



REPORT ARAB POLITICS BEYOND THE UPRISINGS

Understanding Iraq's Hashd al-Sha'bi

State and Power in Post-2014 Iraq

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Perhaps the most common handicap among outsiders trying to understand Iraq is the difficulty of keeping pace with Iraq's fast-changing social and political landscapes. Western and Arab impressions of Iraq have consistently lagged behind Iraqi reality and, worse, many outsiders seem unaware of just how brief a shelf-life Iraqi politics can sometimes impose on trends, personalities, and frames of reference. Hence for example, some foreign analysis continues to consider the possibility of a return of Vice President Nouri al-Maliki to the premiership in 2018¹—something that Iraqis in Iraq would dismiss as fantastically improbable. More broadly, Arab and western perceptions toward Iraqi sectarian relations—and by extension Iraq—often seem to be stuck somewhere in the years 2003–2007, whereby all that came before and all that followed must form a neat chain of causality, as forever epitomized by the peaks of violence and sectarian entrenchment witnessed in 2006–2007. This has had a distortive effect on our understanding of recent events, something that is particularly evident in commentary on the Hashd al-Sha'bi (the Popular Mobilization Units, henceforth the PMU).

The emergence of the PMU goes back to the summer of 2014, when IS overran about a third of Iraq. With the Iraqi army having collapsed and the Iraqi state seemingly in disarray, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most widely emulated Shi'a cleric, issued a fatwa calling upon Iraqis to join the Iraqi security forces to help repel the IS threat.² In practice, this led to a mass mobilization, not so much to join the Iraqi army, but to join both newly formed and long-standing Shi'a paramilitary organisations under the new banner of the Hashd al-Sha'bi (Popular Mobilization).³ The organic popular element in the PMU's emergence, coupled with Sistani's blessings and the subsequent role played by the PMU in repelling IS has turned the PMU into a permanent feature of Iraq's social, political and security landscapes.

One often finds that the phenomenon of the PMU is filtered by international policymakers and other outsiders through the lens of sectarian conflict, with the PMU being framed in much the same way that the Jaysh al-Mahdi was framed over a decade ago: an unruly Shi'a mob waging war against Sunni areas and propelling Iraq toward sectarian apocalypse.⁴ That is the impression conveyed by, to name a few examples, the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister who described the PMU as purely sectarian and Iranian-led;⁵ by a group of British MPs condemning, a "brutally-sectarian militia";⁶ and by U.S. Foreign Secretary Rex Tillerson's call on "Iranian militias" to go home.⁷

Such simplifications are not restricted to politicians, nor are they the preserve of sensationalist journalism: time and again one is confronted with such arguments from academics and even practitioners working on issues relating to Iraq. In a recent State Department–European Union sponsored workshop on reconciliation in Iraq, some conflict resolution practitioners were dumbfounded to learn that the PMU are an extremely popular phenomenon amongst Iraqi Shi'as and even amongst some non-Shi'a Iraqis. These practitioners' opinions were based on a simple and unfounded equivalence: the PMU are the "Shi'a-ISIS." The absurdity of this view only comes into full relief when one is in Iraq itself, and it is an absurdity that is as likely to be pointed out by the PMU's many Iraqi detractors as it is by their supporters.

The purpose of this report is not to judge the PMU. What is important is not whether the PMU are seen in a negative or a positive light; rather, for people such as the above-mentioned practitioners who have ambitions of furthering “reconciliation in Iraq,” it is vital that we get the PMU right regardless of whether or not we like them. They are neither the angels that their more ardent fans portray them as, nor the Iranian-made automatons of doom that their critics would have us believe they are: neither black nor white, they occupy a spectrum spanning several shades of grey. Yet, outside of Iraq, few things are as misrepresented as the PMU. Therefore, in the hope of providing a corrective of sorts, this report will first outline how the PMU are perceived within Iraq itself, then it will turn to the common fears and points of contention that are often raised in discussions about them. A basic conceptual error that has to be put to rest is viewing the PMU and “the state” as opposing or otherwise antagonistic forces. As will be argued throughout, far from threatening the state or encroaching upon it, the PMU are a function and reflection of the post-2003 Iraqi state—be it on human rights, institutional incoherence, or links to foreign powers.

Popular Mobilization Units 101

In order to properly understand the place of the PMU in Iraq today, one must appreciate how they are perceived within Iraq. The PMU’s popularity is organic, genuine, and broad-based, and is rooted in what is regarded as selfless sacrifice in the national fight against IS. In addition to their popularity, it is equally important to recognize that the PMU span a spectrum organizationally, ideologically, and in terms of the religious and sectarian composition of individual formations.

The PMU Are Comprised of a Spectrum of Actors

It was refreshing to hear the acting U.S. State Department spokesperson say: “I think it’s important also to emphasize that the PMU is an umbrella term for an assortment of militias that includes, of course, Shi’a, but also Turkmen, Christian, and Sunnis; and also worth noting that not all Shi’a militias are Iranian-supported or funded.”⁸ Rather than being any one thing, the PMU are a spectrum of up to an estimated 140,000 fighters and over 40 paramilitary units who will vary in their relationship with various Iraqi political actors, with Iran, and with each other.⁹ Yet, to this day, many people—nowhere more so than in the Arab world—are either oblivious to or dismissive of this fact. In this, there is a stark contrast between discourse on and criticism of the PMU within Iraq and beyond.

There is a tendency among observers to overlook the distinctions within the PMU, with many reports settling for the more-simplified (and value-laden) characterization that they are “Iran-backed Shia militias.” In actuality, the PMU consists of units that have differing histories, affiliations, and loyalties. There are formations within the PMU that are

tied to the religious seminaries in Iraq; this is sometimes unofficially referred to as the Hashd al-Marji'i (as in the PMU formations that are tied to the Shi'a religious authorities or *marji'iyya*). More prominent and more controversial are the formations that are aligned with Iran, often referred to as the Hashd al-Wala'i (wala' being the Arabic word for loyalty—this is a reference to these formations' loyalty to the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei). The former groups tend to be smaller and tend to have been formed after the fall of Mosul in 2014, as a direct response to Sistani's call for mass mobilization to counter the threat of the Islamic State (IS). The latter, more Iran-aligned formations tend to be more seasoned groups with a longer history of paramilitary activities in Iraq and, in some cases, Syria as well. These two broad categories are not official, nor is there a clear boundary separating them. Indeed, there may be some within the PMU and beyond who benefit from blurring such distinctions: this way, the Hashd al-Wala'i can better tap into the organic credibility and popularity of the Hashd al-Marji'i, who in turn benefit from association with the military gains of the former. Nevertheless, overlaps and ambiguities notwithstanding, the distinction exists, and it must be borne in mind when discussing the PMU.

Criticism of the PMU within Iraq is far more likely to be grounded in actual experience and hence far less likely to evince the hysterics one encounters in international media.

Criticism of the PMU from outside of Iraq is often—though not always—mediated either through the prism of sectarian competition and Sunni victimhood or through the exigencies of needing to counter Iran. On the other hand, criticism of the PMU within Iraq is far more likely to be grounded in actual experience and hence far less likely to evince the hysterics one encounters in international media. To illustrate, in early 2015, I had a chance encounter in Baghdad with people who had just arrived from Samarra—a Sunni-majority town north of the capital that had a heavy PMU presence. When asked about their opinions toward the PMU, their response was one that is encountered within Iraq but almost never outside it: “Which formation of the PMU are you talking about?” They proceeded to outline a taxonomy of PMU formations, ranging from those they feared to those they felt somewhat comfortable dealing with.

That sort of nuance—the sort acquired through experience—is almost totally absent in international, particularly Arabic-language commentary on the PMU. Far from being restricted to punditry, a common view outside of Iraq holds that any encounter between the PMU and Sunni Iraqis must inevitably be a confrontational and bloody one. For example, writing about the Iraqi government's priorities in the fight against IS, political scientist Mark A. Heller argued that it was particularly important to “minimize the involvement of the hated Shiite militia, the *hast ash-sha'bi* [sic], whose

depredations against the local Sunni population following the ‘liberation’ of Fallujah further dampened any remaining Sunni enthusiasm for a reunified Shiite-dominated Iraq.”¹⁰ Common though such assertions are, they completely fly in the face of realities on the ground in Iraq.



PMU FORCES AT VICTORY DAY CELEBRATIONS IN JANUARY 2018. SOURCE: FACEBOOK/ALHASHEDALSHABEY.

The PMU Have Popular Support

To grasp the extent of the PMU’s popularity, one needs to look beyond the individual formations that make up the PMU and consider the PMU’s iconic and symbolic weight. The mythology of the PMU is not tied to a particular paramilitary group; indeed, this lack of a narrowly specified identity facilitates the perpetuation of the PMU’s iconic status amongst vast sections of Iraqi society, not all of whom are Shi’a: were they too closely associated with an individual, formation, or party, they would inevitably have been tarnished by the litany of shortcomings and transgressions that have accumulated since 2014. There is nothing particularly unique about this. It is reminiscent of the immense symbolic legitimacy that marked the memory of the uprisings of 1991 (mostly amongst Kurdish and Shi’a Iraqis) and how, despite its popular canonization, or perhaps because of it, all successive political claimants to the mantle of 1991 failed. Be it the PMU or 1991, a mythology’s survival is perhaps best preserved through abstraction. Another parallel is how people often view their national armies, particularly their elite units: the United States Marine Corps, for example, seems to occupy a special place in the American patriotic imagination, one that is not readily undermined by reports of atrocities, scandals, or other bad behavior the Marines may have committed. Whether it is the Marines or the PMU, the details and the shortcomings are unimportant: the brand is built around a narrative that resonates with a broad public.

In the case of Iraq, the pro-Hashd narrative focuses less on identifiable groups and individuals, and more on the abstract figure of the selfless impoverished youths of Baghdad and southern Iraq who answered the call to defend and avenge the homeland. In this narrative, this ideal-type PMU volunteer is contrasted against a corrupt, ineffective, and self-interested political class, and is credited with defending Baghdad in 2014 and saving Iraq. In many ways, this mythology of the Hashd is the bedrock of a new mythology of Iraqi nationalism that emerged after the calamities of 2014: national salvation was not attained by a foreign occupation (2003), nor was it realized by small clandestine parties such as those that opposed Saddam Hussein's regime; rather, in this emerging, though by no means hegemonic, narrative, national salvation has been attained through a popular, mass self-sacrifice in the form of the Hashd al-Sha'bi/PMU fighting a sacred war to liberate Iraq. In that regard, this narrative differs little from similar mythologies of nationalism that emerged out of war such as Russia's "Great Patriotic War" or Iran's "Sacred Defence"—a reference to WWII and the Iran–Iraq War respectively.

As such, the popularity, reputation, or (mis)deeds of this or that paramilitary group, let alone this or that individual as in the case of the more brutal antics of Abu Izra'il, are immaterial to the legitimacy of the PMU.¹¹ In other words: buying into the narrative of the PMU and opposing a particular formation within it are not mutually exclusive. In a recent survey of Shi'a pilgrims to the shrine city of Karbala, for example, researchers found that 96 percent of Iraqi respondents chose the PMU when asked to choose a cause to which to donate. Overall, the survey found that 99 percent of Iraqi respondents supported the PMU.¹² Had the survey asked about individual groups within the PMU, the approval ratings likely would have been somewhat diminished, with support fragmenting along any number of intra-Shi'a lines.

All of which illustrates that, in the short term at least, the PMU phenomenon will likely remain a permanent feature of Iraqi society, Iraqi politics, and Iraq's security infrastructure. Recently, some analysts have expressed alarm at the prospects of PMU formations taking part in the forthcoming elections (scheduled for May 2018). Such fears are either misplaced or disingenuous given that, among the PMU formations that are of most concern to observers, at least two (Badr and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq) are already a part of the political landscape and have a history of engagement in electoral politics predating the existence of the PMU. In fact, more than simply contesting elections, the Badr Organization (described to the author by a member of a smaller PMU formation as the PMU's "spinal column") has been a permanent fixture in Iraqi politics, firstly as a key member of the opposition-in-exile between 1982 and 2003, and secondly as a member of Iraq's political elites since then (the Badr Organization currently heads the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior). As for the PMU and Iraqi security, in November 2016, the PMU—in their various shades and orientations—were given legal cover and a veneer of state institutionalization by being formally recognized as part of Iraq's security infrastructure through the Hashd al-Sha'bi Law.¹³ For all these reasons, calls for PMU disbandment are unrealistic, and tying "reconciliation" or bilateral relations to such calls is counterproductive.¹⁴ As unfortunate as it may be to many, the dream of an Iraqi state built on institutions and a Weberian bureaucracy will remain out of reach for the foreseeable future.

Common Controversies

A number of concerns are commonly raised with regard to the PMU. These include the PMU's relation with the state; their relations with Iraqi Sunnis; and human rights violations, war crimes and atrocities. All of these concerns are valid, and present genuine challenges to policymakers in Iraq and beyond. However, as with the subject of the PMU more generally, there is a discrepancy between how these concerns play out in Iraq, and how they are framed in western and Arab media.

The PMU and the State

A common line of thinking frames the PMU as an antagonistic other to "the state." Invariably, this approach takes the form of pleas for external actors to "support the state" against the PMU, or warnings that the PMU are a threat to the Iraqi state, or that the PMU seek to undermine or encroach upon the state. This perspective fundamentally misreads the nature of power in Iraq, the bases of the PMU's legitimacy, how the PMU are viewed by their supporters and consequently how the PMU's behavior is constrained by these factors.

To begin with, arguing that the PMU is a threat to or that they undermine "the state" vastly overestimates the coherence of the PMU and, more so, the post-2003 Iraqi state; it also misreads the relationship between the two. As already mentioned, the PMU are very much a part of the state that they are accused of seeking to undermine. The PMU phenomenon could turn out to be the last nail in the coffin of the dream for a Weberian Iraqi state; however, such dreams had already become somewhat far-fetched long before the PMU emerged. This is why dichotomizing "state" and "PMU" does not work: the line between state and nonstate armed actors has been blurred since the very beginning of the "new Iraq." The Badr organization can be considered one of the "founding fathers" of post-2003 Iraq, given their significant role in the pre-2003 Iraqi opposition. From Badr to the Peshmerga to the Jaysh al-Mahdi to the Awakening Councils and on to the various paramilitary groups that dot Iraq's security, political, and criminal landscapes, such groups have been a permanent fact of post-2003 Iraq. In that sense, the institutionalization of the PMU may have bestowed legality on what was, officially at least, a long-standing extra-legal issue.

All of which touches on the nature of power in Iraq and further complicates attempts to dichotomize "state" and "PMU." Political power in Iraq is best imagined in the shape of a fluid connectivity chart rather than a solid pyramid; that is, as a collection of power centers and power brokers of varying strength and influence who combine to form "the state," even if contradictions, antagonisms, and outright enmity abound between some of these nodes of power. Therefore the state is a brittle concept in today's Iraq, particularly given that the various contradictory nodes of power that make up the state are in turn linked to a collection of foreign powers and patrons who are equally likely to work at cross-purposes. The PMU

can therefore be viewed as a new constituent variable of the post-2003 Iraqi state; an addition to the field of political and power contestation, rather than as an outsider challenging a clearly ring-fenced “state.” This is especially evident in how some elements of the PMU have aligned with certain political forces or have been used to bolster political positions in intra-Shi’a political competition.¹⁵



IRAQI PMF FIGHTERS JUNE 20, 2017 ON THE IRAQ-SYRIA BORDER IN NINEVEH, IRAQ. THE POPULAR MOBILISATION FRONT (PMF) FORCES, COMPOSED OF MAJORITY SHI'ITE MILITIA, PART OF THE IRAQI FORCES, PLAYED A MAJOR ROLE IN PUSHING ISLAMIC STATE MILITANTS FROM THE NORTH-WESTERN IRAQ BORDER STRIP BACK INTO SYRIA. SOURCE: MARTYN AIM/GETTY IMAGES.

The other problem with framing the PMU as a threat to or somehow antagonistic toward the state relates to the bases of the PMU’s legitimacy and popularity. Central to the mythology of the Hashd is the belief that their emergence saved the state: one of the most commonly heard sentiments amongst PMU supporters is that, “were it not for the Hashd, Baghdad would have fallen to Da’ish [IS].” With that in mind, it would be near fatal to the PMU’s legitimacy if they were seen to be threatening or undermining the very same state that their supporters credit them with saving. To illustrate, one often hears of rivalries between the PMU and the Iraqi army; however, if this was seen to be anything but friendly, it would likely prove fatal for much of the PMU’s popularity. The PMU’s supporters do not view the army as a rival; indeed, for the PMU’s supporters, the army and the Hashd are two sides of the same anti-IS, jingoistic, Iraqi coin.

In short, the PMU do not stand against the state; not because they are an inherently benign force, but rather because they are a function, if not a product, of the dysfunctional post-2003 Iraqi state. More than that, the PMU is tied to the Iraqi state through the latter’s provision of funding and armaments (a relationship that varies from formation to

formation). Less obviously, the PMU is in many respects dependent on the state for legitimacy. The PMU's supporters in Iraq will not embrace forces that are seen as anti-state, particularly if fears of existential threat are in retreat. The props of state provide the PMU with a veneer of legality that further bolsters their legitimacy. Similarly, the PMU derives legitimacy on the international stage from their association with the office of the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, which links them to the international system and allows the prime minister to act as an intermediary with international powers, not least the United States. Back at home, a related factor governs and constrains the PMU's behavior and that is their other source of legitimacy, namely Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Sistani's call to arms in 2014 gave the PMU their baseline legitimacy. Were they to openly oppose the state, Sistani may well withdraw his blessing by condemning the PMU, thereby stripping them of much of their popular legitimacy and reducing them to fallen angels in the eyes of many of their supporters.¹⁶

In sum, the dichotomy of "state" and "PMU" is a problematic one. The PMU is an imperfect part of an imperfect state, and is today a firm component of the patchwork of alliances and rivalries that govern Iraqi political life and Iraq's security apparatuses. Furthermore, there is an interdependence between the PMU and some of the other power centers that make up the Iraqi state, not least of which is the prime minister's office. This reifies them as an institution and enhances their legitimacy and popularity, which in turn governs and to some extent constrains their behavior. In a sense, it influences how they perceive their "corporate interest."

Sunni Iraqis and the PMU

Perhaps the most jarring misconceptions of the PMU emerge when their relationship with Iraq's Sunnis is discussed. Opponents of the Iraqi government or of the Iraqi political order are especially prone to portraying the PMU as a fundamentally Shi'a force that is irrevocably antagonistic if not outright genocidal towards Sunnis. In the Arab world and in some corners of western punditry, this is practically an article of faith. In the Arab world, the PMU were, from their very inception, perceived as an intrinsically anti-Sunni force: the idea was forcefully propagated almost immediately after Sistani's fatwa, complete with a hashtag that translates into, "Sistani orders our [Sunnis'] death," (*Al-Sistani yafti bi qatlina*). Yet, even the most cursory reading of Sistani's fatwa would not support such a conclusion.¹⁷

To begin with, while the PMU are predominantly made up of Shi'as, they are not exclusively so. Some formations have Sunni fighters amongst their ranks: in December 2015, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi approved the inclusion of 40,000 Sunni fighters in the PMU, and Sunnis form up to 20 percent of some formations, such as the Abbas Combat Division and the Ali al-Akbar Brigades.¹⁸ In addition to which, there are several non-Shi'a formations, such as the Lions of Babylon Brigades—a Chaldean Christian force.¹⁹ Likewise, there are Yazidi formations and Sunni ones as well in the form of the various groups that make up what is referred to as the Hashd al-'Asha'iri—the "Tribal Hashd."²⁰

The PMU brand has had two primary non-Shi'a force-multipliers: the realities and necessities of the post-2014 environment, and the legal and financial benefits that come with Hashd affiliation. With regard to the latter, the benefits of Hashd affiliation were only enhanced with its official institutionalization in 2016. As Renad Mansour explains:

One tribal leader from Salahadeen [sic] joked to the author that the [PMU] funding scheme means that perhaps Sunnis will defend the PMU more than the Shi'a. Former Governor of Ninewah (Mosul) Athil al-Nujaifi, who heads a paramilitary outfit of local Moslawis, decided to join the PMU in October 2016... the decision was primarily based on gaining access to PMU funds and attempting to keep relations with powerful Shi'a members open in a post-ISIS Iraq. Nujaifi's Ninewah Guards, which is made up mainly of Sunni fighters, is now on the PMU payroll.²¹

In short, there are financial, legal, and political incentives for paramilitary groups—whatever their religious or ethnic composition—to be officially recognized as part of the PMU. In this way, the PMU has become yet another vehicle for the funnelling of state resources to clients, be they Sunni or Shi'a. This fits in neatly with Iraq's pervasive culture of patronage and clientelism, as illustrated by allegations that the number of PMU formations often increases after areas have been recaptured from IS.²² As for the main powers within the PMU, far from the genocidaires they are imagined to be by many outsiders, they are in fact particularly keen on gaining non-Shi'a members and formations, provided these fall into line and do not try to challenge power relations within the PMU or try to disturb the balance of power amongst Iraq's political elites. This is the essence of Shi'a-centric state-building:²³ Sunnis and non-Shi'as are welcome at the table as clients or partners provided they accept that Shi'as (in the form of Shi'a-centric political and military actors) are the senior partner.²⁴ As far as the PMU's major stakeholders are concerned, the more diverse the PMU are seen to be, the better they can uphold the pillars of the PMU's core narrative—namely, an Iraqi patriotism defined by a cross-confessional (but Shi'a-led) fight against IS.²⁵

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The other driver behind the diversification of the PMU has been the challenges and necessities occasioned by the rise of IS since 2014. The sheer scale of the calamities visited upon Sunni-majority governorates left locals with few options, let alone the luxury of being able to pick and choose allies in the fight against IS. This saw many Sunni tribes that opposed

IS allying themselves with the PMU. Whatever fears and reservations they initially had, many Sunnis had little choice but to work with and try to secure their interests through the PMU. If one were to look for a silver lining to the horrors of 2014, it is that the brutalities of IS and the hardships they inflicted on local society were such that previously unthinkable cross-sectarian cooperation began to take root. For example, as early as 2014, the Jubour tribe around Dhulu'ya (a Sunni-majority area) reached out to Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (one of the most feared and Iran-aligned PMU formations) for help in confronting IS.

These instances of new alliances have been repeated across Iraq in the months and years since 2014. One of the results of this development is that views toward the PMU have evolved significantly among Sunni Iraqis. In my own visits to Iraq in 2014, 2015, and 2016, an increasingly recurrent theme seems to be the normalization of the PMU. Time and again one would hear of fears being allayed through experience. Politicians, tribal leaders, civil society activists, and academics all report the same pattern: a pervasive existential fear of the PMU among broad sections of Sunni society that eventually gave way, not necessarily to support, but at least to something less extreme than existential fear. The more the interaction, the more likely it is that the PMU will have been normalized (though not necessarily embraced) amongst Sunnis. As former Iraqi minister of defence Ali Allawi put it:

Since 2014 Sunnis have gotten a better understanding of the fact that “the Shi’a” are not monolithic. “The Shi’a” got what they wanted and did what they threatened to do and the world did not end. The PMU entered Anbar and they entered Tikrit with little incident. It has led to a genuine paradigm shift in how the Hashd is viewed by Sunnis in Iraq—a shift that is a long way off of happening in the Arab world.²⁶

A recent survey found that significant numbers of people in Sunni-majority provinces favourably viewed the PMU; supporting the argument made here that Sunni views toward the PMU have evolved through contact, the survey found that between January 2016 and March 2017, there was a 22 percent increase in the number of people in western Iraq who viewed the PMU in a positive light.²⁷ This does not necessarily mean that Sunni communities are supporters of the PMU; however, it shows that their views have evolved from the zero-sum fear they may have regarded the PMU with back in 2014 to something more grounded in personal experience that allows for varying shades of grey between the poles of terror and adulation.

The PMU, Human Rights, and War Crimes

When it comes to the question of human rights violations and the PMU, there is little room for debate: the PMU have undoubtedly and repeatedly committed gross human rights violations.²⁸ However, as with many of the problems caused and challenges presented by the PMU, their human rights violations are a symptom of a broader Iraq-wide issue.

Presenting the PMU as somehow uniquely implicated in human rights violations overlooks the fact that there is a far broader culture of impunity that is unfortunately exhibited by all armed actors in Iraq: from the pre-2003 regime²⁹ to U.S. and British forces³⁰ to security contractors³¹ to the Iraqi federal police,³² Iraqi army,³³ intelligence services,³⁴ Ministry of Interior,³⁵ Peshmerga,³⁶ Asayish,³⁷ the Awakening Councils,³⁸ Sunni tribes,³⁹ and so the list goes on.

The abuse of detainees, human rights violations, and even torture and war crimes are, unfortunately, not restricted to the PMU. This is not meant as a “whataboutery” with which to diminish the gravity of PMU human rights violations. Rather, it is meant to highlight that framing the PMU as a uniquely problematic human rights case diverts attention away from the deeper structural issues that pervade human rights violations in Iraq generally. To put it simply: in Iraq’s war against IS, neither sectarian division nor paramilitary units are a prerequisite for atrocities; if the PMU did not exist, Iraq’s human rights record would be just as appalling.

Where matters become more problematic is when it comes to the involvement of some formations of the PMU in Syria. This has further undermined the already volatile regional state order, nakedly extended Iranian interests, challenged the sovereignty of both Syria and Iraq, and threatened Iraq with further embroilment in regional conflict. One hopes that a relative stabilization of the situation in Syria will see an end to the active involvement of some PMU formations and other Shi’a paramilitary groups in Syria. However, that such groups will remain as Iranian assets that stand ready to serve Iranian interests and act as spoilers is likely to be a permanent fact for the foreseeable future.

Looking to the Future

Much of what alarms people about the PMU is symptomatic of post-2003 Iraq’s broader ills: be it on human rights or institutional incoherence, even on links to Iran, the PMU are less an exception and more a reflection of post-2003—and more so, post-2014—Iraqi realities. After all, the more Iran-aligned formations tend to predate the PMU and, furthermore, Iran’s influence and assets in Iraq stretch beyond the Hashd. Iran-aligned PMU formations fighting in Syria might be more headline-grabbing, but they are nevertheless part of a larger web of interests and relations that has helped to further Iranian interests in Iraq and Syria; and this can be manifested in less spectacular ways, such as in the use of Iraqi airspace to supply the Syrian military.⁴⁰ Likewise, whatever can be said about certain PMU formations and their links to Iran can similarly be said about significant sections of Iraq’s political elites. Indeed, the case of Badr shows that, in some instances, there is considerable overlap between the two. More to the point, the existence of Iranian proxies and allies in Iraq is not dependent on the existence of the PMU. In short, the extension and consolidation of Iranian interests in Iraq is a characteristic fact of post-2003 Iraq and not a PMU idiosyncrasy.

One thing that emerges from visits to Iraq is that the PMU are here to stay. The sooner stakeholders—foreign and

domestic—accept that fact, the better they can compete for relative advantage in Iraq’s shifting political sands. This need not entail a readiness to equally accept all formations of the PMU. If the PMU are indeed a spectrum, then they should be treated as such: some formations are less inimical to foreign interests than others, and so identifying these would be more beneficial than blanket rejections that fly in the face of Iraqi realities. The fact is that accepting Iraq and the Iraqi state today necessitates an acceptance—to one degree or another—of the PMU. To illustrate, even Vice President Ayad Allawi (hardly a figure one associates with the PMU), when speaking at the Manama Dialogue in December 2016 (perhaps the least PMU-friendly venue imaginable), felt obliged to offer nuanced praise for the PMU: “Some of it [PMU] is an asset; a response to the *marji’iyya*’s call to join the sacred fight against terror. However, there are others [who are not as commendable] . . . those [in the PMU] who have the correct intentions should join the institutions of state.”

Some potential challenges are less likely than others. For example, talk of formations turning on each other seems unfounded—the odd localized skirmish notwithstanding. The reason is simple: there is enough of an overarching authority structure in the form of the Hashd Commission (and more so its deputy chairman, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis—Iran’s man in Iraq), Iranian Quds Force commander Qassim Suleimani and, in cases of unlikely extremes, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani to bring any intra-PMU rivalries under control. Furthermore, the cautionary tale of the Jaysh al-Mahdi and its fall from popular grace into criminality and widespread disfavor has likely shaped the PMU’s self-perception and messaging.

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As things stand, any notion of dissolving the PMU into the army beyond its current superficial integration, much less having it disband, is far-fetched.⁴¹ There are too many vested interests and too much political strength, foreign patronage, and popular support to do away with the PMU in a fell swoop. In part or in whole, the PMU are likely to occupy a permanent place as part of the ever-burgeoning list of Iraqi security forces. After all, as far as their supporters are concerned, there will likely be an excuse for their existence well into the future. Liberating Mosul is neither the end of the IS presence in Iraq, nor a definitive end to insurgent attacks. Even a minimal rate of insurgency will present the PMU and their backers with a rationale for continuation. Other arguments for continuation would include future conflict with the Kurds over disputed territories, ongoing security fears, and a hostile regional environment. Even in the highly unlikely event that security in Iraq becomes so manageable as to invalidate security-based arguments for keeping the PMU, various formations could branch out beyond the sphere of security and military affairs: already Qais al-Khaz’ali of

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq has stressed the need to retain the title of Hashd, and has stretched its conceptual scope to encompass all sections of society (women's Hashd, university Hashd, doctors' Hashd and so forth—in his words: “we are all Hashd”). Somewhat overstating the point, he went on to say that, “if it were up to me I would officially change my name to Hashd ibn Hashd al-Hashdawi.”⁴²



PMU LEADER ABU MAHDI AL-MUHANDIS SPEAKS AT A CEREMONY IN FEBRUARY 2018 MEMORIALIZING HEZBOLLAH OPERATIVE IMAD MUGHNIYEH, ASSASSINATED IN 2008. SOURCE: FACEBOOK /ALHASHEDALSHABEY.

Nevertheless, the PMU's power and room for maneuver should not be overestimated. In addition to the already mentioned constraints of popular opinion, there are other factors limiting the PMU's likely role in the future. For example, the possibility of the PMU turning into an Iraqi version of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) or a parallel to Lebanese Hezbollah is something that is often mentioned, but that seems less likely upon closer scrutiny. The PMU lack the organizational coherence and the unified ideological and political core needed to truly act as a parallel to the IRGC or Lebanese Hezbollah. In that sense, the furthest that the IRGC/Hezbollah parallel is likely to develop would be with regards to this or that individual PMU formation that may act as an extension of the IRGC—something that is very much in evidence with several of the Iran-aligned formations in Iraq and in Syria. This assessment is not to diminish from the dangers inherent in such scenarios: Iran-aligned formations are the more powerful ones within the PMU, and they seem to be willing to place themselves—and by extension Iraq—in the service of Iranian interests. Even if the relationship with Iran is packaged as serving a convergence of Iraqi-Iranian interests—and there is no reason to deny that, at times, this is actually the case—it is nevertheless problematic in that it risks entangling Iraq in intractable regional conflicts and can complicate Iraq's unavoidable and perpetual balancing act between its relations with Iran and with the United States.

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A key question when considering the PMU's future is what Ali al-Sistani will decide to do. Firstly, the PMU know that they cannot count on Sistani's unlimited support. His fatwa did not envision anything like the PMU, and was rather aimed at bolstering the pre-existing security agencies of the state. It is perhaps for this reason that Sistani and his representatives never use the term "Hashd," opting instead for "volunteers." This alone can potentially act as a glass ceiling on the PMU's legitimacy going into the future, and the PMU—Iran-aligned formations included—are likely wary of doing anything that would antagonize Sistani or that would be considered egregious enough to force his hand.

One unknown is the fate of the PMU in an Iraq without Sistani. For example, were he to pass away without having issued instructions regarding the PMU's future (a demobilization fatwa for example), Iraq could be faced with a very delicate situation in which the legitimacy of a deceased Sistani might be used by various PMU formations and their political patrons to jockey for position as the "true heirs" of the Hashd. This hypothetical scenario would in some ways recall the proliferation of Sadrist splinter groups after 2003, who all claimed the mantle of the deceased Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr. Having said that, while a demobilization fatwa after the liberation of Mosul may have seemed desirable to some, the effects of such a fatwa should not be exaggerated: in the same way that some PMU formations pre-existed Sistani's fatwa for mobilization, they can continue to exist after a demobilization fatwa as well. In such a scenario the PMU's Iran alignments will come into sharper relief, as it will be these formations that are most likely to resist calls for demobilization. As argued by journalist Jack Watling, "If . . . the units under his [Sistani's] control demobilize, the [PMU] will be a set of Iranian proxies and political militias, officially part of the state, but not under its control."⁴³ This raises the question of whether the presumed benefits of a demobilization fatwa are as straightforward as is often assumed. In light of the fact that under no short-or medium-term circumstances will *all* formations disband, perhaps retaining the entirety of the PMU would be a better way of mitigating against the impact of the PMU's Iran-aligned formations and of diluting the PMU's sect, ethnic, and ideological composition.

Notes

1. For example, Matthew Reisener, "The Last Thing Iraq Needs Is More Maliki," *The National Interest*, January 22, 2018, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-last-thing-iraq-needs-more-maliki-24177>.

2. For full text of Sistani's fatwa, see <https://www.sistani.org/arabic/in-news/24908/>.

3. There is evidence that prior to the IS emergency of 2014 former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force commander Qassim Suleimani were already planning the establishment of a new military force to parallel the Iraqi army. See Nibras Kazimi, "The Origins of the PMUs," *Talisman Gate, Again*, July 1, 2016, <https://talisman-gate.com/2016/07/01/the-origins-of-the-pmus/>. However, the PMU would not have taken the shape or reached the scale that it did without the emergency of 2014 and Sistani's fatwa.
4. For background on the Jaysh al-Mahdi see Marisa Cochrane, "The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement," *Institute for the Study of War*, Iraq Report no. 12, January 2009; Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada al-Sadr and the Fall of Iraq* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 2008); Nicholas Krohley, *The Death of the Mehdi Army: The Rise, Fall and Revival of Iraq's Most Powerful Militia* (London: Hurst and Co., 2015).
5. "Saudi Arabia against sectarian troops in Iraq," *Al Arabiya English*, December 26, 2016, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2016/12/26/Jubeir-We-oppose-any-sectarian-forces-in-Iraq.html>.
6. U.K. Parliament, early day motion 451, "Kurdistan Region of Iraq," Session 2017-19, October 24, 2017, <https://www.parliament.uk/edm/2017-19/451>.
7. Stephen Kalin and Jonathan Landay, "Go home, Tillerson tells Iranian-backed militias in Iraq," *Reuters*, October 22, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-gulf-tillerson-iraq/go-home-tillerson-tells-iranian-backed-militias-in-iraq-idUSKBN1CR0JR>.
8. Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "US: Iraq trying to control Shi'a militias, Kurds fear future clashes," *ARA News*, March 24, 2017, <http://avim.org.tr/en/Bulten/US-IRAQ-TRYING-TO-CONTROL-SHIA-MILITIAS-KURDS-FEAR-FUTURE-CLASHES>.
9. Jack Watling, "The Shi'a Militias of Iraq," *The Atlantic*, December 22, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/12/shia-militias-iraq-isis/510938/>.
10. Mark A. Heller, "Syria and Iraq after the Islamic State," in *Strategic Survey for Israel 2016-2017*, ed. Anat Kurz and Shlomo Brom (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2016), 98, <http://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/8.pdf>.
11. Abu Izra'il is perhaps the most recognizable individuals in the PMU and is a celebrity of sorts in Iraq. He does not claim affiliation to any specific formation. He has a heavy media and social media presence, and while most of his videos have helped to elevate his popularity by presenting him as an affable tough guy, several videos have drawn criticism, even from supporters of the PMU, for their brutality. For example, several videos show Abu Izrael taking pleasure in and making light of the mutilation of corpses of IS fighters.
12. Fotini Christia et al., "To Karbala: Surveying Religious Shi'a from Iran and Iraq," MIT Political Science Department Research Paper No. 2016-39, October 20, 2016, 131, http://web.mit.edu/cfotini/www/Shia_Pilgrims_Survey.pdf.
13. For text of the Hashd al-Sha'bi Law (Arabic) see, "Al-Sumeria News Tanshur Nas Qanun al-Hashd al-Sha'bi," (Al-Sumeria News publishes text of the Hashd al-Sha'bi Law), *Al Sumeria News*, November 26, 2016, <https://www.alsumeria.tv/news/187029/السومرية-نيوز-تنشر-نص-قانون-الحشد-الشعبي>.
14. For example, in 2017 a proposed 'settlement' was submitted to the United Nations by some of Iraq's prominent Sunni political figures which included the disbandment of the PMU as part of a wide ranging list of measures that they demanded the Iraqi government undertake within 6 months. For details see Mohammad Sabah, "Tahaluf al-Qiwa Yussalim

Guterres Waraqat al-Taswiya Ma'a Mulhaq min 20 Bend," (Tahaluf al-Qiwa submits to Guterres the settlement paper with an appendix of 20 articles), *Al-Mada Newspaper*, April 1, 2017, <http://www.almadapaper.net/ar/news/-تحالف-القوى-يسلم-غوتيرس-ورقة-التسوية-مع>. Even more far-fetched was Saudi Arabia's proposal in 2017 of financial investment and strengthened economic ties in exchange for, amongst other things, the disbandment of the PMU. See Mohammad Sabah, "Al-Riyadh li-Baghdad: Istithmarat Khalijiya wa Tashghil Unbub al-Naft Muqabil Tahdid al 'Ilaqa Ma'a Iran," (Riyadh to Baghdad: Gulf investments and activation of oil pipeline in exchange for limiting Iraq's relation with Iran), *Al-Mada Newspaper*, May 23, 2017, <http://www.almadapaper.net/ar/news/530376/الرياض-لبغداد-استثمارات-خليجية-وتشغيل-أن>.

15. To illustrate, reports in June 2017 suggested that the PMU want to take over Baghdad's security file may at first sight look like an attempt by elements within the PMU to assert their autonomy and political power—perhaps even take over the state. However, a closer reading reveals that the issue is tied to political competition among post-2003 Iraq's established political elites. For details see Mustafa Saadoun, "PMU wants to take over Baghdad's security," *Al-Monitor*, June 9, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/06/iraq-security-baghdad-operations-command-pmu.html>.

16. My thanks to Baghdad University's Ali Taher for his thoughts on the subject of the PMU and legitimacy.

17. Sistani's fatwa being read out in full by his representative can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7by5almGhA>. Also see Luay Al-Khatteeb and Abbas Kadhim, "What Do You Know About Sistani's Fatwa?" *Huffington Post*, July 10, 2014, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/luay-al-khatteeb/what-do-you-know-about-si_b_5576244.html.

18. For the Ali al-Akbar Brigades it is commonly stated that Sunnis make up 20 percent of their fighting force. See for example, Renad Mansour, "After Mosul, Will Iraq's Paramilitaries Set the State's Agenda?" The Century Foundation, January 27, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/report/mosul-will-iraqs-paramilitaries-set-states-agenda/>; Robert Tollast, "Inside Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units," *The National Interest*, May 23, 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/iraqs-shia-militias-arent-bad-you-think-16291>.

19. For a profile of a Christian formation see Owen Bennett-Jones, "The Christian militia fighting IS," *BBC News*, April 11, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35998716>. For a more recent look at Christian and Shabak forces see Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Journeys to Mosul," *The Middle East Review of International Affairs* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2017), <http://www.rubincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Jawad-YC-au-PDF.pdf>.

20. For a recent Yazidi addition to the PMU constellation, see Saman Dawud, "Qiyadi Yazidi lil-Alam al-Jadid: Asasna quwatuna bi ri'ayat al-Hashd li-idarat manatiqina," (Yazidi leader to al-Alam al-Jadid: We established our forces under the sponsorship of the Hashd in order to administer our areas), *Al-Alam al-Jadid*, June 1, 2017, <https://al-aalem.com/news/41427-قيادي-يزيدي-للعالم-الجديد-أسسنا-قو>. For a profile on a Sunni formation see Noor Samaha, "Iraq's Good Sunni," *Foreign Policy*, November 16, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/16/iraqs-good-sunni/>.

21. Mansour, "After Mosul," <https://tcf.org/content/report/mosul-will-iraqs-paramilitaries-set-states-agenda/>.

22. For example it is alleged that Ninewa had four units of the Hashd al-Asha'iri (local Sunni forces) but that, since the recapture of most of Ninewa province, that number has risen to over thirty. For a discussion of this issue see, "Bil-Harf al-Wahid fi Ramadhan 2017" (*Bil-Harf al-Wahid* in Ramadhan 2017), uploaded June 13, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GcvArKQaT50>.

23. Fanar Haddad, "Shia-Centric State-Building and Sunni Rejection in Post 2003 Iraq," *Carnegie Endowment for*

International Peace, January 2016, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP261_Haddad_Shia_Final.pdf.

24. This does not preclude instances of demographic engineering in certain places. For example see Mustafa Habib, “Security or Demographics: Why Babel Province Has a Ghost Town,” *Niqash*, August 17, 2017, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/security/5725/>. However, the more common pattern is to establish patronage networks and work through local clients/partners. See for example, “Winning the Post-ISIS Battle for Iraq in Sinjar,” *International Crisis Group*, Middle East Report 183, February 20, 2018, 8-10, 12-16 <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/183-winning-the-post-isis-battle-for-iraq-in-sinjar.pdf>.

25. James Garrison, “Popular Mobilization Messaging,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague*, April 2017, <https://icct.nl/publication/popular-mobilization-messaging/>.

26. Ali Allawi, interview with author, Baghdad, December 2016. The view was echoed in other interviews such as (amongst others) Major General Ahmed al-Beilawi, head of the PMU in Ramadi, Baghdad, December 2016, and Ali al-Ugaidi, general secretary of Quwat Ghirat al-Abbas (a PMU formation that was active in Salah al-Din province), Baghdad, December 2016.

27. “Improved Security Provides Opening for Cooperation: March-April 2017 Survey Findings,” National Democratic Institute and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, June 2017, <https://www.ndi.org/publications/improved-security-provides-opening-cooperation-iraq-march-april-2017-survey-findings>. Importantly, this did *not* translate into support for a PMU presence in western Iraq as the same survey found vast majorities in Sunni provinces favouring the army to stay on as security providers following the defeat of IS.

28. See for example, “Absolute Impunity: Militia Rule in Iraq,” Amnesty International, October 14, 2014, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE14/015/2014/en/>; “After Liberation Came Destruction: Iraqi Militias and the Aftermath of Amerli,” Human Rights Watch, March 18, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/03/18/after-liberation-came-destruction/iraqi-militias-and-aftermath-amerli>; “Ruinous Aftermath: Militia Abuses Following Iraq’s Recapture of Tikrit,” Human Rights Watch, 20 September 20, 2015; “Iraq: Possible War Crimes by Shi’a Militia,” Human Rights Watch, January 31, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/31/iraq-possible-war-crimes-shia-militia>; “Turning a Blind Eye: The Arming of the Popular Mobilization Units,” Amnesty International, January 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde14/5386/2017/en/>.

29. “Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds,” Human Rights Watch, July 1993, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1993/iraqanfal/>.

30. “Human Dignity Denied: Torture and accountability in the ‘war on terror,’” Amnesty International, October 27, 2004, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr51/146/2004/en/>; “Baha Mousa Inquiry: ‘Serious discipline breach’ by army,” *BBC News*, September 8, 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-14825889>.

31. “Rogue Contractors Shooting Iraq Civilians—No End in Sight,” uploaded on July 9, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcJROVgVqAA>.

32. “Investigate reports Iraqi forces tortured and killed villagers near Mosul in ‘cold blood,’” Amnesty International, November 10, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/11/investigate-reports-iraqi-forces-tortured-and-killed-villagers-near-mosul-in-cold-blood/>.

33. “Dhabit Iraqi yuhaqiq ma’a ahad ‘anasir Da’ish fil-Mosul” (Iraqi officer interrogates a member of Da’ish [IS] in Mosul),

uploaded March 23, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8JnJzQp1Yg>.

34. "Iraq: Hundreds Detained in Degrading Conditions," Human Rights Watch, March 13, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/13/iraq-hundreds-detained-degrading-conditions>.

35. Ali Arkady et al., "Bound. Tortured. Killed," *Toronto Star*, May 25, 2017, <http://projects.thestar.com/iraq-torture-abuse-murder-war-crimes/>.

36. "Shuf shlon al-Akrad yadhribun al-Nazihin 2018" (See how the Kurds beat displaced people, 2018), uploaded February 18, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33cdzqbd6mM>.

37. "Kurdistan Regional Government: Allegations of Mass Executions," Human Rights Watch, February 8, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/08/kurdistan-regional-government-allegations-mass-executions>.

38. "Al-Sahwa: Hatha Jaza' al-Mujahidin Ba'd An Nafaru li-Nusratihim" (The Sahwa: this is how the Mujahidin are rewarded after having mobilized to support them), uploaded February 13, 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bYOP_yKyz4g; "Execution by machine gun of a suspected Islamic militant by Al-Anbar council members," uploaded June 26, 2007, https://www.liveleak.com/view?i=cdc_1182895203.

39. For example, Kamal al-Ayash, "Anbar Tribes Exact Revenge Upon Iraqis who Worked with Extremists," *Niqash*, October 13, 2016, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/security/5378/>; Kamal al-Ayash, "Anbar's New Anti-Extremist Militias Get Bigger, Cause New Problems," *Niqash*, November 30, 2016, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/security/5417/>.

40. This issue garnered much attention in 2012-13. For example see, Michael R. Gordon, "Iran Supplying Syrian Military via Iraqi Airspace," *New York Times*, September 4, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/05/world/middleeast/iran-supplying-syrian-military-via-iraq-airspace.html>.

41. The PMU's integration into Iraq's security infrastructure is designed to blur the distinctions between individual formations under a supposedly unitary "Hashd al-Sha'bi," complete with brigade numbers, a unitary command, and answerable to the office of the commander-in-chief as per the Hashd al-Sha'bi Law. As with much else in Iraq, this official picture is, in practice, cover for a messier reality. For details, see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Hashd Brigade Numbers Index," October 31, 2017, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2017/10/hashd-brigade-numbers-index>.

42. "Al-Sheikh Qais al-Khaz'ali yaqul ugheyir ismi wa ismi Hashd ibn Hashd" (Sheikh Qais al-Khaz'ali says I will change my name and my name is Hashd son of Hashd), uploaded April 3, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFla9XBIQFg>.

43. Watling, "The Shi'a Militias," <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/12/shia-militias-iraq-isis/510938/>. Also see Ali Mamouri, "How will Abadi handle Iraq's Shiite Militias?" *Al-Monitor*, March 31, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/03/iraq-abadi-shiite-militias-us-sunnis-kurds-isis.html>.



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