THE SHIA MILITIAS OF IRAQ

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Along the road joining the cities of Najaf and Karbala in southern Iraq is a line of placards, attached at 50-meter intervals to every lamppost. Each one shows the face of a volunteer killed in the fight against the Islamic State. But these are not the faces of Iraqi army soldiers. They are the faces of fighters from the Hashd al Shaabi, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) created via fatwa by the senior-most cleric in Shia Islam, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, in response to the fall of Mosul in 2014. Sistani declared the fight against the Islamic State a sacred defense, and promised that whoever of you sacrifices himself to defend his country and his family and their honor will be a martyr.

Today, the PMF is estimated to boast over 60,000 fighters, contributing 35,000 men to the 90,000-strong force currently besieging Mosul. The PMF has played a key role in the attacks on Fallujah, Ramadi, and Baiji, and recently spearheaded the Iraqi advance on Tal Afar, just west of Mosul. But despite the PMFs importance to the war effort, its status remains ambiguous. On November 26, the Iraqi government passed legislation making the PMF an official component of Iraqs security forces, subject to military law, with equal status to the army. But two days later, a senior Iraqi MP told me that the bill is what were working towards; it will take time. Full integration, then, is still some way off.
The Shia Power Brokers of the New Iraq

Members of the PMF refer to theirs as a movement of national liberation, or as a religious crusade against evil. International media have described the group as a mostly Iranian-backed coalition of Shia militias, barely controlled by the Iraqi state. Neither description is entirely correct. The PMF itself embodies many of the fault lines of modern Iraq, divided between religious and national identities, state and non-state actors, and private and foreign interests. The 40 core units that make up the PMF range from the Abbas Division, controlled by Sistani but closely aligned with the government and trained by Iraqs special forces; to the Peace Brigades, loyal to the Iraqi cleric and politician Moqtada al-Sadr; to the Badr Organization, an Iranian proxy militia. Roughly half of the PMF units were formed out of pre-existing Iraqi militias, some of which fought against coalition forces after the 2003 invasion. The rest are new formations, mobilized by Sistani or Iraqi politicians.

The PMF is, itself, a process □□ struggle for control over a myriad of armed groups. It could become the basis for a new Iraqi army, with much stronger ties to the communities it is supposed to protect; in Shia areas at least, the PMF are held in higher regard than the army. Or its ascension could lead Iraqi politics into an era of warlordism, in which party factions wield private armies. The worst outcome would see Iraq remain a battlefield, beset by proxies funded by Iran and Gulf

countries.

The future of the PMF as an institution has massive implications Iraq. For many members of the PMF, the legitimacy of their struggle is derived from Sistanis fatwa. If he withdraws it, and the units under his control demobilize, the PMF will be a set of Iranian proxies and political militias, officially part of the state, but not under its control. Alternatively, if corruption drives a wedge between the Iraqi government and Iraqs clerical establishment, the loyalty of PMF units raised by the Shia shrines could be tested.

At the center of the Iraqi governments efforts to control the PMF sits the imposing, white-haired Faleh al-Fayad, Iraqs national security adviser. He is technically in command of the PMF; in practice, he plans operations through negotiations with PMF commanders. He sees Iraq caught in a struggle against global jihad, with sectarianism stoked by outside actors. Some rich Gulf countries are using the measures of their wealth to give legitimacy to these groups," he said, noting the quality of the Islamic States equipment. The money supporting Daesh stinks of oil. ☀ Daesh exported oil through Turkey, he suggested, using another name for ISIS. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar are all part of the coalition fighting ISIS, but concerns have been raised over the flow of funds from individuals in these countries to groups in Syria. Furthermore, weapons supplied to groups in Syria have often found their way into the hands of ISIS. Al-Fayad claimed this was deliberate. But when asked about Irans influence on Iraq, he grew cautious. We are allies of the U.S. and have good relations with Iran, he said. After the fall of Mosul, Iran supported us. It is in Irans interest to fight Daesh, which is why they support [the PMF]. We have American and NATO advisers. We accept everyones help.

What al-Fayad didnt say is that five of the largest units in the PMF receive money, support, and direction from Iran. Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq were significant Iranian proxies during the coalition occupation of Iraq, and are now major units in the PMF, while Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada has openly fought in Syria for the Assad government. The Badr Organization, perhaps the most prominent Iranian proxy, is commanded by Hadi al-Amiri, who fought for Iran in the Iran-Iraq war. Amiri is a close friend of Qassem Soleimani, the head of Irans Quds Force, a branch of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps responsible for covert warfare beyond Irans borders. For al-Fayad to openly criticize Tehran could impair his ability to direct those units.

But despite Irans machinations, Iraq does retain some control of the PMF. When I spoke to Lahur Talabany, the outspoken head of Kurdistans Zanyari intelligence service, about the planning process for the Mosul operation, he said, You cant stop the Shia militia taking part in operations, but you can give them zones of responsibility, so that their actions assist the Iraqi army. The PMF, in his view, can be contained, if not controlled.

This process of negotiated cooperation was very much in evidence as PMF units moved toward Tal Afar in late October. The original plan had been to mostly encircle Mosul in a horseshoe, leaving ISIS militants an avenue for escape. The Badr Organizations al-Amiri had other ideas, bringing intense pressure on the Iraqi government to allow his forces to advance on Tal Afar, and close Mosuls encirclement. The Iraqis conceded, and the PMF spearheaded the capture of Tal Afars airfield, supported by the Iraqi air force.

The mounting concern now, according to British and Iraqi intelligence officers, is that Irans interest

in Tal Afar had less to do with the town itself than with the highway running westwards across the Syrian border. Al-Amiri himself has weathered suspicions of harboring ties to Syria. In 2013, U.S. General James Mattis, Donald Trumps pick for secretary of defense, accused al-Amiri of facilitating the movement of weapons to Syria during his time as Iraqs minister of transportation, a post he left in 2014; al-Amiri denied those allegations. Meanwhile, the presence of Iraqi militias in Syria, including in the final assault on Aleppo this week, has been widely reported. The Badr Organization and other Iranian proxies now have troops traversing Iraq from Diyala province, through Salah ad-Din and Kirkuk provinces, to Ninevah Province and the road into Syria.

What Iran wants to do with these units is limited. Their main interest is Syria, and the unit commanders have their own motives, Tom Hardie-Forsyth, the former chairman of NATOs Critical Infrastructure Protection Committee, and an advisor to the Kurdistan Regional Government, explained. A senior State Department official concurred, noting that Irans primary interests in Iraq are economic. Iran also wants to ensure that Iraq never becomes powerful enough to pose a threat, as it did under Saddam.

Iran is not the only power with influence within the PMF either. Iraqs holy shrines, which are controlled by Sistani, set up three of the best-trained and equipped units of the PMF: the Imam Ali Brigade, Ali al-Akhbar Brigade, and Abbas Division. Their officers are largely nationalists, mirroring Sistani, who is supportive of the Iraqi state. But his religious authority gives the shrines significant, competing political clout: It was Sistanis loss of confidence in former Prime Minister Maliki that forced him from office.

The shrines also strongly oppose foreign interference in Iraq, and, unlike Faleh al-Fayad, are unafraid of criticizing Iran. The shrines have significant theological disagreements with Irans religious leaders, especially over the proper relationship between clerics and the state, with Sistani arguing that religious leaders must remain moral counselors, rather than political leaders in their own right.

Shortly after the shrine units were established, they were offered foreign assistance, including arms and training, from Iran. We directed them to give the weapons to the Iraqi army to distribute to us, Sheikh Maitham al-Zaidi, commander of the Abbas Division, told me. Other countries should respect the sovereignty of Iraq and deal with the Iraqi government so weapons dont go to the wrong hands.

We follow orders from Sistani, we dont just carry his name.
Sistani has directed the shrines units to work closely with the Iraqi Ministry of Defense. These are the good Hashd. We can work with them, a senior Iraqi officer noted. For those who serve in these units, like Adil Talib, a former officer in Saddam Husseins army who now oversees logistical operations for the Ali al-Akhbar Brigade, the Brigade fights for Iraq. It is a national struggle. ☀ We laugh at the name militia. There is no difference between us and the army. Yet in spite of the shrines cooperation with the Iraqi military, differences remain between the two groups. And when they arise, the shrine units listen to Sistani. We follow orders from Sistani, we dont just carry his name, Sheikh al-Zaidi said.

For now, the shrines biggest disagreement with the Iraqi government is over the PMFs future. The shrines supported the PMF law of November 26, and have encouraged the government to bring the PMF under the control of the state. However, if Sistani demobilizes the shrine units, the

balance of power within the PMF will swing toward those units currently beyond government control. If members of Irans proxies continue to fight in Syria, while the PMF are an official component of Iraqs security forces, this creates a foreign policy dilemma for the Iraqi government.

Our existence is temporary. Our vision as the Abbas Division is to follow the fatwa and we will go back to our jobs after victory, al-Zaidi said. The other vision comes from the government. They see the Hashd as an official body of the state. My personal view is that we leave when Grand Ayatollah Sistani calls for us to go home.

Perhaps, then, it is better to treat the PMF less as institution, and more as a struggle for influence that will decide Iraqs future, long after ISIS is defeated.

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