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# Iran and Armed Militias in post-ISIS Iraq

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**A**fter the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, many Shiite armed groups and militias emerged in different forms and affiliations and were directly involved in the Iraqi civil war. These militias differed in terms of strength and influence, depending on their connections and penetration of the Iraqi security agencies. The presence of these groups and militias has by no means been fortuitous. Many historical transformations and circumstances contributed to their emergence, and their expansion has torn out Iraq apart and flooded the country with violence and sectarian conflicts.

The Shiite armed operations started a long time ago in Iraq, especially after the reign of the Ba'ath party excluded most Shiite parties from the politics. Consequently, the Shiite militias strove to destabilize the country and expand their activities to spark a Shiite revolution and topple the regime. Indeed, this strategy has become the foundation for the political work of most Shiite parties in Iraq.

The Shiite armed militias proliferated in Iraq due to the security vacuum created by the American invasion of this country in 2003. The new Iraqi leaders, especially during former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's era, oversaw the formation of the death squads and directed them to carry out the worst forms of repression and crimes against civilians and opponents.<sup>1</sup>

### **First: Emergence of the Armed Militias in Iraq**

The armed militias in Iraq appeared before the Iraqi-Iranian war and developed over time into their current shapes through the following stages:<sup>2</sup>

**1-** The first generation: Under the leadership of Hadi Alamiri, Badr division established in the 1980s as the military wing of the Higher Council for the Iranian Revolution in Iraq. This division was headed by the Shiite Scholar Mohammed Baqir Alhakim. Side by side with other Shiite factions such as Alda'wah and the Iraqi National Summit parties, the Badr division carried out several military attacks on the Iraqi army during the Iraqi-Iranian war.

**2-** The second generation: Armed militias emerged after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. These militias included: Almahdi Army, 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq', Alyaom Almao'ud companies, Al-Nujaba Movement, the Iraqi Hezbollah, Abu Alfadl Alabbas Battalion, and others who represent the Resistance in Iraq. Many of these parties broke down into factions. For example, Al-Mahdi army split into three armed factions as follows: Alsalam companies under the leadership of Muqtada Al-Sadr, Asa'ib Ahlulhaq under the leadership of Qais Alkhaz'ali, and Al-Nujaba Movement under the leadership of Akram Alka'bi.

**3-** The third generation: This stage coincided with the emergence of ISIS and consisted of 61 factions that comprised the so-called Public Mobilization Forces (PMF), which included Imam Ali Battalion, Ashora companies, Sayyid al-Shuhada Battalion, Alghadhab Battalion and others.

In addition to the aforementioned, the following other Shiite militias also appeared in Iraq after the emergence of ISIS:<sup>3</sup>

No.	Name	Leadership	Area of Operation	Reference
1	Jund Alimam Battalion	Ahmed Alasadi	Iraq-Anbar and Salah Uddin Sector	Iran-Khamenei
2	Alabbas Combat Division	Maitham Alzaidi	Iraq-Alnakheeb-Mosul	Iraq-Sistani

No.	Name	Leadership	Area of Operation	Reference
3	Alnokhbah Walghaith Alhaidary Battalion – Da'wa party- Aldakhil Abdulkarim Ali'nizi Organization	Munaf Alhusseini	Iraq-Anbar	Iran-Khamenei
4	Ali Alakbar Brigades – Islamic Action Organization	Ali Alhamdani	Iraq-Alnakheeb	Iran-Sadiq Alshirazi
5	Alshabab Alrisali Brigade	Maitham Alimlaq	Iraq-Karbala	Iraq-Mohammed Ali Alyaqoubi
6	Ansar Almarji'yah Brigade	Hameed Alyasiri	Iraq- Samarra	Iraq-Sistani
7	Almukhtar Army	Wathiq Albatat	Iraq, Syria	Iran-Khamenei
8	Alwa'd Alsadiq Division	Ammar Alhaddad	Iraq, Syria	Iran-Khamenei
9	Qamar Bani Hashem Battalion	Abu Talib Almiahi	Iraq-Anbar	Iraq-Kamal Alhaidary
10	Revolutionary Hezbollah	Rahman Aljaza'iri	Iraq-Baghdad Surrounding Area	Lebanon- Hassan Nasrallah and Mohammed Alkothrani
11	Emad Moughnieh Battalion- the Iraqi surrounding area	Sa'ad Alfatlawi	Iraq-Anbar	Lebanon- Hassan Nasrallah
12	Qassim Aljabbarin Brigade	Mohammed Almousawi	Iraq- Alnakheeb	Iran-Khamenei
13	Alimam Alqa'im Brigade	Talib Ali'layawi	Iraq- Baghdad surrounding area	Iran-Khamenei
14	A'imat Albaqi' Battalion	Jihad Altamimi	Iraq	Iran-Khamenei
15	Ansarullah Alawfia' Movement	Haidar Algzawi	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding area	Iran-Khamenei
16	Almuntazar Brigade	Daghir Almousawi	Iraq- Baghdad surrounding area	Iraq-Sistani
17	Tha'irollah Battalion	Walid Alhilli	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding area	Iran-Khamenei

No.	Name	Leadership	Area of Operation	Reference
18	Alqassas Battalion	Abdullah Allami	Iraq-Samarra	Iran-Khamenei
19	Ashbal Alsadr Battalion	Mohamed Hussein Alsadr	Iraq-Samarra	Iran- Khazim Alha'iri
20	Tha'ir Alhussein Battalion	Ghassan Alshahbandar	Iraq-Alnakheeb	Iran-Khamenei
21	Malik Alashtar Battalion	Ja'far Abbas Almousawi	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding area	Iran-Khamenei
22	Aldima' Alzakiah Battalion	Mu'ayad Ali Alhakim	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding	Iraq-Sistani
23	Zo Alfaqar Brigade	Hussein Altamimi	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding area	Iraq-Sistani
24	Alabdaal Movement	Ja'far Almousawi	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding area	Iran- Khamenei
25	Muslim Bin Aqeel Battalion	Ahmed Alfartousi	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding area	Iraq-Sistani
26	Ansar Almahdi Brigade	Naji Alhalfi	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding	Iraq-Sistani
27	Almo'amil Brigade	Sa'ad Siwar	Iraq	Iran-Khamenei
28	Aladalah Battalion	Sameer Alsheikh Ali	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding	Iraq-Sistani
29	Alfath Battalion	Kazim Alsaied Ali	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding	Iran-Khamenei
30	Alzahra' companies Battalion	Mumtaz Alhaidary	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding	Iraq-Sistani
31	Aliraq Alislami Movement	Jamal Alwakeel	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding	Iran-Sadiq Alshirazi
32	Alatabah Alhusseiniah- Ali Alakbar Brigade	Abdulmahdi Alkarbala'i	Iraq- Baghdad surrounding area, Bigi, Kirkuk, Anbar, and Qiarah	Iraq-Sistani

No.	Name	Leadership	Area of Operation	Reference
33	Zainab Alaqeelah Brigade	Hassan Alshakarji	Iraq- Baghdad surrounding area	Iran-Khamenei
34	Altaf Brigade	Mustafa Almousawi	Iraq- Baghdad surrounding area	Iran-Khamenei
35	Absent Imam Battalion	Mohammed Allami	Iraq- Baghdad surrounding area	Iran-Khamenei
36	Alqayam Alhusseini Battalion	Mohammed Alkhafaji	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding area	Iran-Khamenei
37	Dar' Alwilayah Battalion	Ala' Mhalhil	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding area	Iran-Khamenei
38	Alqari'ah Battalion	Ahmed Alzamili	Iraq- Baghdad surrounding area	Iraq-Sistani
39	Yadollah Battalion	Ahmed Alsa'idi	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding area	Iran-Khamenei
40	Baqiatollah Battalion	Mustafah Alobeidi	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding area	Iran-Khamenei
41	Alshabeebah Alislamiyah Battalion	Mustafah Almousawi	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding area	Iran-Khamenei
42	Jam'iat Al Albait Battalion	Mousa Alhassani	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding area	Iran-Khamenei
43	Altifl Alradee' Battalion	Wisam Alhaidary	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding area	Iraq-Kamal Alhaidary
44	Almukhtar Althaqafi companies	Abdulmahdi Alkarbala'i	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding area	Iraq- Sistani
45	Alsajjad companies Brigade	Abdulmahdi Alkarbala'i	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding area	Iraq-Sistani
46	Wa'dollah Battalion	Sami Almas'odi-deputy chief of the Shiite Waqf	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding area	Iraq-Sistani

No.	Name	Leadership	Area of Operation	Reference
47	Alghawth Alazam Battalion	Firas Alalaq	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding area	Iraq-Sistani
48	Babylon Battalion	Rayan Alkildani	Iraq-Baghdad surrounding area-Mosul	Denied by the Patriarchate
49	Alshabakiah Mobilization Militias	Haneen Alqido	Iraq-Mosul-Nineveh plains	-----

Most armed militias in Iraq owe allegiance to the Jurist Leader Ali Khamenei. To Shiites, Khamenei is the “Supreme Leader” and his orders are final and executory by a divine right until the comeback of Imam Al-Mahdi. This view was evident in Khamenei’s speeches when he frequently said that the mission of these militias is not confined to Iraq only, but they have to help oppressed people throughout the Middle East and the world.<sup>4</sup>

Most of these militias reported to the Iraqi Ministry of Defense and Interior that reports directly to the Iraqi Prime Minister and General Commander of the Armed Forces, Haider al-Abadi. Under pressure from Iran, Al-Abadi passed the PMF law and included these militias in the Iraqi army under the so-called Public Mobilization or the Resistance. Accordingly, these armed militias reported to two main references:

**4- Political reference:** The Prime Minister and General Commander of the Iraqi Armed Forces, Haider al-Abadi

**5- Religious reference:** The Iranian Jurist Leader Ali Khamenei.

In addition, some militias reported to the Iraqi religious authorities, such as Alsalam companies to Muqtada Al-Sadr, Ashora companies to Ammar lhakim, Alabbas Alqitalyah Division and Ali Alakbar Brigade to Najaf authority.<sup>5</sup>

## **Second: The Armed Militias and their regional impact**

These militias have expanded their operations outside the Iraqi borders in the Middle East region to include the following countries:

### **Syria**

Some of the militias working in this country came from Iraq, including Imam Ali Battalion, Abu Alfadl Alabbas Battalion, Al-Nujaba Movement, and others. In fact, the Syrian civil war attracted the Iraqi armed militias after Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki announced his support of Syrian President Bashar Assad, who opened the door for the Iraqi militias to come to Syria under the pretext of protecting the Shiite holy shrines.<sup>6</sup> Al-Maliki also announced his readiness to send these militias to Syria starting in 2012

to prevent the victory of the Sunni-majority opposition due to its impact on the balance of power back in Iraq itself. However, these militias moved toward the front lines, away from the Shiite territories and their religious symbols and became part of the Syrian crisis in mid-2014.<sup>7</sup>

### **Yemen**

The role of these militias has extended from providing logistic support, advice, and training to Houthi rebels to fighting on their side against the decisive storm carried out by the Saudi-led coalition. Some of the working militias in Yemen are the Iraqi Hezbollah, the Badr Organization, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Al-Nujaba Movement, Alkhurasani companies, Imam Ali Battalion, Sayyid al-Shuhada Battalion, the Iraqi "Islamic Movement", and others.<sup>8</sup> In addition, a Houthi delegation visited Baghdad in September 2016 and met the militias' leaders in Iraq. The purpose of the visit was to exchange the military expertise of these militias and transfer them to Yemen. The Houthi delegation met the PMF commanders such as Abu Mahdi Almuhandis, Hadi Alamiri, and Qais Alkhazali. Both sides discussed establishing a joint strategy to cooperate in confronting the Arab coalition and carrying out joint operations in Yemen. Some sources revealed that both sides agreed to establish a proxy branch for the Imam Ali militia and send it to Yemen as the first step of cooperation without explaining its mechanism or whether the government of Haider al-Abadi would approve this step or not. Moreover, the Iraqi government granted the Houthi delegation fifty million USD at a time when Iraq was suffering a severe economic crisis as a result of the armed operations and the great migratory waves.<sup>9</sup>

### **Saudi Arabia**

The Iranians discovered that southern Iraq near the Saudi borders is a vital region for military operations against the kingdom. The IRGC succeeded in making the Iraqi city of Samawa a base for intelligence and logistic support on the inside of Saudi Arabia through Hezbollah militias in this area and espionage and surveillance missions across the Saudi-Iraqi borders, specifically in Alsalman and Um Alishoush territories. Hezbollah militias played a major role in Iraq by firing some missiles into the Saudi territories and carrying out a defamation campaign against the kingdom through propaganda, protests, and a call for boycotting Saudi products. These tactics impacted Iraq's politics, security, and social aspects. The IRGC has won many investment contracts in Iraq, especially in land reclamation field in Samawa and Nasiriyah cities near the Saudi borders during Nouri al-Maliki's era; nevertheless, instead of developing the agricultural land in these areas, the IRGC surveilled them and planted many espionage and intelligence devices alongside the Saudi borders.<sup>10</sup>

### **Bahrain**

On March 27, 2017, the Bahraini authorities arrested an armed cell that was planning to carry out attacks in the capital, Manama. According to the Bahraini Ministry of Interior, most members of that cell were trained in the hands of the Iraqi Hezbollah. Qais Alkhazali, head of 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq', said that the Iraqi experience proved the inefficiency of



the political and diplomatic works. He further said, "This is our view about the events in Bahrain. We think when the enemy finds people in this country standing up to oppression, he would submit to people's demands and compromise." On the same issue, the Secretary General of the PMF unit Sayyid al-Shuhada Battalion, Abu Ala' Alwala'I, said that the Bahraini authorities had gone too far because the international community let the Bahraini people down and that the deprivation of nationality from Sheikh Issa Qassem is a clear violation of people's rights. Alwala'i also said, "We here in Iraq warn of the policies of the tyrant regimes of the Gulf".<sup>11</sup>

### **Kuwait**

After the recent disagreement between Iraq and Kuwait on Khor Abdullah, the armed militias appeared again and escalated tension between the two countries. The Al-Nujaba Movement, one of the PMF militias, warned of taking a decisive action against Kuwait in case it encroached upon the Iraqi sovereignty and asked the Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi to explain his government's real position toward this crisis and the other regional countries' infringement on the Iraqi territories. This militia asserted that it would not remain silent toward these violations and would take decisive action if the Iraqi government does not.<sup>12</sup>

### **Turkey**

Ankara warned of handing Mosul over to the PMF militias, asserting that these militias are similar to ISIS and that their control of the city would start a sectarian war. On the same issue, the Turkish Deputy Prime Minister and spokesperson for the Turkish government, No'man Qortolmosh, said in a TV interview with a Turkish channel, "We must not invite a terrorist organization to liberate Mosul from another terrorist organization. We must not leave the city in the hands of the PMF nor leave it to fall into the hands of the Kurdistan Workers' Party and its proxy in Syria, the Kurdish People Protection Units, under the pretext of liberating the city from the ISIS".<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the armed militias threatened the Turkish presence in Ba'sheeqah camp and described it as an occupying force when Abu Mahdi Almuhandis said that the PMF participation in the Mosul battles was to prevent transforming the city into a Turkish base. A leader in the PMF, Jawad Altleibawi, also said, "After liberating the city of Hadhar, our next destination would be Ba'aj district and the Iraqi-Syrian borders to stop the Turkish offenses on the Iraqi territories".<sup>14</sup>

In addition, these militias have opened training and logistic support camps carrying names with foreign connotations that have no relation to Iraq and extend to Arabic and regional countries, which means that the mission of these militias goes beyond Iraq to other countries, the same as was called for by ISIS. Some examples of these camps include Al-Baqi' in Babel, Ahrar Al-Manamah (which hosts 500 militants including Kuwaitis and Bahrainis) in Najaf, 'Soldiers of Imam' near a residential area in Kout city, Wasit, and Martyr Hameed Taqawi Camp (named after the highest ranking Iranian General killed in Tikrit, Iraq, in 2015) in Bigi city of Salah Uddin province.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, the regional events reflect the major role played by these militias, which

coincides with the Iranian role in the region. For example, most militias denied any involvement in the kidnapping of the Qatari hunters in the Iraqi desert in 2016. According to the Iraqi Prime Minister, the Qataris entered Iraq legally. Later, the Iraqi Hezbollah claimed responsibility for this incident after the release of some members of the Lebanese Hezbollah who were arrested by Fatih Alsham Frontier (previously Jabhat Alnusrah); this incident reflects how these militias are woven into the fabric of the Iraqi security forces. Furthermore, the kidnappers announced that they had carried out this operation on the orders and intelligence of the Iranian IRGC, which negatively influenced the reputation and sovereignty of Iraq that was referred to by Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi in a press conference following the release of the hunters. This operation is not the first of its kind; other incidents included the kidnapping of eighteen Turkish workers in September 2015 and seven Iraqi students on May 5, 2017, in Baghdad due to their civic activities in the protests calling for a civil state and the trial of corrupt officials in the country.

Since 2003, the Iranian leadership has been working on dominating political, security, economic, and religious decision-making processes in Iraq and the region. Indeed, Tehran has accomplished its project in Iraq as stated by the US National Intelligence Director, Dan Cots, when he said that Tehran had sent thousands of Iraqi, Afghani, and Pakistani militias to Syria, Yemen, and Iraq.

According to the American Voice Radio, Cots stated during the annual meeting of the security committee in the US Senate that Iran has ten thousand Iraqi, Afghani, and Pakistani militants trained and armed for fighting in Iraq and Syria. Cots also said that Iran is threatening the international security and still preserving its nuclear capabilities despite the nuclear agreement with the P5+1 group. Moreover, the Iranian IRGC has established training camps all over Iran to train its proxy militias from Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Bahrain under the supervision of Quds Force.<sup>16</sup>

All in all, after including all militias officially under the umbrella of the Iraqi Ministry of Defense, the PMF gained legal status and contributed to the chaotic situation in the Middle East. The appointment of the new Iranian ambassador to Iraq, Eirge Masjidi who was one of the IRGC commandants, advisor of Qassem Suleimani, and military supervisor of the battles of Fallujah, Tikrit, and Jurf Alsakhr in addition to the military advice he gave to the PMF in the Mosul battles reflected an Iranian tendency to assign Iranian military personnel to run and oversee the Iraqi file during the coming phase due to the continuous US pressure on Tehran. This new ambassador said more than one time that Iraq is the first line of defense for Iran and that the Iranian invasion of Fallujah aimed at keeping Iran at the center of Shiites in the world. He also said that without Iran and Quds Force, Bashar Assad would not have survived this long.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Tehran's control of these militias means control of Iraq, which reflects the Iranian fear of any regional developments in the post-ISIS era.

### **Third: Iran and the Armed Militias in Iraq**

Most views related the establishment of the PMF to the fall of Mosul in the hands of ISIS; however, the real Iranian strategy in the Middle East, drawn by the Iranian National Security Council and implemented by Quds Force and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards

Corps (IRGC), implies that the issue goes further than a fleeting moment in the Iraqi political history. The Jurist Leadership of the Shiite clerics over the PMF and its militias has become a religious tradition where each militia and group reports to a cleric, and the PMF ideology unveils an organized structure in terms of goals and missions. The Shiite leaders alleged the main goal of the PMF was to confront ISIS and protect the Shiite holy places, but the true goal was to create a parallel entity in Iraq and implement cross-borders goals in the neighboring countries, to consolidate the Iranian expansionist strategy in Iraq and the Middle East.

Transforming most of the armed militias into official organizations under PMF within the Iraqi government validated the Iranian interference in Iraq and silenced the Iraqi political opponents, especially the Sunnis who called for the breakdown of these militias. Iran treated the emergence of ISIS as a great opportunity. Indeed, Tehran materialized its plans and ambitions and established and trained most Iraqi militias in Iran. On the other hand, the religious authorities in Najaf issued a fatwa (permission) for Jihad (holy war) on June 13, 2014, and called citizens to volunteer and join the security forces, but never pointed to the formation of the PMF. Since the 'Shiite Fiqh' (religious laws) revoke fatwa by annulling its purpose, the Iraqi people raised many questions about the validity of the PMF during the post-ISIS era. In response, Iran exerted pressure on the Shiite parties to legalize the formation of these militias within the structure of the Iraqi army. However, these militias worked independently from the Iraqi military institution to facilitate the work of the Iranian advisors and generals in battles like Diyala, Anbar, Salah Uddin, and Mosul.<sup>18</sup>

After the fall of Mosul in the hands of ISIS, the Iraqi government called people to volunteer in the PMF. Most volunteers were simple people driven by the religious fervor and spiritual values of Najaf. Nevertheless, the consequences were disastrous. The first battles for the PMF were in Baghdad's surrounding area and resulted in thousands of casualties. These events exerted pressure on the government of Nouri al-Maliki, who withdrew all volunteers as unqualified personnel to engage in wars of attrition and guerrilla warfare. Instead, Al-Maliki mobilized the armed militias backed by Iranian military advisors under the leadership of Qassem Suleimani, which led to the inclusion of Shiite militias in the Iraqi regular army with the same rights and privileges as any regular military unit.

Though the Iraqi government paid these militias and supplied them with weapons, military uniforms, vehicles, and all other military equipment, in terms of military decision-making, they reported to Iran and the IRGC. In fact, the PMF could make decisions and go to war without permission from the Iraqi government, which allowed the PMF to carry out sectarian and political score-settling operations, commit mass murder, and forced migration and demographic change on the Sunnis in Diyala, Tikrit, Fallujah, Habbaniyah, Yathrib, and other areas.<sup>19</sup>

Based on that assumption, Iran sought to dominate Iraq during the post-ISIS era in all aspects and consolidate the PMF in the Iraqi army on the Hezbollah model in Lebanon to be part of the Iraqi political structure. Indeed, the PMF became Iran's proxy army to defend its regional interests outside its territories, which will materialize the Iranian influence and strong presence in the region, especially in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.<sup>20</sup>

#### **Fourth: Iran and the Armed Militias in Mosul Battle**

The significant movement by the Iranians toward Mosul city was part of a comprehensive strategy on the regional and international levels. Iran strove to intensify its presence in Iraq and internationally through enhancing its political position toward the new US movement on the Iraqi-Syrian borders and the Middle East in general.

Since the beginning, Iran has had a major role in planning for the battle of Mosul and the type of troops required on the ground. While Iraq and the international coalition were focused on ending this war with fewer losses, Iran planned to make use of these events for all potentials of the Syrian war, which required the international community to read the Iranian role in this battle and after carefully.

On October 2016, the Iraqi military operation “Nineveh, we are coming!” started to take Mosul back from ISIS. The plan was to blockade the city on three directions- north, east, and south- while leaving the western direction near the Syrian borders open in order to drive ISIS elements out of the city toward Talafar and then into Syria. Nevertheless, Iran and Russia exerted pressure on the Iraqi government to blockade the western direction for **the following strategic reasons:**

1- Driving ISIS elements into Syria would prolong the Syrian war and give ISIS the opportunity to expand there, which would mean continued depletion of the Assad regime, Iran, and their proxy militias.

2- Giving the opportunity for ISIS to flee toward Syria means the possibility for most of these elements to go back near the Russian borders, specifically to Caucasia, which would exert more pressure on Russian security forces.<sup>21</sup>

On the level of administration and planning, Iran wanted to establish a foothold in Mosul, the Sunni city beyond the Iranian influence.

Since the beginning of the operations to liberate the Iraqi cities from ISIS, Iran has directed the movement of the PMF within strategic territories to preserve the Iranian security and interests in the Middle East. In Diyala, Iran supported its proxy militias to control the southern part of this Sunni city near the Iranian borders that represented an Iranian point of weakness during the Iranian-Iraqi war and prevent its people from coming back home even two and a half years after its battle. After that, Iran removed Alnakheeb district from Anbar province and handed it over to Asa’ib Ahlulhaq under the pretext of protecting the Shiites. Iran then annexed this district to Karbala province in order to cut off any connection between Anbar province and Saudi Arabia and Jordan. The same scenario was repeated in Jurf Alskhr, Touz Khirmato, Yathrib, Balad and others and is expected to extend to Talafar in Mosul city. In fact, Iran pushed the Iraqi government to assign the responsibility of Talafar’s battle to the PMF in order to influence on demographic, political and military developments in the post-ISIS era. Iran has participated in Talafar battle to prevent the establishment of Sunni provinces, scale the Turkish power in Iraqi northern areas and to make Talafar as an entry point to Syria, as well as enhancing Shiite powers through Shiite demographic movements.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, the latest crisis between Kirkuk and the Iraqi central government revealed the Iranian influence on the Iraqi Kurdistan province through the IRGC and its armed

militias in this province and Kirkuk city. After the visit of General Qassem Suleimani to Suleimaniah on April 11, 2017, this issue was delayed until the post-ISIS era. Many sources said that the Iranian general threatened the Kurdish leadership in this province, which coincided with the Iranian IRGC establishing a number of military camps in Sayed Sadiq city in Suleimaniah province, Biran Shahr, and Shino districts near Kilsheen district in the province of Kurdistan. Iranian rapid intervention forces of 400 Iranian soldiers were also stationed near Suleimaniah and other military installations dominated by the Iranian forces that belonged to the rebel Kurdish Iranian party in Iraq Alhayah Alhurra “Bijak.”<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the northern command center of the PMF was stationed in Kirkuk under the leadership of Mohammed Albayati, the commander in Badr Division, and included six combat installations spread all over this city, which points to the critical Iranian militia influence in the Iraqi Kurdistan. Indeed, by the end of Mosul battle, the Iranian containment of the Iraqi Kurdistan province would be accomplished.

**Iran has adopted the following strategies in Mosul:**

**1-** Mobilize the PMF, specifically in Talafar.

**2-** With the ‘liberation’ of the left part of the city, Iran exerted pressure on its loyal Iraqi parties to open offices (such as Badr Organization, the Higher Council, and Dawlat Alqanoun) in the city of Mosul. Some sources said that Quds Force of the IRGC had opened a plethora of military and political posts under the PMF cover in the left part of this city. Some sources also revealed that the Iraqi Vice President and Secretary General of Alda’wah Party, Nouri al-Maliki, oversees these posts and supports them with money to attract some of the Sunni clan elders and citizens in the city. The spokesperson for the Arabian clans in Mosul, Mzahim Alhweit, said that Al-Maliki succeeded so far in attracting a number of the Sunni Arab clans sheikhs and figures in this part of the city. He added that Al-Maliki was working undercover to form clan councils in Mosul to report directly to him with direct support from the IRGC and the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. Alhweit also said that the IRGC had opened posts for troops equipped with all types of weapons for small parties that Al-Maliki aims to deploy in Baghdad. Alhweit concluded that these posts were directly linked with the Iranian regime and **each armed group** controls a specific area to carry out dragnets against citizens.<sup>24</sup>

**1-** Support the PMF militias, like Almilitiat Alshabakiah under the leadership of Haneen Alqido, to carry out armed robbery operations on houses and personal property.

**2-** Support the Christian militia operations under the leadership of Rayan Alkildani to displace the Sunni Arabs on the Nineveh plains, specifically in Talkeef district, under the pretext of affiliation with ISIS.

**3-** Impose a fait accompli inside the city of Mosul by supporting one political party over the other. On one side is the former governor, Atheel Alnujeifi, backed by the Turkish and Kurdistan province; on the other, the current Governor, Nofal Alakoub, is backed by the

Iraqi government and the PMF. Indeed, Iran's close location to this city would allow the Iranian regime to achieve its goals.

4- Iran is aware of the importance of the city of Mosul for Turkey's security, politics, religion, and economics. Tehran believes any positive results it achieves in Mosul means a strategic loss for Turkey, adding a crucial point to the series of conflicts between both sides in the region. On the same issue, the US military leadership in Mosul airport, the center of the joint operations, said that Turkey exerted pressure on the US to reject the involvement of the PMF in the battle of Talafar. The US leadership added that Ankara threatened to use the Turkish artillery against these militias if they approach the outskirts of the city.

5- Mosul would be a battleground to deplete the US forces in Iraq. With the beginning of the 'liberation' of the right part of Mosul, many US military units were stationed at the airport after taking it back from ISIS. In addition, there were about five hundred to one thousand U.S. advisors, contractors, and soldiers on Qayyarah airbase. Senior White House Advisor Jared Kushner's visit to these two bases last April reflected the importance of Mosul to the United States in the post-ISIS era. About two thousand US soldiers are also concentrated on Sa'ad airbase on the Iraqi-Syrian borders near the Syrian city of Bokamal. They carried out successful air drops on Deir ez-Zor city, arrested twenty-one leaders of ISIS, and are expected to play a major role in the forthcoming battle of Raqqa. This base has a strategic location and covers the main territories in the Middle East- in Iraq, Syria, the Red Sea, Yemen, Iran, and the logistic lines to Syria. On the other hand, Iran understood that it would be the next target after the elimination of ISIS and strove to prevent any future dangers. In early June 2017, a US technician was killed in the PMF-dominated area on the left side of Mosul, and this violence reflected the Iranian dissatisfaction with the US presence in Mosul vicinity. Despite the PMF leaders' denial of being involved in this operation, the US investigations proved the opposite.

The future awaiting the city of Mosul is terrible. Each side has its goals and ambitions regionally and internationally in case ISIS loses this city. Many regional powers, like Turkey and the Gulf States, fear the potential dangers and negative consequences, while Iran has set up its geostrategic goals to expand its influence to Syria based on the results of this battle, opening future to all options, especially with the escalation of tension between Iran and the Trump administration.

#### **Fifth: Future of the Armed Militias in Iraq after Mosul battle**

With Mosul battle coming to an end, the Iraqi people raised many questions about the future of these militias under the PMF during the post-ISIS era. Some have called for breaking down these militias, including them in the Iraqi army, or transforming them into civil society organizations. The PMF commanders, however, have argued for transforming these militias into independent organizations on the model of those established after the occupation of Iraq in 2003 (such as Alnazahah, Alshuhada, and Alsujana' Alsiasieen) and governing them by separate rules and regulations away from common laws. Accordingly, the Iraqi House of Representatives passed the PMF law on November 26, 2016 session,



but did not refer to these militias' rights, duties, structure, and the mechanism of their inclusion in the Iraqi army and Ministry of Defense. In essence, this law violated the Iraqi Constitution from 2005 that prohibited the formation of any entities and organizations based on sectarian or ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, this law acted as justification for other sects and ethnicities to form armed militias on the same model, which means a country inside another as referred to by Muqtada Al-Sadr when he called for the breakdown of the PMF militias due to their danger for the future of Iraq and the region.<sup>25</sup>

No one can predict how things will end in Iraq or what roles and duties the armed militias will play in the post-ISIS era.

**Since these militias were officially annexed into the PMF under the umbrella of the Iraqi army and Ministry of Defense, their legal status now qualifies them to take larger political, security, economic, and social roles:**

### **Political**

The next period might witness intense political engagement for the political powers supporting these militias. The PMF has become the safest and strongest harbor of all Shiite political currents, which exerts pressure on the civilian powers running the next provincial councils and parliamentary elections. In reality, the PMF strove to achieve two main goals as stated by Al-Maliki:

**1-** Appear as the official representative of the PMF in front of the Shiite political spectrum

**2-** Upset the plans of the other Shiite political powers, such as Ammar Alhakim and Muqtada Al-Sadr, who adopt a relatively conciliatory speech compared with that of Al-Maliki. The first has introduced a resolution project to get out the severe Iraqi crisis by bringing all Iraqi political opponents to the table. This resolution was rejected by Al-Maliki under the pretext that it would be at the expense of his political ambitions of going back to the cabinet office, while Al-Sadr is leading a public current that aims at toppling Al-Maliki's project by all means, including public protests in Al-tahrir square in Baghdad. Hence, the next political phase might witness the following events from the PMF:

**A.** Running the upcoming elections to solidify its political and military status in Iraq.

**B.** Investing the victories achieved by the PMF against ISIS and giving these militias political momentum to convey a message as the only Shiite entity to preserve the Shiite political gains after 2003.

**C.** Winning Iranian support on all levels.

**D.** Consolidating the PMF's political status as representative of the Shiite sect, though this will expose the PMF to criticism for representing one specific sect over the others.

### **Security**

The PMF law did not determine these militias' purposes and missions. Today, the PMF is engaged in a relentless war against ISIS, which raises a question about their status in the post-ISIS era.

Many times, former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki said that the mission of these militias does not end in Mosul, but extends to Raqqa, Aleppo, Yemen, and Bahrain. Head of 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq' Qais Alkhazali also said that his organization is proceeding with its project to establish the so-called Shiite Full Moon (Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, the Arabian Gulf, and Yemen) rather than Shiite Crescent (Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon), which is evidence that the role of these militias might exceed that of the IRGC in the Middle East.

**Moreover, Iraq is expected to witness internal security tension during the next phase for the following reasons:**

**1-** The role and mission of these militias during the next phase is unclear, which makes its involvement selective when necessary.

**2-** If the PMF enters the Iraqi political arena as a political project or as a parliamentary coalition, it would confuse the Iraqi internal situation and might result in new political and security strategy in Iraq on the Hezbollah model in Lebanon.

**3-** Many PMF militias have established security centers and checkpoints on the streets and carried out campaigns of arrests without court orders. For example, the PMF arrested journalist Afrah Shawqi, who criticized bearing arms by members of these militias, reflecting the terrorist activities of the PMF.

**4-** The PMF carried out large-scale raids on the Baghdad surrounding area, especially in Altaji, Abu Ghraib, and Tarmiah districts, in an organized campaign to depopulate the Sunni territories within an Iranian strategy to establish pockets of security as a departure point toward northern Baghdad in the future.

**5-** The leadership of these militias always says that their military power overwhelms that of the Iraqi army, which reflects the intentions to play a more influential role in Iraq in the next phase.

These militias have adopted a policy of imposing the law by force and by courtship. After invading Tikrit, they established the 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq' militia mostly from the Sunni clans in the city and from Baghdad, Mosul, Anbar, and others. Those who refused to join these militias were killed or persecuted for charges of cooperating with ISIS. These actions turned the country into a completely militant society.

**6-** The next phase will witness a true confrontation between the PMF and the Iraqi security forces, such as the US-backed Counterterrorism Service and other domestic and federal police agencies.

### **Economic**

Despite the economic austerity in Iraq, the PMF is proceeding toward economic independence that would allow them a great level of maneuverability in the next phase.

The PMF allocation funds are increasing continuously. In 2005, the PMF budget amounted to 6 trillion and 36 billion Iraqi dinars and increased an additional 160 billion dinars in 2006. That equals one billion US dollars. In 2017, the PMF received 3 trillion dinars as running costs and investments due to the current economic austerity and crisis in



Iraq, which would represent big burdens on the Iraqi federal government's budget in the next phase. **Other factors that influence the PMF budget** include the following:

- 1- The constant increase in financial aid for the PMF from Arab and Gulf businessmen.
- 2- Constant cuts in the state's employee allowances that amount to 10% in favor of the PMF.
- 3- Constant donations from non-governmental organizations for these militias.

The Iraqi parliament's decision to prohibit importing and selling alcohol in Iraq paved the way for the PMF to raise huge funds through smuggling marijuana, poppy, and drugs from Iran.<sup>26</sup>

The Iranian financial support to these militias goes through the following channels:<sup>27</sup>

1- As revealed by the Iranian opposition (the National Council for the Iranian Resistance) in the 1990s, the Iranian government gives monthly payments to the elements of these militias to buy their loyalty. This council also released a list of 31,690 names of Iraqi agents for the IRGC who receive monthly payments from Iran, which was confirmed by the French News Agency.

2- The IRGC militias in Iraq receive funds under technical, constructional, and charitable excuses in Iraq. In 2014, General Rustum Qassemi, former chief of 'Khatam-al Anbiya' base of the IRGC, said that Iran had paid five billion US dollars for technical and engineering services in Iraq.

3- Organizations like "the Iraqi-Iranian Joint Higher Committee" and "the Iraqi-Iranian Joint Committee for Trade and Economic Cooperation" were established in 2005 and financed by Iran.

Based on the aforementioned, the PMF's influence and economic independence are increasing, which will help these militias to play an independent role away from the Iraqi government in the next phase.

## **Social**

The PMF started mobility without specific leadership in its early stages and introduced itself as a force to confront ISIS. After that, it developed and became an official organization with its own laws and regulations. However, these militias suffered significant losses and sought to introduce themselves within a comprehensive socio-political project with specific goals and dimensions as representatives of the Shiite community.

The PMF activities were accompanied by propaganda and misinformation. A number of satellite channels played a major role in enhancing the militias' image in the minds of ordinary Shiite people. Some of these channels were:

- 1- Afaq belongs to Nouri al-Maliki.
- 2- Al-Nujaba militias.
- 3- Alghaddeer to Badr militia.
- 4- Al'ahid to 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq'.

- 5- Altaif Aljadeed and Almanhaj to Muqtada Alsadr current.
- 6- Alfurat to the Higher Council under the leadership of Ammar Alhakim.
- 7- Biladi to the Iraqi Foreign Minister Ibrahim Alja'fari.
- 8- Alitijah to the Iraqi Hezbollah.
- 9- Other channels like Hashd, Hashduna, Karbala, Najaf, Thaqalain, Wilayah, Do'a, Minhaj, Arba'eeniah, Hujjah, Ahwaz, Anwar, Raj'iah, Hawzah Ilmiah, Mahdi, Fadk, Imam Hussein, Abbas, Nibras, Sadiq, Eeman, Iba', Koufah, Ghadeer, and Ishraq.

All these channels praise the PMF, the IRGC, the Pakistani Zaynabioun militias, and the Afghani Fatimiyoun militias. These forces have committed mass murder against what they call the grandsons of Yazeed (one of the Sunni Caliphs 1,400 years ago), such as the crimes they committed in Tikrit, Diyala, Jurf Alsakhr, Mosul, Aleppo, Taiz, Hems, Irsal, Sham Tripoli, and Saïda. Furthermore, these Iranian-backed militias released satellite and radio channels in the Kurdish, English, Azeri, French, Bosnian, Hausa, Bushtit, and Swahili languages.<sup>28</sup>

The media has played a major role in increasing the Shiite's popular sympathy for the PMF. The armed militias' great popular incubator is evident through the names "Alhashd Alsha'bi Almuqadas," "Rijalollah," and "Hashdollah," with many connotations and implications that reflect the great status of the PMF in the minds of the Shiite people. Indeed, the PMF has become a red line as the holiest of the holy that cannot be crossed or criticized. The next phase will witness more efforts to consolidate this status in the Iraqi society.

### **Religious**

The doctrinal affiliation of the Iraqi armed militias is a big challenge in the next phase, especially after Sistani passes away. Most armed militias in Iraq are loyal to the Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei. They committed many crimes and increased their humanitarian violations in Iraq, which provoked the Najaf authority to establish armed militias under its umbrella, such as Abbas Combat Division and Ali Akbar.

This situation raises the question, what comes after Sistani? The Najaf religious authority headed by Sistani has always avoided the sectarian speech toward the GCC countries, especially Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. On the contrary, the religious authority in Iran released fatwa encouraging Shiites in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia to rebel against their political regimes and called Shiites to arm and fight on Bashar Assad regime's side in Syria. In fact, Najaf's position violates the Iranian sectarian trend in the Middle East, which raises the Iranian concerns about Sistani's successor. Furthermore, Najaf's support of Muqtada Al-Sadr's initiative to break the PMF down after eliminating ISIS was a big hit to the Iranian project in Iraq. The new Iranian ambassador in Baghdad was appointed to plan the post-Sistani era in this country. Iran seeks to elect a person who adopts the Iranian extremist speech despite the possible contenders to succeed Sistani, such as Mohammed Baqir Alirwani, Abdula'la Alsibzawi, and his son Mohammed Riza Sistani. Iran will strive to expand its influence in Najaf; however, the Iranian Supreme Leader will have limited power over this authority for the following reasons:

1. The power of the Iranian Jurist Leader comes from the political position in Tehran more than the religious status in Qum.

2. The Iranian Supreme Leader has few influential proxies in Najaf. For example, Mahmoud Alhashemi Alshahrawardi, the member in the Iranian Assembly of Experts of the Leadership, was born in Najaf, but has a small office and few disciples there, while Kamal Alhaidary, a former Iraqi Scholar, who studied in Najaf and lives in Qum, belongs to a Reform Shiite sect, which is less popular among the Iraqi people.<sup>29</sup>

Hence, the next phase will witness growing Iranian influence in the scholastic Hawza in Najaf in order to control the election of the Shiite senior scholar in Iraq and exclude those acting outside the Iranian sectarian cycle. Indeed, the armed militias will play a decisive role in this concern.

### **Conclusion**

The armed militias played a major role in reshaping the Iraqi state, especially after the US invasion in 2003. Many circumstances such as the lawlessness state and security vacuum, contributed to the development and prevalence of these Iranian-backed militias in terms of efficiency and influence, which was evident through the statements of the Coalition Authority Leader and US ambassador in Iraq, Paul Braymer, about the Iranian dual role in Iraq. On the one hand, Iran supported the political process drawn by the US in Iraq after 2003, but on the other Iran supported the militias with weapons and money to carry out military operations against the US troops in Iraq. For example, 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq' carried out about six thousand operations against the US and Iraqi troops, including the kidnapping of foreigners such as the British expert Peter Moore and four of his companions, who were exchanged for the militia's leader Alkhazali and hundreds of its elements who were imprisoned by the US in 2005-2007.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the Iraqi sectarian conflict enhanced the role of these militias through introducing themselves as a strong defender of the Shiite sect and its gains after the occupation of Iraq, which made them the center of attention of the Shiite socio-political arena.

After the emergence of ISIS, these militias acquired the form of holiness under the PMFC. Iran played a major role in the development and growth of these militias through supplying them with weapons, money, advice, and command and control systems until they became the major Iranian forces in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain. Indeed, these militias exposed the Iraqi sovereignty to serious challenges and became a point of concern for Iraq's neighbors.

The post-ISIS phase would play a major role in determining the armed militias' mission and their internal and regional influence. The significant involvement of Iran in the Iraqi political, religious, economic, social, and cultural affairs is expected to diminish due to the new US strategy under the Donald Trump presidency, who aims at containing the Iranian influence in Iraq and the Middle East in the post-ISIS phase, which would pose many questions about the near future of the region.

All in all, the armed militias have become a brand name for the Iranian Quds Force and the IRGC in Iraq because, first and foremost, the movements, strategies, and activities they carry out in Iraq or elsewhere are in favor of the Iranian national interests.

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