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## **IRAQ'S ADEL ABDUL MAHDI: US DID NOT DEMAND SHIITE MILITIAS BE DISARMED**

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Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi denied that he was urged by Washington to disarm Shiite paramilitaries as angry MPs called for the withdrawal of all US troops.

The Shiite fighters, known as the Popular Mobilisation Force, are a group of militias backed by Iran, which the US regards as among the biggest threats to security in the Middle East. The militias became an official unit of Iraq's security forces after playing a vital role in fighting ISIS after 2014.

Reports claimed that US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had asked Baghdad to confiscate weapons held by the 67 militia groups, including Badr, Asab Ahl Al Haq and Saraya Al Salam, that are headed by the influential Iraqi Shiite cleric Moqtada Al Sadr.

But yesterday Mr Abdul Mahdi said the reports were incorrect. The Iraqi leader also tried to ease MPs concerns over US troop numbers, saying that these fell by a quarter last year.

MPs have demanded a parliamentary debate to review the US military presence.

The US once had 166,000 troops in Iraq after the 2003 invasion to topple Saddam Hussein, Mr Pompeo said in Cairo last week, but that about 5,000 remained today.

Iraqi MPs calls came after a surprise visit by US President Donald Trump that upset legislators because he visited troops at the Ain Al Asad base west of Baghdad shortly after Christmas but did not meet Mr Abdul Mahdi or any other Iraqi officials.

In January 2018 there had been almost 11,000 foreign soldiers, about 70 per cent of them were American, Mr Abdul Mahdi said. The numbers fell to about 8,000 in December, he said. He estimated that about 6,000 US troops were still in Iraq.

However, that number is contested by MPs in Baghdad who claim that there are more than 9,000 American soldiers in Iraq – a number that may increase after the announcement of a US troop withdrawal from Syria.

Mr Trump said that his troops would remain in Iraq after the withdrawal of all US forces from Syria and will be available to take action against ISIS militants on the other side of the border if necessary.

During his December visit, Mr Trump said he had no plans to remove US forces from Iraq.

Former US president Barack Obama ordered all troops to be withdrawn from Iraq by the end of 2011, but in 2014 ordered a new deployment as part of an American-led coalition to confront ISIS.

The insurgents have now been largely defeated but still carry out operations and control small areas of remote desert in eastern Syria.

In Iraq, ISIS also has sleeper cells and hideouts. The group has carried out regular killings and attacks.

<https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/iraq-s-adel-abdul-mahdi-us-did-not-demand-shiite-militias-be-disarmed-1.814284>

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