forces has neither changed the group's uncompromising anti-Americanism, nor has it prevented AAH members from engaging alongside the Lebanese Hezbollah and other pro-Assad militias in Syria.<sup>61</sup> Together with *Kata'ib Hezbollah* (KH), AAH now also calls for the immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, threatening to take military action if the Iraqi parliament fails to expel foreign forces operating in the country.<sup>62</sup> Downplaying the gravity of such acts of defiance, Hadi al-Ameri describes them as mere rhetorical provocations that are "firing back at verbal affronts by U.S. officials targeted at AAH's leader Qais al-Khazali".<sup>63</sup> The extent to which al-Ameri can guarantee that the above cited provocations will not be put into action remains debatable, especially in view of the PMU's decentralised character and often ambiguous chain of command. As Renad Mansour rightfully points out, all of the PMU-affiliated figures discussed here are also well aware of each other's words and actions, and will not denounce each other's credibility publicly.<sup>64</sup>

### *Kata'ib Hezbollah and the Iranian Connection*

Equally believed to be supported by the IRGC, *Kata'ib Hezbollah* (KH),<sup>65</sup> the Hezbollah Brigades, represent another one of the U.S.-designated 'Special Groups'.<sup>66</sup> Not to be confused with Abdul Kareem Muhammadawi's Iraqi Hezbollah party,<sup>67</sup> the *Kata'ib Hezbollah* are attributed to the previously mentioned Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was initially affiliated with *Badr* and SCIRI.<sup>68</sup> Even though the group only gained prominence in 2007, its origins appear to date back to the period following the 2003 Iraqi invasion,<sup>69</sup> when KH members were being accused of perpetrating deadly attacks against U.S. military personnel on the ground.<sup>70</sup> Reported to have "committed, directed, supported, or posed a significant risk of committing acts

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56 Posch, "Shiite Militias in Iraq and Syria"

57 Sam Weyer, "The Resurgence of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq," Institute for the Study of War, accessed March 27, 2018, <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/resurgence-asaib-ahl-al-haq>.

58 Michael Knights, "The Evolution of Iran's Special Groups in Iraq," *CTC Sentinel*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Vol 3, no. 11 (2010): 5.

59 "Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq | Mapping Militant Organizations."

60 Posch, "Shiite Militias in Iraq and Syria."

61 "Militant Groups – Breaking Aleppo – Atlantic Council," accessed March 27, 2018, <http://www.publications.atlanticcouncil.org/breakingaleppo/militant-groups/>.

62 Ahmad Majdyar, "Iran-Backed Militia Groups Threaten U.S. Forces in Iraq," Middle East Institute, accessed March 28, 2018, <https://www.mei.edu/content/iran-backed-militia-groups-threaten-us-forces-iraq>.

63 Ameri, Hadi al-. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal Interview. Baghdad, April 25, 2018

64 Mansour, Renad. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Telephone Interview. May 7, 2018

65 Official Arabic Homepage of *Kata'ib Hezbollah*, accessed May 21, 2018, <http://www.kataibhezbollah.com/>.

66 "Kata'ib Hezbollah | Mapping Militant Organizations," accessed October 13, 2017, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/361?highlight=kataib+hezbollah>.

67 Kenneth Katzman, *Iraq: Post-Saddam Governance and Security* (DIANE Publishing, 2009).

68 Posch, "Shiite Militias in Iraq and Syria."

69 "Kata'ib Hezbollah: We're Ready to Fight American Troops in Iraq," Middle East Institute, accessed March 28, 2018, <https://www.mei.edu/content/iran-backed-militia-groups-threaten-us-forces-iraq>.

70 "Subcommittee Hearing: Terrorist Groups in Syria," *Committee on Foreign Affairs* (blog), accessed March 28, 2018, <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/subcommittee-hearing-terrorist-groups-in-syria/>.

of violence against Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces”, KH were designated in July 2009 by the U.S. Department of State as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation.<sup>71</sup>

The U.S. Department of the Treasury has also denounced their leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis “for threatening the peace and stability of Iraq and the Government of Iraq”, holding him responsible for his ties to the IRGC and support for the Lebanon-based Hezbollah.<sup>72</sup> Further allegations against al-Muhandis include the 1983 bombing of the U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait, as well as the attempted assassination of a Kuwaiti Emir.<sup>73</sup> Even though he denies these charges, Abu Mahdi has never sought to conceal the mutual trust and recognition defining his bond with Iran’s infamous Quds Force Commander, Qassem Soleimani, as reflected in a recent video footage made available by *Pure Stream Media*.<sup>74</sup> Al-Muhandis emphasised that his publicly covered exchange with Iranian regime representatives, including his recent meeting with Iran’s Minister of Defence, Brigadier-General Amir Hatami,<sup>75</sup> has been facilitated primarily through official diplomatic channels and governmental institutions.<sup>76</sup> He also views himself as a devout Iraqi nationalist, who has taken a strong stand for a truly inclusive political system that represents all of the country’s ethno-sectarian identities.<sup>77</sup> Comprising nearly 20,000 men,<sup>78</sup> Abu Mahdi’s KH are reportedly on the PMU payroll,<sup>79</sup> even though the faction is still said to funnel fighters from Iraq to Syria using the façade of groups such as *Harakat al-Nujaba* and *Liwa’a Abu Fadl al-‘Abbas* (LAFa).<sup>80</sup> Abu Mahdi explained the presence of those fighters on the ground in Syria by pointing to the volunteers’ right of an individual choice, for which the PMU as an umbrella institution could hardly be held accountable.<sup>81</sup>

## Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada – *Seeking Martyrdom in Syria?*

Considered by some experts as a joint product of KH and *Badr*,<sup>82</sup> *Al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya – Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada* (The Islamic Resistance – The Battalions of the Lord of the Martyrs)<sup>83</sup> are reported to be sending reinforcements to Syria, and “defending Sayyidiah Zaynab”<sup>84</sup> as communicated by its spokesperson for *Al-Sharqiya* news channel.<sup>85</sup> The majority of sources affirming KSS’ presence in Syria date back to

71 “Treasury Designates Individual, Entity Posing Threat to Stability in Iraq,” accessed March 28, 2018, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg195.aspx>.

72 “Treasury Designates Individual, Entity Posing Threat to Stability in Iraq.”

73 Qassim Abdul-Zahra, “U.S. Probes Embassy’s Bombing in Kuwait – Washingtonpost.Com,” accessed March 29, 2018, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/06/AR2007020600432.html>.

74 “Qasem Soleimani | Pure Stream Media,” accessed March 28, 2018, <https://www.purestream-media.com/portfolio/qasem-soleimani/>.

75 “Meeting held between Iran’s Defence Minister with the leader of Iraq’s Popular Mobilisation Forces”, Rasa News Agency, April 20, 2016, <http://en.rasanews.ir/detail/news/437272/23>.

76 Muhandis, Abu Mahdi al-. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal Interview. Baghdad, April 22, 2018

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

78 Posch, “Shiite Militias in Iraq and Syria.”

79 Jabar, “The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq’s Future.”

80 Phillip Smyth, “Liwa’a Abu Fadl Al-Abbas,” accessed March 29, 2018, <http://jihadology.net/category/liwaa-abu-fadl-al-abbas/>.

81 Muhandis, Abu Mahdi al-. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal Interview. Baghdad, April 22, 2018

82 “Kata’ib Sayyid Al-Shuhada | Mapping Militant Organizations,” accessed October 13, 2017, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/629>.

83 Official Arabic Homepage of Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, <http://saidshuhada.com/>.

84 Phillip Smyth, “Kata’ib Sayyid Al-Shuhada,” accessed March 30, 2018, <http://jihadology.net/category/kataib-sayyid-al-shuhada/>.

85 “Tashyī 4 min ‘anāshir katā’ib Sayyid al-Shuhadā’ fi muhāfazat al-Baṣra janūbī al-‘irāq qutilū bī rīf Dimashq” [The funeral of 4 members of the Battalions of the Lord of the Martyrs in the province of Basra in southern Iraq killed in the countryside of Damascus], Sharqiya Television, August 27, 2013, <https://www.alsharqiya.com/news/?p=67524>.



2013,<sup>86</sup> following Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani's alleged defection from the Hezbollah Brigades.<sup>87</sup> Martyrdom announcements mourning fallen fighters in Eastern Ghouta, released on the KSS official Facebook page in 2013 have also prompted national security and foreign affairs analyst William Tucker to assume the group's connection to one of the deadliest chemical weapons attacks against the Syrian population.<sup>88</sup> Nonetheless, the date of establishment remains controversial. Walter Posch refers to U.S. cables that indicate that KSS initially emerged in the period following the 1991 Shi'a rebellion against Saddam Hussein, upon whose overthrow in 2003 the group is said to have temporarily laid down its arms.<sup>89</sup>

Alongside the Basra-based parliamentarian Falih al-Khazali, the aforementioned Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani (a.k.a. Hamid al-Sheibani), and alleged Quds Force subordinate, is regarded as the group's leader.<sup>90</sup> Although al-Sheibani was labelled in January 2008 as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist for allegedly attacking U.S. and British forces,<sup>91</sup> no Western country has so far declared KSS a terrorist group.<sup>92</sup>

## Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba – a *Hezbollah wannabe*?

*Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba*, known as *Muqawamat Islamiya al-Nujaba*, are also ascribed by Walter Posch to what he defines as the 'Hezbollah family'.<sup>93</sup> Believed to have been formed in 2013 with the explicit goal of supporting the Assad regime in Syria, *Nujaba's* unconditional alignment with Iran has also been evident on the group's Persian website.<sup>94</sup> Its Secretary General, Sheykh Akram Abbas al-Ka'bi, a former commander in Sadr's Mahdi army, has also been appointed as representative of several prominent Grand Ayatollahs, including Safi Golpayegani, Sayyid Kazem Husayni Haeri, Sayyid Mahmud Hashemi Shahrudi, Nuri Hamdani, Allavi Gorgani and Ayatollah Makarem-Shirazi (who he reportedly provided with access to multiple sources of financing).<sup>95</sup> Accused of orchestrating mortar and rocket attacks against Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces alongside Shi'a insurgents, al-Ka'bi was designated as terrorist by the U.S. Treasury in 2008.<sup>96</sup>

As Renad Mansour reiterates, the group willingly declares its foreign-dictated mandate to advocate and push forward Iranian policies. Their current affiliation with the state-sanctioned PMU has also not prevented their leader from pledging loyalty to the 'axis of resistance', vowing in unison with AAH's leader Qais al-Khazali to back Hezbollah in any future scenario of war with Israel, who he

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86 Phillip Smyth, "Hizballah Cavalcade: Kata'ib Sayyid Al-Shuhada: Another Supplier of Iraqi Shia Fighters in Syria," accessed April 2, 2018, <http://jihadology.net/2013/06/03/hizballah-cavalcade-kataib-sayyid-al-shuhada-another-supplier-of-iraqi-shia-fighters-in-syria/>.

87 "inshiqāq 'amin 'amm katā'ib Hizbu 'llāh al-'irāq wa tashkīl katā'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada'" [The split of the Secretary-General of the Hezbollah Brigades in Iraq and the formation of the Battalions of the Lord of the Martyrs], *almasalah*, April 14, 2014, <http://almasalah.com/ar/PrintNewspage.aspx?newsid=10285>.

88 Phillip Smyth, "Hizballah Cavalcade: Kata'ib Sayyid Al-Shuhada Emerges: Updates on the New Iraqi Shia Militia Supplying Fighters to Syria," September 9, 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/09/09/hizballah-cavalcade-kataib-sayyid-al-shuhada-emerges-updates-on-the-new-iraqi-shia-militia-supplying-fighters-to-syria/>.

89 "Iranian Front Group Comes Out of the Shadows," Wikileaks Public Library of U.S. Diplomacy (Iraq Basra, November 5, 2007), [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07BASRAH104\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07BASRAH104_a.html).

90 Michael Knights, "Iran's Foreign Legion: The Role of Iraqi Shiite Militias in Syria," accessed March 30, 2018, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-foreign-legion-the-role-of-iraqi-shiite-militias-in-syria>.

91 "Treasury Designates Individuals, Entity Fueling Iraqi Insurgency," accessed March 30, 2018, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp759.aspx>.

92 Alex MacDonald, "U.S. Arms Firm 'quits Iraq' over Use of Abrams Tanks by Iran-Backed Militia," Middle East Eye, accessed March 30, 2018, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/abrams-iraq-1042703768>.

93 Posch, "Shiite Militias in Iraq and Syria."

94 Official Website of Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, accessed April 2, 2018, <http://alnujaba.ir/aboutus>.

95 Posch, "Shiite Militias in Iraq and Syria."

96 "Treasury Designates Individuals and Entities Fueling Violence in Iraq," accessed April 3, 2018, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp1141.aspx>.

has labelled a 'Zionist regime'.<sup>97</sup> Earlier in March 2016, the group's spokesperson, Hashem al-Musawi, had released a strong statement, condemning Hezbollah's designation as a terrorist organisation by the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League, in which he declared that "Hezbollah and the *Nujaba'* movement [*Harakat al-Nujaba*] are the twins of resistance that cannot ever be loosened or separated."<sup>98</sup>

Similar statements and populist declarations of loyalty often invite the comparison between the PMU and the Lebanese Hezbollah. Nevertheless, al-Muhandis, in his capacity of Deputy Head and Operational Commander of the PMU, explicitly rejects such parallels as misleading, defining the PMU as "a unique Iraqi exemplar", that differs from the Lebanese Hezbollah in its historical origin, structure and relation to the state:

"Moreover, Hezbollah came into being waging armed resistance against Israel, which is recognised as a state by the UN. The PMU, on the other hand, has never engaged in fighting against another state entity. Unless one would go claiming that [the Islamic State] represents a state, the PMU has only been witnessed combatting an internationally designated terrorist organisation."<sup>99</sup>

### *Saraya al-Khorasani – Tehran's satellite in Iraq?*

As the online presence<sup>100</sup> and the emblematic name of the group unambiguously indicates, *Saraya al-Khorasani* (the Khorasani Brigades), have demonstrated one of the highest levels of compliance with Iran's ideological imperative.<sup>101</sup> According to its Secretary General – Ali al-Yasiri, the organisation was founded initially in 1995 in Iran by the IRGC Quds Force General Hamid Tuqawi,<sup>102</sup> who had continued serving as its military adviser until his assassination by an Islamic State sniper in late December 2014 during fighting in Samarra.<sup>103</sup> In order to commemorate him, *Saraya al-Khorasani's* leadership has sought to glorify his military skills in video memorials,<sup>104</sup> even naming a training camp after him.<sup>105</sup> Formally under the command of the PMU Commission, *Saraya al-Khorasani* were involved in the military offensive for the liberation of Tikrit, while also declaring themselves as instrumental in breaking of the siege of Amerli.<sup>106</sup> Seeking to capitalise on this battlefield fame, their commander Hamed al-Jaza'iri revealed in August 2016 the registration of the faction with the Independent Electoral Commission as a political entity meant to participate in the country's provincial elections.<sup>107</sup>

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97 Ahmad Majidiyar, "Another Iran-Backed Iraqi Militia Leader Visits Lebanon, Threatens Israel," Middle East Institute, accessed April 3, 2018, <https://www.mei.edu/content/another-iran-backed-iraqi-militia-leader-visits-lebanon-threatens-israel>.

98 "Raddan 'alā al-tā'mur al-khalījīyyi qīd Hizbu 'llāh al-mutaḥaddith al-rasmīyyū li ḥarakat al-Nujabā' Sayyid Hāshem al-Mūsawīyy" [Spokesman for Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Mr. Hashem al-Moussawi, in response to the conspiracy of the Gulf against Hezbollah], *alnujaba.com*, March 13, 2016, <https://alnujaba.com/4989--.html>.

99 Muhandis, Abu Mahdi al-. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal Interview. Baghdad, April 22, 2018

100 Twitter channel of Saraya al-Khorasani, accessed April 4, 2018, <https://twitter.com/alkursany?lang=de>

101 "Saraya Al-Khorasani 31 August Statement: Translation and Analysis :: Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi," accessed April 4, 2018, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2014/08/saraya-al-khorasani-31-august-statement>.

102 "«Sarāya al-Khorāsānī» ta'sīs wa wilā' 'irānī" [On the Establishment of Saraya al-Khorasani and their loyalty to Iran], *Asharq al-Awsat*, May 5, 2016, <https://aawsat.com/home/article/632431/«سرایا-الخراسانی»-تأسيس-وولاء-إيراني>.

103 The martyrdom of an Iranian Mujahedin in Samarra: خاص ابنا "استشهاد مجاهد إيراني يقود غرفة العمليات في سامراء," <http://ar.abna24.com/service/iran/archive/2014/12/28/661168/story.html>.

104 Ned Parker, Babak Dehghanpisheh, and Isabel Coles, "Special Report: How Iran's Military Chiefs Operate in Iraq," *Reuters*, February 24, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-committee-specialreport/special-report-how-irans-military-chiefs-operate-in-iraq-idUSKBNOLS0VD20150224>.

105 Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, "Iraqi Shiite Militia Promotes Training Camp Named after Qods Force General | FDD's Long War Journal," accessed April 4, 2018, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/09/iraqi-shiite-militia-promotes-training-camp-named-after-qods-force-general.php>.

106 "Saraya Al-Khorasani 31 August Statement: Translation and Analysis :: Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi."

107 "Wāqī' siyāsiyy jadīd yashhaduhu al-'irāq mā ba'd Dā'ish" [A new political reality witnessed in Iraq after Daesh], *alarab*, August 10, 2016, <https://alarab.co.uk/واقف-سياسي-جديد-يشهده-العراق-ما-بعد-داعش/>.



Even though the preceding five groups raise legitimate concerns due to their vocal compliance with Iranian security institutions and flirtation with religious symbolism, one should remain aware of the varying levels of manifestation of this loyalty, thus differentiating between rhetorical commitments and actions on the ground. Some of the groups have demonstrated interest in engaging in the political process and occasionally tend to underline their PMU affiliation. Preparing for the parliamentary elections, some even adapted the uncompromising anti-western narrative that is normally adopted. On the other hand, groups like al-Nujaba, which are not engaged in electoral campaigning, do not feel the pressure to soften their positions or contextualise their allegiance to Iran, as Renad Mansour highlights.<sup>108</sup> Therefore, even though all five of the above groups seek to maximise their influence within Iraq's security apparatus, they are still not equally invested in undermining the structures of the state.

### *Kata'ib Tayyar al-Risali – Iraqi Loyalists with Sadrist Roots*

*Kata'ib Tayyar al-Risali* (The Missionary Movement Battalions) represent a more nuanced case.<sup>109</sup> Having established a reputation as a highly qualified and valued member of the Muqtada al-Sadr's movement, their leader Sheykh Adnan al-Shahmani had distanced himself from the Sadrists in 2007, in order to launch his own formation, "Iraqi National Gathering", later renaming it in May 2008 to "First Iraqi Gathering".<sup>110</sup> After the dissolution of his "First Iraqi Gathering", as revealed officially in August 2009, al-Shahmani participated in the 2010 elections of the Council of Representatives as an independent candidate within Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition.<sup>111</sup> Appointed as a member of the Iraqi Parliament's Defence and Security Committee, al-Shahmani announced the establishment of his new political organisation – *Tayyar al-Risali al-Iraqi al-Jadid* (The New Iraqi Missionary Movement) – which was granted a license by Iraq's High Electoral Commission (IHEC) and participated in both the 2013 provincial and the 2014 parliamentary elections.<sup>112</sup>

Falsely presumed by some experts to be a Khomeini loyalist, Sheykh Adnan al-Shahmani has named both Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr and Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr as his religious references, underlining as well his respect for Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.<sup>113</sup> Established as the party's military wing, his *Kata'ib Tayyar al-Risali*, also known as the *Risaliyun*, has gained additional legitimacy as the 31st Brigade under the PMU.<sup>114</sup> Even though al-Shahmani did not contest the elections, he still defended the right of other PMU-affiliated leaders to participate, as long as they are motivated by serving Iraqi national interests.<sup>115</sup>

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108 Mansour, Renad. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Telephone Interview. May 7, 2018

109 Official Facebook Page by Tayyar al-Risali – Risaliyyun, accessed April 6, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/kateabalresaly/>.

110 Muhannad Ghazzi, Iraq's Tayyar al-Risali, September 14, 2014, [http://sumerianpriest.blogspot.com/2014/09/blog-post\\_14.html](http://sumerianpriest.blogspot.com/2014/09/blog-post_14.html).

111 Ibid.

112 Ibid.

113 Shahmani, Adnan al-. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal Interview. Berlin, January 21, 2018

114 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Hashd Brigade Numbers Index," Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, accessed April 8, 2018, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2017/10/hashd-brigade-numbers-index>.

115 Shahmani, Adnan al-. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal Interview. Berlin, January 21, 2018

*Kata'ib Tayyar al-Risali* is thus an interesting case that encourages further nuance amidst the three primary clusters, as its leadership has sought to emancipate themselves from the image of an Iranian proxy. This demonstrates a positive nationalist rhetoric on one hand, without denying their appreciation of any help received from Iran on the other.

### *Saraya al-Salam – How Rebellious are the Peace Brigades?*

In view of Iran's reported efforts to weaken the Sadrist movement by prompting smaller splinter groups such as *Kata'ib Hezbollah* and *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq* to switch allegiance to Tehran,<sup>116</sup> Muqtada al-Sadr has a strategic interest in preserving the independent character of his *Saraya al-Salam* Brigades (The Peace Regiments), currently concentrated in Samarra. Seeking to dissociate himself from pro-Khamenei PMU factions, Sadr's statements regarding *Saraya al-Salam*'s status within the PMU have remained ambivalent. Nevertheless, his repeated call for the dismantling of the *Hashd*<sup>117</sup> has not prevented *Saraya al-Salam* from claiming state-funded benefits based on their PMU affiliation as the 313th and 314th PMU Brigade.<sup>118</sup> According to leading Sadrists however, the adopted anti-Iran stance seems to have cost the organisation access to most of the monetary resources and military hardware, which have been reserved for the Khamenei-aligned camp.<sup>119</sup> Despite the cited material restrictions, prominent figures from within Sadr's circle have been quoted by Renad Mansour and Faleh Jabar as saying that *Saraya al-Salam* still harboured the untapped potential of putting together a 100,000-strong army of volunteers.<sup>120</sup> However, if Sadr's opposition to Iran on certain occasions has earned *Saraya al-Salam* the international endorsement as a headstrong rebellious movement, not paying tribute to the so-called "Axis of Resistance", other figures within the PMU spectrum remain sceptical of this pro-actively exhibited "individualism", and regard Sadr's wording more as a political tool rather than intrinsically motivated re-orientation.

### *Hashd al-Marji'i – the 'Holy' Mobilisation*

Underfunding seems a challenge that equally affects the so-called "shrine" militias wing (*Saraya al-'Atabat*) within the PMU, also referred to as *Hashd al-Marji'i*.<sup>121</sup> Those include the Najaf administered *Saraya al-'Ataba al-'Abbasiya* (the al-Abbas Combat Division), *Saraya al-'Ataba al-Hussainiya*, *Saraya al-'Ataba al-'Alawiya*, and *Liwa' 'Ali al-Akbar*. But even though these factions have proven a reliable counterpart for Iraqi national commando authorities, this has reportedly not secured them any preferential treatment from the state, leaving them to manage their own fundraising. In an interview with Renad Mansour, Sheykh Nizar Habel el-Mateen from *Saraya al-'Abbasiya* openly criticised the PMU administration, accusing al-Muhandis of taking advantage of his decision-making power by denying pro-Sistani volunteers salaries and military equipment.<sup>122</sup> Such instances of alleged discrimination within the PMU have rendered the path towards partial integration in the Iraqi

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116 Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future."

117 "Abadi Rejects Al-Sadr Call to Dissolve Hashd Al-Shaabi," accessed April 8, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/abadi-rejects-al-sadr-call-dissolve-hashd-al-shaabi-170805153517075.html>.

118 Tamimi, "Hashd Brigade Numbers Index."

119 Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future."

120 Ibid.

121 Fanar Haddad, "Understanding Iraq's Hashd Al-Sha'bi."

122 Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future."

army one worth exploring, motivating 1,000 of al-Abbas' fighters to register officially with the Iraqi Ministry of Defence, as confirmed by their leader Sheykh Maytham al-Zaydi.<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, while other Iran-favoured paramilitary leaders prepared for the elections, the al-Abbas Combat division instead engaged in social service provision, deploying its engineering specialists to clear Basra of landmines, organising free student tutorials and first aid courses for locals, and assisting with school reconstruction work.<sup>124</sup> Nevertheless, despite the criticism voiced on behalf of internationally celebrated figures like al-Zaydi, the *marji'iyya* behind him strictly refrain from openly condemning Iran's role and undeniable leverage within the PMU, recognising the support received by Iraq's neighbour in the critical phases of the Islamic State invasion.

As illustrated in this overview of some select PMU factions, ideological differences and conflicts of interest seem to exist even within the Iran-backed wing of the paramilitary conglomerate, which is often regarded as homogenous. On the other hand, short-term objectives and shared enmities could always account for some opportunistic last-minute alliances, or at least encourage competing groups to preserve a minimum level of coordination efforts.

Building on these historical legacies and institutional constraints, the following chapter will examine the political outreach and campaigning efforts of PMU-affiliated leaders and discuss possible coalition scenarios following the May 2018 election results.

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123 "Akkada al-mushrif 'alā firqat al-'Abbās al-qitāliyya al-shaykh al-Maytham al-Zayyīdī al-'ahād '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>.

124 Mustafa Habib, "The Controversial Iraqi Militia That Now Prefers Social Work To Politics," Niqash, accessed April 5, 2018, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/security/5873/>.



## Chapter 3 – Election Manoeuvring

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Despite calls for rescheduling,<sup>125</sup> Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi held Iraq's national elections on May 12.<sup>126</sup> 7,187 candidates<sup>127</sup> competed for 329 parliamentary seats<sup>128</sup> on 88 electoral lists,<sup>129</sup> reflecting Iraq's highly fragmented political landscape. It is important to acknowledge that a party could also be represented on two different lists, as was the case of the internally divided Da'wa party, with its most prominent representatives – Haider al-Abadi and his predecessor Nouri al-Maliki – heading two separate alliances.<sup>130</sup> Focusing predominantly on the pre-election period, this chapter aims to elaborate on the competitiveness and political manoeuvres adopted by the main competitors of the PMU-affiliated candidates on al-Ameri's *Fatah* list, which are regarded by the author as critical for *Fatah*'s final electoral performance, receiving 47 seats and finishing second after al-Sadr's *Sa'iroun*.<sup>131</sup>

In the midst of the heated pre-election rhetoric, the future role of sectarianism occupies an ever more prominent place in the Iraqi public discourse, exacerbating further the intra-Shiite divisions. Challenging his fellow party member Abadi, Maliki insisted in pre-election talks with tribal leaders to discuss the potential abolishment of the country's controversial quota system.<sup>132</sup> Even though there is no wording in the Iraqi constitution that stipulates that power sharing must be organised along sectarian lines, the posts of the Iraqi president, Prime Minister, and Parliament Speaker have so far been allocated to the Kurds, the Shiite and the Sunni Muslims respectively.<sup>133</sup>

The instrumentalisation of fundamental issues, such as the distribution of decision-making posts, illustrated how easily any measures framed as 'combating sectarianism' could be hijacked by politicians and used in election campaigning. Nevertheless, the poorly graded performance of well-established Iraqi politicians fifteen years after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime fundamentally challenged the traditional logic of voters' preferences who were eager to find tangible content and outcomes behind the slogans.<sup>134</sup>

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- 125 Ihsan Noori, "Why Iraqi Lawmakers Want to Postpone the Elections | 1001 Iraqi Thoughts," accessed April 13, 2018, <http://1001iraqithoughts.com/2018/01/19/why-some-iraqi-lawmakers-to-postpone-the-elections/>.
- 126 Mustafa Saadoun, "Dozens of Iraqi Journalists Enter Parliamentary Race," *Al-Monitor*, March 27, 2018, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/03/iraq-election-journalists.html>.
- 127 IHEC Index of Registered Candidates, accessed May 2, 2018, <http://www.ihec.iq/ihecftp/2018/parts/morth18-4.pdf>.
- 128 "Report of the Secretary-General Pursuant to Resolution 2367 (2017) (S/2017/881)," accessed May 3, 2018, [http://www.uniraq.com/images/SGReports/N1809914\\_S2018359\\_EN.pdf](http://www.uniraq.com/images/SGReports/N1809914_S2018359_EN.pdf).
- 129 "Iraqi Elections 2018 Database," Google Docs, accessed May 3, 2018, [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1VgI\\_8trsPJ1IK03Xt4u\\_jMzjji0GGzyTRauew\\_BM/edit#gid=0](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1VgI_8trsPJ1IK03Xt4u_jMzjji0GGzyTRauew_BM/edit#gid=0).
- 130 Baxtiyar Goran, "Rift Deepens between Ruling Dawa Party's Influential Figures over Iraq's Future Cabinet," *Kurdistan24*, accessed April 13, 2018, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/2fe6f235-d1b5-4e72-9c5d-a3c8b504b4a5>.
- 131 Ali Mamouri, "Iraqi Election Results Shock Political Class," *Al-Monitor*, May 14, 2018, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/05/iraq-election-sadr-fateh.html>.
- 132 Mustafa Habib, "Iraqi Politicians Debate Changing System That Kept Parliament Peaceful For Years," *Niqash*, accessed April 13, 2018, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/5870/>.
- 133 Yasir Kuoti and Dlawer Ala'Aldeen, "Confessionalism and Electoral Prospects in Iraq | MERI," accessed April 13, 2018, <http://www.meri-k.org/publication/confessionalism-and-electoral-prospects-in-iraq/>.
- 134 Editor, "The Upcoming Iraqi Elections: New Faces or Repetition of the Old – Rawabet Center," accessed April 13, 2018, <http://rawabetcenter.com/en/?p=5517>; "As Iraq's Elections Approach, Iraqis Fed up with 'Old Guard,'" *The Baghdad Post*, April 28, 2018, <http://www.thebaghdadpost.com/en/story/26649/As-iraq-s-elections-approach-iraqis-fed-up-with-old-guard>.

This reorientation tendency has been particularly beneficial for cross-sectarian alliances.<sup>135</sup> One of the most noticeable examples here constituted Sadr's unexpected coming to terms with the secularists and the weakened Iraqi Communist Party, which to a certain extent secured him the election triumph.<sup>136</sup> With his newly formed political party '*Istiqama*' (Integrity), he has been branding the rather unorthodox alliance named *Sa'iroun* (translated as 'Being on the move'), as a non-sectarian and inclusive march toward reform and social justice.<sup>137</sup> Building on his preferred theme of anti-corruption (the motto of the social protests orchestrated with his blessing in October 2016) Sadr had been drawing on the rule of law imperative as a common denominator, helping him overcome ideologically motivated resistance arising from within both camps.<sup>138</sup> *Sa'iroun* candidate Hassan Karim al-Kaabi, whose election posters hung prominently across the streets of Sadr City, highlighted the challenges before the Iraqi Commission of Integrity and the systemic hurdles for eliminating corrupt practices in the country: "The problem lies in the gentlemen's agreement between the different parties to cover for each other, as in the end no one's hands are clean. Our goal is to bring the guilty to justice."<sup>139</sup>

Achieving good governance and improving transparency standards were also among the main goals of Ammar al-Hakim's newly founded *Tayyar al-Hikma al-Watani* (National Wisdom Movement),<sup>140</sup> which captured 19 parliamentary seats.<sup>141</sup> According to al-Hakim's political adviser Baleegh Abu Gelel, these overlapping themes and the shared vision make the *Sa'iroun* bloc a good match when it comes to the implementation of the movement's ambitious program.<sup>142</sup>

Bridging the gap between ethnic and religious divisions was soon identified as a useful vote-maximising and image-polishing tool. One example was the case of Sarwa Abdul Wahid, senior member of the Change movement in Iraqi Kurdistan, who was brought on by Abadi's *Nasr* alliance in a gesture that projected a message of inclusiveness, while simultaneously strengthening his leadership claims.<sup>143</sup> Meanwhile, Hadi al-Ameri (often branded as a sectarian Shiite militant) advertised his own successes in building trust and engaging with influential Sunni tribal figures. Sheykh Hamid al-Hais, leader of the Tribal Mobilisation Forces, the so-called *al-Hashd al-Asha'ir*, declared his support for the inclusive character of al-Ameri's *Fatah*, the coalition which is said to include a number of Sunni candidates from the governorates of Anbar and Salah ad-Din.<sup>144</sup>

As none of the registered forces was able to achieve a majority of parliamentary seats, experts have identified five major contenders after the release of the election results with the potential to affect Muqtada

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135 Emma Sky, "New Hope for Iraq?," *Foreign Affairs*, April 5, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-04-05/new-hope-iraq>.

136 The New Arab, "Sadr Calls for Broad Coalition Following Iraq Election 'Win,'" [alaraby](https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/5/15/sadr-calls-for-broad-coalition-following-iraq-election-win), accessed May 15, 2018, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/5/15/sadr-calls-for-broad-coalition-following-iraq-election-win>.

137 Thanassis Cambanis, "Can Militant Cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr Reform Iraq?," The Century Foundation, May 1, 2018, <https://tcf.org/content/report/can-militant-cleric-muqtada-al-sadr-reform-iraq/>.

138 Mustafa Habib, "Major Religious Group, Sadrist, Allies With Iraq's Communists, For Election Shake-Up | Niqash," accessed February 8, 2018, <https://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/5829/Major-Religious-Group-Allies-With-Iraq%E2%80%99s-Communists-For-Election-Shake-Up.htm>.

139 Kaabi, Hassan Karim al-. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Telephone Interview. Baghdad, April 26, 2018

140 "Ammār al-Hākīm yu'linu al-qaṭ'at ma'a 'irth al-majlis al-'islāmiyyi al-'a'alā" [Ammar al-Hakim announces his cut with the legacy of the Supreme Islamic Council], *Asharq al-Awsat*, July 26, 2017, <https://aawsat.com/home/article/982756/عمار-الحكيم-يعلم-القطعة-مع-إرث-المجلس-الإسلامي-الأعلى>.

141 Rudaw, "Sadr Wins Iraqi Parliamentary Elections with 54 Seats," accessed May 21, 2018, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/180520182>.

142 Abu Gelel, Baleegh. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal Interview. Baghdad, April 26, 2018

143 Ibrahim Saleh, "In Baghdad, Kurdish Voters Likely To Ignore Kurdish MPs," Niqash, accessed May 5, 2018, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/5871/>.

144 Hais, Hamid al-. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Telephone Interview. Baghdad, April 26, 2018

al-Sadr's government formation efforts. These five are: Hadi al-Ameri's *Fatah* (Conquest Coalition), Haider al-Abadi's alliance *Nasr* (Victory), Nouri al-Maliki's *Dawlat al-Qanun* (State of Law Coalition), Ayad Allawi's *al-Wataniya* (National Alliance), and Ammar al-Hakim's *Tayyar al-Hikma al-Watani* (National Wisdom Movement).<sup>145</sup> With Muqtada al-Sadr so far rejecting the option of becoming coalition partners with al-Ameri and al-Maliki,<sup>146</sup> Ammar al-Hakim's *Tayyar al-Hikma* (Wisdom Movement), together with the Kurdish opposition parties, still have the potential to play an important role as powerbrokers in finalising the composition of the next government, as initially anticipated in a pre-election MERI report.<sup>147</sup> Nevertheless, this allegedly uncompromising stand has not prevented Sadr from meeting with *Fatah's* leader Hadi al-Ameri on May 20, as part of his outreach efforts to speed up the process of government formation.<sup>148</sup>

## Betting on the Hashd

Acquiring a stake in forming the future government of Iraq depends not only on the popular vote, but also on the virtue that a particular alliance could provide as a prospective coalition partner. A member of the Iraqi parliament (who wished to remain anonymous) indicated in an interview with the author, the negotiations following the election results are most likely to be subjected to the effects of chance and personality, rather than be based on the compatibility of programmatic content.<sup>149</sup> As Daniel Gerlach recalled in a conversation with the author, the parliamentary oligarchy in Iraq remains a case *sui generis*.<sup>150</sup> Representation within the country's National Assembly thus constitutes an understandable aspiration, as it provides its members with the necessary leverage to push forward beneficial legislation, while engineering any ambiguities within existing laws in their favour. This common wisdom has also affected both the pre- and post-election behaviour of PMU-associated leaders with ambitions to govern, such as the seasoned *Badr* cadre Hadi al-Ameri.

Soon after international appeals for the gradual demilitarisation of the PMU started to gain publicity,<sup>151</sup> al-Ameri was proclaimed in December 2017 as the head of a new PMU-dominated electoral bloc, as announced by the Hezbollah-aligned newspaper *Al-Akhbar*.<sup>152</sup> In addition to several Sunni tribes, the prematurely named '*Mujahideen*' alliance was said to include, among others, the political wings of the following well-known PMU formations: *Badr*, *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq*, *Harakat al-Nujaba*, *Kata'ib Hezbollah*, *Saraya al-Khorasani*, and the Imam Ali Brigades. Negotiations for the establishment of the *Mujahideen* alliance have been publicly confirmed on *Al-Ahad* TV by Layth al-Adhari, spokesperson of Iraq's *Sadiqun* bloc, which is affiliated with the *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq*.<sup>153</sup> Despite al-Abadi's voiced determination

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145 Mamouri, "Iraqi Election Results Shock Political Class."

146 Muqtada al-Sadr listing on his official Twitter blog lists various political blocs as potential coalition partners except al-Ameri's *Fatah*, al-Maliki's *Dawlat al-Qanun*, and PUK, Tweet, @Mu\_AlSadr (blog), May 14, 2018, [https://twitter.com/Mu\\_AlSadr/status/996070961945423875](https://twitter.com/Mu_AlSadr/status/996070961945423875).

147 Yasir Kouti and Dlawer Ala'Aldeen, "Confessionalism and Electoral Prospects in Iraq | MERI."

148 Reuters, "Iraqi Cleric Sadr Meets Pro-Iran Amiri after Election Win," May 20, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-election/iraqi-cleric-sadr-meets-pro-iran-amiri-after-election-win-idUSKCN11LOSP>.

149 Iraqi Member of Parliament. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal Interview. Baghdad, April 26, 2018

150 Gerlach, Daniel. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal Interview. Berlin, April 18, 2018

151 The New Arab, "Iraq Slams Calls to Disband Hashd Al-Shaabi Militia Alliance," alaraby, accessed April 13, 2018, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/12/3/iraq-slams-calls-to-disband-hashd-al-shaabi-militia-alliance>.

152 Al-Hashd al-Sha'abi towards elections: Mujahideen Alliance to be headed by Hadi al-Ameri?, *Al-Akhbar*, accessed December 11, 2017, <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/287217>.

153 Layth al-Adhari, spokesperson of Iraq's *Sadiqun* bloc, giving statement on *Al-Ahad* TV, accessed April 13, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXA-srm9EJM>.



to prevent paramilitary leaders from contesting the May 2018 elections, only the name of the alliance was not destined to survive the deadline for the registration of electoral coalitions on January 11, 2018.<sup>154</sup> In order to avoid criticism for instrumentalising the term 'jihad' for political purposes, a concern voiced even by *Badr* official Karim Nouri,<sup>155</sup> the architects behind the alliance opted to rename it instead to "*Fatah*". Translated as "Conquest", the name is seen as a symbolic reminder of the successive victories achieved by the PMU in the offensive against the Islamic State. Campaigning on the basis of one's hard-earned combat glory can also not be prevented by existing legislation. The Iraqi law for political parties from August 2015 has left a significant loophole for pre-existing political formations and former government officials to reclaim their right to serve as elected officials, as long as they have formally dissociated themselves from their respective military wings.<sup>156</sup>

Following this pattern, Hadi al-Ameri, who previously served as the country's Minister of Transport, passionately defended his right to return to politics: "When *Daesh* invaded Iraq, I voluntarily left my post as Minister to defend my country. After we have achieved victory on the battlefield, I am now simply going back to my previous vocation as politician and public servant".<sup>157</sup> However, Adil Abd al-Mahdi, former Vice President of Iraq and Oil Minister (2014 to 2016), regards this development as a good sign: "Even though, most of those leaders might keep a shadow self within their military organisations, this is still a step forward. They are recognising that we need to have a political process without military pressure."<sup>158</sup>

Embracing the rules of the game has not been a singular act of pragmatism on behalf of PMU-affiliated figures. In contrast to the most common public expectations, Hadi al-Ameri and Haider al-Abadi had managed – at least temporarily – to put their differences behind them, joining hands in what analysts soon came to refer to as a "still-born alliance".<sup>159</sup> But even though their merger failed to materialise (due to what some have been quick to attribute to an unresolvable conflict over would take up the post of prime-minister), in an official statement al-Ameri had stressed that the main reasons for his split from Abadi's '*Nasr*' coalition have been foremost of a "technical nature".<sup>160</sup> He also reiterated his willingness to cooperate with Abadi at a later stage after the elections.<sup>161</sup> Al-Ameri had explained that having engaged himself during the last round of elections with the "State of Law Coalition", he would have felt uncomfortable to take sides and back either Abadi or Maliki, after both had decided to go their separate ways.<sup>162</sup>

However, Abadi – even though finishing third with 42 seats – still presents an appealing option not only for al-Ameri and al-Maliki, but also for figures like Ammar al-Hakim and Muqtada al-Sadr. The latter is also willing to look past the aforementioned rapprochement attempts

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154 Kirk H. Sowell, "Iraq's Status Quo Election," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed February 12, 2018, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/75488>.

155 "ma'rakat 'alā istikhdam al-hashd al-sha'abi fi l-intikhābāt al-muqabila" [The battle over the instrumentalisation of the Popular Mobilisation Units in the upcoming elections], *Baghdad Today*, December 2, 2017, <https://baghdadtoday.news/news/25801> صحيفة معركة على استخدام الحشد الشعبي في الانتخابات المقبلة هذه أطرافها

156 Law on the Political Parties – Iraqi Council of Representatives, August 27, 2015, <http://ar.parliament.iq/2015/08/27/20218/>.

157 Ameri, Hadi al-. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Baghdad, April 25, 2018

158 Abd al-Mahdi, Adil. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Baghdad, April 24, 2018

159 Mustafa Habib, "The Still-Born Political Alliance That Casts Doubt On Iraq's Popular PM," *Niqash*, accessed January 22, 2018, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/5814/>.

160 Habib.

161 "Bi l-wathīqat... al-'Amīrī yūqāhu 'asbāb 'insihābihi min 'ittilāf al-Nasr" [al-Ameri clarifies the reasons for separating from the *Nasr* Coalition in a document], *alkawthartv.com*, January 16, 2018, <http://www.alkawthartv.com/news/116424>.

162 Ameri, Hadi al-. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Baghdad, April 25, 2018



between Abadi and the PMU-affiliated camp, which Sadr has been criticising for its alleged sectarian orientation.<sup>163</sup> Ammar al-Hakim and representatives of his *Hikma* party have also signalled interest in post-election coalition combinations with Abadi's "Nasr" coalition. Referring to programmatic similarities, *Hikma*'s party official Baleegh Abu Gelel confirmed the potential for possible future cooperation with Abadi, though hinting that the desirability of the Prime Minister's post presented a sensitive topic.<sup>164</sup>

Furthermore, Abadi's popularity as the internationally favoured candidate,<sup>165</sup> and his advantageous position among Sunni voters, who seem to have rewarded him in Mosul for both the proclaimed victory over Islamic State and for preserving Iraqi unity after the Kurdish referendum,<sup>166</sup> also provide him with certain leverage when it comes to bargaining coalition deals. Therefore, one should carefully acknowledge the alternatives remaining to al-Ameri, especially with the Middle East's 'Grey Eminence', *Quds* Force Brigadier General Qassem Soleimani, trying to block Sadr's government formation efforts by brokering an understanding towards an Iran-friendly coalition.<sup>167</sup>

A number of theories become possible in this environment. Iran may slightly pressure other actors from the Shiite spectrum to back an alliance featuring al-Ameri's *Fatah* and Nouri al-Maliki's *Dawlat al-Qanun*, which could result in power remaining concentrated within tried and trusted hands. Alienated by the election results,<sup>168</sup> Alawi would also likely be approached to join this combination, alongside some of the Kurdish parties who are keen to play kingmaker and benefitting accordingly from this position.<sup>169</sup>

Another possibility in view of *Fatah*'s verbal commitment to overcoming sectarian differences as prominently announced in its program,<sup>170</sup> is that al-Ameri critically reflects upon the negative implications coming with the aforementioned choice of allies, especially when his party is seeking to avoid being seen as a primarily Shiite-oriented Iranian-backed actor.

Recent protests in Iraq, following Iran's arrest of the popular Shiite cleric Hussein Shirazi for criticising Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's application of the concept of *velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist),<sup>171</sup> have already signalled that Iraq's citizens seem to have reached a threshold regarding their toleration of foreign meddling in the country's internal affairs. Moreover, with Sheykh Abdul-Mahdi al-Karbalai, official representative of Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Ali al-Sistani, condemning all forms of foreign interference in the parliamentary

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163 Baxtiyar Goran, "Sadr: Abadi, Hashd Al-Shaabi Coalition Paves Way for Corruption, Sectarianism," *Kurdistan24*, accessed May 4, 2018, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/75e86cef-3af4-44df-be4c-989fb2892e4f?>

164 Abu Gelel, Baleegh. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal Interview. Baghdad, April 26, 2018

165 Aron Lund, "How Washington Learned to Love Haider Al-Abadi," accessed May 4, 2018, <https://tcf.org/content/report/washington-learned-love-haider-al-abadi/>.

166 Hamza Mustafa, "Abadi Vows to Achieve Political Majority in Iraq's Parliamentary Elections | Asharq AL-Awsat," accessed April 13, 2018, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1208726/abadi-vows-achieve-political-majority-iraq%E2%80%99s-parliamentary-elections>.

167 Middle East Monitor (blog), "Iran's Soleimani Playing Role in Iraq Government Formation," May 18, 2018, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180518-irans-soleimani-playing-role-in-iraq-government-formation/>.

168 Kurdistan 24, "Iraqi VP's Coalition Calls IHEC 'Incompetent, Corrupt,'" accessed May 21, 2018, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/022c6c51-be40-477e-8a4c-c299a27bac3d>.

169 Yasir Kouti and Dlawer Ala'Aldeen, "Confessionalism and Electoral Prospects in Iraq | MERI."

170 "The head of #al\_Fatah\_Alliance, #Hadi\_al\_Amiri, presents the alliance's electoral program", *Alghadeer Satellite Channel - Facebook*, accessed April 9, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/alghadeer.english/photos/a.1382235475435945.1073741828.1382157918777034/2054480794878073/?type=3&theater>.

171 "Iran Risks Losing Clout in Iraq by Arresting Shiite Cleric Shirazi," accessed March 18, 2018, [https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/03/shirazi-shiite-iran-iraq-vilayate-faqih.html?utm\\_source=dvr.it&utm\\_medium=twitter](https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/03/shirazi-shiite-iran-iraq-vilayate-faqih.html?utm_source=dvr.it&utm_medium=twitter).

elections in a sermon on May 4,<sup>172</sup> any move perceived as catering to Iranian coalition preferences may prove counter-productive for the PMU and its affiliates in the long-run.

The latest opinion polls, conducted by the National Democratic Institute in Iraq, demonstrate that PMU groups are at least no longer perceived as an existential threat by the Sunni population.<sup>173</sup> Giving her impression of the PMU as an Iraqi Sunni, Nawar Isa, who formerly served as a regional advisor for UNDP, condemned the often one-sided media coverage of PMU fighters,

“Even though there have been isolated incidents of human rights violations on behalf of a few members, generalising all these young boys as militias is shameful and an insult to their heroism. After all, they have fought to defend their fellow countrymen from Daesh – both Sunni and Shi’a”.<sup>174</sup>

In view of this positive development, PMU-affiliated leaders who achieve success at the ballot box bear a huge responsibility to not risk tarnishing the hard-earned reputation of the relatively young PMU institution. They must be particularly cautious in striking a balance between their ideological and religious roots, and their repetitive claim to represent national interests. If they succeed in substantiating this claim with facts and concrete measures, the PMU and its leadership, as advocated in an interview with Fanar Haddad,<sup>175</sup> could be instrumental in repairing Iraq's social fabric while bridging unhealthy and often artificially rekindled sectarian divisions. On the other hand, bowing unconditionally to Iran's regional agenda of expanding its spheres of influence,<sup>176</sup> would certainly cast a shadow over the already tainted reputation of the PMU, intensifying the demands for its ultimate de-mobilisation.

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172 “al-marji'iyya al-'uliyā tuşaddiru bayānan bi sha'ni l-'intikhābāt al-barlamāniyya al-muqbila” [Iraq's *Marji'iyya* issues a statement on the upcoming parliamentary elections], Alghadeer TV, May 4, 2018, <http://www.alghadeer.tv/news/detail/73889/>.

173 “Improved Security Provides Opening for Cooperation in Iraq: March to April 2017 Survey Findings,” Text, June 7, 2017, <https://www.ndi.org/publications/improved-security-provides-opening-cooperation-iraq-march-april-2017-survey-findings>.

174 Isa, Nawar. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal Interview. Baghdad. April 25, 2018

175 Haddad, Fanar. Interview by Post-War Watch. “After Sectarianism,” *Post-War Watch* (blog), November 20, 2017, <https://postwarwatch.com/2017/11/20/after-sectarianism/>.

176 The New Arab, “The Iraq Report: Iran Influences Iraq's Future Relations with Saudi Arabia,” alaraby, accessed May 15, 2018, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2018/4/4/the-iraq-report-iran-influences-iraqs-relations-with-saudi>.

## Chapter 4 – Conclusion

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**B**ased on the above discussion, there are several possible scenarios to consider when informing strategies for dealing both with the PMU and its elected affiliates in the future. The climate of Iraq's 'populocracy' has helped the PMU-coloured coalition capitalise on revanchist narratives to win sympathies across various segments of society. Domestic political opponents, Iraq's Gulf neighbours, and its Western allies now fear that al-Ameri's *Fatah* might soon end up reaping the fruits of the PMU volunteers' widely recognised sacrifices, even if not as part of the governing coalition. In this regard, Iraq would neither be the first, nor the last, state where legislative measures have failed to prevent the politicisation of national defence campaigns against an external security threat, as is currently being witnessed in both Israel and Lebanon.<sup>177</sup> Despite the warnings of the Shiite *marji'iyya* against the exploitation of the voters' legitimate sympathies with the Popular Mobilisation movement, Hadi al-Ameri is aware of his advantageous position, which would also strengthen his negotiation position in the allocation of portfolios:

"There is a big difference between making empty claims and performing actions consistent with one's claims. While others have preferred to hide in their offices, when [Islamic State] invaded, the people have witnessed our firmness on the battlefield. Having proven our intentions, we are now ready to take the next step and achieve victory in the political process".<sup>178</sup>

Even though the electorate has to some extent rewarded the political party for what has been achieved through an openly celebrated grassroots movement, it remains uncertain whether these electoral gains will necessarily secure the PMU-camp strategic domains like the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defence. Regardless of the final outcome, both the recent past and Iraq's current state of affairs demand the separation of the two. Addressing simultaneously the operational challenges of a young state-sanctioned security institution, and the pre-election tactics of the politicians, who have once laid its foundation, requires different approaches.

Strengthening the discipline of the PMU institution would not necessarily require its dissolution within the Iraqi army, which according to Iraqi officials is still in a volatile state.<sup>179</sup> One probable scenario is outlined by Renad Mansour, who argues that integration within the National Security Council (NSC) as a civilian institution would benefit the PMU leadership, providing them "with greater manoeuvrability and autonomy."<sup>180</sup> Nevertheless, PMU leaders like al-Muhandis still frown upon any form of civilian oversight, as they regard the PMU

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177 Hoffman, Gil Stern Stern, "The Prime Minister's Strategists Reveal How They Seized the Election from the Jaws of Defeat – Israel Elections – Jerusalem Post," March 21, 2015, <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-Elections/The-winning-strategy-revealed-394532>; Amin, Ali al-, "Lebanon Elections and Hezbollah's Fearmongering about War with Israel – Al Arabiya English," March 25, 2018, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2018/03/25/Lebanon-elections-and-Hezbollah-s-fearmongering-about-war-with-Israel.html>.

178 Ameri, Hadi al-. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal Interview. Baghdad, April 25, 2018

179 Abd al-Mahdi, Adil. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal Interview. Baghdad, April 24, 2018

180 Renad Mansour, "More Than Militias: Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces Are Here to Stay," War on the Rocks, April 3, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/more-than-militias-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces-are-here-to-stay/>.

as a security organisation which needs to coordinate directly with the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces – the Prime Minister. Pointing out parallels with the Peshmerga, while still acknowledging that the PMU constitute an extreme example, Renad Mansour questions the willingness of the PMU to be integrated or assimilated within any specific entity, without considerable external pressure.<sup>181</sup> As long as they can keep on taking advantage of the varied roles and mandates currently accessible to them, they would not embrace being subjected to a structure that would necessarily curb their independence, and impose a strict code of conduct on them.

Fatah coalition leader and former PMU commander Hadi al-Ameri perceived with dismay what he described as “hugely exaggerated fears” with regard to the PMU preserving its relative independence from the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defence: “Why only in Iraq do people make an either-or dilemma out of the relation between the army and the PMU?”<sup>182</sup> In unison with al-Muhandis and even the non-PMU affiliated former Vice President, Adil Abd al-Mahdi, al-Ameri also pointed to the existence of many different special commando forces within the U.S. security infrastructure existing and coordinating in times with the U.S. army. All of them agree on the fact that Iraq needs both the army and the PMU to tackle its current challenges. Al-Muhandis even compared the PMU and the army as the walls of one and the same room, that require both of them to stand stable.<sup>183</sup>

Though a proponent of this argument, Adil Abd al-Mahdi agrees that Iraq cannot just offer equal salary to guarantee that PMU-listed fighters maintain their responsibilities to resist foreign meddling, while prioritising national security interests. Vocalised affiliation with the transnational *basij* resistance movement demonstrated by some<sup>184</sup> and seen as engineered by Iran's IRGC, is not helpful in putting at ease deep-seated concerns regarding the alleged conflicting loyalties within the PMU. Along this line of thought, having former PMU affiliates occupying key ministerial portfolios would only exacerbate the perceived threat that the PMU could bend under Iranian pressure to pursue a security agenda that contradicts Abadi's current and Sadr's envisioned multi-directional foreign policy line.

Confronted with this issue, al-Ameri underlined that his party is committed to follow through with the current policy of “opening the door” to all neighbours and building strong relations with different allies: “Such diplomatic efforts should serve Iraq's national interests and not be exploited for private benefits”.<sup>185</sup> Coming from Hadi al-Ameri, with his track record of longstanding ties with Iran, this declaration does not automatically evoke the trust of PMU sceptics. Though, as al-Shahmani has exemplified, pre-emptively punishing the institution for the political orientation of some of its godfathers, instead of co-opting it step-by-step within state structures, is determined to create backlash: “The Iran aligned factions one fears so much would be the first to approach the volunteers, in case the state turns a deaf ear on them”.<sup>186</sup> This illustrates the risk of having trained military personnel on the loose, whose subjective feelings of rejection by the state might be easily

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181 Mansour, Renad. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Telephone Interview. May 7, 2018

182 Ameri, Hadi al-. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal Interview. Baghdad. April 25, 2018

183 Ibid.

184 “Iran's Most Senior Terrorist Announces Plans for a Global *Basij* Terrorist Network – YouTube,” accessed April 13, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsEn0mwr3EY>.

185 Ameri, Hadi al-. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal Interview. Baghdad. April 25, 2018

186 Shahmani, Adnan al-. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal Interview. Berlin, January 21, 2018

aggravated or even exploited, resulting in the undermining of the very same state they have been defending.

Regardless of the aforementioned electoral gains by PMU-affiliated leaders within and outside the established Fatah alliance, and their future role in government formation, the PMU require the firm institutional embracement of the Iraqi authorities. With the Islamic State regrouping and evolving into an insurgency, the PMU needs to develop gradually into a both disciplined and agile organisation within Iraq's security forces to respond to this concern. This transformation process, along with the implementation of comprehensive security sector reform in a fragile, and yet hopeful democracy, will take time. The professionalisation of the armed forces and consolidation of the military institutions must go hand-in-hand with an effective counter-insurgency strategy, preventing the re-emergence of the Islamic State and the exploitation of sectarian frictions which remain present. Re-establishing public trust in the state institutions will also require re-construction and development programmes, reviving the economy and attracting investments for large-scale infrastructure projects. Breaking the vicious cycle between corruption, clientelism and the recently witnessed voter apathy and political alienation calls for Sadr's alliance to secure stricter enforcement of accountability and transparency measures. Iraq's future government will inherit the PMU issue, and will likely expect from its partners tolerance and understanding for the complexity in dealing with the many challenges ahead. Perhaps best captured in Adil Abd al-Mahdi's words, this task remains "a marathon, and not a 100-metres race."<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Abd al-Mahdi, Adil. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal Interview. Baghdad, April 24, 2018





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