



The Hashd's Popular Gambit: Demystifying PMU Integration in Post-IS Iraq

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Introduction

During the first two weeks of October, Iraqi authorities were confronted with a wave of mass protests over years of administrative inefficiency, financial mismanagement and endemic corruption. Evidence of a disproportionately violent crackdown on demonstrators emerged, incriminating both state and non-state armed elements, implying their engagement in a highly non-transparent and rather worrisome “burden sharing” in their attempts to “protect the public order”. The accountability gap generated by such an approach has once again exposed the limitations of superficially cataloguing commissioned security providers as “state”, “non-state”, or – currently the far more fashionable term – “hybrid” actors. Acknowledging the transactional dealings between ruling elites and the plethora of armed auxiliaries, this report seeks to show how, despite being generally considered devalued, the label “state actor” has nonetheless become a bargaining chip that unlocks access to agenda-setting powers and institutional leverage. Once negotiated, state endorsement can often come at the expense of the state’s own institutional backbone, the bureaucratic apparatus of which can easily be transformed from hostage into enabler and, eventually, accomplice to its own debilitation. As a comparative consideration on state-sanctioned paramilitarism shows, the paramilitary umbrella known as Iraq’s Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU) presents no exception to this rule.

The decree of Iraq’s prime minister, Adil Abdul Mahdi, on 1 July 2019 formally stipulating the integration of the PMU with Iraq’s security forces provoked controversy within circles of Iraq observers and security analysts, as well as mixed reactions among the PMU’s own ranks. While some have embraced the prime minister’s order as a step towards the gradual dissolution of the PMU within Iraqi armed personnel structures,¹ others have warned about the risks of “institutional state capture”, an approach favoured by various PMU leaders.²

Regardless of how deeply entrenched the PMU may seem, the paramilitary umbrella is still in its infancy in terms of its organisational development.³ Having marked the fifth anniversary of its establishment, the PMU has been highly invested in consolidating its image as a state-sanctioned security institution, aggressively rejecting the pejorative term “militia” and challenging any calls for its incremental dissolution.

Nevertheless, the popular literature on the PMU is often dominated by a highly securitised and, to some extent, sectarianised narrative that feeds on the concerns of the seemingly inescapable “Hezbollahisation”

1 Deutsche Welle, “Iraqi PM Orders Iran-Backed Militias into Army Command,” [www.dw.com](http://www.dw.com/en/iraqi-pm-orders-iran-backed-militias-into-army-command/a-49438268) (1 July 2019), <https://www.dw.com/en/iraqi-pm-orders-iran-backed-militias-into-army-command/a-49438268>.

2 Renad Mansour, “Reining in Iraq’s Paramilitaries Will Just Make Them Stronger,” *Foreign Policy* (9 July 2019), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/09/reining-in-iraqs-paramilitaries-will-just-make-them-stronger/>.

3 Muhammad al-Waeli, “Rationalizing the Debate Over the PMF’s Future: An Organizational Perspective,” *1001 Iraqi Thoughts* (14 December 2017), <http://1001iraqithoughts.com/2017/12/14/rationalizing-the-debate-over-the-pmfs-future-an-organizational-perspective/>.

of Iraq. Accordingly, comparative studies have overstated the obvious parallels with Shiite militarism, as exercised both by Hezbollah and by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).⁴

Maintaining a conscious distance from this normative argument, this report explores the institutional logic of state attempts at forming paramilitary forces to help a government protect the established power structure from external and internal threats. Empirical evidence from across the globe has highlighted the rationale of governments resorting to relatively disciplined paramilitary wings, which can serve either as an auxiliary of, or as a counterweight to, the traditional army. Whether combating home-grown violent extremism or suppressing mass protests perceived to be demanding regime change, these praetorian-like actors have been selectively deployed by ruling elites either as an insurance policy against coups or as occasional backup for border security. Acknowledging the utility of this practice, PMU veterans and embedded strategists, as well as Iraqi government officials and international advisors, continue to test possible routes for transforming the paramilitary structure into a highly agile but still reliable and internally cohesive force capable of responding to the government's disparate security needs.

Commenting on the global surge in paramilitarism beyond Iraq's immediate neighbours, this report seeks to interrogate the rubber-stamping of state-endorsed mechanisms originally meant to delegate authority only conditionally to a variety of para-institutional wielders of violence – be they civil defence forces, pro-government militias, national and royal guards, or tribal groups.

The first chapter seeks to provide an analytical framework for placing an empirical case study of the PMU in context. Its opening section discusses the structural challenges of pursuing piecemeal Security System Reform (SSR) and Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) interventions in inherently fragmented, post-conflict environments. Elaborating on the gamble of compromising the traditional military chain of command, the second chapter presents a comparative approach to state-sanctioned paramilitarism and its various forms, seen in Latin America, Africa and across the Middle East. Focusing on Iraq's highly "diversified" armed forces portfolio, the third part of the chapter seeks to highlight structural parallels between other formally endorsed Iraqi forces and the PMU. To demonstrate the PMU's unique leverage, chapter three then traces the group's incremental institutional entrenchment within the occasionally state-brokered security marketplace and comments on the recent implications of the intrinsically motivated consolidation efforts.

Returning to the initial debate, the last chapter summarises the risks associated with a top-down rationale of empowering security providers outside the structures of the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defence. The accountability gap this creates can further undermine public trust in the legitimacy of the state security sector,

4 Phillip Smyth, "The Shia Militia Mapping Project," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (May 2019), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-shia-militia-mapping-project>; Michael Knights, Phillip Smyth & Ahmed Ali, "Iranian Influence in Iraq: Between Balancing and Hezbollahization?," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (1 June 2015), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraq-and-iranian-influence-between-balancing-and-hezbollah-ization>; Frederick W. Kagan, Kimberly Kagan & Danielle Pletka, "Iranian Influence in the Levant, Iraq and Afghanistan," American Enterprise Institute (19 February 2008), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep03026>.

as demonstrated by the controversial involvement of unidentified armed personnel in the violent crackdown of the October protests across Iraq. Moving beyond the short-term reputational damage for elected governments, the report aims to sensitise its audience to the systemic politicisation of praetorian elements, whose professedly 'pro bono publico et patria' services often come at the expense of the state's contested, if not illusionary, monopoly on the legitimate use of force.⁵

In addition to the academic and think-tank literature on the field of armed politics, pro-government militias and state-sanctioned paramilitarism, the research findings draw on primary Arabic sources, Iraqi legislative documents, official government statements, and fifty semi-structured interviews with government officials, Iraqi analysts and representatives of Iraq's security sector, conducted during six field trips over the course of 2018 and 2019.

⁵ Louise Fawcett, "States and Sovereignty in the Middle East: Myths and Realities," *International Affairs* 93, no. 4 (1 July 2017), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/ia/states-and-sovereignty-middle-east-myths-and-realities>.

Analytical Framework

In order to avoid the tendency of projecting the Westphalian state-centric view onto a fragile and conflict-affected environment, the author draws instead on the post-Weberian approach (as outlined in the analyses of Lottholz and Lemay-Hébert, Boege and Clements, Mac Ginty and Richmond, Hobson and Seabrook, and so on).⁶ This approach has contributed to a more nuanced and culturally sensitive conceptualisation of state legitimacy, illuminating its legal-relational, charismatic and traditional dimensions.⁷ Exemplifying how the last two types have so far been largely neglected by scholarly research on the topic, these authors make a strong case for revisiting the restrictive legal-relational approach in order to encompass aspects of charismatic and traditional legitimacy, thereby generating a more comprehensive understanding of the different means of manufacturing public consent.⁸

Feeding into this post-Weberian field, the author defines state legitimacy as the physical and normative power of the state to secure broad acceptance for established governance rules and administrative practices and to gain approval for its state-sanctioned institutions. For these purposes, the state is expected to rely not only on its legal-rational supremacy claim but also on the more traditional and charismatic legitimation rationales, allowing it to draw on the “devotion to the [exceptional] sanctity, heroism or exemplary character” of individual actors to whom it has delegated certain power.⁹ The author furthermore differentiates between the input, output, institutional and international dimensions of state legitimacy. Following the example of OECD’s Development Co-operation Directorate, which appealed to donors in its publication “State’s Legitimacy in Fragile Situations” to revisit their perception of legitimacy by acknowledging the role played by people’s shared beliefs and traditions, the author pays particular attention to popular sentiments and widespread convictions still engraved in the collective consciousness of Iraqi citizens.¹⁰

This holistic reading of the concept is significant, as it offers a logical explanation for the voluntary outsourcing of security provision by the state to an array of para-institutional agents, especially in cases where organs of the state are confronted with “existential anxiety” and/or identify an opportunity to capitalise on the symbolic

6 Philipp Lottholz & Nicolas Lemay-Hébert, “Re-Reading Weber, Re-Conceptualizing State-Building: From Neo-Weberian to Post-Weberian Approaches to State, Legitimacy and State-Building,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 29, no. 4 (1 October 2016): 1467–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2016.1230588>; Volker Boege et al., “On hybrid political orders and emerging states: state formation in the context of ‘fragility,’” Berghof Research Foundation (2008); Kevin P. Clements et al., “State building reconsidered: The role of hybridity in the formation of political order,” *Political Science* 59, no. 1 (2007): 45–56; Kevin Clements Traditional, charismatic and grounded legitimacy (Eschborn, Germany, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, 2010); Roger Mac Ginty & Oliver Richmond, “The fallacy of constructing hybrid political orders: a reappraisal of the hybrid turn in peacebuilding,” *International Peacekeeping* 23, no. 2 (2016): 219–239; John M. Hobson & Leonard Seabrooke, “Reimagining Weber: Constructing international society and the social balance of power,” *European Journal of International Relations* 7, no. 2 (2001): 239–74.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Lottholz & Lemay-Hébert; Clements.

9 Lottholz & Lemay-Hébert.

10 OECD iLibrary, “The State’s Legitimacy in Fragile Situations: Unpacking Complexity, Conflict and Fragility,” (OECD Publishing, Paris, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264083882-en>.

legitimacy and charisma of partially co-opted paramilitary figures. Furthermore, tracing the traditional legitimacy claim would also require taking into account vulnerable communities' tacit consent to the mandate authority of so-called extra-legal wielders of violence.

Building on Thurber's framing of the term "paramilitaries", the author defines this subcategory of non-state armed actors as an agile and mobile force to whom the state has nominally delegated the right to exercise physical violence against a common enemy for the sake of preserving the established order and safeguarding the interests of ruling elites.¹¹

Elaborating on the various motives of states to resort to the assistance of paramilitaries, Thurber argues that paramilitaries can be applied as a cost-effective tool to support a state-led counter-insurgency campaign.¹² Furthermore, as Ahram's conceptual map of violence devolution exemplifies, collusion with such para-institutional agents can easily provide unstable regimes with an option for saving face, allowing them to intimidate and bully their opponents into submission without ever being held accountable for brutal human rights violations.¹³ Nevertheless, Ahram warns against over-theorising the functionality of such forces, underlining the importance of reading the agenda of the elite through the prism of deep-rooted social norms, which often influence states' strategies of deploying pro-government militias (PGMs) as a response to illicit security challenges: "... states must adjust their repertoires of violence to accommodate the very idea of PGMs, identify violence specialists willing and able to collaborate, and find ways to assert control over their actions through incentives and rewards."¹⁴

Evaluating studies of violence in Latin America, Africa and the Middle East, Ahram reiterates the trilateral relationship between state, anti-state and state-sponsored elements.¹⁵ Underlining the already established loose or covert affiliation with the state, Ahram conceptualises state-sponsored elements or PGMs as 'para-institutional wielders of violence', which corresponds to a large extent to the author's definition of paramilitary units.¹⁶

Regardless of whether it is formalised or lacking a legally binding character, the transactional nature of the relationship between para-institutional agents and their state sponsor often becomes a thorn in the side of the majority of foreign-sponsored SSR and DDR efforts, which tend to underestimate the trajectory of such interdependencies.¹⁷

In view of this highly variable local context, an artificially derived formula combining SSR and DDR has repeatedly been framed as the panacea for all evils of post-war state disintegration.

11 Ches Thurber, "Militias as Sociopolitical Movements: Lessons from Iraq's Armed Shia Groups," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 25, no. 5–6 (3 September 2014): 900–923, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2014.945633>.

12 Thurber.

13 Ariel I. Ahram, "The Role of State-Sponsored Militias in Genocide," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 3 (1 July 2014): 488–503, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2012.734875>; Ariel I. Ahram, *Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State-Sponsored Militias*, (Redwood City, CA, Stanford University Press, 2014).

14 Ariel I. Ahram, "Pro-Government Militias and the Repertoires of Illicit State Violence," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 3 (3 March 2016): 207–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1104025>.

15 Ahram, *Proxy Warriors*.

16 *ibid.*

17 Ahram, *Proxy Warriors*, 11.

Existing theoretical and conceptual frameworks, meant to capture the ambivalence of those terms, leave room for interpretation. For the purposes of this research paper, the author will draw on the guidelines developed by the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), which emphasises three essential components of SSR, as follows:

- i) the improvement of basic security and justice service delivery;
- ii) the establishment of an effective governance, oversight and accountability system;
- iii) the development of local leadership and the ownership of a reform process to review the capacity and technical needs of the security system.¹⁸

According to these objectives, engaging in DDR might often seem a logical, routine step towards rightsizing mobilised security personnel in post-conflict societies. Nevertheless, lessons from the past have demonstrated that no DDR approach can function as a “stand-alone intervention” or “substitute peace enforcement activities.”¹⁹ As the Clingendael Institute’s report on the dilemmas of pursuing DDR in post-conflict societies emphasises, “DDR must be seen as part of the political process of consolidating peace and promoting security, and not first and foremost as a technical activity.”²⁰ Understanding the limitations of prioritising DDR strategies over a more holistically designed SSR strategy would require a rigorous evaluation of one or several of the less successful DDR attempts.

As experiences in Palestine, Yemen and Lebanon have demonstrated, underestimating the rapidly changing economic and sociopolitical dynamics on the ground and the developing role of non-state or local hybrid security actors can weaken the impact of foreign-sponsored efforts to reform the security sector, delivering instead ill-coordinated, piecemeal interventions.²¹

These highly autonomous players, who either have been deployed by the state for the purposes of regime maintenance or cropped up, seemingly at random, out of the remnants of the disintegrating national armed forces, have paved the way towards the hybridisation of security structures that were once administered in a bottom-up fashion.²² The overt power games among these actors, as well as their covert contestation of and competition with state institutions, have come to challenge the conventional logic and applicability of Eurocentrically conceptualised SSR and DDR approaches,

18 OECD, *The OECD DAC Handbook on Security System Reform: Supporting Security and Justice* (Paris, OECD Publishing, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264027862-en>; OCDE, “Security System Reform and Governance: OECD DAC Guidelines and Reference Series,” DACNews, September–October 2005, <http://www.oecd.org/tr/cad/securitysystemreformandgovernanceoecdacguidelinesandreferenceseriesdacnewssept-oct2005.htm>.

19 Nicole Ball & Luc van de Goor, “Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration: Mapping Issues, Dilemmas and Guiding Principles,” Clingendael Institute (August 2006), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05424>.

20 *ibid.*

21 Philipp Rotmann, “Men with Guns: Political Economy Lessons for Disbanding or Integrating Hybrid Security Forces,” GPPI (12 September 2019), <https://www.gppi.net/2019/09/12/men-with-guns-political-economy-lessons-for-disbanding-or-integrating-hybrid-security-forces>; Nadine Ansorg & Eleanor Gordon, “Co-Operation, Contestation and Complexity in Post-Conflict Security Sector Reform,” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 13, no. 1 (1 January 2019): 2–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2018.1516392>; Yezid Sayigh et al., “Fixing Broken Windows: Security Sector Reform in Palestine, Lebanon, and Yemen,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (3 November 2009), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2009/11/03/fixing-broken-windows-security-sector-reform-in-palestine-lebanon-and-yemen-event-1463>.

22 Yezid Sayigh, “Hybridizing Security: Armies, Militias and Constrained Sovereignty,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (30 October 2018), <https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/10/30/hybridizing-security-armies-militias-and-constrained-sovereignty-pub-77597>.

the effectiveness of which has remained constrained by their preoccupation with the Weberian ideal type of state monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force.²³ The one-sidedness of this rather problematic interpretation suggests revisiting the historical context of Weber's lecture "Politics as a Vocation", which he had delivered during a period of mounting civil unrest and political instability throughout the struggling German state.²⁴ Moreover, in his historical and sociological works, Weber himself challenges the reliability and validity of hypothetically constructed ideal types.²⁵ As Hariri emphasises on the basis of global historical sociology (GHS),²⁶ conceptualising states as "entities in motion" would instead enable us to revisit the capacity of non-state forces to warp the state's design of imposing obedience.²⁷ Therefore, the following sections will comment on a variety of cases from across the globe, demonstrating the challenges of revisiting security sector governance in the context of inherited or escalating military dualism, which has normalised the role of paramilitary actors into a permanent feature of the state's negotiated sovereignty.

23 Ursula Schroeder & Fairlie Chappuis, "New Perspectives on Security Sector Reform: The Role of Local Agency and Domestic Politics," *International Peacekeeping* 21 (9 June 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2014.910401>; Ansorg & Gordon, "Co-Operation, Contestation and Complexity in Post-Conflict Security Sector Reform."

24 Lottholz & Lemay-Hébert, "Re-Reading Weber," 1469.

25 Lottholz & Lemay-Hébert; Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1, A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760*, (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1986).

26 George Lawson, "A global historical sociology of revolution," in Julian Go & George Lawson (eds.), *Global Historical Sociology*, (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2017).

27 Aula Hariri, "State Formation as an Outcome of the Imperial Encounter: The Case of Iraq," *Review of International Studies*, undefined/ed: 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210519000196>.

A Comparative Perspective on Paramilitarism

The Global Appeal of Paramilitarism

Although the upsurge in paramilitary violence is often interpreted as an indicator of state fragility and a weakening of assertiveness on the behalf of ruling elites,²⁸ the rationale of such violence in states with relatively strong military backing has remained an under-researched area. As argued by Julie Mazzei on paramilitarism in Latin America, even states with well-established security forces have occasionally resorted to extra-legal auxiliary groups, allowing them both to keep the army in check and to deploy those groups in irregular warfare, capitalising on their guerilla-style tactics (such an approach was tested in Columbia).²⁹ Beyond providing authoritarian regimes with an efficient coup-proofing mechanism, paramilitaries can occasionally allow those in power to repress civilian discontent and plead – when deemed necessary – moral innocence, particularly in the case of unaccounted-for human rights violations, by claiming plausible deniability.³⁰

Acknowledging the multiple advantages of arming pro-government civilian groups, former Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez drew on the experience of Cuba's Committees for the Defense of the Revolution and Panama's Dignity Brigades, setting up his own "Bolivarian" National Armed Forces (FANB).³¹ The main function of this entity was to protect the Chavista regime and the party's "revolutionary" project. Moreover, through systemic promotion of patronage networks, Chávez had knowingly politicized state-controlled security institutions, thereby irreversibly undermining the military chain of command.³² The ensuing security vacuum was to be filled by empowering so-called *colectivos* – a catchphrase for disparate left-wing groups, which often presided over entire communities and were tasked with providing security and social services in areas with limited state presence.³³

This practice of subcontracting vigilante forces to fill in for the state has been successfully adopted by Nicolás Maduro's current government, which continues to rely on local loyalist groups for the purposes of regime maintenance. Cementing the path towards

28 Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, *Los Zetas Inc.: Criminal Corporations, Energy, and Civil War in Mexico*, (Austin, Texas, University of Texas Press, 2017); Ross Dayton, "Maduro's Revolutionary Guards: The Rise of Paramilitarism in Venezuela," *CTC Sentinel* 12 no. 7 (August 2019): <https://ctc.usma.edu/maduros-revolutionary-guards-rise-paramilitarism-venezuela/>; Shane Joshua Barter, "State Proxy or Security Dilemma? Understanding Anti-Rebel Militias in Civil War," *Asian Security* 9 no. 2 (3 July 2013): 75–92, 10.1080/14799855.2013.795546; Andrew Hubbard, "Plague and Paradox: Militias in Iraq," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 18 no.3 (3 January 2008): 345–62, 10.1080/09592310701674218.

29 Julie Mazzei, *Death Squads or Self-Defense Forces?: How Paramilitary Groups Emerge and Challenge Democracy in Latin America*, (Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina Press, 2009), http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9780807898611_mazzei.

30 James T. Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security* 24, no. 2 (1 October 1999): 131–65, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228899560202>; Ahram, *Proxy Warriors*.

31 John Polga-Hecimovich, Brian Fonseca & Harold Trinkunas, "Venezuelan Military Culture," (Florida International University, 13 June 2016), <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.2331.6084>; Dayton, "Maduro's Revolutionary Guards."

32 Dayton, "Maduro's Revolutionary Guards."

33 Dayton; Mazzei.

state-endorsed paramilitarism, Maduro welcomed the transactional and tactical interactions between home-grown, armed *colectivos* and Colombian guerrillas. The groups had managed to forge a symbiotic relationship under the benevolent gaze of the Venezuelan state. The government's shortsighted indifference to the long-term consequences of prioritising immediate regime stability over reinforcing public authority empowered these loosely aligned actors to pursue their occasionally converging interests in an extra-legal grey zone.³⁴ As Ahram argues, "Once repertoires of PGM activation are solidified, institutional inertia makes their modes of managing violence progressively easier to duplicate and harder to displace."³⁵ In such cases, the resulting path dependence continues to shape the trajectory of the delicate civic–military union, allowing contested regimes to perpetuate their power at the cost of eroding state control at an institutional level.

Shedding light on governments' motivation in resorting to empowering such irregular units, Francis draws attention to the long-term effects that self-perpetuating civil defence forces and pro-government militias have on the mechanisms of security governance. The presented evidence thus challenges the traditional portrayal, as laid out by Duverger in 1967, of militias as "an organised group of citizens mobilised to provide military service."³⁶ Basing his argument on multiple cases from across Sub-Saharan Africa (Sierra Leone, Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria, Congo and Uganda), Francis criticised the rather conservative view of state-militia relations, which overestimated the state's capacity to serve as the primary provider of security. When examining the root causes and implications of militarism in post-conflict environments, the aforementioned state-centric conceptualisation of security misses out on the wide array of "complex political emergencies" undermining the state's monopoly on the use of force.³⁷

Paramilitarism Across the Middle East

Dissecting the hybridisation of security governance, the Civil-Military Relations in Arab States programme of the Carnegie Middle East Center has offered exceptional insights into the structural challenges of reintegrating autonomous security providers under contested, dual-military structures.³⁸ Similarly, looking into the controversial footprint of local, hybrid and sub-state forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, a collaborative research project led by the Global Public Institute has shown how these actors have succeeded in translating their battlefield authority into post-war institutional leverage.³⁹

34 Dayton.

35 Ariel I. Ahram, "Pro-Government Militias and the Repertoires of Illicit State Violence," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 3 (3 March 2016): 207–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1104025>.

36 David J. Francis, *Civil Militia: Africa's Intractable Security Menace?*, (London, Routledge, 2017).

37 *ibid.*

38 Frederic Wehrey, "Armies, Militias and (Re)-Integration in Fractured States," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (30 October 2018), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/30/armies-militias-and-re-integration-in-fractured-states-pub-77604>; Frederic Wehrey & Ariel I. Ahram, "Taming the Militias: Building National Guards in Fractured Arab States," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (7 May 2015), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2015/05/07/taming-militias-building-national-guards-in-fractured-arab-states-pub-60005>; Sayigh, "Hybridizing Security."

39 Rotmann, "Men with Guns"; Global Public Policy Institute, "Militias or Partners? Local, Hybrid and Sub-State Forces in Afghanistan and Iraq," GPPI (13 September 2019), <https://www.gppi.net/issue-area/peace-security/militias>.

Without negating the presumed ideological motivation of such hybrid actors, Thurber indicates that paramilitary fighters may also receive monetary compensation and be guaranteed other incentives for their security services.⁴⁰ This type of transactional arrangement between a government and a state-sponsored entity can be observed across a number of cases that feature violence outsourced to loyalist entities with a varying degree of success.

Despite drawing on lessons from Britain's Territorial Army and Denmark's Home Guard, the attempted establishment of the so-called Libyan Territorial Army as a national guard-type volunteer force and of the consequent Libyan National Guard has failed to handle the challenges of domestic factionalism and to accommodate the reality of "localised security."⁴¹ Pointing at the difficulties of overcoming this deeply entrenched localism in the post-2011 period, Libya analyst and security expert Emad Badi elaborated on the root causes, condemning the Libyan National Guard plan as a "failure by design": "At inception, the plan was already seen as a means to preserve narrow interests of particular groups – notably those of the city of Misrata, considered a military powerhouse – rather than a wider process of SSR reform that would transcend the factionalism prevalent in society."⁴² According to Badi, the utilitarian approach of co-opting local armed groups without any consideration of the conflict dynamics on the ground was bound to backfire and undermine any "well-intentioned" efforts of setting up a national guard-like military structure: "This experiment should teach us that any attempt to reform the security sector must focus on garnering political and social buy-in and outline clear steps that would gradually shift loyalties from the local to the national. This would be the best approach to avoid the perception that such a process would create winners and losers, which would galvanise actors into jettisoning it."

Turning such forms of localised competition to its advantage, the Syrian regime has proved far more successful; it capitalises on the patchwork nature of PGMs, with their varying degrees of support from, and loyalty to, foreign sponsors. For example, having been set up to reorganise and assimilate the plethora of often autonomously acting PGMs, umbrella-like structures such as the Local Defence Force and the National Defence Force have remained highly contested with both Iran and Russia entertaining conflicting visions with regard to military integration steps within Syria's fractured national defence system – as witnessed with the 4th and 5th assault corps.⁴³ As underlined by Reinoud Leenders, by playing such domestic and international rivalries to its advantage, Bashar al-Assad's government has managed to entrench its institutional grip while mitigating a "double crisis of sovereignty" wherein the state's monopoly on the use of force would have been fully undermined and foreign meddling allowed to continue in an unbridled fashion.⁴⁴

40 Thurber, "Milittias as Sociopolitical Movements," 904.

41 Wehrey, "Armies, Militias and (Re)-Integration in Fractured States"; Wehrey & Ariel, "Taming the Militias"; Yezid Sayigh, "Milittaries, Civilians, and the Crisis of the Arab State," Carnegie Middle East Center (8 December 2014), <https://carnegie-mec.org/2014/12/08/milittaries-civilians-and-crisis-of-arab-state-pub-57438>.

42 Emad Badi. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Telephone interview, 1 October 2019.

43 Haid Haid, "Reintegrating Syrian Milittias: Mechanisms, Actors, and Shortfalls," Carnegie Middle East Center, (12 December 2018), <https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/12/12/reintegrating-syrian-milittias-mechanisms-actors-and-shortfalls-pub-77932>; Mustafa Mershawy, "Constructing State, Territory, and Sovereignty in the Syrian Conflict," *Politics* 39, no. 3 (1 August 2019): 332–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395718770348>.

44 Reinoud Leenders. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Telephone interview, 24 September 2019.

Though not facilitated by the state through a bottom-up approach, the hybridisation of security provision in Lebanon has been more or less silently condoned, empowering Hezbollah to nurture its aura of resistance and portray itself as indispensable contributor to domestic security arrangements.⁴⁵ The acceptance of this internal balance of power is to an extent involuntary on the part of Lebanon's foreign allies, which also explains how Hezbollah has so far been exempted from externally sponsored SSR and DDR approaches. As pointed out in talks with several European security sector officials and advisors, such approaches have instead focused on improving the capacity of the Lebanese armed forces in the hope of countering Hezbollah's narrative, which paints the army as too weak to cope with the complex threats jeopardising Lebanon's fragile social stability and inevitably endangering the lives of innocent civilians.⁴⁶ "As long as the state armed forces remain hostage to the Lebanese consensus system, Hezbollah is likely to continue insisting on operational independence, while denying other state institutions or political actors any influence over the use of its military capabilities."⁴⁷ As Lebanon analyst Heiko Wimmen further elaborates, apart from the leadership in Tehran and other external allies within the so-called "axis of resistance," Hezbollah tends to keep at arm's length any elements outside its own party ranks.

Weary of the well-understood side-effects of the self-emancipation of paramilitaries, Saudi Arabia has incrementally delineated the mandate of al-Ḥaras al-Waṭanī, its national guard (SANG), which has grown to constitute an integral branch of the military forces of the kingdom. As with other pro-government auxiliary forces, SANG has been placed under the administrative control of the Ministry of the National Guard instead of being integrated into the structures of the Ministry of Defence. In comparison to the regular Saudi army, SANG and the Kuwaiti National Guard build on loyalist tribal elements, which were initially tasked with protecting the nascent state and its founding fathers from both domestic and external threats.⁴⁸ The *fowj* tribal battalion in particular has offered the royal family a platform not only to coopt more heterogeneous sub-state units from the Saudi social fabric but also to forge a national identity formed around the growing prestige of the organisation. As emphasised by a European military advisor with in-depth knowledge of the internal structure of SANG, though patronage networks continue to influence the politics of promotion, the Ministry of the National Guard has not shied away from implementing the necessary reforms required for the professionalisation of its lower-level and middle-level cadres. Moreover, the Saudi success rate demonstrates that the institutionalisation of a disciplined paramilitary force can be realised only through a long structural process that allows the government to diversify the provision of security under a unified chain of command, as well as to create tangible incentives for stakeholders to enhance coordination and comply with state-led directories.

45 Sayigh, "Fixing Broken Windows."

46 Interviews conducted in Beirut with European security sector officials, August and September 2019.

47 Heiko Wimmen. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal interview, 12 November 2019.

48 Anthony H. Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia: Guarding the Desert Kingdom*, (New York, NY, Routledge, 1997), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429497452>.

Despite what might resemble praetorian like elements, under appropriate checks and balances SANG has been largely prevented from overstepping its security mandate and entrenching its leverage within civilian institutions.⁴⁹ The more systematically enforced “separation of power” is what also separates SANG from other manifestations of military dualism, such as Iran’s IRGC, whose institutional entrenchment within the socio-political field has substantiated its reputation as the “the People’s army” or the “Ten-Million-Man Army”.⁵⁰ Recognizing the highly distinctive ideological component of the IRGC’s DNA, Iranian analyst Hasan Ahmadian nonetheless reiterates the IRGC’s designated function as a pillar and protector of the established revolutionary order, defining the umbrella as “a logical continuation of the system in military means.” As also underlined by security expert Walter Posch, the IRGC’s organisational cohesiveness also benefitted from the state-led approach to its unification, where, shortly upon its establishment, it called upon new recruits to choose between a path within the IRGC structures or a career as a political leader. In that sense, the ruling class has managed to protect its own guardian from falling victim to internal rivalries, forming instead an organisational identity around a common ideological vision and ardent loyalty towards a charismatic religious dignitary as commander-in-chief.⁵¹ Compared to this sanctified cult of a professedly infallible supreme leader, any institutional subordination under a state servant labelled “commander-in-chief” cannot be anticipated to generate the same degree of ardent devotion, especially among a far less homogenous entity, such as Iraq’s PMU.

In an interview with the author, retired US Army Special Forces Colonel David M. Witty, who draws on more than ten years living and working in the Middle East, emphasised the singular character of Iraq’s PMU, particularly in comparison with some of the aforementioned cases associated with the Shiite “Axis of Resistance”: “The PMF [PMU] is nowhere near the power or influence of the IRGC. I don’t believe the PMF [PMU] currently has another corresponding paramilitary-like organization in the Middle East. It is not Hezbollah, which actually controls parts of Lebanon, and it is not the IRGC, which is the principal security sector player in Iran. It is not the Zaydi Houthi tribesmen in Yemen, who have always had resistance to state control.”⁵²

In order to interrogate the extent to which the PMU constitutes a unique case in Iraq’s history of paramilitarism, the following section will comment on several manifestations of “hybrid security governance”, starting with that seen during Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath party era.

49 Toby Matthiesen, “A Purge in Riyadh,” *Foreign Affairs* (8 November 2017), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2017-11-08/purge-riyadh>; Tamara Cofman Wittes & Bruce Riedel, “Shuffling the Deck Chairs in Saudi Arabia,” Brookings blog (28 December 2018), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/12/28/shuffling-the-deck-chairs-in-saudi-arabia/>.

50 Kenneth Katzman, “The Pasdaran: Institutionalization of Revolutionary Armed Force,” *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 3/4 (1993): 389–402, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4310864>; Frederic M. Wehrey, United States & National Defense Research Institute (U.S.) (eds.), *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps*, Rand Corporation Monograph Series (Santa Monica, CA, RAND National Defense Research Institute, 2009); Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran’s Revolutionary Guards*, (New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2016).

51 Walter Posch, “Shiite Militias in Iraq and Syria,” (26 March 2018), https://www.academia.edu/34182023/Schittische_Milizen_im_Irak_und_in_Syrien.

52 David M. Witty. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Telephone interview, 22 September 2019.

Iraq's Fractured Security Landscape

In view of Iraq's longstanding tradition of outsourcing violence to militias and extra-legal armed groups, the author draws on examples from within the country's ostensibly fractured security landscape, thereby challenging whether employing the "state's monopoly on force" as the key indicator of enhanced state legitimacy is apposite.⁵³

Most of Iraq's relevant political decision-makers have, on different occasions in the past, resorted to establishing their own loyalist militias.⁵⁴ This favoured practice placed at their command a reliable force able to safeguard the diverse interests of those leaders and to cater to the changing needs and priorities within multiple patronage networks. Exposing an inherent ambivalence towards the concept of sovereign power by elites, such gambles tend to consolidate a condition of "precarious stateness," which Vasilache and Agamben define as "a product of the notion of sovereignty itself."⁵⁵

As this section re-emphasises, the PMU phenomenon is not without precedent in Iraq's history, as in multiple cases the state has opted for delegating authority to an auxiliary para-institutional force. Under the rule of former Ba'ath party leader Saddam Hussein, Arab and Kurdish militias were deployed by the state to combat both local political opponents and external threats to the regime.⁵⁶ For instance, the Jaysh al-Sha'abi militia (People's Army) became instrumental during the Iraq–Iran War, while the Fedayin Saddam (Saddam's Men of Sacrifice) and the civilian defence corps Jaysh al-Quds (Jerusalem Army) enjoyed strong institutional backing and the regime's support during the critical phase of the 1990–1 Gulf War, as well as during the 2003 war against the US-led coalition.⁵⁷

When asked in an interview shortly before the parliamentary elections in May 2019 about similarities between the PMU and other actors currently shaping Iraq's fragmented security field, the current prime minister, Adil Abdul Mahdi, pointed out the parallels between the PMU and the Kurdish Peshmerga forces:

"Even though direct comparisons are always problematic, I tend to view the Hashd through the prism of Peshmerga – to put it in Iraqi terms. The Peshmerga came to existence in order to resist the oppression by the former regime. They were defending their territories not because the Iraqi state had called upon them to do so. It resembled more a sort of Fatwa from the people of Kurdistan. And despite the need for further reforms, Peshmerga now constitutes an integral part of the Iraqi security institutions. In that sense, we can think of the Hashd in the context of the Peshmerga

53 Thomas S. Mowle, "Iraq's Militia Problem," *Survival* 48, no. 3 (1 October 2006): 41–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396330600905528>; Damian Doyle & Tristan Dunning, "Recognizing Fragmented Authority: Towards a Post-Westphalian Security Order in Iraq," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29, no. 3 (4 May 2018): 537–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2018.1455324>.

54 Ahram, *Proxy Warriors*.

55 Andreas Vasilache, "Precarious Stateness and the Fleeting Boundaries of Sovereignty: Reflections on Giorgio Agamben, Transition Theory, and the Indonesian Case," (4 October 2010); Stephen Humphreys, "Legalizing Lawlessness: On Giorgio Agamben's State of Exception," *European Journal of International Law* 17, no. 3 (1 June 2006): 677–87, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ejil/chl020>; Giorgio Agamben, "Ausnahmestand. Homo Sacer (State of Exception)," Teil II (Part 2): 1, Perleнтаucher, <https://www.perleнтаucher.de/buch/giorgio-agamben/ausnahmestand-homo-sacer-teil-ii-band-1.html>.

56 Omar Al-Nidawi & Michael Knights, "Militias in Iraq's Security Forces: Historical Context and U.S. Options," The Washington Institute, Policywatch 2935, (22 February 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/militias-in-iraqs-security-forces-historical-context-and-u.s.-options>.

57 Al-Nidawi & Knights; Malcolm W. Nance, *The Terrorists of Iraq: Inside the Strategy and Tactics of the Iraq Insurgency 2003-2014*, (Baton Rouge, FL, CRC Press, 2014).

experience, demonstrating that under the control and banner of the state, one can still accommodate a certain degree of flexibility.”⁵⁸

Beyond this overly optimistic view, current similarities can be identified in terms of the deep-rooted culture of transactional leadership, which within the disputed territories has directly contributed to the fragmentation of what in Bourdieusian terms may be referred to as the contested “security field.”⁵⁹ With practices of racketeering, extortion, coercion and co-optation constituting “the new normal,” the Kurdish Peshmerga and its multiple patrons, including the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), have in turn become more exposed to the corrupting side-effects of armed politics.⁶⁰ Therefore, prolonged competition within the Peshmerga is bound to reveal more worrisome parallels with the PMU; previously the KRG’s security forces were at least able to claim the moral high ground. In an interview with the author, Falah Bakir Mustafa, the head of KRG’s foreign relations department, underlined how the Peshmerga was structurally and culturally embedded in Kurdish history, declaring: “Peshmerga is a constitutional force, not just a force which has obtained legality through the passing of a single law in parliament.”⁶¹

Nevertheless, this declared superiority has yet to withstand an institutional litmus test. The impression created by the Peshmerga and the KRG at times resembles a dysfunctional conglomerate of power-hungry elites with undisciplined and divided armed forces, which not only overshadows the Peshmerga’s supposedly heroic image but also increases the risk of diluting the structural and normative distinctions between other government-sponsored paramilitaries at large.

As the Peshmerga example demonstrates, the PMU can hardly be singled out in terms of its structural deficiencies, arbitrary approach to compliance, profiteering from illicit war economies or involvement in human rights violations. There is evidence that even the Counter Terrorism Services (CTS), despite being considered one of the most renowned of Iraq’s security agencies, has been subjected to criticism regarding their handling of captured IS fighters, especially in the final stages of the battle for Mosul^{62 63} Nevertheless, leading PMU figures continue to voice a clear desire to be compared to, and treated in a similar way as, the CTS.

In an interview with the author, Lieutenant-General Abdul Ghani al-Assadi, a prominent commander in the CTS, emphasised the improved coordination between the various army divisions, the Federal Police, the PMU and its tribal components, the local police, and the rest of the security agencies under the Joint Operations Command: “Fighting battles together and in coordination with the CTS has helped both enhance their operational capabilities, gain additional experience

58 “Reviving UN Mediation on Iraq’s Disputed Internal Boundaries,” International Crisis Group, (14 December 2018), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/194-reviving-un-mediation-iraqs-disputed-internal-boundaries>.

59 Toby Dodge, “Pierre Bourdieu and Explanations of Sectarian Mobilisation in Iraq and the Wider Middle East,” *Middle East Centre* blog, (12 September 2018), <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/09/12/pierre-bourdieu-and-explanations-of-sectarian-mobilisation-in-iraq-and-the-wider-middle-east/>.

60 Paul Staniland, “Armed Politics and the Study of Intrastate Conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research* 54, no. 4 (1 July 2017): 459–67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343317698848>.

61 Falah Bakir Mustafa. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Telephone interview, 9 June 2019.

62 Human Rights Watch, “Iraq: Execution Site Near Mosul’s Old City,” (19 July 2017), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/19/iraq-execution-site-near-mosuls-old-city>.

63 David M. Witty, “Iraq’s Post-2014 Counter Terrorism Service,” The Washington Institute, (October 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraqs-post-2014-counter-terrorism-service>.

in combatting terrorist threats as well as narrow the skills and experience gap between the different units.”⁶⁴ Despite the optimism voiced by the lieutenant-general, Witty has remained more sceptical of what he perceives as a rather far-fetched comparison in terms of deficiencies in the PMU’s administration process and its desperate need for a military professionalisation process: “Above all, a functioning integration under the national security structures would require ridding the organization of any foreign-sponsored lackeys.”⁶⁵

Nevertheless, the CTS has also not been spared allegations of alignment with external powers. Such allegations, as Iraqi security analyst Hisham al-Hashemi has emphasised, have often been generalised, labelling actors as US-trained proxies.⁶⁶ In a highly contested “security marketplace”⁶⁷ strongly affected by the enthusiasm of Iraq’s international partners and neighbours either to preserve or expand their zones of influence within the country, domestic armed actors have often been simultaneously “courted” by politically opposing sides. What all of the abovementioned examples demonstrate is the intrinsic – albeit volatile – motivation for actors to pursue an autonomous agenda, only occasionally aligning with sponsors when they are equipped to compete with or outbid incentives packages offered by opponents.⁶⁸ In opting for a flexible mode of sporadic engagement with external forces, these extra-legal or, in some cases, embedded actors have managed to transform the very tenets of interaction between the state and paramilitaries.

By tracing the emergence and the incremental entrenchment of the PMU, the following chapter seeks to show how, despite their formal integration within a certain legal framework or, indeed, by virtue of it, these forces have unlocked a chain of path dependencies. The PMU case demonstrates how these dependencies are bound to penetrate the institutional logic of the state-building project and reshape the patterns through which “statehood” manifests itself as the negotiated outcome of heterarchical power relations.⁶⁹

64 Abdul Ghani al-Asadi. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal interview, 14 March 2019.

65 David M. Witty. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Telephone interview, 25 April 2019.

66 Hisham al-Hashemi. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal interview, 3 March 2019.

67 Omar Sirri, “Reconsidering Space, Security and Political Economy in Baghdad,” LSE Middle East Centre, (8 October 2019), <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2019/08/12/reconsidering-space-security-and-political-economy-in-baghdad/>.

68 Douglas A. Ollivant & Erica Gaston, “The Problem with the Narrative of ‘Proxy War’ in Iraq,” *War on the Rocks*, (31 May 2019), <https://warontherocks.com/2019/05/the-problem-with-the-narrative-of-proxy-war-in-iraq/>.

69 Joyce White, “Incorporating Heterarchy into Theory on Socio-political Development: The Case from Southeast Asia,” *Archeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association* 6 (January 1995): 101–23, 10.1525/ap3a.1995.6.1.101.

Hashd – Still a Case Sui Generis?

On the fifth anniversary of the PMU's establishment, the Iraqi parliament voted to recognise Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's fatwa, issued on 13 June 2014 and calling men to arms against IS, as a "national occasion".⁷⁰ In all congratulatory speeches following the territorial defeat of IS, officials across the partisan spectrum, including Iraq's former prime minister Haider al-Abadi and the incumbent president, Barham Salih, applauded the heroism and sacrifices of the PMU, placing it on an equal footing with the Iraqi army, the federal police, the security and intelligence services and the Peshmerga.⁷¹ The following sections seek to comment on the contextual factors enabling the PMU's rise to prominence and power.

Emergence

Weakened by bureaucratic infighting, systemic corruption and sectarian clientelism, the nearly 600,000-strong US-trained Iraqi army witnessed an unprecedented collapse in the face of the IS offensive on Mosul.^{72 73} In the months preceding the fall of Mosul, Iraq's National Alliance had already been deliberating the need for additional security units as a way of addressing the debilitated operational capabilities of Iraq's traditional military institutions. Referring to an official meeting held on 7 April 2014, Nibras Kazimi elaborated on the Shiite leadership bloc's rationale to set up the so-called *saraya al-dif'a al-sha'abi* (Popular Defence Brigades).⁷⁴ By the beginning of 2014, Nouri al-Maliki's government had already welcomed the assistance of seven battle-hardened paramilitary units countering the advances of IS fighters in contested Sunni areas: Badr Organisation; Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH); Kata'ib Hezbollah; Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada; Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba; Kata'ib al-Imam Ali; and Kata'ib Jund al-Imam.⁷⁵

Unable to rely upon regular national defence institutions and having failed to persuade Obama's administration to intervene, al-Maliki endorsed the creation of the Hay'at al-Hashd al-Sha'abi

70 Sangar Ali, "Iraqi Parliament Recognizes Sistani's Militia-Forming Fatwa as 'National Occasion,'" Kurdistan24, (13 June 2019), <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/deeb6561-588d-4b65-8a4a-701e61a3f5a1>.

71 Chatham House, "Barham Salih on Iraq and Its Role in the Region," (27 June 2019), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/file/iraq-and-its-role-region>.

72 Ned Parker, Isabel Coles & Raheem Salman, "Special Report: How Mosul fell – An Iraqi general disputes Baghdad's story," *Reuters* (14 October 2014), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-gharawi-special-report/special-report-how-mosul-fell-an-iraqi-general-disputes-baghdads-story-idUSKCN0I30Z820141014>.

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

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

75 Kirk H. Sowell, "The Rise of Iraq's Militia State," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, (23 April 2015), <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=59888>; Renad Mansour & Faleh A. Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, (28 April 2017), <http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810>.

(the Commission for the Popular Mobilisation Forces) through cabinet decision 301, dated 6 June 2014 and re-enacted on 7 April 2015.⁷⁶ Under the direct authority of the Prime Minister's Office, the Commission was tasked with administering the newly created PMU in terms of training, equipment, maintenance and operations deployment.⁷⁷ Since the constitution prohibits the establishment of militia entities outside the framework of the armed forces, this somewhat improvised formation process for the PMU would certainly not have evoked the same degree of nationwide support without the religious endorsement it received from Sistani, the Shiites' foremost religious authority, also known as Iraq's most prominent *marja'*.⁷⁸

Underlining that the responsibility to confront terrorism does not fall upon one particular sect or subnational community, the language adopted in Sistani's 2014 "Wajib al-Kifai" fatwa⁷⁹ refrained from discriminatory references.⁸⁰ As underlined in talks with representatives of Sistani,⁸¹ the fatwa was a call to all Iraqi citizens to volunteer within the Iraqi security forces. Nevertheless, due to the breakdown of Iraq's security infrastructure, Sistani's attempt to mobilise fresh cadres for the ranks of the army and the federal police ended up boosting the recruitment campaign of the newly launched PMU Commission instead.⁸² Investing in radio and television channels, as well as social media, some of the pre-existing paramilitary units succeeded in rebranding their clandestine mode of operation, thereby advertising a popular resistance narrative, especially through Facebook and Twitter accounts.⁸³ In addition to these re-activated groups, Iraq's Shiite religious authorities (*marja'iyya*) facilitated the formation of additional units, which professed their loyalty to Sistani and were initially funded by the Holy Shrines (*Al-'Atabat al-'Aliyat*).⁸⁴ The PMU was criticised for the often privileged position of Shiite fighters, constituting a majority within the PMU; in response, high-ranking officials, such as the then acting vice president of the PMU Commission Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, sought to emphasize the inclusive character envisioned for the umbrella structure. As Muhandis explained, "There are over 30,000 Sunni fighters in the PMU, Christian groups, including Rayan al-Kaldani's 'The Lions of Babylon Brigades', as well as Turkmen, Kurdish, Yazidi and Shabak members registered within the different formations."⁸⁵ However, as highlighted by the Iraqi analyst Muhanad Seloom, it was historical vulnerabilities of minority communities that to a large extent accounted for their choice, primarily survival-oriented, to enlist within the ranks of the PMU.

76 PMU Official Website, "Organisational Structure of the Central Administration Department of the Popular Mobilisation", al-hashed.net, (5 September 2016), <http://al-hashed.net/2016/09/>.

77 Sara Salam, "Who is? Popular Mobilization," Media Directorate, Popular Mobilization Commission, 2017.

78 Fanar Haddad, "Understanding Iraq's Hashd Al-Sha'bi: State and Power in Post-2014 Iraq," The Century Foundation, (5 March 2018), <https://tcf.org/content/report/understanding-iraqs-hashd-al-shabi/>.

79 The *Wajib al-Kifai* fatwa constitutes a religious injunction imposed on the Muslim community while only necessitating the engagement of as many individuals as required to fulfil the mission.

80 Arabic version of Sistani's 2014 "Wajib al-Kifai" fatwa, (3 January 2019), <https://www.sistani.org/arabic/in-news/24908/>; Abbas Hassan, "The Myth and Reality of Iraq's al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces): A Way Forward," Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Amman, (September 2017), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/136889.pdf>.

81 Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani, Sheikh Mahdi al-Karbalai and Sheikh Ahmed al-Safi

82 Mansour & Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future."

83 *ibid.*

84 Harith Hasan al-Qarawee, "The 'Formal' Marja': Shi'i Clerical Authority and the State in Post-2003 Iraq,"

British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 46 no. 3 (2 February 2018): 481–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2018.1429988>.

85 Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Personal interview, 22 April 2018.

This choice then fed into the narrative of the umbrella's ostensible inclusiveness.⁸⁶

Legalisation

Despite remaining “genealogically” diverse, the PMU forces came to constitute a multilayered paramilitary body, which was in 2016 officially integrated into the Iraqi security forces through the so-called Hashd law.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, the wording of the law, which framed the PMU as part of the country's security forces while simultaneously labelling it as an “independent” element, allowed for conflicting interpretations. This ambiguity had enabled the more notorious Iranian-backed factions to navigate between state and non-state actor identities depending on the socio-political context.⁸⁸

In March 2018, addressing the ambiguity ahead of the parliamentary elections in May that year, Haider al-Abadi, then acting prime minister, issued an additional decree meant to reiterate the “state character” of the PMU, which had been viewed with scepticism.⁸⁹ The document repeatedly defined the PMU as an integral part of the Iraqi armed forces, entitled to the same privileges and subject to the same rules and code of conduct as employees of the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defence. Even though the PMU leadership has generally welcomed the prospect of equal salaries and access to military colleges and institutions, in an interview in March 2018 with the Arabic international newspaper *Asharq al-Awsat*, Naeem al-Aboudi, the spokesperson for the AAH PMU division, rejected the scenario of a 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.”⁹⁰ In an announcement read by his representative Sheikh Abdul Mahdi al-Karbalai during the Friday sermon on 15 December 2017, Sistani also advocated for the integration of PMU fighters within “official and constitutional structures”. However, any chance of the grand ayatollah revoking his 2014 fatwa following the territorial defeat of IS remains wishful thinking. On the contrary, Sistani had repeatedly stressed that the victory over IS “doesn't mean the end of the battle with terrorism,”⁹¹ suggesting that the security apparatus still requires the support of the fighters involved in the battle for Iraq's liberation. Moreover, due to its moral commitment towards volunteers, Najaf's *marja'iyya* is not likely to argue in favour of depriving numerous combatants of basic income provided by the state. This absence of a financially feasible roadmap for the integration and re-qualification of

86 Muhanad Seloom. Interview by Inna Rudolf. Telephone interview, 1 October 2019.

87 Al Sumaria, “The Hashd al-Sha'bi Law,” full text in Arabic, (26 November 2016), <https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/187029/السومرية-نيوز-تنشر-نص-قانون-الحشد-الشعبي>.

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

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

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

91 Amir Toumaj & Romany Shaker, “Top Iraqi-Shiite Cleric Endorses Incorporation of PMF into the State,” FDD's Long War Journal (28 December 2017), www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/12/top-iraqi-shiite-cleric-endorses-incorporation-of-pmf-into-the-state.php.

150,000 individual fighters is likely to allow the PMU to continue to manoeuvre, enjoying its operational legality and proclaimed ideological legitimacy.

However, increasingly being associated with the state security apparatus and the country's malfunctioning bureaucratic machine also means higher levels of pressure around accountability for the PMU, as witnessed in the last round of escalating social protests across the country. The label "state actor" thereby increases the risk of being held responsible for any instances of incompetence, economic mismanagement, or operational and tactical errors on the part of the state leadership, issues largely attributed to Iraq's highly contested military chain of command.

Despite these reputational risks, the organisation's leadership, in multiple interviews with the author, has sought to underline its association with the state security infrastructure while emphasizing its loyalty to Sistani. Even figures more strongly associated with the Iranian political establishment, such as Qais al-Khazali, the commander of the AAH, have become more vocal in professing the PMU's allegiance to the Najaf Seminary (also known as al-Hawza al-'Ilmiyya), as demonstrated in an interview posted on YouTube on 28 January 2019.⁹²

Nevertheless, any form of comprehensive integration under the Ministry of the Interior or the Ministry of Defence continues to be rejected by prominent PMU leadership figures, arguing that "the purity of the organisation" can only be preserved by nurturing an independent brand outside the structures of what they perceive as "internally compromised security agencies."⁹³ Moreover, with the war against IS mutating into a counter-insurgency, the PMU has found a further justification for its existence as an indispensable force of good with a unique capacity to combat IS sleeper cells.

Codifying the status of the PMU as a part of the Iraqi security forces was prompted in part by the government's eagerness to decorate itself with the fame of the PMU volunteers and enhance its credibility as a security provider. Nevertheless, this gambit has so far neglected several major elements.⁹⁴ With the PMU advertising their affiliation with the armed forces, any statements accusing the PMU of committing human rights violations continue to tar the integrity of the Prime Minister's Office. To illustrate, there have been recent accusations regarding the involvement of PMU-affiliated elements in the violent crackdown during the most recent round of demonstrations. Such accusations only exacerbate citizens' frustration with the government's inability

92 Qais al-Khazali, "Al-ḥashd al-sha'bi laysa ḥaras thawrī 'irānī aw Hizbu'llāh lubnānī [The Popular Mobilization is not Iran's Revolutionary Guard nor a Lebanese Hezbollah]," YouTube channel Qabas Kareem, (28 January 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_KdO8WH80fE.

93 Interviews with PMU Commanders conducted in Baghdad in March and September 2019.

94 Nancy Ezzeddine, Matthias Sulz & Erwin van Veen, "The Hashd Is Dead, Long Live the Hashd!," Clingendael, (July 2019), <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/hashd-dead-long-live-hashd>; Nancy Ezzeddine & Erwin van Veen, "Who's Afraid of Iraq's Hashd?," War on the Rocks, (10 September 2019), <https://warontherocks.com/2019/09/whos-afraid-of-iraqs-hashd/>.

to identify and punish the alleged perpetrators.⁹⁵ Furthermore, the PMU's sabotaging or challenging of government-led consolidation attempts and disciplinary measures is bound to expose the fragile authority of the country's widely mistrusted partisan elites.

Insisting upon differentiating between leaders from the so-called Islamic resistance factions, which operate in a more autonomous fashion, and the officially registered PMU volunteers, Sheikh Adnan al-Shahmani, a former member of the Security and Defence Parliamentary Committee, reiterated that the process of professionalisation had lessened dependence on the assistance initially provided by these pre-existing factions. Indeed, the current efforts are aimed at strengthening the internal cohesion of the originally heterogeneous organisation by gradually blurring the lines between the different divisions and substituting their old brigade names with numbers, for the sake of simplification and unanimity.⁹⁶ In a more recent attempt to consolidate power in March 2019, the PMU Commission initiated an extensive arrest campaign that, according to the Commission's media directorate, mainly targeted "fake units" falsely claiming affiliation with the PMU (in some cases these units had set up offices without obtaining institutional authorisation).⁹⁷ However, as both Mansour and al-Tamimi highlight, apart from seeking to clear the image of the amorphous paramilitary umbrella, these widely publicised efforts also signalled the rising pressure to rein in intra-organisational rivalries and to reassert control over the less disciplined elements.⁹⁸

Disciplining the various factions under the PMU umbrella would further require drawing a clear line between, on the one hand, the participation of PMU units in state-sanctioned manoeuvres and, on the other, the individually motivated participation of PMU affiliates in the political and financial schemes of the organisation's pioneers, which has become even more pronounced within disputed territories.⁹⁹

95 MENA Media Monitor, "Al-ḥashd al-sha'bi yuhaddid mutazāhiri al-īrāq [The Popular Mobilisation threatens the demonstrators in Iraq]," (7 October 2019), <https://www.mena-monitor.org/ar/articles/view/35493/>; Arab News, "Iranian General 'Played Leading Role' in Crackdown on Iraqi Protests," (9 October 2019), <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1566211/middle-east>; Al Hurra, "Shuhūd yatahaddathūn 'an tafāṣīl laylat al-raṣāṣ al-ḥayyi fi-madinati ṣadr [Witnesses give details about the firing of live bullets in Sadr City]," (7 October 2019), <https://www.alhurra.com/a/515088/الفساد-مظاهرات-الفساد-ينقلون-صورة-مظاهرات-الفساد>.html; Heshmat Alavi, "New video provides a window into the sheer brutality and brute force used by Iraqi security forces," Twitter feed @HeshmatAlavi, (12 October 2019), <https://twitter.com/HeshmatAlavi/status/1183010027306672130>.

96 Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis; Adnan al-Shahmani. Interviews by Inna Rudolf. Personal interviews, 22 April 2018.

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

98 Renad Mansour, "Why Are Iraq's Paramilitaries Turning on Their Own Ranks?," *Washington Post*, (18 February 2019), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2019/02/18/why-are-iraqs-paramilitaries-turning-on-their-own-ranks/>; Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Arrest of Aws Al-Khafaji: Looking at the Abu al-Fadi al-Abbas Forces," (2 April 2019), <http://www.aymennjawad.org/22523/the-arrest-of-aws-al-khafaji-looking-at-the-abu>.

99 Mac Skelton & Zmkan Ali Saleem, "Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries after ISIS: Heterogeneous Actors Vying for Influence," *Monograph*, (February 2019), <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100100/>.

Consolidation

As indicated in a recent analysis by Iraqi security analyst Hisham al-Hashemi, Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi has stressed the importance of reforming the structure of the PMU Commission since coming to power on 24 October 2018. In a strategic move aiming to underline the state affiliation of the PMU paramilitary umbrella, on 1 July 2019 Abdul Mahdi issued Diwani Order number 237, outlining the incremental steps towards finalising the PMU's integration into the Iraqi armed forces.¹⁰⁰ According to the decree, the brigades' commonly used names and labels, including those of any local or tribal formations, were to be replaced with military designations, such as company, squad, regiment, and so on. All of the units are also expected to cut their ties to political organizations and parties, thereby complying with the formal laws and directives regulating modes of political and humanitarian engagement. Article 5 of the document also demanded the closure of economic offices, hindering the pursuit of commercial interests and the exploitation of the PMU for individual or partisan gains. However, despite emphasising the imperative of preserving the state monopoly on violence, the decree had in no way implied or argued for the gradual dissolution of the PMU within the structures of the Iraqi army or police. On the contrary, Abdul Mahdi made clear in a lengthy interview with two Iraqi journalists that the end goal is not the integration of the PMU into the Ministry of Defence, but rather its gradual consolidation as a disciplined and agile military actor, able to work in parallel, full coordination with all other Iraqi security agencies.¹⁰¹

Signalling readiness to comply fully with the requirements listed in the decree, Faleh al-Fayyadh, the chairman of the PMU Commission, issued a letter of response, requesting to prolong the initial deadline for implementing the requirements by two months. In the following weeks Fayyadh also announced a series of measures, including the partial closure of PMU offices within cities.¹⁰² Nevertheless, internal rifts and apparent disagreement regarding the PMU's role within Iraq's national defence system gave rise to scepticism regarding Fayyadh's capacity to proceed with the envisioned reforms and keep the various factions in line.

Sidestepping Fayyadh, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the PMU's acting vice chairman, threatened retaliatory measures in a public document condemning the Americans and Israelis for their alleged involvement in a recent round of air strikes on strategic PMU locations and weapon depots.¹⁰³ Responding to the remarks, Fayyadh questioned the authority of Muhandis to issue such threats without any formal endorsement from the prime minister as commander-in-chief.¹⁰⁴ The dissonance between the statements of the two leaders has been further exacerbated by the circulation of a disputed statement from 5 September 2019, which advocated for the creation of a Hashd

100 Media Office of the Prime Minister, "ra'is majlis al-wuzāra' al-qā'id al-'ammu li-l-quwwāt al-musallaha al-sayyid 'Adil 'Abdul Mahdi yuṣdiru al-'amr al-diwanīyy al-muraqqam 237 [Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Adel Abdul Mahdi issued Diwaniya Order No. 237]," Twitter feed @IraqiPMO, (1 July 2019), <https://twitter.com/iraqipmo/status/1145735482518724608>.

101 Official Facebook Channel of Adil Abd al-Mahdi, Televised Meeting with Journalists, (23 July 2019), https://m.facebook.com/watch/?v=436742136912800&_rdr

102 Kurdistan24, "Fayyadh announces the closure of PMU provincial offices," kurdistan24.net, (23 July 2019), <https://www.kurdistan24.net/ar/newsreader/df18f41e-5246-437d-8ad1-a76cd6aed70d>

103 Official Homepage of the PMU Commission, "Statement by PMU Vice Chairman Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis," al-hashd.net, (21 August 2019), <http://al-hashd.net/2019/08/21/بيان-من-نائب-رئيس-هيئة-الحشد-الشعبى-أبو-أبو>

104 Steven Nabil, "Statement by PMU Chairman Faleh al-Fayyadh", Twitter feed @thestevennabil, (22 August 2019), <https://twitter.com/thestevennabil/status/1164299815829659648/photo/1>

air force.¹⁰⁵ Although the leaked document did carry Muhandis' signature, an allegedly authorised source from the PMU Commission denied the authenticity of the release.¹⁰⁶ According to the document, Salah Mahdi Hantoush, who has also been designated by the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control as belonging to a list of "persons who commit, threaten to commit, or support terrorism", was supposed to lead the new directory.¹⁰⁷

Despite the heightened debate, Muhandis had still not officially renounced the document as a fake. These controversies also prompted him to take steps meant to demonstrate a more unified chain of command. Through a new directive, released on 14 September 2019, the prime minister boosted the authority of the Iraqi Joint Operations Command, which is accordingly empowered to exercise full control over the various formations participating in state-led military manoeuvres, including not only the respective ministries and but also the Peshmerga, the CTS and the PMU.¹⁰⁸ Last but not least, weapons and other equipment designated for the PMU are to be transferred to facilities belonging to the Ministry of Defence in order to protect them from future bombardments, according to an Iraqi news agency report.¹⁰⁹

Following up on his plan to redesign and consolidate the national defence infrastructure, Abdul Mahdi sought to rid the paramilitary umbrella from debilitating partisan, tribal, ethnic and sectarian affiliations. Limiting the opportunities for factions of the Islamic Resistance to exploit their influence over certain formations within the PMU, Order 331 proposed a new organisational structure meant to transform the PMU into a reliable and easily deployable emergency task force, able to defend Iraq's national sovereignty and protect the state from terrorist threats and homegrown insurgencies. Under the suggested structure, Fayyadh, as chairman of the PMU, will nominate the various military commanders. Furthermore, the decree had also envisioned the post of a secretary-general or "chief of staff", who is to work closely with five professional assistants required to have graduated from one of Iraq's military colleges.¹¹⁰

Due to the surprisingly restrained reaction from figures perceived to belong to the Iran-aligned camp, observers assumed that the proposed reconstruction has already been approved by IRGC Quds Force Major-General Qassem Soleimani, who has reportedly held meetings with security officials in Baghdad.¹¹¹

105 Husam Altaee, "Statement on Establishment of PMU Air Force", Twitter feed @husam_taeae, (5 September 2019), https://twitter.com/husam_taeae/status/1169596030041677825/photo/1

106 "Statement by PMU Commission Officials on the Establishment of PMU Air Force", YouTube, accessed 20 September 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ak37ygiJCM&app=desktop>

107 Foreign Assets Control Office, "Designations of 4 Individuals Pursuant to Executive Order 13224 of September 23, 2001, 'Blocking Property and Prohibiting Transactions With Persons Who Commit, Threaten To Commit, or Support Terrorism,'" Federal Register, (15 November 2012), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2012/11/15/2012-27831/designations-of-4-individuals-pursuant-to-executive-order-13224-of-september-23-2001-blocking>; al-Araby al-Jadeed, "wathiqa tatahaddath 'an 'istiḥdāth milishiyāt al-ḥashd mudiriyyat li-l-quwwat al-jawwiyya [A Document reports the creation of an Air Force Directorate by hashd militias]," alaraby.co.uk (5 September 2019), <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2019/9/5/العراق-وثيقة-تتحدث-عن-استحداث-الحشد-مديرية-للقوة-الجوية>.

108 Al-Sumaria, "Bi l-wathiqa: 'i'ādātu tashkīl qiyādat al-'amaliyāt al-mushtaraka [Restructuring the Joint Operations Command]," alsomaria.tv, (15 September 2019), <https://www.alsomaria.tv/news/أمن-318404/بالوثائق-إعادة-تشكيل-قيادة-العمليات-المشتركة>.

109 News of Iraq, "Wizāratu l-difa' tu'lin naql asliḥa al-ḥashd al-sha'bi [The Ministry of Defence announces the retransferring of weapons belonging to the Popular Mobilisation]," Twitter feed @Newssofiq, (14 September 2019), <https://twitter.com/newsofiq/status/1172948667659161601>.

110 Al Arabiya, "ba'd 'inhiyāz 'Abdul Mahdy li-l-Fayyād... ḥaykala al-ḥashd taqṣi al-Muhandis [After Abdul Mahdi sided with Fayyadh: The structure of the PMU moves away from Al-Muhandis]," alarabiya.net, (21 September 2019), <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/Arab-and-world/iraq/2019/09/21/بعد-انحياز-عبدالمهدي-لمحمود-الفياض-هيكله-الحشد-تقضي-ا>

111 Al Arabiya, "Sulaimany fi Baghdād sirran [Sulaimany on a secret visit to Baghdad]," alarabiya.net, (18 September 2019), <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/Arab-and-world/iraq/2019/09/18/سليمانى-في-بغداد-سرًا-دعوة-لضرب-مصالح-أمريكا>.

Despite the initial euphoria that followed these government-backed efforts to prevent the PMU from being “proxyfied”,¹¹³ Mansour reminds observers not to be blinded by cosmetic interventions meant to divert attention away from more subtle forms of state capture.¹¹⁴ Discussions with security analysts emphasised that, having been granted the crucial post of chief of staff, Muhandis is likely to continue to dominate the internal allocation of resources, thereby preserving his grip over established patronage networks.¹¹⁵

Following their electoral success, PMU-affiliated leaders are now confronted with the challenge of striking a balance between their distinct ideological and religious roots, and their repeated claims to defend Iraqi national interests. If they succeed in substantiating such claims with concrete measures, the PMU and its leadership, as advocated in an interview with Fanar Haddad,¹¹⁶ could be instrumental in reconciling Iraq's social fabric. For this purpose, the PMU leadership would need to invest heavily in disciplining certain representatives of the pro-Khamenei current, whose often provocative remarks tend to undermine public trust unnecessarily in the state's ability to restore its monopoly on the use of force and to bring all armed formations under control.¹¹⁷ Moreover, being perceived as a marionette of Iran's regional agenda¹¹⁸ casts a shadow over the still-tainted reputation of the PMU.¹¹⁹ The image of being an externally controlled proxy threatens to put the PMU's comfortable arrangement with the Iraqi state at risk.¹²⁰

With looming tensions between the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran and its allied Islamic Resistance factions, Adil Abdul Mahdi, Iraq's prime minister, is committed to preventing the fragile regional equilibrium from spinning out of control on Iraqi soil. Engaging in a series of diplomatic manoeuvres, the prime minister has attempted both to appease Iraq's competing neighbours and overseas allies and to curb the enthusiasm of domestic stakeholders for overblown militant theatrics. Seeking to prove his own credibility as guarantor and protector of Iraq's sovereignty, Abdul Mahdi cannot afford to be perceived by the US, Israel and their allies as lenient in terms of his readiness to engage militarily with any entities labelled as Iran-controlled proxies. As commander-in-chief, the prime minister is anticipated to have the capacity to prevent any further air strikes on strategic locations and weapon depots belonging to the PMU.

The need to come up with a decisive response had already arisen after another member of the Security and Defence Parliamentary Committee referred to sources confirming that the PMU sites had

113 Ollivant & Gaston, “The Problem with the Narrative of ‘Proxy War’ in Iraq.”

114 Mansour, “Reining in Iraq's Paramilitaries Will Just Make Them Stronger.”

115 Michael Knights, “Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, (8 August 2019), <https://ctc.usma.edu/irans-expanding-militia-army-iraq-new-special-groups/>.

116 Matthew Schweitzer, “Interview with Fanar Haddad: After Sectarianism,” EPIC, (20 November 2017), <https://www.epic-usa.org/after-sectarianism/>.

117 Ahmad Majidiyar, “Iran-Backed Iraqi Militia Leader Intensifies Propaganda against U.S. and Its Allies,” Middle East Institute, (1 August 2017), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-backed-iraqi-militia-leader-intensifies-propaganda-against-us-and-its-allies>; Ahmad Majidiyar, “Another Iran-Backed Iraqi Militia Leader Visits Lebanon, Threatens Israel,” Middle East Institute, (14 February 2018), <https://www.mei.edu/content/io/another-iran-backed-iraqi-militia-leader-visits-lebanon-threatens-israel>; Al Arabiya English, “Iranian-Backed Iraqi Militia to Back Hezbollah in Any War against Israel,” (14 February 2018), <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2018/02/14/Iranian-backed-Iraqi-militia-to-back-Hezbollah-in-any-war-against-Israel.html>.

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

119 Baria Alamudin, “West in Denial about the ‘Hezbollahization’ of Iraq,” Arab News, (2 September 2018), <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1365671>.

120 Phillip Smyth, “Iranian Militias in Iraq's Parliament: Political Outcomes and U.S. Response,” The Washington Institute, POLICYWATCH 2979, (11 June 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iranian-militias-in-iraqs-parliament-political-outcomes-and-u.s.-response>.

been targeted by Israeli drones, reportedly with the knowledge of the International Coalition.¹²¹ As protecting the country's armed forces from foreign orchestrated assaults falls under the deliverables of the administration as guardians of the country's territorial integrity, Mohammed al-Halbousi, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, rapidly facilitated the creation of yet another entity meant to guide the government-led efforts to preserve Iraq's sovereignty.¹²²

Given that the PMU is considered an integral part of Iraq's security forces both in the so-called Hashd law from 2016,¹²³ and in the decree issued on 1 July 2019,¹²⁴ any further targeting of PMU military bases will require the current administration to deliver a convincing and coordinated response.

Provided the government fails to demonstrate a unified chain of command, the largely autonomous character of the PMU will continue to fuel international scepticism regarding Iraq's ability to rid itself of the image of a geopolitical hostage. Reassuring Iraq's neighbours and allies would also necessitate reclaiming institutional leverage. For that purpose, the government would have to enforce disciplinary measures across a patchwork of self-catering and occasionally "proxyfied" armed factions. It is therefore worth noting that the leaders of the various Islamic Resistance factions remain well aware of the fact that the proposed restructuring mechanisms are first and foremost tools meant to reduce their institutional grip across the PMU Commission as well as to unify them under one legal framework.¹²⁵

121 Sumer News, "al-difā' al-niyābiyya tuḥaddid makān 'inṭilāq al-ṭā'irāt al-'isra'īliyya li-'istihdāf mawāqī' al-hashd al-sha'bi [Parliamentary Defence determines the location of Israeli aircraft targeting PMU sites]," *sumer.news*, (15 September 2019), <http://sumer.news/ar/news/41632/>
الدفاع النيابية تحدد مكان انطلاق الطائرات الإسرائيلية لاستهداف مواقع الحشد الشعبي

122 Al Etejah, "Al-Fataḥ yakshafu 'an 'a'dā' lājnatī ḥifzi siyādat al-'irāq min al-'iḍā'āt al-ṣāḥyawaniyya al-mutakarrira [Al-Fateh reveals to the members of the Committee to "preserve the sovereignty of Iraq" from repeated Zionist attacks]," *alletejahtv.com*, (14 September 2019), <https://alletejahtv.com/etejah-press/archives/338235>.

123 Al Sumaria, "The Hashd al-Sha'abi Law," Full text in Arabic, (26 November 2016), <https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/187029/>
السومرية نيوز-تنشر نص قانون الحشد الشعبي

124 Media Office of the Prime Minister, "ra'īs majlis al-wuzāra' al-qā'id al-'ammu li-l-quwwāt al-musallaḥa al-sayyid 'Adil 'Abdul Mahdy yuṣdiru al-'amr al-diwāniyy al-muraqqam 237 [Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Adel Abdul Mahdi, issues Diwaniya Order No. 237]," Twitter feed @IraqiPMO, (1 July 2019), <https://twitter.com/IraqiPMO/status/1145735482518724608>.

125 Al Arabiya, "ba'd 'inhāyāz 'Abdul Mahdy li-l-Fayyāḍ" [After Abdul Mahdi sided with Fayyadh].

Lessons and Conclusion

Following the controversial removal from the CTS by Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi of one of Iraq's national heroes, Lieutenant-General Abdulwahab al-Saadi, the lack of progress in starting the reconstruction process and creating long-promised employment opportunities triggered an unprecedented level of civilian protests in the first weeks of October 2019.¹²⁶ With the death toll rising to over 300, and at least 15,000 wounded (as reported on 10 November 2019),¹²⁷ the government has failed to account for the disproportionately violent crackdown on what had initially started as peaceful demonstrations demanding primarily "a state" or "a homeland" (*waṭan*).¹²⁸ When confronted with the allegation of snipers firing live ammunition at protestors, representatives of Iraq's security agencies were forced to admit their complete incapacity to identify and bring to justice the perpetrators in a fashion consistent with a functioning judicial system.¹²⁹

All things considered, it remains unclear whether it was administrative incompetence that led elected representatives to subcontract units from within Iraq's imploding security marketplace to protect the status quo at all costs. Another plausible explanation is the now-exposed inability of the government to demonstrate a unified chain of command and rein in security providers and armed entrepreneurs. Such an explanation may help readers become aware of the often unpredictable side effects of delegating the use of force to loosely aligned elements. As this report has demonstrated, despite being highly efficient in assisting ruling elites to dismantle domestic threats and prevent established power structures from collapsing, these actors often constitutes a double-edged sword. Their loyalties remain as fluid as their idiosyncratic understanding of statehood. To defend their version of a strong state, they have not shied away from monopolising its institutional foundations, under the weary eye, or often with the blessing, of power-driven formal bureaucracies.¹³⁰

Despite the arbitrariness of such surveillance practices, which in Iraq are only being observed selectively, preserving its privileges would require the PMU to provide convincing evidence of its alleged intentions to safeguard the rule of law. Challenging the state's authority on the ground and claiming plausible deniability would only exacerbate the mistrust, particularly regarding the PMU's relationship with external sponsors and their allied factions. In view of the demonstrated interdependences among this plethora of actors, it is safe to conclude that both the PMU and the Iraqi state have a long-term interest in

126 Harith Hassan, "Iraq Is Currently Being Shaken by Violent Protests," Carnegie Middle East Center, (4 October 2019), <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/79993>.

127 Mohammed Tawfeeq, "Iraq protests death toll rises to 319 with nearly 15,000 injured," CNN, (10 November 2019), <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/11/09/middleeast/iraq-protest-death-toll-intl/index.html>

128 Ahmed Falah, Twitter feed @AljaffalA, (6 October 2019), <https://twitter.com/AljaffalA/status/1180846390181675009?s=08>.

129 Harith Hasan, "Body Language Helps Explaining Whether Those Officers Really Have a Clue about What Is Going on. Further, One of Them Explicitly Said: 'Yes, There Were Snipers and We Don't Know Who They Are,'" Twitter feed @harith_hasan, (6 October 2019), https://twitter.com/harith_hasan/status/1180923505547894793.

130 Renad Mansour & Peter Salisbury, "Between Order and Chaos: A New Approach to Stalled State Transformations in Iraq and Yemen," Chatham House, (9 September 2019), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/between-order-and-chaos-new-approach-stalled-state-transformations-iraq-and-yemen>.

rethinking their mode of collaboration. With the threat of IS regrouping in the country's safe havens and a prolonged failure to deliver good governance, the Iraqi population will have little tolerance for military incompetence and operational errors.¹³¹ Any future failure to enhance public safety and security will therefore be shared both by the PMU and by the state as an institutional construct. Such a failure would limit their joint symbolic capital to win back if not the hearts and minds, then at least the benefit of the doubt of Iraq's disillusioned citizens. Shifting the blame through euphemisms such as cloak-and-dagger "third parties" or "undisciplined factions" can no longer trivialise factual evidence of indiscriminate violence against civilians. With an accelerated degree of collective resilience cemented through a not-much-left-to-lose-attitude, the awareness on the street is not going to be fobbed with banal responses denying culpability and pleading for dismissal. The Hashd's mainstream legitimacy is at stake and the pawn's gambit is not helping them live up to their popular name.

131 Colin Clarke, "ISIS's New Plans to Get Rich and Wreak Havoc," *Foreign Policy*, (10 October 2018), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/10/isis-new-plans-to-get-rich-and-wreak-havoc/>.



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