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# Hybrid Conflict, Hybrid Peace

How militias and \_\_\_\_\_  
paramilitary groups shape  
post-conflict transitions

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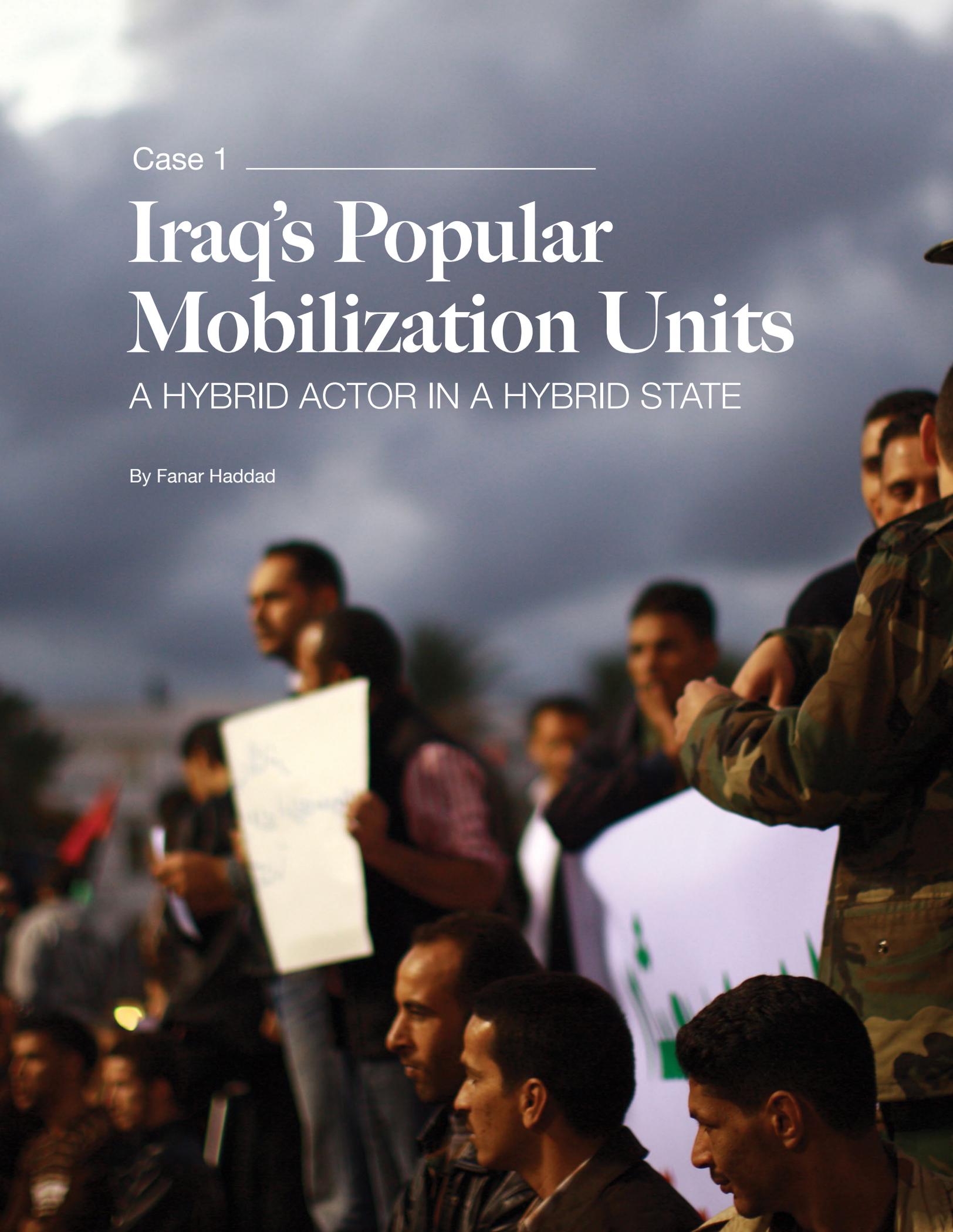
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Case 1 \_\_\_\_\_

# Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units

A HYBRID ACTOR IN A HYBRID STATE

By Fanar Haddad





UN Photo/Jason Focuntien

Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU, or al-Hashd al-Sha'bi in Arabic), an assemblage of armed groups that is nominally administered by the State, is one of the most powerful forces in Iraqi security and politics. The PMU cannot be understood in isolation of the broader nature of the country's governing order since the 2003 US-led invasion. Rather than an aberration or an extraordinary phenomenon, the PMU is consistent with State-building trends that have gained purchase in Iraq since 2003, though it is a more amplified expression of those trends. The PMU is a State-sanctioned body that presents itself as an upholder of the State and of Iraqi sovereignty. Yet, the more powerful of the dozens of groups within the PMU have shown a willingness to ignore and contradict the Iraqi Government if and when deemed necessary. The PMU's relationship with other State institutions and political actors is one of bargaining, collusion and competition. However, the Iran-leaning elements within the PMU retain an upper hand in these relationships by virtue of their coercive strength, Iranian support, legal and political cover, and the PMU's broader popular appeal and perceived religious legitimacy.

When trying to understand hybrid actors in hybrid States, such as the PMU in Iraq, it is unhelpful to think in terms of rigid binaries between State and non-State, formal and informal, and legal and illicit. Projecting concepts rooted in ideal-type Weberian States onto cases like contemporary Iraq is a futile exercise.

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Like the broader Iraqi State, the PMU is not a unitary actor or a unitary phenomenon. The more powerful Iran-leaning elements of the PMU are firmly embedded in Iraqi politics and in its security sector and are part of the country's political elite. These characteristics are unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. It bears mentioning that the Iran-leaning elements of the PMU were among the primary sponsors of the outgoing Government of Adil Abdul-Mahdi (Prime Minister from October 2018 to November 2019, and currently the caretaker Prime Minister). The PMU's normalization and institutionalization have accentuated its role as defender of the status quo. This has come at the expense of the PMU's once considerable popularity. The protest movement and escalating tensions between the US and Iran have underlined the PMU's internal contradictions and significantly dented its public image.

Iraq has been in a state of crisis and near-constant conflict since 1980. Though accelerated after 2003, the gutting of State institutions has been a long-term

process spanning three decades. Iraq came under the most comprehensive United Nations sanctions in history between 1990 and 2003. The sanctions arguably did more damage to Iraq's social fabric and institutional structures than any amount of war or violence could have achieved. In many ways, the sanctions era was the incubator of what was to follow after 2003 — from corruption to the fragmentation of State institutions, and more. As such, Iraq's security sector had already undergone considerable fragmentation prior to 2003. This was, above all, a function of the desire of Saddam Hussein's regime to neutralize potential threats from within the military establishment through the creation of overlapping and parallel militaries. Hussein's establishment, in the 1990s, of new paramilitary units, such as the Fedayeen Saddam and Jaysh al-Quds, exemplified this trend. Likewise, before the US-led invasion, there was already a measure of security decentralization: the State empowered favored tribes to take over certain State functions, including security.<sup>1</sup> The destruction of the State in 2003 and the deliberate disbanding of the Iraqi security services vastly accelerated these processes, to the point that, today, hybridization is a structural feature of the State.

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## A. Key arguments

This case study focuses on the role of the PMU following the liberation between 2014 and 2017 of territory held by the Islamic State (IS). In doing so, this analysis makes several key arguments:

1. A more specific terminology is needed when analysing the PMU. The PMU is an umbrella organization that includes dozens of armed groups. The Iraqi State has tried to get the PMU to conform to the structures of a traditional military, dividing the forces into "brigades." But the reality is that the PMU contains an array of independent groups and "formations," which vary in their origin, orientation, power, ideological leanings, and proximity to Iran. As such, we must exercise caution when making generalizations about "the PMU". Iraqis interviewed for this report often made an informal distinction between the more powerful and politically active Iran-leaning formations and the rest of the PMU, especially the shrine-affiliated formations that more readily work with, and are subsumed by, formal State institutions. In popular parlance, the State-aligned PMU groups, or *hashd al-dawla*, are often simply called *hashd*. The Iran-aligned PMU groups are known as *fasa'il*, short for *fasa'il al-muqawamma*, meaning "resistance formations." State-aligned PMU groups have retained some of the popular currency that the PMU gained during the war against IS, whereas *fasa'il* formations, outside of their constituencies, are often negatively viewed as Iranian proxies and as members and defenders of the political elite.

As this analysis shows, there are other ways of categorizing the various groups and trends within the PMU. In addition to Iran-leaning formations and groups tied to the shrines, there is also Muqtada al-Sadr's Saraya al-Salam, which though retaining a presence in the PMU, has a longer, separate history that is somewhat in its own category. Then, there are the PMU formations that represent local and minority groups in areas liberated from IS. This latter category includes Sunni formations that are often referred to as the "tribal *hashd*." This study proposes several main analytical categories for PMU groups and explains their various relevance for policymaking.

2. The collapse of the Iraqi military in the face of the IS onslaught in 2014 accentuated, but did not create, the setting for the emergence of auxiliary forces. The PMU was already taking shape prior to the fall of Mosul in June 2014. More to the point, several of its constituent formations predate the creation of the PMU. One of the most important of these, the Badr Organization, was established in the early 1980s and has been intertwined with Iraqi politics and security since 2003.<sup>2</sup>
3. Since its establishment in 2014, the PMU has become a formalized State institution, even as it encompasses groups that arose outside of the State, and which continue to draw power from other sources. Legislation aimed at institutionalizing the PMU within the rubric of the Iraqi State has given the PMU legal cover. The PMU also has political cover through its parliamentary representatives. Most importantly, it also commands coercive strength in the form of its military muscle and the *fasa'il*'s links to Iran. This is particularly pertinent given the weakness of the rule of law in Iraq. As one interviewee said: "It is a country run by gangs and [the PMU] is the strongest gang."<sup>3</sup>
4. Despite legal frameworks and attempts at institutionalization, the PMU is a hybrid organization that reflects the hybridity of the Iraqi State. Internally divided, the PMU is neither entirely autonomous nor fully institutionalized; neither entirely beholden to Iraqi authorities nor simply an Iranian proxy. Rather, and much like other Iraqi institutions, the PMU operates in a grey zone where the lines are blurred between formal and informal, licit and illicit. Again, this reflects the hybrid reality of the Iraqi State, where these lines are similarly blurred. More broadly, the State/non-State binary is unhelpful to policy analysis, in that it fails to capture the hybridity of both the PMU and the wider Iraqi State.
5. The PMU's relationship with formal Iraqi governance and security structures is ambiguous and is marked by bargaining, collusion and competition, depending on the context. The PMU places great stock in being recognized as an arm of the State, and jealously guards the legitimacy that such State affiliation creates. As such, there is much overlap and cooperation with other arms of the Iraqi security establishment — they are represented in Iraq's Joint Operations Command (JOC), for example.<sup>4</sup> However, the reality is that, when necessary, individual PMU formations from the *fasa'il* act independently — at times, even in a manner that is at odds with the Iraqi Government and other Iraqi security agencies. There is little that the latter can do to push back.
6. The PMU today is very much part of the State: its more powerful figures and formations are key actors in elite politics, electoral competition, the economy (formal and illicit) and in Iraq's security sector. The PMU's normalization and deep involvement with political, military and economic activity mean that it is a complicit partner in the system of patronage and corruption that defines Iraqi governance. Thus, it comes as little surprise that the PMU is very much a defender of the status quo, rather than a challenger to it. Indeed, certain formations within the PMU act as something of a praetorian guard for the Iraqi political class, and particularly its Iran-leaning elements.
7. The fact that the PMU is so embedded in Iraqi political life and in Iraq's security sector makes wholesale demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) initiatives unrealistic in the short term. However, selective DDR measures alongside sustained long-term efforts at reform of the security sector, in tandem with political reform, may ameliorate some of the issues related to the PMU.
8. One of the most pressing issues that the PMU presents to Iraq today is that it sustains and deepens the incoherence of governance. This is particularly a concern with regards to the more powerful Iran-

leaning formations of the PMU. The PMU's corrosive effect on Iraqi governance is a more urgent problem than its history of human rights violations, which were more of an issue during the kinetic phase of the war against IS. The political marketplace that the PMU has entered may have already been flawed, but the PMU's military power and Iranian backing have further entrenched that flawed marketplace. The more powerful elements of the PMU are able to operate beyond the law and are a potent block against reform — sometimes through violence against activists and political opponents. Such methods were on display in the violent repression of the mass protests that began in October 2019.

9. That the more powerful elements of the PMU are tied to Iran and claim to represent the “axis of resistance” is a constant threat to Iraqi stability and Iraq's international standing. Iraq is forced to maintain a precarious balancing act between its relationships with Iran and with the US. The fact that Iran-leaning PMU figures are in government and in Iraq's formal security sector complicates that balancing act. It also further fragments the Iraqi Government and prevents it from coalescing into a unitary actor. The recent escalation of Iranian–US tensions on Iraqi soil, beginning in December 2019, has thrown these contradictions into relief.<sup>5</sup>

The report also relies on survey data about perceptions toward the PMU. The survey was commissioned for this study and was carried out by the Iraqi research organization Peace Paradigms in January 2019. The sample size is 500 respondents, equally spread across 5 governorates: Basra, Baghdad, Salahaddin, Nineveh and Diyala.

With the escalation of tensions between the US and Iran, a second major crisis erupted in Iraq in December 2019, culminating in the assassination in Baghdad in early January 2020 of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, alongside Deputy Head of the PMU and Chief Coordinator of the *fasa'il*, Jamal Jafaar Mohammed Ali al-Ibrahim, better known by his *nom de guerre*, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Given the centrality of these two figures to the PMU and to the architecture of Iranian power in Iraq, their assassination and the crisis that it triggered will profoundly affect the PMU. This study, however, does not engage in speculation as to what this might look like. Rather, it touches upon the crisis to illustrate the risks surrounding the transnational extensions of the PMU and how these raise the risk of embroiling Iraq in the rivalry between the US and Iraq.

## B. Methodology

This study is based on extensive interviews with a range of sources in Iraq and elsewhere. The author conducted telephone interviews from September 2019 to January 2020, and field interviews in November to December 2019. The outbreak of mass protests in early October 2019 severely hampered fieldwork. Sources were either too preoccupied or too wary to be interviewed. The crisis that began in late 2019 has forced this study to be more Baghdad-focused than originally intended, and has necessitated a greater focus on structural rather than granular issues.

# Context

A review of the recent history of the security sector in Iraq clearly illustrates the basis for this study's central arguments. Many of the issues that the PMU raises for Iraqi security and governance are symptoms of broader trends in the country. The PMU has, in some cases, amplified these trends, but it did not create them.

## A. Overview: conflict in post-2003 Iraq

The destruction of the State in 2003 was followed by a protracted set of interlocking conflicts, some of which continue today, albeit in altered form. Firstly, there were multiple insurgencies against the US-led occupation of Iraq. Although analysts and the media have often described this as a "Sunni insurgency," there were in fact multiple insurgencies, with a spectrum of motivations that crossed sectarian and ideological lines. They included State-aligned Shia militias such as the Mahdi Army and its offshoots, such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, that nevertheless fought coalition forces. In time, they and other similar organizations entered Iraqi politics and, after 2014, joined the PMU. These groups have always operated on two levels: on the level of domestic Iraqi political and military contestation, and on the level of international geopolitical competition, as an extension of Iranian defence policy.

Sunni militancy likewise fragmented and morphed across time. Global jihadist

movements such as Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad and its successor organizations — Al-Qaida in Iraq and IS (including its previous iterations, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS) — may be the most prominent avatars of Sunni militancy, but there were other strands that took the Iraqi nation State and Iraqi identity as their main platform. The latter included organizations such as the 1920 Revolution Brigades and the Naqshabandiya Army. Some Sunni militants who had fought US forces would eventually switch sides. Beginning in 2006, they formed a movement that became known as the Sahwa, or the Awakening.<sup>6</sup> These groups were theoretically State-aligned paramilitary groups that worked with American forces against more extreme jihadist movements. The Awakening groups were eventually folded into the purview of the Iraqi State, but they were never fully incorporated into the State or even fully normalized. A lack of trust led Shia-centric politicians and particularly Nouri al-Maliki (Prime Minister from 2006–14) to fear the rise of an armed Sunni force. Elements of the Awakening were co-opted into the State, while others were marginalized.

As this history shows, within the insurgencies that fought the US-led coalition forces, there was a significant divide between State-aligned and State-opposed groups. Sunni militants tended to see the State as an illegitimate American construct that propped up the occupation and did America's bidding. In that sense, the Sunni insurgencies were both against the coalition and against the Iraqi State. The nascent State was

dominated by Shia-centric (often Iran-leaning) elements that championed the causes of Shia victimhood and empowerment; this lent anti-State violence a sectarian dimension. Out of these dynamics, a second conflict arose: a civil war between sect-centric political factions and their respective armed camps. Fundamentally, this was a struggle over the nature of the post-2003 order and, should it survive, the hierarchies of power that would define political life and the balance of power between sect-centric actors. This conflict was already well underway in 2005 and peaked in 2006–7. The civil war ultimately led to the consolidation of a Shia-centric political order in Baghdad and signaled the irreversibility — at least in the capital — of the changes of 2003.

Sectarian competition, in the form of Sunni-centric pushback against a political order dominated by Shia-centric actors, continued in various forms: electoral contestation in 2010, attempts at Sunni federalism in 2011–12, the Sunni protest movement of 2012–13, and the renewed insurgency in 2013, which culminated with the IS takeover of about a third of Iraqi territory in 2014.<sup>7</sup> The subsequent war with IS significantly altered Sunni–Shia contestation. It created linkages throughout Iraq between local anti-IS actors and more powerful Baghdad-aligned forces (and, in some cases, Kurdish-aligned forces). The intra-Sunni divisiveness of IS meant that these relations often transcended sectarian boundaries. As this study shows, the PMU was an important vehicle in the forging of these relationships, dependencies and hierarchies of power.<sup>8</sup>

Other lines of conflicts that have simmered and raged over the course of the last seventeen years include intra-Shia and intra-Sunni conflicts, and the conflict over political rights, territory and hydrocarbons between Baghdad and the Kurdistan regional government. Interlaced through all of the above lines of contestation is organized crime — something that encompasses political competition, economic activity, tribal disputes and political violence.

The conflicts listed above have intensified the fragmentation of Iraq's security sector. The Iraqi State, coalition forces, opponents of the State,

and foreign powers have all relied on auxiliary forces in pursuing their interests in Iraq. Far from a recent phenomenon, the hybridity of the Iraqi State was evident from the very beginning after the 2003 invasion. Blurred lines between formal and informal security providers and between political and military actors, and the outsized role of foreign powers have been a structural feature of post-2003 Iraq. The PMU is ultimately an accelerated continuation of these trends. For example, State-aligned auxiliaries were at the front lines at the height of the sectarian violence in Baghdad in 2005–7. The Mahdi army and Badr operated out of formal State institutions and often with the collusion of formal security providers and coalition forces. The lines between formal and informal, State and non-State, national and transnational, and licit and illicit, were hopelessly blurred back then, and remain so today. It is that context that allowed for the emergence of the PMU and which underlines the irrelevance of the State/non-State binary for recent Iraqi political and security dynamics.<sup>9</sup>

## B. The history of the PMU

The Iraqi Government formally recognized the PMU as an umbrella organization for new and pre-existing State-aligned militant groups in June 2014, following the IS conquest of Mosul and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's subsequent fatwa (religious edict) calling for a defensive jihad against IS. But the PMU actually emerged significantly earlier, during Maliki's highly divisive second term in office (from 2010–14).<sup>10</sup> Following a contested election outcome, Maliki was able to secure a second term in 2010 with the help of an Iranian-brokered (and American-supported) reconstitution of Iraq's grand Shia alliance, known as the National Alliance.<sup>11</sup> Maliki's second term saw a marked shift toward increased authoritarianism and the centralization of power around him and his allies.<sup>12</sup> This consolidation of power was divisive within Shia politics, but it was positively toxic for Maliki's relations with Sunni politicians and for Sunni views towards the federal Government.<sup>13</sup> The Prime Minister's actions eventually triggered a mass protest movement in Sunni governorates in late 2012, which ultimately led to the re-emergence of a

large-scale insurgency in 2013. Just over a year after the beginning of the protest movement in December 2012, Fallujah fell to insurgents (including IS — or ISIS, as the group was then known) in January 2014.<sup>14</sup>

It was in this securitized context of sect-coded political factionalism and insurgency that the PMU began to emerge. In the months leading to the fall of Mosul in June 2014, Maliki openly floated the need for parallel forces to make up for the weaknesses and unreliability of formal security structures. As early as February 2014, a system of rewards and benefits were instituted for civilians fighting against ISIS, thereby enabling the creation of auxiliary forces tied to the Prime Minister's office.<sup>15</sup> With the federal Government struggling to hold on to Sunni governorates and with some cities, such as Fallujah, having already fallen to insurgents, the spring of 2014 saw increasing talk of the need for a "parallel army" (*jaysh radeef*) to confront the threat posed by ISIS and other insurgents. For many observers, the not-so-subtle subtext was that a sect-coded army of paramilitaries was needed to confront this sect-coded threat. Indeed, according to one source, this point was explicitly made at a meeting of the National Alliance in April 2014.<sup>16</sup> However, Maliki and other Shia actors (including paramilitary units) were happy to work with and incorporate local Sunni forces as junior partners in the emerging war against ISIS.<sup>17</sup> This intertwined the building of auxiliary forces with the expansion of patronage networks and, thus, made the security sector subject to the influence and interference of individuals further weakening the semblance of institutionalized bureaucracy.

It was at this time, in early 2014, that the PMU began to form around a nucleus of seven Iran-leaning paramilitary organizations that were already taking part in the war against ISIS: the Badr Organization, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Kata'ib al-Imam Ali and Kata'ib Jund al-Imam.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the term "popular mobilization" was already in use prior to the fall of Mosul and Sistani's fatwa, which are often mistaken as the PMU's genesis.<sup>19</sup> This was very much part of Maliki's push for a parallel

army composed of paramilitary and irregular forces tied to himself under the title of Sons of Iraq (another name for the Awakening).<sup>20</sup> In addition to the pre-existing Shia auxiliaries, Sunni auxiliaries were also raised, especially in Salahaddin and Anbar Governorates. At a basic level, the formation of these units was a kind of self-defence against an existential threat. However, such expansion of informal security actors was also driven by local tribal and political rivalries. A security sector dominated by informal actors has channels for accessing State resources, political patronage and material gains. Later, the formal inclusion of the PMU in State institutions further entrenched the role of informal actors in the security sector.

The emergent network of auxiliaries — and particularly their Iran-leaning core — would have likely remained in the shadows, and in the relatively narrow service of the Prime Minister's interests, were it not for the fall of Mosul on 9-10 June 2014. The conquest of Iraq's second-largest city was followed by what looked like a domino effect of collapse, spreading from north-western and western Iraq toward the capital. In response, Maliki established the Popular Mobilization Commission — the first institutional manifestation of the PMU. The Commission is a government body that administrates the PMU. Its creation, which essentially formalized the PMU as a State actor, was a violation of Article 9b of the constitution, which forbids the establishment of "militias outside the framework of the Armed Forces." More consequentially, Sistani — the highest Shia religious authority — issued his edict on 13 June 2014 calling on Iraqis to take up arms against IS. In doing so, Sistani chose his words carefully: the edict did not contain sect-specific language and called upon Iraqis to join the formal security services to repel the growing threat.<sup>21</sup> In practice however, the edict popularized, normalized, expanded and ultimately institutionalized the PMU beyond anything the PMU's patrons could have conceived of prior to the fall of Mosul. The popular response was overwhelming, with hundreds of thousands of Iraqis rushing to volunteer.

Technically, the PMU predates Sistani's fatwa; however, in practice, the PMU as we know it today is a product of the fatwa: it legitimized and mainstreamed what was to become the most significant auxiliary force in Iraq in a way that would have been impossible without the crisis presented by the IS onslaught and Sistani's response. In the process, it provided pre-existing militias with the opportunity to tap into the social, political and religious currency commanded by Sistani. This was later turned into political and legal capital that were used to institutionalize and further legitimize the PMU. This formalization accelerated the extension of the PMU franchise to increasing numbers of non-Shia local groups across Iraq. Sistani's edict therefore triggered a chain reaction that entrenched and expanded the hybridity of the Iraqi State, and particularly Iraq's security sector. The subsequent legislation relating to the PMU essentially provided legal cover for an extralegal phenomenon.

## C. The popularity of the PMU

Understanding the "popular" in "Popular Mobilization Units" is important to appreciating the extent to which the grouping exceeded its initial military role. The legitimacy bestowed upon the PMU by Sistani's fatwa and the urgency of the fight against IS turned the PMU into something far more than just a military body. PMU lore is built on the image of a mythologized, ideal type, selfless PMU fighter. This mythology has allowed PMU supporters to maintain a critical stance toward the *fasa'il* — even though the *fasa'il* are a core part of the PMU. Consideration of the PMU's popularity and the mythology surrounding it is important to understanding Iraqi discourse on the subject and the impracticality of treating the PMU as a rogue actor, or one that can be simply dismantled.

The energy unleashed by Sistani's edict was primarily channeled through Shia auxiliary forces and militias — including those that existed before the issuance of the edict, and newly formed ones. There were several reasons

that Shia paramilitaries dominated the PMU. Firstly, despite Sistani's best efforts and his strict avoidance of sect-specific vocabulary, the sect-coding of both the fatwa and the mobilization that followed was inevitable, given the backdrop of a sect-coded war. A Shia-centric State was fighting Sunni insurgents led by IS — an organization with an openly genocidal stance toward the Shia. An edict proclaiming jihad, issued by the highest Shia clerical authority, galvanized Shia militancy, regardless of the fatwa's wording. That the fatwa came a day after the gruesome Camp Speicher massacre, in which IS murdered more than a thousand Shia cadets, further inflamed the sectarian aspect of the war.<sup>22</sup>

Secondly, the Iraqi military never fully recovered from its disbandment after 2003. Auxiliary forces have been intertwined with the formal security services since that time. The collapse of the military in 2014 further dented its already damaged image and made ideological Shia militias and auxiliaries a more attractive choice for Shia fighters. In that sense, the PMU's popularity often came at the expense of what PMU supporters regarded as compromised formal security institutions.<sup>23</sup> This was particularly the case in the early days after the fall of Mosul. According to one study, only 9,000 out of an expected 24,000 recruits joined the Ministry of Defence in 2015, while in Shia-majority governorates, it is estimated that 75 per cent of men aged 18–30 joined the PMU during the same time period.<sup>24</sup> Overall, the PMU received up to ten times the number of volunteers that the Iraqi security forces did in the first two years following the fatwa.<sup>25</sup>

There was also a utilitarian aspect to PMU recruitment, relating to long-standing economic deprivation, unemployment and the difficulties that most Iraqis face in accessing or bypassing the party machineries of patronage.<sup>26</sup> In that regard, the PMU offered an alternate route to employment. Finally, there was a logistical reason for why militias and auxiliaries stood to benefit from the fatwa: the formal security services were incapable of absorbing the influx of volunteers. Auxiliaries and their affiliated political parties set up recruitment centres across southern Iraq

and the capital. Volunteers did not necessarily know or care which specific organization they were joining in the early euphoric days following the issuance of the fatwa. As one man who has since built a career in the Badr Organization put it: "I wanted to respond to the fatwa and defend my country. Badr became the means with which I could do this. It happened by chance. After the fatwa, I immediately volunteered, even though I had no military experience since the 1980s. I went to several places and got turned away many times because they did not have space for me. I ended up with Badr."<sup>27</sup>

Far more than just a military body, the PMU soon took the form of a social and political phenomenon as well. In a survey of Shia pilgrims to the shrine city of Karbala in 2016, researchers found that, when asked to choose a cause to donate to, 96 per cent of Iraqi respondents chose the PMU. The same survey found that 99 per cent of Iraqi respondents supported the PMU.<sup>28</sup> After Sistani issued his fatwa, "the *hashd*" quickly became a brand that transcended individual PMU leaders and formations. Rather than identifiable groups and individuals, the mythology of the PMU is more focused on the abstract figure of the selfless, impoverished youths of Baghdad and southern Iraq who answered the call to defend and avenge the homeland. However, there has been, from the very beginning, an inner tension in how supporters of the PMU viewed it: between admiration for an abstracted PMU, and suspicion or disdain for individual figures and entities within it. Such disdain is especially aimed at PMU figures and factions that have entered politics. These are primarily the pro-Iranian "resistance" factions — the *fasa'il*.

Iraqi parlance differentiates the Iran-aligned *fasa'il* factions from the broader PMU of which they are a part. Their Iranian connections, vast power, political role, and their often-predatory economic activities stand in sharp contrast to the ideal type salt-of-the-earth fighters of PMU mythology. The political ascendance of the *fasa'il*, the end of major operations against IS and the PMU's institutionalization have accentuated these contradictions. The elections of 2018 created a government in which the *fasa'il* were a dominant force — hence the absurdity of

drawing a dichotomy between "government" and "militias." The electoral vehicle of the *fasa'il* was the Fatah Alliance, which came second in the 2018 elections behind Sadrist-led (and hence also PMU-affiliated) Sa'iroun. This electoral outcome further blurred the lines between State and non-State, as major PMU factions became the chief sponsors of the government.

Ironically, the more the PMU succeeded in becoming a part of the State and the more institutionalized and legalized it became, the more its brand suffered, as its complicity with the political elite became increasingly more evident. A survey conducted for this study in 2019 — in stark contrast to the 2016 report discussed above — found that half of respondents across five governorates believed the PMU played a negative role in their area. In Salahaddin, more than 75 per cent of respondents were critical of the PMU's role.<sup>29</sup> The dimming of support for the PMU is a function of the *fasa'il*'s greater political foothold and the factions' explicit role as a status quo force that resembles and defends the rest of the much-maligned ruling classes. The *fasa'il* amply demonstrated their role as the system's praetorian guard in their violence against the protests of 2018 and again in the protests that broke out in 2019 and that have continued into 2020.

The *fasa'il* routinely try to blur the line between themselves and the rest of the PMU. For example, they deflect criticism by accusing dissenting voices of attacking the "sacred *hashd*" (*al-hashd al-muqaddas*). As one PMU commander complained: the *fasa'il* use the PMU brand to protect their own interests.<sup>30</sup> The ongoing protests and the violent attempts at their suppression have, again, highlighted the inner contradictions within the PMU and in the popular perceptions of them: the ideal of a popular people's mobilization stands at odds with the reality of the *fasa'il* factions within it, which act as violent defenders of the status quo. These contradictions have further widened the conceptual gap between "the *hashd*" and "the *fasa'il*." The *hashd* is viewed with far more legitimacy and has far more supporters than the *fasa'il*, which, particularly since 2018, are widely

regarded as avatars of the system and the ruling political parties.

To illustrate, there are many examples of protestors and PMU personnel expressing solidarity and support for each other.<sup>31</sup> PMU fighters and protestors posted reciprocal hashtags on social media emphasizing the idea of a joint struggle — a military struggle against IS paired with a peaceful struggle against the political classes.<sup>32</sup> This followed a pattern set in earlier rounds of protest. In 2015, for example, a hashtag and meme emerged on social media stating: “you fight for my sake, I demonstrate for yours.” These expressions of solidarity reflect a consistent desire for nationalistic solidarity with Iraqi security forces — including the PMU but not the *fasa'il*. As one young protestor from Basra put it in November 2019: “[The political elite] are trying to blend the PMU with the parties. The PMU is what its name says: the popular mobilization [*al-hashd al-sha'bi*]. Not you parties... The PMU is the people.”<sup>33</sup>

## D. The PMU spectrum

The diversity of groups encompassed by the PMU is wide enough to make the term “PMU” problematic for analysis. One recent report goes as far as recommending that US officials refrain from using any collective descriptors such as “the PMU,” “the *hashd*,” or “Shia militias,” both because of the unwieldy diversity of groups that such terms refer to and because of the reverence with which many Iraqis view the PMU, both as a societal experience and as an institution.<sup>34</sup> Whatever semantic structure that is used, it is important to be mindful of the main ideological and organizational divisions within what is referred to as “the PMU.” This is crucial in understanding the divergent aims and internal competition in the PMU. There are at least five categories that together make up the PMU:

1. The *fasa'il*, or resistance factions, sometimes referred to as the *hashd al-wala'i* (a reference to these formations' loyalty — *wala'* — to the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei). These factions tend

to have been established between 2003 and 2014, with the notable exception of the Badr Organization, which was set up in the early 1980s. All these factions have operational ties to Iran. Most were active against US forces between 2003 and 2011. More importantly, they take the lion's share of high positions in the Popular Mobilization Commission and are the most powerful actors within the PMU. It is this category that raises fears of an unruly PMU beyond State control. The reality is that they cooperate with formal State forces — of which they are technically a part, by way of the Popular Mobilization Commission — while retaining the power and autonomy to act independently and at odds with the Government, should they feel the need to do so. The relationship between the *fasa'il* and the State is marked by bargaining and accommodation, more than antagonism.

Crucially, the *fasa'il* are politically represented and, in some cases, embedded in State institutions. In the elections of 2018, they were represented in the Fatah Alliance electoral coalition, which, as mentioned above, came in second behind Sadrist-led Sa'iroun. The Badr Organization is the oldest and most institutionalized of the *fasa'il* and has long had a presence in formal politics; Badr has been embedded in the Ministry of Interior since 2005. The *fasa'il* groups' ties to Iran often undermine Iraqi sovereignty and threaten to embroil Iraq in regional Iran-related conflicts. While all *fasa'il* factions serve Iranian interests to one extent or another, they are not equally proximate or subservient to Iran. The more established and institutionalized entities, especially those that have entered formal politics, have domestic Iraqi political considerations and economic interests to consider.

The *fasa'il* have been accused of repeated human rights abuses and criminality. Some of the more prominent of the *fasa'il* include: the Badr Organization, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Kata'ib al-Imam Ali, Kata'ib Jund al-Imam, Kata'ib Sayyid

al-Shuhada and Saraya Talia al-Khurasani, in addition to other smaller organizations.

2. A second category of PMU groups is *al-hashd al-marji'i*, sometimes referred to as the "State hashd" — *hashd al-dawla*. A *marji'* is a source of emulation and religious authority in Shia Islam. The unofficial label *al-hashd al-marji'i* is a reference to these groups' ties to the holy shrines of Karbala and Najaf. These shrine-affiliated PMU groups were formed after Sistani's fatwa in 2014, and thus are also sometimes known as *hashd al-fatwa* — "the *hashd* of the fatwa." They were started as a temporary measure to meet the needs of an existential crisis. Unlike the resistance factions, they lack broader ideological drivers beyond the war against IS. As such, they have been more willing to integrate into State structures and to work within the JOC. These groups do not have links with Iran and, of all the PMU groups, are the closest to having full institutionalization within formal Iraqi structures.<sup>35</sup> In effect, these groups are the ones that most closely align with the mythology of the PMU. Popular perception regards them positively as "the *hashd*" as opposed to the Iran-leaning *fasa'il*, which tend to be more negatively viewed. However, the lines separating the *hashd* from the *fasa'il* are not always clearly demarcated — something the *fasa'il* have long benefitted from, since it allows them to tap into the organic credibility and popularity of the PMU. The shrine-affiliated formations are weaker than the *fasa'il* in numbers, political representation, and power. Some of the most prominent shrine PMU groups include the Abbas Combat Division, Saraya al-Ataba al-Hussainiya, Liwa Ali al-Akbar and Saraya al-Ataba al-Alawiya.
3. A single organization, Saraya al-Salam, occupies a category of its own. Saraya al-Salam is the latest incarnation of Iraqi Shia cleric and political leader Muqtada al-Sadr's auxiliary forces. Like some of the resistance factions, Saraya al-Salam is partly in the PMU and partly autonomous.<sup>36</sup>

Despite selectively adopting the language of "resistance" when necessary, Sadr has generally been critical of the *fasa'il* and of Iranian influence. He has therefore sought to frame Saraya al-Salam as being closer to the ideal type *hashd* of PMU mythology. Sadr presents Saraya al-Salam as a nationalistic, orderly, disciplined and State-aligned auxiliary, in contrast to what he calls the "impudent militias" — a reference to the Iran-aligned *fasa'il*. Saraya al-Salam have had a less chequered human rights record than the resistance factions. Their continuing presence in the Sunni-majority shrine city of Samarra is often pointed to as one of the more successful templates for relationships between the PMU and locals.<sup>37</sup>

4. A fourth category comprises those groups variously referred to as the local, Sunni or tribal (*asha'iri*) *hashd*. These groups are small, locally-focused formations that are chiefly concerned with day-to-day security in their areas. Some of these groups were formed in early 2014 prior to the fall of Mosul as part of Prime Minister Maliki's attempts to build a network of auxiliaries tied to himself under the rubric of the Sons of Iraq. The majority, however, were formed later, during the war against IS. The institutionalization of the PMU in 2016 turned it into a formal channel through which to access patronage and State resources. This incentivized the formation of local PMUs, even after areas had been liberated from IS.<sup>38</sup> While Sunnis were initially apprehensive of the PMU, a number of factors caused their fear to give way to a more transactional perspective, which led to the emergence of Sunni PMU groups. In many cases, there was no other way to formally join the fight against IS and access salaries, supplies and logistical support other than through the PMU.<sup>39</sup> Later on, the legal and financial benefits of PMU affiliation further accelerated Sunni membership. Again, this was often because of a lack of options. As one Sunni PMU commander

put it, Sunnis have no international backing and hence fewer options.<sup>40</sup>

In some cases, Sunni PMUs were trained by coalition forces in what US officials refer to as the tribal mobilization forces (usually abbreviated as TMF, though the name is not an official designation). Although the TMF were fully integrated into the PMU and salaries were channeled through Baghdad, the former were distinguishable from other Sunni PMU groups because they had direct training and support from coalition forces.<sup>41</sup>

The more common pattern of Sunni PMU group formation, however — especially outside of Anbar and Nineveh Governorates — was for local PMUs to be associated with or sponsored by a more powerful actor, be it the Iraqi security forces, the Kurdish Peshmerga auxiliaries or, more commonly, one of the larger Shia PMU formations.<sup>42</sup>

The presence of Shia PMU brigades in Sunni areas was at times problematic during the kinetic phase of the war against IS. War crimes, sectarian violence and general ambivalence toward the PMU phenomenon took time to abate. Likewise, the role of local Sunni auxiliaries in the PMU — or whether they should have such a role at all — was still an open question in the early years of the war. But with time, fear and mistrust have given way to transactional relations.<sup>43</sup> In most Sunni areas today, Shia PMU groups exert influence indirectly through local Sunni PMU groups. This reflects the fragmented and layered security and governance structures created by the war against IS.

Shia PMU groups retain outside leverage in these hierarchies of power, but they often work through local partners such as tribal PMU groups as part of the bargaining, co-optation and competition that mark power relations today.<sup>44</sup>

It is estimated that, as of early 2020, there are more than 40 Sunni PMU formations. This estimate is conservative, however: there are many small formations and others that are not formally registered with the Popular Mobilization Commission.<sup>45</sup>

5. A fifth type of PMU groups includes those in the so-called minority *hashd*. The IS genocide against minorities — such as the Yazidis and various Christian groups in Nineveh — spurred the creation of religious and ethnic auxiliaries. Some are tied to the Popular Mobilization Commission and officially come under the purview of the PMU. Others are sponsored by Kurdish actors. A few are tied to the global coalition against IS. One study estimates the existence of eleven minority auxiliary forces tied to the PMU.<sup>46</sup>

While the *fasa'il* are, collectively, the most powerful actor in the PMU, they often exercise their power through other formations, like the minority PMU groups or the Sunni and local PMU groups. This is important to keep in mind where human rights abuses or governance issues arise. For example, PMU involvement does not automatically make such instances a sectarian issue. The face of the PMU in many post-IS areas is often that of local powerbrokers, like the tribal *hashd* or the minority *hashd*, which derive their authority from links to more powerful groups within the PMU, such as the *fasa'il*.

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# The PMU and the State

Analytically splitting “the State” and “the PMU” into antagonistic or mutually exclusive opposites — or even into entirely separate concepts — is highly problematic. The PMU is an imperfect hybrid part of an imperfect hybrid State and has, since its inception, been firmly entrenched in the patchwork of alliances and rivalries that govern Iraqi political life and the security sector. Indeed, many of the PMU’s constituent formations and leaders were embedded in Iraqi politics and formal security institutions long before 2014. Further, before the PMU was established, the lines separating formal from informal actors, licit from illicit activities, national from transnational had long been blurred. For that matter, many other demarcations are also unclear — such as those between politicians, the PMU, rent-seekers, organized crime and tribal actors. This is why strict categorization and binaries are unhelpful.

However, the Abdul-Mahdi Government saw the power of the *fasa’il* grow as a result of the groups’ sponsorship of the Government and the influence they exerted on the Prime Minister’s office, and on matters relating to security. This greatly increased the *fasa’il*’s ability to operate with impunity, and further weakened the façade of civilian control over the PMU. In short, the past three years have seen the *fasa’il* become, arguably, the most influential player in the

patchwork of powerbrokers that collectively make up the Iraqi State. The ambiguity of the PMU — part State-affiliated, part autonomous, part Iraqi institution, part Iranian strategic asset — makes the empowerment of the PMU in this manner highly problematic. Not only has it given the *fasa’il* greater freedom to exercise their informal role, it has also threatened to drag Iraq into the escalating rivalry between the US and Iran and their respective allies. The hybridity of the Iraqi State and the empowerment of the *fasa’il* prevent Iraq from adopting a neutral stance — even if such a stance is the Government’s officially stated policy.

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As this study has already explained, security hybridization has a long history in Iraq and the region. However, as the scholar Yezid Sayigh notes, in the twentieth century this tended to be a top-down affair, with auxiliaries being instrumentalized for the purposes of regime

survival. The situation today differs in that the State is often unable to block the emergence of informal security actors in contexts of State fracture, civil war, weakened sovereignty, foreign penetration and financial crisis.<sup>47</sup> Auxiliaries have become integral to hybrid security arrangements that are often informal yet have legal cover from the State.<sup>48</sup> In addition to blurring the lines between formal and informal security providers, these dynamics also offer an entry point for foreign intervention. Iran and its affiliated PMU formations are, of course, a case in point.

The PMU's institutionalization in Iraq's security infrastructure gives the appearance of civilian oversight. But the PMU's inclusion in the Iraqi State is, in fact, an accommodation, made necessary by a convergence of interests and the realities of Iraq's hybrid security sector.<sup>49</sup> Faced with the reality that the State lacks a monopoly on force, the Iraqi Government, in effect, attempted to restore its primacy by recognizing the PMU and redefining them as part of the State.

The security sector operates on the basis of a shared *modus vivendi* that various entities tolerate. However, the balance of power between these entities is skewed toward the *fasa'il*, due to their military strength, political representation, financial resources and Iranian links. Should their interests dictate operating autonomously and in opposition to the Government, they are willing and able to do so in pursuit of specific objectives. This has been evident in the *fasa'il's* readiness to serve Iranian interests and attack American ones in defiance of the Iraqi Government's stated policy of neutrality. It is also evident in relations within Iraq's security sector. For example, in November 2019, Major General Yasir Abd al-Jabar al-Omari, a career officer and head of the Ministry of Interior's Higher Institute for Security and Administrative Development, was kidnapped in broad daylight by a convoy of masked men. It was common knowledge in Baghdad that Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and the PMU's Central Security Directorate (essentially the PMU's internal affairs division and the *fasa'il's* intelligence agency) were behind the kidnapping. The reasons for the kidnapping are unclear, though there was much speculation that it was

related either to a personal disagreement or to hiring policy at Omari's institute.<sup>50</sup> Regardless of the motive, the event is a significant example of the *fasa'il's* reach. The *fasa'il* had kidnapped a senior officer in one of Iraq's formal security institutions; the reverse (a senior commander in Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq being kidnapped or even arrested) is far less likely to happen, because of the *fasa'il's* power within Iraq's security sector.

This form of hybridity was not created in 2014, nor did it begin with the PMU. Rather, it has been a characteristic feature of the post-2003 State. Structural contradictions were embedded throughout the State, and informal actors have often dominated formal institutions. The collapse of 2014 and the emergence of the PMU were therefore accentuations of already extant trends and practices rather than aberrations in post-2003 governance. The blurred line between State and non-State, formal and informal, should lead us to view the PMU not as a threat or challenge to the State but as a competitor within it, colluding with other political actors in pursuit of a greater share of the State's resources and greater control over its direction — particularly where security and foreign policy are concerned. As such, and unlike more unruly auxiliaries — such as the Mahdi army in the first few years after the 2003 invasion — the PMU has consistently positioned itself as a part of the State. The props of State structures provide the PMU with a veneer of legality and further its normalization. State recognition has, therefore, been key to building and maintaining its legitimacy and its brand.<sup>51</sup> As Inna Rudolf has argued, even the most Iran-aligned formations do their utmost to promote themselves as servants of the Iraqi State and defenders of Iraqi stability.<sup>52</sup> In the process, far from threatening the State, they have become a status quo force and a key defender of a much-maligned political system.<sup>53</sup>

Rather than an exception to the post-2003 governing order, the PMU is a reflection of it. The PMU's relationship with politics and the State — particularly the *fasa'il's* relationship — is best described as one of collusion and complicity. The nature of this relationship is widely recognized in Iraq, even by PMU personnel who may glorify the PMU while criticizing its leaders and individual



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formation.<sup>54</sup> One man did not hesitate to describe the formation he belonged to, the Badr Organization, in identical terms to the rest of the political classes: “We don’t have a country. The State is controlled by the parties. The same goes for the Popular Mobilization Commission. [Badr] is no different than any other party. Complicit with all the others.”<sup>55</sup>

This collusion extends to most of the political classes, who together have divided State resources and used them to build vast patronage machines that dominate public life in Iraq. The PMU figures and entities that entered politics effectively entered into this bargain. Their participation in this bargain adds a material incentive for the PMU to maintain its status as a formal part of the State.<sup>56</sup> Its hybridity notwithstanding, oil wealth and rent-seeking have kept the State and the central Government at the heart of economic activity, both formal and illicit.<sup>57</sup>

The PMU is formally an independent armed entity under the National Security Council tied to the Prime Minister’s office. The PMU is thus a part of Iraq’s security apparatus, alongside — and not subservient to — the security ministries. Such a relationship has a precedent in Iraq’s security sector: it is identical to the institutional framework of the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS), an elite Iraqi force created by the US after the 2003 invasion.<sup>58</sup> This level of autonomy and fragmentation led a recent study to go as far as arguing that Iraq, in effect, has four separate defence forces: the CTS, the PMU, the Iraqi Army and the Kurdish Peshmerga.<sup>59</sup> Defenders of the PMU often deflect criticism and concern by pointing to the legal similarity between the PMU and the CTS. However, while there are structural parallels between them, the PMU and the CTS play very different roles. For one thing, the CTS is better aligned with the Ministry of Defence and is under direct government control. The PMU, in contrast, plays a more opaque role and, when

deemed necessary, will operate autonomously of the government, if not in direct opposition to it. As such, the CTS tends to support the consolidation of government institutions, while the PMU adds to their hybridization. Another difference is that the PMU itself is more internally divided and heterogeneous than the CTS. The PMU's Iran-leaning formations and the challenge their allegiances present to Iraqi sovereignty and security further set the PMU apart from the CTS. Finally, unlike the CTS, the PMU has a strong political role in parliament and in the Government through its political parties, under the banner of the Fatah Alliance.<sup>60</sup>

The ambiguity surrounding the PMU is not solely related to its dual role in politics and security. It is also a function of the organization having formal and informal roles. The *fasa'il*, in particular, benefit from this institutional ambiguity, retaining a foot in the State (through the PMU) and a foot outside it. As Renad Mansour writes, some PMU formations “move back and forth between formal and informal spaces, as its interests dictate... The PMU retains the image and prominence of a State actor but the autonomy of a non-State actor.”<sup>61</sup> While the *fasa'il* need the veneer of State institutionalization — and while they will do their utmost to be seen as a formal security actor answerable to the Prime Minister in his capacity as commander in chief — they have not hesitated to go against the Government's official line when necessary. This has created contradictions not just between the PMU and the Government but within the PMU itself — between the so-called State *hashd* (the second category in the taxonomy of PMU groups presented above) and the *fasa'il*.<sup>62</sup> As Karim Nuri, the former official spokesman for the PMU pointed out, the relationship between the *hashd al-dawla* and the *fasa'il* is as important as the relationship between the PMU and the State.<sup>63</sup>

These internal contradictions have been stretched to breaking point by recent crises relating to the protest movement and, more importantly, tensions between the US and Iran. Those tensions have highlighted the challenge presented by the *fasa'il* to Iraqi sovereignty and stability. In particular, their ties with Iran and the fact that they act as extensions of Iran's

regional security infrastructure have dragged Iraq into Iran's escalating conflicts with the US, Israel, and some of Iraq's Gulf neighbours.<sup>64</sup> Being dragged into these conflicts has been especially embarrassing for Iraq, given the Iraqi Government's official position of neutrality on such matters.<sup>65</sup> Worse, *fasa'il* factions that are, in effect, semi-formal Iraqi actors have attacked US forces that are in Iraq at the request of the Iraqi Government. These tensions have brought the many contradictions of the PMU into sharper relief: between State *hashd* and *fasa'il*, between the PMU's national and transnational roles, and between its formal and informal capacities. Attacks on US forces compelled several PMU representatives and defenders to remind media audiences that there is a difference between the PMU proper and the resistance formations — the *fasa'il* — and that the latter had units both within the PMU and separate from it, in the service of “the resistance.”<sup>66</sup>

The balance of power and influence between the *fasa'il* and their rivals in the political classes was significantly altered in favour of the former under Abdul-Mahdi's Government. In interviews conducted for this study, several analysts and PMU members pointed out that Abdul-Mahdi's predecessor, Haider al-Abadi (Prime Minister from 2014–18), was a source of pressure and pushback against the *fasa'il*, and that he was far better at balancing the relationship between the Iraqi Government, the US, Iran, and the PMU.<sup>67</sup> One former PMU commander described Abdul-Mahdi's premiership as a period that turned the *fasa'il* into a kind of “deep state.”<sup>68</sup> Lacking a party or a base of his own, Abdul-Mahdi was a compromise candidate agreed upon by the Fatah Alliance and Sa'iroun. The *fasa'il* under the leadership and coordination of al-Muhandis (the late deputy head of the Popular Mobilization Commission) made significant headway in extending their influence over the Prime Minister's office.<sup>69</sup> During Abdul-Mahdi's premiership, the PMU also increased its attempts to integrate with Iraqi security forces and become more fully a State institution. In practice, however, integration was more successful with State-aligned formations, leaving Iran-leaning groups to further consolidate their hold over the PMU.<sup>70</sup>

### III

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# The PMU after the fall of the Islamic State

During the war against IS, the PMU had a specific and well-defined purpose it could point to: fighting the extremist group and its genocidal violence. But with IS all but vanquished in Iraq, the true contours of PMU entrenchment in the Iraqi State and political systems have become more evident. The PMU is an acute manifestation of the hybridization of the Iraqi State (and not just its security sector). This has become all the more apparent as the conflict with IS has receded. The question of how to draw a neat line between State and non-State actors in Iraq is as bedeviling as ever.

As outlined above, the PMU is far from a monolithic actor and, more importantly, PMU groups are not the only auxiliary forces operating in areas liberated from IS. The collapse of the State in 2014 and the subsequent war against IS created a fragmented political and military landscape in which the vacuum was eventually filled by an assortment of local, hybrid, formal, and semiformal forces. The role and impact of these forces — including the PMU — varied from place to place, and was shaped by a number of factors, such as personal relations, pre-existing lines of contention, the balance of power between local actors and auxiliary forces, the

number of auxiliaries in a given area, and the degree of PMU involvement in the war effort. In some areas, PMU groups (local or otherwise) supported Iraqi security forces. In other areas, they had uncontested authority.

The majority of local forces are too small to operate autonomously. This has allowed more powerful actors — Iraqi and regional — to assert their leverage over local communities across the post-IS landscape. Iran, Turkey and, to a lesser extent, the US-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS have sponsored various local auxiliaries, as have the Kurdish Peshmerga and, of course, the larger Shia PMU formations.<sup>71</sup> The latter are the dominant actor in post-IS hierarchies of power, particularly in Salahaddin, Kirkuk and Diyala Governorates. In Nineveh Governorate, these dynamics have led to the militarization of minorities. This arose out of a genuine need for self-defence in the face of the IS onslaught, and the failure of Iraqi and Kurdish forces to provide protection. Still, a number of local and external actors exploited the situation for their own ends, and often in service of broader regional geostrategic goals. For example, in Sinjar, in Nineveh Governorate, no fewer than four rival Yazidi auxiliary forces have been established



UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

in the wake of the genocide the minority group suffered at the hands of IS. These militias are tied to and sponsored by the Kurdistan Worker's Party (known by its Kurdish acronym, the PKK), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the PMU.<sup>72</sup>

The PMU's presence in Sinjar — the site of genocidal killing of Yazidis in 2014 — serves the Iranian strategic objective of establishing a land route toward the Mediterranean. This objective is also the reason for Iran-aligned PMU formations' presence on Iraq's borders with Syria, and the motive for alleged ethnic cleansing and demographic engineering. For example, in the Nineveh Plains, a larger Shia Shabak community lives alongside Christian minorities. Christians and Shabaks have both established auxiliaries tied to the PMU. The Shabak auxiliaries, in particular, are accused of human rights violations and demographic engineering aimed at expelling Christians from these areas.<sup>73</sup>

The PMU repeatedly committed gross human rights violations during the war against IS. These violations included running illegal prisons, abductions, torture and extrajudicial killing.<sup>74</sup> Such violations were far more common at the height of the war against IS. Since then, in addition to the waxing of power relations in liberated areas, the major Shia PMU formations tend not to be located in towns and cities; instead, they are in rural areas and border zones.<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, they exert their influence on local dynamics through their allies and partners. As one source put it, the *fasa'il* are the ultimate arbiter and decision-making is ultimately in their hands.<sup>76</sup> The PMU is also able to exert influence through formal institutions. A case in point is the Badr Organization's entrenchment in the Ministry of Interior and its domination of the federal police.

The presence of the PMU (and other powerful sponsors) fed into pre-existing local conflicts and long-standing rivalries. This dynamic was

especially pronounced in disputed territories, where there were instances of demographic engineering through property destruction and the prevention of displaced members of rival communities from returning to their homes.<sup>77</sup> However, it would be inaccurate to view these conflicts solely through the prism of ethnic and sectarian division: the appalling human rights abuses that accompanied the war against IS were driven as much by intragroup competition. As early as 2014, and even prior to the fall of Mosul, there were warnings that the rise of IS was threatening to turn intra-Sunni violence into a long-term problem.<sup>78</sup> In liberated areas, intra-Sunni violence and tribal vengeance have been more persistent issues than sectarian violence.<sup>79</sup>

The grim human rights situation in liberated areas and the primacy of vengeance over justice have been too systemic and have implicated too broad an array of actors to be analysed solely as a form of sectarian violence.<sup>80</sup> During the war, it was all too easy to assume that the culprits behind human rights violations were PMU groups, and that such violations had a sectarian motive. While there were certainly many cases of PMU human rights violations — including violations with sectarian motivations — local rivalries and vendettas were just as likely to be a source of human rights abuses. For example, Shia PMU formations were assumed to be responsible for the widespread looting and violence that followed the liberation of Tikrit and surrounding areas and a sectarian angle was likewise assumed.<sup>81</sup> While there were instances of such groups' culpability, the reality was more complex. "Homegrown PMU forces, both Sunni tribal and Shia Turkmen forces, were often responsible for as much or more of the violence in Salah al-Din," write Erica Gaston and Andras Derzsi-Horvath in a 2018 Global Public Policy Institute report. "Local Sunni tribal forces affiliated with Shi'a [PMU groups] in Shirqat, Tikrit, and surrounding areas used their position (and the cover of powerful Shi'a [PMU] forces) to retaliate against rivals, engaging in property destruction and abuses, including the looting of Tikrit."<sup>82</sup>

With IS having suffered a territorial defeat, the blunt human rights violations of the war are not as common an occurrence today. A more

pressing issue is that of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Again, it is often assumed that the main Shia PMU formations are the primary problem and that the IDP crisis is a sectarian issue. However, displacement is often perpetuated by local rivalries whereby locals refuse the return of so-called "IS families" — people who are suspected of IS sympathies or who are related to IS members.<sup>83</sup> To the misfortune of IDPs, there is a lot of arbitrariness involving multiple actors (including local and Shia PMU groups) in how IDP return is handled. Forced displacement and the obstruction of returns is often enforced by auxiliary forces, but this enforcement is sometimes carried out at the behest of — or in collusion with — formal authorities, such as the governorate councils or the Iraqi security forces.<sup>84</sup>

As with many of the problems associated with the PMU, its abysmal human rights record is a symptom of broader, structural, Iraq-wide issues. A culture of impunity and a disregard for human rights is exhibited by a broad array of security actors. Local auxiliaries have engaged in demographic engineering, demolition of homes, the destruction of entire villages, displacement, and blocked returns. Vendettas and divisions within and between different sects and ethnicities have been key drivers, depending on the location. But formal forces have also engaged in such behaviour. Kurdish forces are implicated in egregious human rights violations in disputed territories.<sup>85</sup> Likewise, the Iraqi military and formal security agencies have been accused of human rights violations, extrajudicial killings and the abuse of detainees.<sup>86</sup> Even the CTS, perhaps the most positively viewed Iraqi security agency, has been criticized for its handling of IS detainees.<sup>87</sup>

While the PMU may have initially been viewed with trepidation as an anti-Sunni force, it has since become intertwined with local dynamics. As explained above, a more transactional relationship has displaced the fear that characterized early views toward them in Sunni areas.<sup>88</sup> There are several exceptions to this, where the PMU participated — for strategic reasons or out of vengeance — in depopulating certain areas, either through killings, forced displacement or by blocking returns.<sup>89</sup> However,

when considered in the broader post-IS context, such instances are more the exception than the rule. The war against IS turned the PMU (both its local factions and the more powerful Shia groups) into a key powerbroker in post-IS areas. This transformation was accompanied by the emergence of a new class of Sunni actors who sought to build their own patronage networks through their relationship with the PMU.

The role of the PMU as an influential powerbroker can be a source of resentment for locals, especially in Sunni areas.<sup>90</sup> The PMU asserts its authority on governance, security and the distribution of resources and contracts. Whatever power structures locals deal with — governorate councils, tribal figures, and so forth — ultimately must defer to the major Shia PMU formations and their local allies.<sup>91</sup> This is especially the case where security is concerned, something that has significantly impacted reconciliation and IDP returns.<sup>92</sup>

Again, however, it is important to note the lack of uniformity in the role played by the PMU in liberated areas. In some cases, it has played a positive role in reconciliation and mediation.<sup>92</sup> In others, its role has been more negative. In all cases, powerful Shia PMU groups' position are mirrored and implemented by their local allies and proxies. As Haley Bobseine has written in a study focusing on Anbar Governorate, tribal leaders and PMU leaders alike have both facilitated *and* blocked IDP returns.<sup>94</sup> PMU leaders are a part of Iraq's political economy and, as such, resemble other actors and elites with whom they bargain, collude and compete.

More recently, the *fasa'il* have played a role in the bloody suppression of the ongoing protest movement that emerged in October 2019.<sup>95</sup> The clampdown has further underlined the hybridity of the security sector. Rather than militias running amok in the face of impotent State forces, there was broad collusion between the *fasa'il* and the forces of law and order in the

It is important to note the lack of uniformity in the role played by the PMU in liberated areas. In some cases, it has played a positive role in reconciliation and mediation. In others, its role has been more negative.

suppression of the protests.<sup>96</sup> The *fasa'il* are suspected of being responsible for targeted assassinations and kidnappings of activists — a problem that predates the protests but that has grown far worse in response to them.<sup>97</sup> Hybridity means that in many cases, drawing a clear line between *fasa'il* and formal State security actors is far from a straightforward affair. The situation has forced Iraqis to ask urgent questions about governance and the future of the PMU — questions for which there are, as yet, no obvious answers: Where does the Badr Organization end and the various agencies of the Ministry of Interior begin? Is the heavy-handed role played by Ministry of Interior forces — such as the Emergency Response Division, the federal police, and the riot police — an example of State violence, or of militia violence? Or is the distinction a superfluous one, given Badr's depth of involvement in these organizations?

The situation has forced Iraqis to ask urgent questions about governance and the future of the PMU — questions for which there are, as yet, no obvious answers.

# IV

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## Economic activity

The PMU's economic activities — licit and illicit — are where their normalization in Iraq's political economy is most apparent. The PMU's economic activities are extensive, ranging from legal investments, to corruption, to extortion, to smuggling, to informal taxes and tariffs. As with the PMU's role in politics and the State, its economic activities are extensions of existing practice and reflect the broader dysfunction of the Iraqi State. This includes the overlap between organized crime, tribes and political parties — three categories that the PMU readily fits into. As with other issues relating to the PMU, its economic activities have exacerbated and further entrenched pre-existing conditions. The PMU's military strength, its impunity, its political, legal and religious cover — all these qualities make the PMU an especially powerful perpetuator of the status quo. At times, the PMU's predatory and extortive economic activities can be highly destabilizing. For example, a 2017 IRIS study found that extortion by several different PMU groups effectively paralysed the concrete block industry in Tuz Khurmatu, Salahaddin Governorate.<sup>98</sup> The main problem there was the decentralization of rent-seeking activities, which led to the cannibalization of the industry. Recently, the Popular Mobilization Commission has tried to tighten control over such activities and maintain some degree of centralization.<sup>99</sup>

A recent case from Diyala Governorate illustrates how the PMU fits into the broader political economy of corruption. In December 2019, there were reports of severe "tribal violence" involving

medium weapons, rockets, assassinations and displacement.<sup>100</sup> The violence was related to the lucrative smuggling networks around the Mandali border crossing with Iran — Iraq's third busiest border crossing, with estimated annual revenues of USD \$700 million.<sup>101</sup> But what media reports and some analysts reductively labelled "tribal violence" actually involved a far broader array of actors, including the PMU. The delayed response to the violence was reportedly caused by "the political affiliation of one of the parties in the dispute." The smuggling networks are facilitated by collusion between formal and informal security actors, and between political parties and organized crime. As an Iraqi newspaper reported: "the struggle is directed in the shadows by militias supported by political parties that compete over border crossing revenues and smuggling of different kinds of goods, including drugs."<sup>102</sup>

Border crossings and ports are particularly lucrative sources of rent. As the scholar Harith Hasan has argued, control of such rents is contested among a number of actors: local groups, foreign powers, criminal organizations, political parties, militias and insurgents.<sup>103</sup> The Iraqi military and formal security services retain a presence at borders and ports, but they are not alone. Rather, they are part of a patchwork of actors who variously compete and collude in border regions, which are subject to hybrid governance arrangements.<sup>104</sup> This shadow economy and the PMU's role in it — alongside local actors, politicians, and other security actors — is replicated across Iraq. Local PMU

groups in Mosul, for example, dominate the large-scale scrap metal business and the tolling of trucks between Erbil and Mosul.<sup>105</sup> In line with the prevailing practice of criminal, political, and economic actors, the PMU also appropriates State infrastructure for its own economic benefit, and does so in collusion with others. For example, in Tuz Khurmatu, Turkmen mafias backed by the PMU oversee oil smuggling networks that extend to the Kurdistan region.<sup>106</sup>

The PMU, like the political and economic classes in general are heavily involved in the awarding of government contracts. All political parties have long had “economic offices” and so do the PMU formations. In that sense, the PMU is a new entrant into an old game. However, what sets it apart is its greater capacity for violence and the greater impunity with which it operates. For example, in the summer of 2019, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq tried to take control of the Grand Mosque in Hillah, Babylon Governorate. The head of the official Shia Endowments Office, Alaa al-Musawi, took the matter to court and won; the court judged that the mosque should be restored to the Shia Endowments. In response, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq raided Musawi’s home and tried to kidnap him.<sup>107</sup>

Property is a major source of revenue for political and economic elites. Again, this is true across the board in Iraq, and is hardly specific to the PMU. As Omar Sirri has shown in several studies, political elites use their position and both legal

and coercive means to appropriate public space and to divide among themselves land and neighbourhood control, along with the economic gains that go with it.<sup>108</sup>

The PMU’s intertwinement with webs of elite economic interests further entrenches it in Iraq’s political and military establishments. This lends economically active PMU formations a material interest, alongside political and ideological interests, in the survival of the system. This further underlines the similarity between the PMU (particularly the *fasa’il*) and the ruling classes. Hence, and as already mentioned, the *fasa’il* are ardent defenders of the status quo, rather than a threat to it. Of course, this becomes increasingly problematic as public discontent with Iraqi governance grows.

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# V

## The current Government response

The hybridity described above inevitably means that there is no unified Government position toward the PMU — how can there be when the PMU is a part of the Government? By extension, there is no unified position on the PMU within the PMU itself — the divergence between the State *hashd al-dawla* and the *fasa'il* being the most obvious. Generally speaking, Iraq has a very “State-centred society.”<sup>109</sup> The State has traditionally played a central role in economic planning, security provision, and job creation. The ideal that is aspired to, and which forms the basis of PMU and Government messaging, is for the PMU to be incorporated into the Iraqi security forces as a recognized arm of the State. In a survey conducted for this report, some 64 per cent of respondents favored the disbandment of the PMU, while 28 per cent favored integration and only 8 per cent were happy for the PMU to continue as an independent armed entity tied to the Commander in Chief (the Prime Minister).<sup>110</sup>

Even within the PMU, particularly in the *hashd al-dawla*, there is a desire for greater State control and regulation. On the one hand, this is driven by attachment to the ideals with which many PMU supporters view the organization. To such people, the hybridity, the lack of clarity, the political and economic activities and the *fasa'il* are sully what they suppose to be the true face of the PMU. There are,

however, other reasons for PMU members to support subordination of the PMU under tighter State authority. Some members of the PMU want the opportunity to build a career in a professionalized organization.<sup>111</sup> If nothing else, this would guarantee benefits, salaries and pensions.<sup>112</sup>

Both Abadi and Abdul-Mahdi were unable (the latter especially) to adequately regulate the PMU and bring it fully under Government control. The basic reason for this is the weakness and hybridity of Iraqi State institutions — many of which are riddled with leaders and figures from the *fasa'il*. The Iraqi Government does not have a coherent view on the matter. For all the talk of integration and State control, some Shia-centric actors, and particularly Iran-leaning elements, see the PMU (especially the *fasa'il*) as the ultimate safeguard against State collapse and as the guarantor of the post-2003 system that they dominate.<sup>113</sup> The Popular Mobilization Commission is similarly divided and has had a Janus-faced relationship with the Iraqi Government: The *hashd al-dawla* and the head of the commission, National Security Advisor Falih al-Fayyadh, support the professionalization and integration of the PMU into Iraq’s security infrastructure. On the other hand, the *fasa'il*, until recently under the leadership of al-Muhandis, would prefer to play a double game as both formal and informal,

Iraqi and transnational, State and non-State actors. In February 2016, Abadi tried to remove al-Muhandis, even going as far as replacing him with the retired General Muhsin al-Ka'bi. This did nothing to dent al-Muhandis's authority. He continued to be the central node of power in the Popular Mobilization Commission. "Ever since the PMU was formed," as analyst Yahya al-Kubaisi puts it, "it was clear that [Fayyadh] would be the frontman, while the true leader would be al-Muhandis."<sup>114</sup>

The Popular Mobilization Commission was formed in June 2014. For the next year, it was treated as an official entity and ministries were instructed to interact with it on that basis despite the absence of formal legislation.<sup>115</sup> The first major legislation regarding the PMU was the PMU Law of 2016, which recognized the PMU as an independent armed entity that is part of the Iraqi security forces, but which is directly tied to the Prime Minister's office, rather than to the security ministries.<sup>116</sup> In the year after the law was passed, there was an attempt to create at least the appearance of integration, by having PMU formations adopt neutral brigade numbers rather than the names and emblems of their individual formations. This measure was supposed to turn the PMU into an auxiliary force resembling the army. However, notwithstanding their new names, the brigades are still controlled by the same PMU factions that the new system was ostensibly supposed to dissolve.<sup>117</sup>

In March 2018, another decree was passed, further underlining the PMU's official status.<sup>118</sup> It also sought to reduce the size of the PMU and to implement better regulations, such as minimum age and training requirements. There were also attempts at centralization and regulation from within the PMU, and specifically by al-Muhandis. In March 2019, the Popular Mobilization Commission announced an extensive campaign of arrests aimed at fake units claiming PMU affiliation.<sup>119</sup> There have also been attempts to merge smaller brigades to reduce fragmentation.<sup>120</sup>

Attempts at integrating and formally institutionalizing the PMU into Iraq's security sector continued under Abdul-Mahdi's Government.<sup>121</sup> In theory, these measures were meant to bring the PMU further in line with the rest of the armed forces. However, given the multiple and contradictory roles of the PMU (formal and informal, military and political, Iraqi and regional) the consequence of such legislation has been to further normalize and legitimize the PMU in its formal capacity while doing little to dent its informal role. The reasons for this are structural and, again, relate to the hybridity of Iraqi politics and governance. No government thus far has had the power or the coherence to enforce a clear vision upon the PMU, particularly where the *fasa'il* are concerned. The weakness of Iraqi Government and State institutions on this question is a direct function of hybridity, in that the *fasa'il* have been a formal part of both, especially in Abdul-Mahdi's Government.

# VI

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## The limits of DDR and security sector reform

Ultimately, demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) is not feasible for the PMU in the short or medium term. A brief review of the complex dynamics that hold hybrid groups and the State in an uneasy balance proves the point. There is no force that can compel the PMU to disarm; at the same time, the PMU is, in some cases, still needed to hold territory and otherwise contribute to security operations. Nevertheless, there is room for manoeuvre and improvement.

There are tensions within Government, between the *fasa'il*, their allies, and their rivals. For now, this is a structural contradiction that cannot be willed away. For most of the past two years, the matter has been papered over by a mutually tolerable arrangement. However, the multiple crises, beginning with the protest movement in October 2019 and the assassination of Soleimani and al-Muhandis in January 2020 — to say nothing of the ongoing impasse in government formation — have strained the contradictory relations between the various entities that make up the Iraqi State and the Iraqi Government. With the obvious exception of Iran, Iraq's international partners view the PMU with considerable trepidation and as an extension of Iranian influence. Given the Government's official recognition of the PMU, this has complicated Iraq's contradictory diplomatic relations. However, there is little the Iraqi Government can

realistically do: calls to “reign in the militias” or to “disband the PMU” are far beyond the ability of any Iraqi politician to meaningfully act upon in the short term. As in other parts of the world, the modus operandi of auxiliary forces, once institutionalized, becomes easier to replicate and harder to replace.<sup>122</sup>

During his premiership, Abadi made several attempts at bringing the PMU under the full purview of civilian control. His preferred option was for PMU fighters to join the security agencies of the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defence. There was also discussion of turning the PMU into a reserve force of part-time fighters under one of the two ministries. At one point, there was mention of demilitarizing the PMU and turning into a civilian mobilization to be deployed for reconstruction projects.<sup>123</sup> The PMU, however, insisted on following the model of the CTS — an autonomous entity tied to the PMO.

It is easy to assume that integration is the best option for auxiliary forces. Yet in the absence of robust institutions, integration may cause more harm than good. Specifically, it can entrench and institutionalize the hybridity of the security sector. This is exactly what happened in the case of the Badr Organization. Under the guise of integration, Badr has been embedded in the Ministry of Interior since 2005 and today

dominates many of the Ministry's security forces. Few institutions are as expressive of the formal State as the Ministry of Interior, yet it has been hybridized to a perhaps irreversible extent, thanks to ill-equipped attempts at integration. Badr's role extends beyond the ministry: it has been engaged in electoral politics since 2014, and today heads the Fatah Alliance, which is one of the largest parliamentary coalitions.

A recent London School of Economics study examined the applicability of DDR in Iraq as compared with Nepal, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan.<sup>124</sup> The author found that there were fundamental obstacles that differentiated Iraq from the other cases, including the heterogeneity of the PMU; the PMU's legitimization, by both the religious establishment and by political decisions and legislation; and the weakness of the State. This evidence, especially, points to the impossibility of wholesale DDR in the near term. As the author of that study argues: "It is a race against time for the [Iraqi security forces] to prove [they have] the ability to secure all of Iraq and that no other 'parallel' force is needed."<sup>125</sup> Most importantly, perhaps, is the PMU's entwinement with the country's political and security establishments, something that is exceedingly difficult to untangle, given that it cuts across political, legal and institutional lines. Sayigh has similarly argued that conventional Western approaches to DDR are both inapplicable and irrelevant in Iraq.<sup>126</sup>

Still, there are incremental steps that can be taken to address the problems of the PMU's current status. The Abdul-Mahdi Government was especially weak and was especially beholden to the *fasa'il* and their supporters. The weight of the ongoing protest movement means that the next government is unlikely to be so supine. A less impotent Prime Minister could build a more balanced relationship with the *fasa'il*. Such an effort may even receive support from within the PMU. After all, the PMU's relationship with the rest of the State and the security sector is not an inherently antagonistic one.<sup>127</sup> In fact, some wings of the PMU — the *hashd al-dawla* — would welcome a more structured relationship with the State and a more balanced power dynamic. A PMU commander in Badr wanted such changes

for personal reasons: as a middle-aged man with only a high school diploma, he welcomed the prospect of a more institutionalized and professionalized Popular Mobilization Commission that could help him advance his career and fulfil his ambition of becoming an officer.<sup>128</sup>

Public support for a tighter governmental grip on the PMU will not be in short supply. And such support will not only come from non-Shia quarters or from opponents of the PMU: even many supporters of the PMU resent what they regard as the sullying of what was supposedly an elevated endeavour.

Likewise, there have been calls for greater governmental efforts to find alternative sources of employment for returning PMU fighters. A 2019 IRIS study found that returning PMU fighters were often a source of tension in their home communities: "They return with the idea that they are liberators. They feel like nobody can tell them what to do."<sup>129</sup>

Finally, a stronger government may take better advantage of the divisions within the PMU to better isolate the *fasa'il* from the other PMU groups. A lot of the relations that tie the larger PMU formations with local forces are transactional, not ideological; hence, they have the potential to shift.<sup>130</sup> There have been long-standing tensions between various wings of the PMU relating to the *fasa'il's* role in US-Iranian rivalry, and how this embroils the PMU and Iraq in regional geopolitical conflict.<sup>131</sup> There are also tensions within the PMU about how the Popular Mobilization Commission is run and how resources are divided. For example, Safa al-Timimi, the spokesman for Saraya al-Salam, complained that a cap on how many of the group's fighters can be registered with the commission was unfair and politically motivated.<sup>132</sup> These divisions can sometimes turn into media scandals. For example, in 2018, a shrine-affiliated PMU formation, the Abbas Combat Division, publicly accused the Popular Mobilization Commission of using the PMU's budget to pay the salaries of Iraqi fighters in Syria.<sup>133</sup>

# VII

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## Conclusions and policy recommendations

The hybridity of not just the PMU but of the Iraqi State itself means that fragmentation, the diffusion of power, autonomous security actors, and foreign influence are structural characteristics of Iraq and its security sector. A Weberian State monopoly on the legitimate means of violence is simply not possible in the foreseeable future. Nor can auxiliaries be entirely disbanded. Iraq and its international partners will have to accept a multipolar security architecture in the medium term.<sup>134</sup> Within these constraints, however, there are some possible steps the Iraqi Government, the United Nations and international partners can take that might potentially improve stability, build a more professional set of security actors and gradually bring the various militias more under State control.

### A. Bringing all PMU formations under greater State control

#### 1 State recognition.

The PMU derives its legitimacy and much of its power and resources from the fact that it is recognized as a formal State institution. A more

coherent government would be able to leverage State recognition to increase its control over the PMU. This would require a strong government capable of asserting its will and willing to name and shame bad behaviour when it arises.

#### 2 Deeper reform.

The PMU is putatively a formal State institution, but this has so far been mostly a charade. The Iraqi State should make the PMU a State institution in both the spirit *and* the letter of the law. Public opinion would support such reform, as would some formations of the PMU — and even some personnel in the *fasa'il*. The overweening public desire for greater professionalization means that once reforms are in motion, it will be more difficult for the *fasa'il* to remain recalcitrant. Successful reform is dependent on a strong and coherent government that is able to assert itself, as opposed to the “consensus governments” of the past seventeen years.

#### 3 Funding.

The PMU is funded by the Iraqi State budget. This gives the Iraqi Government a potentially powerful source of leverage over the PMU, notwithstanding the PMU’s enrichment from its

freelance economic activities. Again, a stronger, more coherent government is needed for this potential to be realized.

## 4 Benefits and social welfare.

Pensions, disability allowances, veterans' benefits, and the like are another source of leverage to increase State control over the PMU.

## 5 Isolating problematic PMU formations.

Combined with the still resonant popularity of the *hashd al-dawla*, as opposed to the *fasa'il*, discord between PMU formations offers the Iraqi Government a potential way of isolating the more problematic formations. Again, this potential is dependent on the strength and independence of the incoming government. That the *fasa'il* are still recovering from the assassination of al-Muhandis, who was an important commander and political figure, may provide the incoming government with an opportunity.

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Development of the security sector cannot be achieved without political change. At the moment, politics are hostage to their entanglement with a hybrid security sector; conversely, security sector reform is blocked by the political system.<sup>135</sup> As a way of ameliorating the effects of hybrid political and security structures, several studies have suggested strengthening the "connective tissue" between formal and informal actors — building interdependence, increasing cooperation, and standardizing bureaucracy and procedure between them, for example.<sup>136</sup> In this way, the relationships between the relevant actors can at least be better regulated, structured and monitored. Ideally, this stronger structure would grant auxiliaries access to, and recognition by, the State — in exchange for submitting to Iraqi law, government bodies and society.<sup>137</sup> Again, the success of such an effort is entirely dependent

on political reform and the balance of power in Iraqi politics under the incoming government.

PMU formations that are not *fasa'il* — mainly, the *hashd al-dawla* formations — should be given more support and more prominence, with an eye toward building their influence within the PMU and the Popular Mobilization Commission. Diluting the State-aligned formations under the banners of the Ministry of Interior or Ministry of Defence would be counterproductive as long as the PMU remains formally in existence. Doing so will only strengthen the dominance of the *fasa'il* within the PMU. The relationship between the State-aligned formations and the two ministries is a potentially fruitful area where "connective tissue" can be strengthened, and the influence of the *fasa'il* diminished.<sup>138</sup>

## B. Improving regulation and professionalization

The Iraqi Government can gain greater control over the PMU by focusing on improving regulation and professionalization. Yet again, a prerequisite for this is a strong and coherent government. Any such reforms are highly unlikely under the current system of "consensus governments" and the apportionment of political positions. Still, it is worth outlining the reforms that will be needed when they become possible.

### 1 Implementing Executive Order 328.

Order 328 restructured the JOC, giving the Prime Minister a direct leadership role. It also gave the JOC operational control over all agencies under its command, which theoretically include the PMU. The order also gave the JOC control of all appointments at the rank of brigade commander and above. If implemented, Order 328 would give the Prime Minister significant leverage over the PMU and would go a long way toward institutionalizing, professionalizing and regulating the PMU.

## 2 Regulating the payment of salaries.

Rather than funnelling them through the Popular Mobilization Commission, salaries should be paid directly to PMU personnel. Using Iraq's QiQard electronic payment system would help increase transparency.

## 3 Streamlining Iraq's security architecture.

The Government should simplify and make more efficient Iraq's overarching security architecture and that of the PMU, in order to push for greater centralized command and to reduce areas of overlap.

## 4 Standardization.

Standardizing and gradually amalgamating formations and brigades will help create a more centralized command, and greater cooperation and interchange within the security sector.

## 5 Preventing the *fasa'il* from operating in isolation.

## 6 Career development and training.

Greater synergies between the PMU and the Ministry of Defence can be achieved by embedding army officers in PMU brigades and offering training courses to PMU personnel, and by creating avenues for career development through secondments and other means.

## 7 Integration.

There needs to be a system for identifying PMU candidates for integration into agencies of the Ministry of Defence or the Ministry of Interior.

## 8 Disarmament.

Gradually stripping the PMU of medium and heavy weaponry.

As this study has shown, conventional DDR programmes are not applicable to Iraq in the short term. Nevertheless, the Iraqi Government should pursue partial DDR, alongside the professionalization, streamlining and further institutionalization of the PMU. To succeed, initiatives must include finding alternate avenues of employment for PMU personnel, which in turn requires investing in skills development initiatives and the diversification of local economies. The PMU's extensive non-military activities (for example, their engineering corps, their medical corps, or their role in providing public services) offer a potential route toward demobilization and alternate employment through PMU channels.<sup>139</sup>

The PMU's deep entrenchment in the Iraqi Government and security agencies is a bedeviling problem for the country. But it would be overly facile to credit the PMU for creating this quandary. It has simply magnified existing dynamics. Achieving meaningful reform will require dealing with the deeper structural issues that plague Iraq. Nevertheless, policymakers do have ways forward that can gradually professionalize the PMU and reduce its hybridity.

**Achieving meaningful reform will require dealing with the deeper structural issues that plague Iraq. Nevertheless, policymakers do have ways forward that can gradually professionalize the PMU and reduce its hybridity.**

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- 20 Ned Parker, Ahmed Rasheed, and Raheem Salman, “Sectarian Strife Threatens Iraq Ahead of Election,” *Reuters*, 28 April 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-strife/sectarian-strife-threatens-iraq-ahead-of-election-idUSBREA3Q0FE20140427>. The Sons of Iraq—or alternately the Awakening—comprised local Sunni forces that worked with American forces against Al-Qaida in Iraq and later against the Islamic State in Iraq, a forerunner to IS. Maliki’s relationship with these forces was always mired by mutual mistrust. In essence, Maliki sought to recreate the Sons of Iraq, but in a manner more aligned to himself.
- 21 For footage of Sistani’s fatwa being read out in full by his representative, see, “Sayyid Sistani Declares Jihad *Kifa’*” (in Arabic), uploaded to YouTube 14 June 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7by5almGhA>. See also Luay Al-Khatteeb and Abbas Kadhim, “What Do You Know About Sistani’s Fatwa,” *Huffington Post*, 10 July 2014, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-do-you-know-about-si\\_b\\_5576244](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-do-you-know-about-si_b_5576244).
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- 25 Mansour and Jabar, “The Popular Mobilization Forces.”
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- 27 PMU commander affiliated with Badr, interview.
- 28 Fotini Christia et al., “To Karbala: Surveying Religious Shi’a from Iran and Iraq,” *MIT Political Science Department Research Paper* 39 (2016): 131.
- 29 The survey, carried out by Iraqi research institution Peace Paradigms, had a sample size of five hundred respondents equally spread over five governorates: Basra, Baghdad, Diyala, Salahaddin, and Nineveh. There was a strong positive correlation between favourable views toward the PMU and whether or not the PMU presence was composed of locals. Basra, Ninewa and Diyala respondents reported more local PMU formations and had more positive perceptions.
- 30 PMU commander affiliated with Badr, interview. This complaint was rather surprising given that he was affiliated with one of the *fasa’il*.
- 31 On PMU fighters expressing support for the protestors, see, “The PMU Demonstrates in Nineveh in Support of Iraqis’ Protests” (in Arabic), uploaded to YouTube on 3 November 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YwdU9z2MN8s&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YwdU9z2MN8s&feature=emb_title). For a montage of protestors in Nasiriya expressing support for the PMU in late December 2019, see the Twitter status of @YasserEljunoori, 28 December 2019, <https://twitter.com/YasserEljunoori/status/1210897807885979648>. The central theme is “we are one with you.” The PMU is framed according to the main points of its mythology: selfless sacrifice by Iraq’s poorest (*wild il khayba*), the debt of gratitude owed to the PMU (“you liberated us from terrorism, we will liberate you from corruption”), and the contrast between the PMU and the political parties (which, of course, include several *fasa’il*).
- 32 The phrases that fighters and protestors rallied around were “we take care of the trenches, you take care of the protests,” and “protesting is on us and the trenches are on you.”
- 33 See the Twitter status of @Al\_Mirbad, 25 November 2019, [https://twitter.com/Al\\_Mirbad/status/1198887295421685761](https://twitter.com/Al_Mirbad/status/1198887295421685761). For a similar message from another protestor directly challenging al-Muhandis and reclaiming ownership of the PMU away from the *fasa’il* (“We’re the PMU... the sons of the poor... We’re the ones who liberated the western region”), see the Twitter status of @irqdubaissi, 2 November 2019, <https://twitter.com/irqdubaissi/status/1190303705104605186>.
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- 38 Renad Mansour, “After Mosul, Will Iraq’s Paramilitaries Set the State’s Agenda?” The Century Foundation, 27 January 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/report/mosul-will-iraqs-paramilitaries-set-states-agenda/?session=1>. Also see, “*Bil-Harf al-Wahid* in Ramadhan 2017” (in Arabic), uploaded to YouTube on 13 June 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GcvArKQaT50>.
- 39 Local PMU commander from Salahaddin, interview with the author, Baghdad, November 2019.
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- 41 Erica Gaston and Andras Derzsi-Horvath, *Iraq after ISIL: Sub-State Actors, Local Forces, and the Micro-Politics of Control* (Berlin: GPPI, 2018), <https://www.gppi.net/2018/03/21/iraq-after-isis-sub-state-actors-local-forces-and-the-micro-politics-of-control>
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- 46 Hashimi, "Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi."
- 47 Yezid Sayigh, "Hybridizing Security: Armies, Militias, and Constrained Sovereignty," *Diwan*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 30 October 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/10/30/hybridizing-security-armies-militias-and-constrained-sovereignty-pub-77597>.
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- 52 Inna Rudolf, *The Hashd's Popular Gambit: Demystifying PMU Integration in Post-IS Iraq* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2019): 22, <https://icsr.info/2019/11/21/the-hashds-popular-gambit-demystifying-pmu-integration-in-post%E2%80%91iraq/>. To illustrate, the late al-Muhandis, despite being unabashedly Iran-aligned and spearheading and coordinating the *fasa'il* through his position as deputy head of the Popular Mobilization Commission, nevertheless spoke in the language of the Iraqi State and often claimed to media that he followed Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani—even though al-Muhandis was widely known to be a follower of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Iranian Supreme Leader. See, for example, "Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis: We Are Ayatollah Sistani's Soldiers" (in Arabic), uploaded to YouTube on 15 October 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWzgBnO0wMA>.
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- 55 PMU commander affiliated with Badr, interview.
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- 64 Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq."
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- 123 International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State Middle East Report 188* (2019): 18, [https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/188-iraqs-paramilitary-groups\\_0.pdf](https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/188-iraqs-paramilitary-groups_0.pdf).
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- 127 As one former PMU commander put it, the lack of institutions meant that personal relations played an outside role: "Some formations like my own have excellent relations with the State. In fact, Risaliyyun has an ideal relation with the State — one that builds towards institutionalization. If the right people are in place, the institutional stuff will follow." Shahmani, interview.
- 128 PMU commander affiliated with Badr, interview.
- 129 Jacqueline Parry and Emily Burlinghaus, *Reintegration of Combatants after ISIL* (Raparin: Institute of Regional and International Studies, 2019): 5, <https://auis.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/For%20WEB%20-%20Parry%20et%20al.pdf>.
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