POLICY NOTES

THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY ▪ 2018 ▪ PN46

IRAN'S FOREIGN LEGION

The Impact of Shia Militias on U.S. Foreign Policy

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FOLLOWING ITS SUCCESSES IN THE SYRIAN WAR, Iran's next step is to infiltrate state institutions in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Without serious action by the U.S. government to counter Iran's regional activities, any international support to Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq—and their financial and military institutions—might result in support for Iran's Shia militias.

With the liberation of Mosul from the Islamic State and the conquest of the "Caliphate" capital, Raqqa, the United States still faces a major challenge in the Middle East: Iran and its proxies. Despite the tough rhetoric by the Trump administration against Iran and its militias, it has yet to develop a coherent policy to contain the Islamic Republic in the region. In the continued absence of such a policy, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Qods Force (IRGC-QF), led by Gen. Qasem Soleimani, will keep expanding further, jeopardizing regional stability and threatening U.S. allies.

While Washington was busy fighting the Islamic State, Soleimani was fostering an army of Shia militias in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, as well as Yemen. Some Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), along with Lebanese Hezbollah, Yemeni Houthis, and Afghan (Fatemiyoun Brigade) and Pakistani (Zainabiyoun Brigade) Shia—driven by political, ideological, and economic factors—are today fighting Iran's regional battles. Iran sees Hezbollah especially as a successful model that could be replicated in other parts of the region. Using the Lebanese and Iraqi parliamentary elections in 2018, Iran will try to further infiltrate state institutions. In Syria, Iran will continue propping up the regime of Bashar al-Assad, while establishing a land bridge from Iran to Lebanon, thereby confirming its presence and power in the region.

To maintain this influence, Tehran typically seeks mechanisms for its associated militias to expand and integrate within state systems. Hezbollah, most notably, is today a fundamental part of the Lebanese state, and therefore has access to institutions that manage security and military decisions and strategies.

As Lebanon has emerged as Hezbollah's operations room,[1] or safe zone, the "Party of God" has grown regionally under the Qods Force umbrella. Today, Hezbollah leads Shia militias in Syria, while also figuring prominently in offering training and logistical support to other Shia militias in Iraq and Yemen. According to various estimates, around seven thousand Hezbollah fighters are present in Syria at any given time, working directly under Soleimani, to help establish Iran's so-called foreign legion.

The battle for power in the region has been relentless and complicated, and Iran has lost many trained fighters, but the country today looks more confident and influential than it did a few years ago. In November 2017, Soleimani declared victory in Syria after crossing[2] the Iraq-Syria border at Abu Kamal, in Deir al-Zour province, where he announced the establishment of the land bridge traveling all the way from Iran's border to southern Lebanon. Iran, with its allies, has achieved its current status through aggressive demographic manipulation. In order to ensure its own supremacy along the corridor, and safeguard its power-projection efforts, the Islamic Republic forced out many Sunni inhabitants of the Sunni-majority region, which was inherently hostile to Iran's presence. A strong signal of Tehran's intent to hold such gains can be found in its considerable investment in recruiting, training, and logistical support for its proxies.

In potentially trying to implement its successful Lebanese Hezbollah model elsewhere, Iran will likely seek to exploit efforts to politically resolve the Syrian war while pursuing a democratic course in Iraq. Thus could it become an influential force in two additional states' political and military systems.

ABOUT THIS PAPER

The analysis presented here results from a June 2017 workshop organized by The Washington Institute to explore different aspects of Shia militias in the Middle East and the implications of Iran's strategic outlook for U.S. policy. Participants discussed the various militias and their roles in the regional war, with case studies from Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, the cooptation methods these proxies have been using to integrate themselves in state institutions, the demographic changes resulting from implementing these tactics, and the repercussions for these countries' sovereignty. This report summarizes the main ideas, discussions, and recommendations that resulted from the workshop, with significant contributions by Michael Eisenstadt, Nicholas Heras, and Michael Knights, as well as editor Hanin Ghaddar.

Although the U.S. government has long maintained that it does not support Iran-sponsored militias, soon enough any international backing to Lebanon, Syria, or Iraq—and their financial and military institutions—might end up benefiting Iran's Shia militias. Accordingly, as the Trump administration looks into ways to contain Iran's influence, it must examine the country's regional outlook and plan, an endeavor that inherently requires closer attention to the Shia militias fighting under the command of the Qods Force.

Iran's Strategic Outlook

Since its establishment in 1979, the Islamic regime in Iran has worked to establish Shia proxies in other countries in the region, infiltrating state institutions whenever possible. Through participation, indirect or direct, in various wars and confrontations over these decades, Iran has managed to grow an army of around 200,000 non-Persian Shia fighters.[3] Individually, these fighters may look scattered and containable, but in reality they are very well organized under Qods Force command. To understand how these Shia militias function, one needs to see them as they see themselves: not as a loose assortment, but as a single army with a very clear structure and hierarchy.

As implied already, most Shia militias fighting in the region today are organized, trained, and funded by the IRGC and its QF. As the IRGC seeks to establish a Shia nation and defend Shia interests within the world's Muslim community, the QF serves as the headquarters of Shia militancy in the Middle East. According to some experts, the force is even designed to outlast the Islamic Republic or its government, should it, for any reason, fall.

The QF and the government in Tehran function as two parallel entities, at times carrying out contradictory missions. But the West often does not differentiate between these two power centers. Indeed, if containing Iran in the region is a priority, officials must understand the contradictions between these two entities.

More particularly, by monitoring funeral activities in Iran, Lebanon, and Iraq, experts have been able to deduce numbers of fallen fighters, thus indicating the scope of various militias' involvement.[4] For example, a breakdown of those Shia fighters announced by various militias to have been killed in Syria in 2016 shows almost half (between 1,100 and 1,700) to have been Lebanese, along with 650 Afghans, 488 Iranians, 144 Pakistanis, and 94 Iraqis. In Iraq, the breakdown is much more homogeneous, comprising 3,400 Iraqis and 39 Iranians, the latter mostly mid-ranking officers.

In Syria, one interesting detail involves the correlation between a peak in Afghan deaths and deaths of Iranian officers, suggesting the Afghan fighters were operating under direct Iranian rather than Syrian command. Moreover, just as ascendant Iranian commanders during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88 have become part of the country's ruling elite today, Iranian commanders in the Syrian war are likely to rise in Iran's political ranks in the coming years. Indeed, one-fourth of all Shia militant deaths in Syria have come from IRGC ground forces.

Further, a blurring has occurred lately between the once-sharply-distinct QF and ground forces. Whereas QF soldiers were previously the sole fighters deployed outside Iran, IRGC ground forces have increasingly played this role in Syria, merging with and effectively augmenting the QF. Those being deployed in Syria will undoubtedly soon receive medals and be promoted within the IRGC, along with their earlier-noted political prospects, setting them up for future ascendancy within the Guards' leadership. This means the same people fighting today could well dominate the future of business, politics, and culture in Iran.

Some in the U.S. government believe Iran does not seek direct conflict with the United States anywhere in the Middle East, given that its proxies need a safe haven to recruit, train, and indoctrinate fighters. According to U.S. official sources, Iran has spent $15 billion to prop up the Assad regime. In 2016, Iran also spent $20 million on the Houthis in Yemen and $26 million on Iraq.

Shia Militias as a Military[5]

MICHAEL EISENSTADT

The Shia militias of the Middle East are diverse organizations that vary in their size, training, and relationship to Iran. Those most closely linked to Iran are part of its Shia foreign legion; these include Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi militias such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Hezbollah, and Kataib Sayyed al-Shuhada, the many mini-Hezbollahs that have been created in Syria in recent years, as well as the Afghan Fatemiyoun and Pakistani Zainabiyoun militias. All these are subject to heavy Iranian influence, if not direct control. Other groups, like the Sadrist "Peace Companies" (*Saraya al-Salam;* formerly the Mahdi

Army), have ties with Iran that have waxed and waned.[6] At present, the two are somewhat estranged. Yemen's Houthi militia, by comparison, has tightened its ties with Iran in recent years.[7] Nearly all the aforementioned militias are in the process of becoming quasi-regular military organizations with small numbers of tanks and other armored vehicles and large quantities of artillery.

Groups that belong to Iran's foreign legion are part of a transnational Shia militia network based on a shared commitment to Khomeinist ideology; adherence to the "Hezbollah model" of translating military achievements into political influence; a shared devotion to Iran's culture of jihad, martyrdom, and resistance; the use of standardized military tactics and techniques (including swarm attacks and heavy reliance on mortars and rockets for fire support); and a heavy emphasis on psychological warfare and propaganda. This network has given rise to a transnational Shia identity forged on the battlefields of Syria through shared goals and mutual sacrifice.

Militarily, Shia militias have often punched above their weight in combat with Arab and even foreign armies, and have a reputation as tough fighters. This is partly because militias can draw on a range of sociocultural resources unavailable to armies. Whereas traditional armies take men of diverse backgrounds and mold them through training into a "band of brothers," the basic building blocks of militias are often—figuratively, if not literally—bands of brothers and friends from tight-knit families, clans, and communities. These social solidarities often contribute to unit cohesion and combat motivation—since militiamen often fight to defend their families, homes, and communities, whose human and physical terrain they know intimately. Militias are slowly evolving into expeditionary forces that fight further and further from home.

Tribal values, nationalism, and religious zeal are often intertwined and further contribute to the motivation of militia fighters. Former underground fighters and clerics—who often play key roles in Shia militias—are inured to habits of discretion, contributing to the operational security of these groups. Conversely, while Hezbollah has set a high standard when it comes to discipline and tactical proficiency, many of these militias consist of poorly trained volunteers, and thus suffer from indiscipline—which may alienate them from their home communities—and a lack of tactical sophistication.

Iranian sponsorship and Hezbollah mentorship provide the Shia foreign legion with significant comparative advantages over other militias and some armies. Training, equipment, funding, intelligence, and logistical support—not to mention the prestige of association with the rising regional power—are comparable and occasionally superior to those of standing armies. Moreover, Iran's tendency to splinter radical elements from mainstream Shia movements to create new proxy militias enables it to cultivate promising leaders, create new paramilitary options, and ensure itself an enduring role as a mediator in Shia communities subject to its influence.

Shia militias, like most militias, have traditionally been better at irregular (guerrilla) tactics and in fighting from static, prepared positions than at combined arms maneuver warfare, a tendency in which they are similar to Arab militaries. As many of these militias become more conventional in their organization and operational mode in the coming years, one cannot know whether they will successfully preserve the efficacious elements of their militia culture while incorporating lessons learned from combat in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere—or whether they will take on some of the more debilitating features of many conventional Arab militaries.

Hezbollah in Syria

Hezbollah, as this paper has thus far shown, is Iran's main arm in the region, and the Qods Force relies heavily on Hezbollah to lead and train the various Shia militias it commands. As Hezbollah became more involved during the war in Syria, its main priority was to defend Damascus, while protecting the surrounding suburbs and the "useful Syria" that links the Alawite coast to the borders with Lebanon. This initiative required major ethnic cleansing of Sunnis from strategically important areas.[8] Like Hezbollah had done previously with its non-Shia Lebanese Resistance Brigades, the group has worked, alongside Tehran, to recruit and train minorities, such as the Druze, to fight alongside it for the regime.

Another priority for Hezbollah was to lead all its Shia fighters to control the Syria-Iraq border, thereby securing the land bridge, or Shia crescent, that would connect Iran to Lebanon via Iraq and Syria. This project, however, turned out to be more complicated than imagined, requiring Hezbollah to move closer than planned

to the Iraqi border. After a few failed attempts to do so from Syria's south, owing to resistance from U.S.-backed groups, Hezbollah became very invested in the liberation of Deir al-Zour. The city is significant to the Syrian economy and provides access to the Euphrates River and Abu Kamal, on the Iraqi border.[9]

In light of these updated missions, Hezbollah's role has expanded from that of a local militia to a key player in Iran's regional army, and it continues to expand its regional portfolio. Along with its Iranian sponsor, the Lebanese group is accumulating influence among Shia communities across the Middle East. Experience in Syria and elsewhere, meanwhile, has endowed the group with advanced military capabilities.

While the IRGC still serves as a supervisory entity, Hezbollah, Iran's top Arab Shia force, is itself training and leading Iraqi, Syrian, Pakistani, Afghan, and Yemeni Shia militias. Indeed, as Iran's role in the region grows, so does that of Hezbollah. This gives Hezbollah more confidence when faced with its other domestic and regional challenges; the group knows that in its next war—possibly with Israel—these Shia militias will come to its aid.

Just as the 2006 Lebanon war helped Hezbollah reinforce its ranks and capabilities, the recent regional war encompassing mainly Syria and Iraq has boosted the organization, to an even greater extent. Indeed, for context, Hezbollah's weapons arsenal grew from 33,000 rockets and missiles before the 2006 war to an estimated 150,000 afterward.[10] Similarly, it swelled from a few thousand members in 2006 to an estimated 20,000-plus.[11]

But this growth came with many challenges:

1. Hezbollah is today involved in a long war in Syria and beyond, and it has lost many of its high-ranking commanders and well-trained fighters.[12] Although the group did manage to recruit more fighters, many of these newcomers have not undergone the same training usually required by Hezbollah, due to the urgency of the war. Quality had to be compromised for quantity.

2. Hezbollah's extensive military operations in the region have forced the group to make budget shifts, wherein most resources are now allocated to military operations,[13] shrinking the group's social services as a result. Today, only Hezbollah fighters and their immediate families can benefit from social services, leaving many other Hezbollah members, employees, and supporters without access to this network free of charge. These budget shifts are, in turn, causing discontent among the Shia community in Lebanon, which has long depended on Hezbollah for services.

3. In addition to social services and the collective history of the Shia, Hezbollah has used the "resistance" against Israel as a main pillar for building its popular support in Lebanon and in the region. Despite the official statements on how "the road to Jerusalem passes through Syria," though, the facts on the ground show a different reality: that Hezbollah is fighting Syrians and never responding to Israel's numerous attacks on its convoys and arms depots in Syria. Practically, the concept of the resistance has been shattered by the Syrian war, and the Hezbollah base doesn't look at the conflict from an ideological perspective, but rather from a realist one.

4. Hezbollah's involvement in a sectarian conflict, and its increase in sectarian rhetoric and practices, has prompted a loss in broad Arab backing. Hezbollah today is branded by the Arab League, Gulf Cooperation Council, and Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) as a "terrorist" organization and supporter.[14, 15]

5. Because of the disillusionment caused by the just-noted factors, many young men have lost the urge to join Hezbollah's war in the region, or else grown fatigued from fighting on an Arab foreign battlefield.[16] Therefore, Hezbollah has resorted to financial incentives to recruit more fighters, such as fixed salaries and benefits available only to fighters, given the recent budget reallocations. In a way, Hezbollah became mainly a "job opportunity" for many young Shia men from poor neighborhoods in Lebanon. The new fighters, whose arrival in Syria generally followed that of Hezbollah, are mostly there for the financial rewards, and therefore are less disciplined and less principled. This is affecting Hezbollah's fighting force in general and changing its relationship to the Shia community.

This list provides a number of opportunities for limiting Hezbollah's influence and expansion in the region and within the Shia community. A military option should cer-

tainly consider Hezbollah's regional role and the QF-sponsored Shia militias, but in terms of nonmilitary and long-term options, creating economic alternatives for young Shia men could offer a slow but effective alternative. Support for Hezbollah might not sour, but such openings would wean the community off of Hezbollah's support. While no magic formula exists for ending the militarization of the Shia community, isolating it or accepting its isolation from the rest of Lebanon will only play into Hezbollah's hands.

Therefore, by helping facilitate jobs for Lebanon's young Shia, the international community would do much to undermine Hezbollah's ability to recruit fighters. The challenge for the international community is to persevere with this outreach to Lebanon's Shia while simultaneously limiting its military role in Syria.

Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces[17]

NICHOLAS HERAS

Iraq is a key focus of the mission by the IRGC Qods Force to protect the Iranian homeland. Indeed, strong QF influence over Iraq provides an opportunity for Iran to achieve several important foreign policy objectives. Fundamentally, the purpose of the QF since it was created almost four decades ago is to achieve Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's vision of Iran as the leader of the world's Muslims, or at least of the world's Shia.[18] Iraq was the first target of the young Islamic Republic's goal of spreading a pansectarian Islamic revolution beyond the borders of Iran. As the conflict against the Islamic State shifts to the stabilization phase in Iraq, the QF will continue to position itself as the power broker within the Iraqi Shia community.

The QF has taken a "let a thousand flowers bloom" approach to shaping the sociopolitical development of Iraqi Shia militia groups now incorporated into the state-sponsored al-Hashd al-Shabi (Popular Mobilization Forces, or PMF) organization. The PMF is being shaped by the policy decisions made by its deputy chairman, Jamal Jaafar Muhammad Ali al-Ibrahimi (aka Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis), an Iraqi who is also a top QF operative.[19] Likewise, the QF is using agents within the PMF drawn from among Shia veterans of the 1980s–90s Iran-led Islamic Resistance Movement, such as Muhandis, to influence Iraq's policy and future.

The QF now has an opportunity to seed its Iraq operations, similar to 2007–10, when the IRGC shaped the ideology and operations of the Special Groups, as certain Iraqi Shia paramilitary forces were known in U.S. parlance. Here, the overarching objective is to surreptitiously develop networks of influence and recruitment to manipulate future policy and militarism in the Iraqi state and populace. In addition, the QF is seeding the PMF with groups led by commanders or containing rank-and-file members that support the institution in Iraq of *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the jurisprudent), the form of governance followed in the Islamic Republic.

Since July 2014, an estimated sixty-seven constituent militias have been raised under the PMF, of which forty are believed to be close to the QF. Analysts believe that most PMF groups, and fighters, come from Iraq's Shia community, although PMF groups were raised from Iraq's Sunni, Christian, Yazidi, Turkmen, and other communities during the counter-IS campaign.[20] Based on the salaries it pays, the Iraqi government estimates the existence of about 110,000–122,000 PMF fighters. Some 70,000–90,000 of these, estimates show, have actually been deployed, ranging from checkpoint duty to actual combat, either in Iraq or Syria. Of this total, some 50,000 fighters are mobilized in organizations under QF influence, particularly within the three largest QF-backed Iraqi organizations: the Badr Organization, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and Kataib Hezbollah.

The PMF groups now closest to the QF, as suggested earlier, are led by commanders who began fighting under the Islamic Resistance Movement against the Saddam Hussein government decades ago. This period was formative for today's PMF commanders, who were then young men.[21] Although the Islamic Resistance Movement ultimately failed to overthrow Hussein, or to cut short the Iran-Iraq War, it did provide the QF with a legacy network of young, motivated Iraqi Shia operatives. This network would become important following the 2003 U.S.-led coalition campaign that defeated and dismantled the Iraqi government, occupied Iraq militarily, and withdrew as Arab Spring uprisings began to have an impact on Iraq's sociopolitics. As in the 1980s, the emphasis remains on establishing *velayat-e faqih* in Iraq, and key commanders include Sheikh Auws al-Khafaji (militia: Qaeda Quwat Abu Fadl al-Abbas), Sheikh Akram Kaabi (militia: Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba), and Ali al-Yasiri (militia: Saraya Talia al-Khurasani).

Quwat Abu Fadl al-Abbas, an expeditionary force that has frequently been deployed to Syria, has an esti-

mated 2,000 fighters. In recent years, it aggressively sought to participate in the counter-IS campaign in Iraq's Nineveh province, with a focus on seizing territory on the Iraq-Syria border.[22] Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, with an estimated 4,000 fighters, began as a Special Group developed from the larger Kataib Hezbollah organization; it has an expeditionary force that has frequently been deployed to Syria.[23] Saraya Talia al-Khurasani, which has an estimated 3,500 fighters, is associated with the political movement Hizb al-Talia al-Islamiyah (Islamic Vanguard Party), which works toward the implementation of *velayat-e faqih* through the Iraqi political process.[24] Hizb al-Talia al-Islamiyah, which is aligned with QF objectives, is slowly gaining power in the southern Iraqi provinces of Dhi Qar and Karbala.[25]

These groups represent the fourth generation of Iran's proxy network. The first and second generations consisted of the Shia armed opposition organizations that were organized inside the Islamic Resistance Movement and emerged from the Dawa Party and Badr Organization in the 1980s and 1990s. The third generation was composed of Shia Iraqi Special Groups, the majority of which eventually splintered off from Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. All such groups are controlled or influenced by the IRGC, support *velayat-e faqih* in Iraq, and generally seek export of the Islamic Revolution. Jihad in Syria has become a staple experience of the latest generation, along with the counter-IS campaign in Iraq, which started in 2014. The next step for these groups appears to be politics, with their involvement already evident in Shia communities especially in southern Iraq and the Baghdad suburbs.

Although the PMF role is now formalized within Iraq's national security architecture, the long-term impact of the forces on the mass politics of Iraq, particularly the Shia community, is unclear. Transitioning to politics would allow the PMF to serve a dual function as an Iranian influencing mechanism and a recruitment tool for its proxy network. To be sure, Iranian backing could significantly alter politicking within the Shia community. Formally, the law that made the PMF an official Iraqi government organization states that the PMF is to be apolitical, nonsectarian, and separate from nongovernmental militia forces. It is an open question, though, whether the militia mobilization that has occurred through the PMF will translate into a vehicle for mass politics, particularly within the Shia community. Provincial and parliamentary elections are likely to be held in April 2018, and election sheets with former or current PMF commanders as candidates will reveal a preliminary answer.

Possible PMF Templates to Expand Influence[26]

MICHAEL EISENSTADT & MICHAEL KNIGHTS

The PMF consists of diverse elements. These include Iran-backed Shia militias, PMF whose leaders were selected by the Shia clergy in Najaf, and Sunni PMF. The latter two groups are assets for Iraq that will hopefully be incorporated into the Iraqi army, Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS), and police forces. The Tehran-backed PMF, however, are a different matter, and their future is a source of acute concern for Washington.

U.S. policymakers are particularly focused on the role that Tehran-backed PMF may play in Iranian efforts to remake parts of the region in its own image. One possibility is the Lebanese Hezbollah model, which refers to the techniques used by that group to garner influence and gain power in Lebanon. First, it used the credibility conferred by armed "resistance" and social welfare activities to establish itself as the dominant actor in the Shia community and to garner support among non-Shia constituencies at home and abroad. Second, it used this popular support to gain a foothold in the political system through elections to ensure that the party's interests could not be harmed by the state. Finally, it used its access to and influence over critical ministries and state agencies to protect and advance the party's interests, and those of its Iranian patron, while preserving the paramilitary and social welfare organizations that undergird its parallel shadow state. The PMF's formal incorporation into the Iraqi security forces (ISF) could lead to it becoming a similar parallel military institution akin to the IRGC to counterbalance U.S. coalition and ISF.

Several Iraqi Shia militias and paramilitary organizations with longstanding ties to Iran, such as Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and the Badr Organization, see Lebanese Hezbollah as a model and view its experience as a possible template for their own growth. This is clearly evident in the political vocabulary, iconography, and modus operandi of these groups. The multiplicity of Iraqi Shia militias is a significant impediment to reproducing the model. In Lebanon, there was only one Hezbollah from the earliest stage of its development and Iraq has multiple organizations with bitter rivalries between their leaders.

Both the February 2016 executive order establishing the PMF as a formal part of the ISF and the November 2016 law were interpreted by many Iraqis as moves in the direction of a permanent institutionalization of the PMF as an Iraqi Basij.[27] But the duration of the PMF's existence was not described in either the order or the law, nor was permanent funding assured for the PMF.[28, 29] Instead, these documents emphasized that the PMF is under the prime minister's command and under the military code of justice. The PMF law clarified that they were not being formalized at the ministry level, as the CTS was.

Financial restrictions on the PMF are a clear differentiator between them and the Basij, and the nonpermanence of their funding apparatus is a signal that the political establishment does not see them as a permanent body. At present, the PMF Commission of the Prime Minister's Office is funded through an annual decision by the prime minister, and to a lesser extent the parliament, to include a PMF allocation in the Iraqi budget. In the 2017 budget, the PMF Commission of the Prime Minister's Office received funding for 122,000 PMF members, which included recurrent spending of 1.39 trillion Iraqi dinars ($1.18 billion). This includes 1.27 trillion dinars ($1.08 billion) for salaries and 120 billion dinars ($102 million) for other operating expenses. Inquiries with Iraqi government officials in Baghdad provide further granularity that is not in the Arabic-language main budget but is described in nonpublic budget annexes. The PMF also received an allocation of 518 billion dinars ($441 million) for capital expenditure, i.e., procurement, which was raised after a 3 percent deduction from state employee salaries, of which 60 percent is used for PMF procurement of "essential supplies," such as food, water, and ammunition.

Total spending on the PMF in 2017, excluding any undeclared support from Iran, is 1.91 trillion dinars ($1.63 billion).[30] By way of comparison, the $1.63 billion that Baghdad plans to spend on the PMF in its 2017 budget is about 22 percent of the $7.4 billion that Tehran plans to spend on the IRGC in Iran's 2017–18 budgets.[31] The PMF receives 6 percent of Iraq's security-related spending, despite providing 28 percent of the country's frontline armed strength.[32]

Limits on PMF resourcing suggest that traditional security organizations will eventually return to primacy in the security apparatus. Of course, this allocation could change after the 2018 elections if a new Iraqi prime minister increases PMF funding—potentially a third-term Nouri al-Maliki or another member of Maliki's Iran-leaning faction. The power of an Iraqi IRGC/Basij force would be dependent on its ability to dominate internal security organizations and attract more external funding than traditional security organizations.

The Problematic Badr Organization

MICHAEL KNIGHTS

Even if a new security ministry is not created in Iraq, one of the most well-established Iran-backed Shia militias—the Badr Organization—is arguably evolving into an IRGC clone within the existing security forces. Badr conducted covert paramilitary operations in Iraq during the 1980s and 1990s under orders from the IRGC Qods Force, but the movement and its Iranian sponsors decided to join the U.S.-led democratic transition in Iraq after 2003. Badr maintained its operational ties to the QF throughout its period of ostensible cooperation with the United States. Members of the Badr Organization now lead the Ministry of Interior, Iraq's largest ministry, which has a budget larger than that of the IRGC.[33] Badr has also developed informal dominance of the Ministry of Defense security forces within a large swath of Iraqi territory in Diyala province, northeast of Baghdad. The Badr Organization enjoys fast-growing influence, with 22 of 328 seats in the Iraqi parliament, plus growing representation on the nine provincial councils in central and southern Iraq.[34]

One of the reasons for Badr's success is that the movement began its hollowing out of the ISF in 2003, eleven years prior to the formation of the PMF. Between 2003 and 2005, 16,000 Shia militiamen were incorporated into the nascent ISF. These so-called *dimaj* (direct appointment) personnel lacked any formal professional education as soldiers or policemen.[35] Badr provided the lion's share of these recruits, largely Iraqi Shia who lived in exile in Iran throughout the 1980s and 1990s and who fought on the Iranian side during the Iran-Iraq War. Many have either dual Iraqi-Iranian citizenship or were born in Iran and only received their Iraqi citizenship post-2003. The Badr recruits were often assigned to Iraqi army intelligence, Ministry of Interior special weapons and tactics teams, and the ministry's National Information and Investigations Agency—Iraq's FBI equivalent. Because, prior to 2003, Badr personnel were trained and controlled by the QF during their stay in Iran, their integration into the ISF since then has

produced an acute counterintelligence challenge.[36] In addition to filling out key ISF portfolios, Badr eliminated hundreds of potential rivals within the security forces, notably Saddam-era intelligence personnel, and exacted revenge on Saddam-era pilots who flew bombing missions during the Iran-Iraq War.

Today, Badr leads the Ministry of Interior, which allows it to support or undermine provincial police chiefs across the country. The ministry also commands the 37,000-strong Federal Police, a five-division motorized infantry force, and the Emergency Response Division, a divisional-sized special weapons and tactics group akin to the CTS. Since 2005, Badr has likewise controlled the leadership and manning of the Iraqi army's 5th Division in Diyala, and is interested in folding its dozen or so PMF brigades into a new Badr-controlled Iraqi army or Federal Police division. Taken together, these represent the largest concentration of ground forces in the country, outnumbering the functional parts of the federally controlled Iraqi army and CTS.

Badr's quiet hollowing out of large portions of the ISF represents a different model than either the "Hezbollahization" of Iraq or the overt development of a new IRGC knockoff there. In many ways, Badr's model is more problematic than either the Hezbollah or IRGC model, and may serve Iran's interests equally well.

Arguably, as long as Badr continues to consolidate security powers and to follow IRGC instructions, Iran has no immediate need to develop a new Hezbollah, or a new IRGC or Basij, inside Iraq. Iran may pragmatically allow Badr a great deal of latitude to pursue its own approach in normal times, but will expect it to act in accordance with Iranian interests when the latter's vital interests are at stake.

Can the United States Do Anything in Iraq?

MICHAEL KNIGHTS & MICHAEL EISENSTADT

The key issue for the United States is whether Badr might one day play a role in attacking U.S. personnel or evicting U.S. troops from Iraq. Badr includes many deeply anti-American elements, not least the current minister of interior, Qasim al-Araji, who spent twenty-six months in U.S. military custody and has been accused of supporting deadly attacks on U.S. personnel. Yet Badr has also profited greatly by working alongside the United States since 2003. If directed by Tehran, could Badr be relied upon to risk its role in government, or its control over the Ministry of Interior, to answer Iran's call to undertake attacks on U.S. military personnel in Iraq? Or might Tehran use radical Badr members to form another splinter group to continue to fight—as it did in the past with Badr members Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis?

This is why smaller groups like Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq, as well as any new breakaway groups that Tehran forms, will continue to serve a very useful purpose for Iran and the IRGC, being easier to influence and deploy in Iraq and in regional struggles such as Syria or Bahrain.

Like the Lebanese original, these smaller Iraqi Hezbollah clones will be used to attack Iran's enemies such as Israel, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, and possibly to pressure Iraqi political, military, or religious leaders who push back too hard against Tehran's priorities. Many of these mini-Hezbollahs will be partially enmeshed within the security forces, and their part-time involvement in foreign wars with Sunni neighbors will be politically difficult for Iraq's Shia prime ministers to prevent.

This is a discouraging picture, but far from the hopeless image of an Iraq "lost" to Iranian domination. The Iran-backed PMF factions do not have to be a political-military game-changer in Iraq as long as Iraqi factions and international partners continue to resist the creation of a new, permanent, well-funded security institution that operates independently of the Iraqi chain of command. While the United States is no longer an occupying power in Iraq and must conduct all efforts "by, with, and through" its sovereign Iraqi partners, U.S. actions will nevertheless be among the most important factors influencing Iran's ability to transform the PMF into an instrument of influence. The more Washington steps back in Iraq, the more Tehran will step forward; a repeat of the rapid coalition drawdown and disengagement after 2011 will likely embolden Tehran and better position it to expand its influence there.

To avert such an outcome, the United States should lock in the international coalition's commitment to continue training the ISF, deal with the heightened threat of Islamic State terrorism after the latter's military defeat, help secure Iraq's borders, and maintain Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve as a broad multinational coalition...Washington should also approve a new three-year Iraq Train and Equip Fund II package for the ISF to cover 2017–20, supplanting the current

package covering 2014–17. Building on this overarching policy framework, U.S. and coalition policymakers should focus on three achievable objectives vis-à-vis the PMF: denying Iran-backed PMF budgetary and institutional advantages, resisting the blurring of the Iraqi PMF "liberation" brand with the Hezbollah/Iran "resistance" brand, and denying Iran-backed PMF social welfare advantages and a sectarian political climate.

Washington and Baghdad must also work to prevent Badr or another actor from carving out a factional army within the existing security forces. The best way to do so is by generously resourcing the most reliable and effective elements of the security forces, such as the army and CTS. Of note, the PMF budget in 2017 is more than double the CTS budget ($1.63 billion for PMF versus $683 million for the CTS). This needs to be reversed…The leadership of the Ministry of Interior should be rotated after elections between Iraq's leading factions to ensure that this critical ministry does not become the fiefdom of the Badr Organization, no matter how reasonable or cooperative they may seem at any given moment.

The United States and its allies should also undermine the resistance brand by remaining firmly committed to resolving the Syrian civil war... so as not to cede ground there to the Iran-backed PMF, and provide them with a pretext for additional foreign interventions.

An underperforming government and a fractured society are fertile ground for Iran-backed PMF elements seeking Hezbollah- or IRGC/Basij-like attributes, and Iran-backed groups will fill the social service vacuum for their own political benefit. U.S. and coalition assistance should focus on capacity building at both the national (ministerial) and provincial levels. U.S. policy should continue to support key projects with tangible impact on Iraq's public services, such as the electricity, water, and health sectors, to demonstrate that non-PMF political parties can deliver services. The United States should also strengthen its outreach into Shia Iraq, particularly via its Basra consulate, which is located in Iraq's poorest but most economically vital oil-rich southern province.

Likewise, the United States should work to deny Iran-backed militias a propitious political and ethnosectarian climate in which to develop political wings by supporting moderate Iraqi political actors such as Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. And it should foster cross-sectarian and multiethnic politicking, to produce crosscutting electoral alliances that would undermine the appeal of sectarian Shia groups like Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and Badr. Meanwhile, the United States should do what it can to splinter Iran-backed militant groups, by constructively engaging some Iran-backed elements of Badr while continuing to treat Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq as terrorist actors and designating elements of Badr as such. Through this process and the general strengthening of the Iraqi government, the United States may incentivize the breakup or withering of sectarian militias and political movements.

Tribal Dynamics

The tribes in Iraq and Syria offer a potential means of resolving the sectarian challenge facing both countries, but these tribes lack a unified command. Some of the tribes previously were entered onto the U.S. payroll around 2006–2009, and fought al-Qaeda in Iraq; when Nouri al-Maliki became prime minister at the beginning of that period, he promised to uphold the tribal payroll and create a tribal battalion.[37] Yet Maliki instead cut them out of the payroll.[38] Afraid he'd be outmaneuvered by rival Shia forces, he started going after Sunnis in a bid to boost his Shia credentials.

Many of the Sunni tribes formed what we today know as the Islamic State.[39] After the fall of Mosul to the jihadist group in June 2014, U.S. chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey urged the United States to recreate the Sunni *sahwa* (awakening) forces, which had turned against al-Qaeda and helped stabilize Iraq around 2007. But the current prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, refused to allow the *sahwa* to be reconstituted, out of fear of an adverse Iranian reaction. Even if U.S. leaders wanted to recreate the *sahwa*, trust between the United States and the tribes has been breached by insufficient U.S. pushback against Iran-supported Shia militias and will require heavy effort to be restored.[40]

In Raqqa, the Islamic State didn't have to rely on military power when it took control in August 2013; instead, it merged with opposition groups and ran its opponents out of town.[41] These oppositionists were convinced that the only way to survive was to cooperate. And to protect themselves, tribes reasoned that they could always switch allegiances if needed. In thus keeping their options open, they occasionally sent emissaries to the opposing camp to keep good ties, preparing for a possible change in the status quo.

An example is the Baggara tribe, whose presence extends from Baghdad in the west to Damascus in the east. Its leader, Sheikh Nawaf al-Bashir, signed the 2005 Damascus Declaration, a critique of the Assad regime by opposition groups. He was forced out of Syria for supporting opposition forces, but the tribe recently switched back to supporting Assad. Bashir himself returned to Syria in January 2017 and declared his support for the regime.[42]

According to Lebanese analysts, Russia has jumped on the tribal bandwagon, connecting with the Lebanese Muhammad Jaafar—who heads the tribal militia known as Dara al-Watan—in an effort to develop relations with Shia tribes that are not pro-Hezbollah. Jaafar formed a militia, active in the Syrian war, whose logo features Lebanon's emblem, the cedar tree, flanked by Syrian and Russian flags.

As this section has demonstrated, tribes hedge their bets, looking to pick winners and be nimble when switching. At all costs, tribes seek to avoid fights of attrition. Their advantages include knowledge of the terrain and connection to the land. Their disadvantages include their inability to self-sustain their fighting force or organizational structure. Tribes are also prone to schisms, a weakness regional players—like Iran—have sought to exploit.

Impact of Shia Militias on U.S. Policy

According to U.S. officials, the Trump administration has adopted a more hardened anti-Iran stance as compared to its predecessor, and one of its core Middle East interests is to contain Iran's influence and resist its regional ambitions.[43] On several occasions in 2016 and 2017, the United States has targeted pro-Iran forces in Syria, heightening tensions between Washington and Tehran. The U.S. military has made clear, however, that these strikes are guided by force protection rather than an inclination to open a broader front.[44]

A central factor underlying the clear U.S. gap between tough words and minimal action is the absence of a comprehensive Iran policy. The main priority in Washington appears to be stopping Iran from having nuclear weapons, and the discussion centers more on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the 2015 nuclear deal is known, rather than Iran's role in the region.

U.S. policymakers are aware that Iran is supporting Iraqi Shia militias such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq, which had claimed more than six thousand attacks against U.S. forces as of late 2012.[45] But these policymakers also recognize that not all PMF groups are allied with Iran; the al-Abbas Combat Division, for example, is affiliated with Najaf-based Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.[46] Given this context, a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq would inevitably benefit Iran more than any other actor. Moreover, in the broader picture, U.S. officials recognize the need to convey the message that Washington is anti-terrorist, not anti-Shia.

Even though not all PMF elements are linked with Iran, the forces' most worrisome elements have expanded their capabilities and the Iraqi government will likely be unable to control them, posing a threat to U.S. interests on the ground. As the counter-IS campaign winds down, and the populated territories of Iraq are fully retaken, the fate of the PMF becomes vital. In light of the view from some Iraqi officials that a wholesale disbanding of the PMF is unrealistic, the only way forward is to try to integrate them. In this effort, the devil will be in the details. If the PMF tries to retain its autonomy and structure itself independently from other security structures in the Iraqi government, or as a parallel force, problems will ensue for the Iraqi state and for other states that interact with the Iraqi government. So the impending challenge is to negotiate the PMF's absorption into the Iraqi state in a way that does not significantly alter the formal structures.

The PMF's various branches are well resourced, receiving more than a billion dollars from the Iraqi budget, based on a 2015 report.[47] If the PMF continued receiving this amount, it would be difficult to imagine their full integration within Iraq's formal security structures. Another unknown involves the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2018, in advance of which various PMF factions are maneuvering to become political parties. In a worst-case scenario, if PMF factions opposed to U.S. influence take up positions of political power, then the handling of everything from post-conflict reconciliation to institution building to rebuffing Iranian influence will become more difficult

Finally, a PMF with political standing, holding blocs in parliament and provincial councils, will pose a compounded challenge for the United States, as compared to its current status outside government. For example, if some PMF leaders—who were well known to the United

States back between 2006 and 2011—manage to emerge as members of a political bloc with an allocated budget, this could greatly undermine U.S. interests in Iraq while sparking greater sectarianism.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

Whereas U.S. policy has sought to support a state-based international system based on robust institutions, Iranian policy has focused on directly undermining the stability and legitimacy of regional states and their institutions. It has done so by stoking sectarian tensions through the use of nonstate actors and militias, as this paper has detailed. Iran has thus cultivated a reputation throughout the region as a threatening and destabilizing sectarian force. Furthermore, traditional U.S. allies have become worried over the potential inadequacy of U.S. support to counter Iran. In Iraq, for instance, non-Shia actors want the United States to weigh in so that their voices are not drowned out by the Shia majority, and thus help reconcile the role Shia militias will play in the post–Islamic State scene.

Since it helped create Hezbollah in the 1980s, the IRGC has been establishing, training, and supporting Shia militias, many of which have been successful in consolidating ties with local actors and gaining influence in the region. No opposing entity has effectively countered this strategy, and the IRGC has benefited from regional vacuums, such as the one now forming following Islamic State defeats in Iraq and Syria. Given the Iranian inclination to constantly expand its influence, one can expect Iranian use of Shia militias to continue, thereby fueling further sectarianism and reshaping the region's political-strategic landscape. Given the relatively low cost Iran expends to engage in these conflicts, any strategy to counter the Islamic Republic regionally must go beyond sanctions and asking allies to allocate more money to fight terrorism.

Strategies to deal with Iran's regional intervention have evolved over the last few years, but Iran's activities, including its support for terrorism, have not diminished, and the JCPOA has not stopped Iranian regional adventurism. The Obama administration believed that addressing the country's nuclear program would encourage an opening that would strengthen centrists and create new incentives for Iran to self-moderate. This approach has not worked, however, because the benefits of regional military expansion appear to loom larger, for Iran, than the benefits of holding back. Indeed, the nuclear deal did not hinder such expansion. To the contrary, recent street demonstrations in Iran have exposed further corruption by the regime, whose spending on the IRGC and regional military operations has left the populace struggling with a very bad economy—the complaint at the core of the demonstrations.

To this end, the lifting of nuclear-related sanctions enabled global players to restore trade ties with Iran, swiftly encouraging a weak European stance regarding Iran's regional behavior. In seeking to drive a wedge between the United States and Europe, Iran has sought to cultivate positive relations with the European Union. In 2017, correspondingly, Iran-EU trade rose by 65 percent.[48]

While extricating Iranian influence across the region is unrealistic, containing this influence may still be possible. But any discussion of containment by the United States must be accompanied by concrete action, or else it risks further emboldening Iran and its Shia militias. Today, Iran sees the region, namely Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, as one big frontier, and hardly differentiates in strategic-priority terms among countries and states. Because of this, a strategy to contain Iran in Iraq *but not* in Syria would fall short. To contain Iran, planners must perceive its militias as one big army, commanded by the Qods Force, to be contained as such, while ensuring the Islamic State defeat does not leave a vacuum to be filled by Iran. Otherwise, Iran will gradually infiltrate state institutions in regional countries, risking U.S. access and relationships with existing allies. In line with these realities, the United States must raise the costs for Iranian misconduct.

PROFILES OF SHIA MILITIAS

- Iran's proxies in the Middle East consist of Shia militants fighting in various groups in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. In addition to **Lebanese Hezbollah**—Iran's most successful and leading proxy—and the ethnically Afghan Fatemiyoun and Pakistani Zainabiyoun brigades, a number of Iraqi militias are active. The largest and oldest is the **Badr Organization**, begun by a group of Iraqi defectors to Iran in 1983. Badr, which was part of the military wing of the Islamic Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution before splitting off in 2012,[49] has changed its name several times, including to the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), and others.[50] Its leader, Hadi al-Ameri, serves in Iraq's parliament, in which Badr holds 22 of 328 seats and was part of former prime minister Maliki's State of Law Alliance;[51] Ameri was also minister of transportation from 2010 to 2014.[52] The organization and Ameri himself fought alongside the IRGC against Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War and returned to Iraq in 2003 after the fall of Saddam Hussein.[53] Badr claimed in 2017 to command between 10,000 and 50,000 troops.[54]

- **Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH)**, another prominent group, was founded in 2006 as an offshoot of the Mahdi Army, which fought the United States in Iraq in 2003-2007 and was led by Muqtada al-Sadr.[55] That same year, it fought alongside Hezbollah against Israel in the Lebanon war.[56] In 2011, AAH shifted its focus to politics and social services before resuming military activities after Islamic State victories in 2014.[57] AAH has recently developed close relations with former Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki. Qais al-Khazali, a previous commander in the Mahdi Army, currently leads AAH under the supervision of Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani.[58] Khazali took part in fighting coalition forces during the occupation of Iraq.

- Another significant Iraqi group is **Kataib Hezbollah**, which was founded in 2003 and carried out attacks against U.S. forces in 2007-2008.[59] Having been designated in 2009 by the U.S. State Department as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, it is the only Iraqi militia to carry this designation;[60] that same year, its leader—Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who is also deputy chairman of the collected PMF[61]—was designated by the Treasury Department as a threat to Iraqi stability. Muhandis is likewise rumored to be the mastermind behind the embassy bombings in Kuwait in 1983 and the assassination attempt on the Kuwaiti emir in 1985.[62]

- **Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN)** was formed as an AAH splinter in 2013 after Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei called for Shia groups to assist Syria's Assad regime against the rebels. HHN, which answers directly to Khamenei,[63] was led by Akram Kaabi until he proposed that the militia move outside the Sayyeda Zainab shrine area, near Damascus. Kaabi subsequently left to found the Haidar al-Karrar Brigade.[64]

- Formed in 2014 as a reconstitution of the Mahdi Army, **Saraya al-Salam** is led by Muqtada al-Sadr—who was previously close to Iran but has lately distanced himself from the neighboring Shia state, refashioning himself as more of a nationalist leader.[65] Saraya al-Salam and the other Iraqi groups mentioned here have deployed fighters to Syria to assist Assad, while also participating in the Iraqi government's military efforts against the Islamic State.

- The **Fatemiyoun Brigade** and **Zainabiyoun Brigade** are principally mobilized by the IRGC and report directly to the Qods Force.[66] Most of their recruits come from the Afghan and Pakistani

ethnic minorities in Iran. They are mainly present in Syria, and although their stated mission is to defend the Sayyeda Zainab shrine, they have participated in offensives in Aleppo and other areas of Syria.[67] Afghans and Pakistanis are motivated mainly to join by poverty and fear of deportation from Iran.[68] Allegedly, Iranian authorities offer legal status in Iran and $800 a month to train and fight in Syria.[69] Most fighters average about a month's worth of training before being sent to Syria as shock troops, resulting in high casualties.[70] Most of the dead are given elaborate ceremonies upon their return to Iran, either to encourage more recruits or convince everyone that only minorities are dying in Syria.[71]

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Publication of this report would not have been possible without the broad support of the staff and trustees of The Washington Institute. First, special thanks to trustees Phil and Regan Friedmann for their continued support of my research. Thank you as well to my colleagues at the Institute, especially in the Program on Arab Politics and the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, for helping design the workshop and assemble this report. I would further like to thank research assistant Jackson Dœring as well as the Institute's administrative assistant, Gina Vailes, for helping make the workshop run smoothly. Finally, thank you to the Institute's publications director, Mary Kalbach Horan, and to editor Jason Warshof for their patience and attention to detail.

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