

# The Leadership and Purpose of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces

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The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) is an Iraqi state security service that Iran has infiltrated and uses to wield significant influence in Iraq. Iran's cooptation of the PMF enables Tehran to pursue its objectives in Iraq while obfuscating its actual involvement in Iraqi internal affairs. Understanding how Iranian leaders wield direct and indirect influence over this significant component of the Iraqi security sector is crucial as the United States considers how to deter Iranian-backed Iraqi militias from attacking US forces in Iraq and Syria.

The PMF originated as part of the effort to stop and reverse the advance of the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) from Syria into Iraq but has become largely a front for militias responsive to Iran. Former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki formed the PMF in June 2014 by "institutionalizing" pre-existing and predominantly Shia militias that were engaged in the fight against ISIS.<sup>[1]</sup> ISIS captured Mosul in June 2014, prompting prominent Iraqi Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani to issue a fatwa calling for Iraqi citizens "able to take up arms and fight terrorists...[to] volunteer and join the security forces to achieve this holy purpose" against ISIS.<sup>[2]</sup> The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) separately and simultaneously mobilized Shia militias responsive to then-IRGC Quds Force Commander Major General Qassem Soleimani.<sup>[3]</sup> Many of the militias responsive to Soleimani came to comprise the PMF along with some of the fighters who had responded to Sistani's call and remained loyal to him.<sup>[4]</sup> The militias responsive to Soleimani were — and remain — close to Iran, and several are US-designated foreign terrorist organizations that killed hundreds of US service members in Iraq between 2003 and 2011.<sup>[5]</sup> The 2016 PMF Commission Law formalized the PMF as an independent entity reporting directly to the Iraqi prime minister, separate from the Iraqi Defense and Interior Ministries.<sup>[6]</sup>

The militias that are part of the PMF and their leaders, in reality, answer to Iran — not the Iraqi prime minister. Abu Mahdi al Muhandis, who was Soleimani's top Iraqi lieutenant, served as the PMF Chief of Staff prior to his death in a US airstrike in 2020. Some Iraqi officials described Muhandis as a more important representative of Iran than the Iranian Embassy in Baghdad.<sup>[7]</sup> Muhandis planned and executed PMF operations while simultaneously serving as Iran's Iraqi "emissary and messenger."<sup>[8]</sup> The current Popular Mobilization Commission (PMC) Chairman, Faleh al Fayyadh, has similarly cooperated with the IRGC to implement Iranian directives in Iraq and reinforce Iranian influence over the militias.<sup>[9]</sup> The PMC, which oversees a range of administrative, planning, and training responsibilities, is formally responsible for ensuring that PMF militias answer to the Iraqi federal government.<sup>[10]</sup> Fayyadh's installation as the chairman of this commission and his relationship with the IRGC shields the PMF from actual Iraqi federal government control, however, essentially ceding part of what should be Iraqi government authority to Tehran.

Most PMF operations commanders are senior members of Iranian-backed militias such as Asaib Ahl al Haq and the Badr Organization. Some simultaneously command a PMF regional operational command and an individual Iranian-backed brigade within the PMF. PMF regional operational commands plan, conduct, and sustain campaigns and operations within their areas of operation.<sup>[11]</sup> PMF regional

operational commands are separate from, but share overlapping areas of responsibility with, the regional operational commands of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF).<sup>[12]</sup> The PMF is not subordinate to the ISF but it does coordinate many activities with the ISF. PMF operational commands frequently work with the ISF to eliminate ISIS remnants, for example.<sup>[13]</sup> Coordination, which produces the perception of horizontal communication, also obscures hierarchical command and control.<sup>[14]</sup> Qasim Musleh al Khafaji, for example, simultaneously commands the 13th PMF Brigade (Liwa al Tafuf) and the Anbar Operations Command.<sup>[15]</sup> Iran’s cooptation of the PMF command structure down to the operational and tactical levels helps to ensure that Iran’s proxies and partners in Iraq are responsive to the IRGC’s guidance. A small number of PMF brigades are not Iranian-backed, however, but Iranian-backed groups have worked to sideline and undermine them.<sup>[16]</sup>

Senior PMF leaders frequently execute operations without the approval of the Iraqi prime minister, who is ostensibly the commander-in-chief of all Iraqi security services. The PMF and its IRGC “advisers” conducted independent operations during the anti-ISIS campaign, most notably near Tikrit in 2015.<sup>[17]</sup> Iranian-backed Iraqi militias shelled civilians in Tikrit on the orders of the IRGC and Iran’s Iraqi proxy commanders without the knowledge of the Iraqi government.<sup>[18]</sup> The IRGC Quds Force — the component of the IRGC responsible for covert activity and managing foreign proxies — has also supported ongoing Iraqi militia attacks targeting US forces in the Middle East, including the attack that killed three US service members in northeastern Jordan on January 28.<sup>[19]</sup> IRGC Quds Force Commander Esmail Ghaani ordered Iranian-backed Iraqi militias to pause attacks targeting US forces immediately after the January 28 attack, demonstrating the Quds Force’s control over its Iraqi proxies.<sup>[20]</sup> Iranian-backed Iraqi militias have not claimed an attack targeting US forces since February 4.<sup>[21]</sup>

Iran’s proxy militias in Iraq have also established political wings that grant the militias political cover and enable them to pursue their political and military objectives as quasi-government institutions. Militia members supported and helped pass the aforementioned 2016 PMF Commission Law that institutionalized the PMF.<sup>[22]</sup> The political wings also pressure the Iraqi prime minister to pursue policies that advance Iranian strategic objectives, such as expelling the United States from Iraq. The Iraqi Parliament passed a non-binding resolution in January 2020 to increase pressure on the Iraqi prime minister to order the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq following the US airstrike that killed Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al Muhandis, for example.<sup>[23]</sup> Kataib Hezbollah threatened to kill the families and staff of parliamentarians who opposed the resolution, highlighting the overlap between political and military power in Iraq.<sup>[24]</sup> The Badr Organization, another Iranian proxy group, is currently using its control of the Parliamentary Security and Defense Committee to draft a new resolution to pressure the prime minister to order the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq in response to recent US self-defense strikes.<sup>[25]</sup>

The following chart shows the political wings of three main Iranian-backed Iraqi militias.

Militia	Militia Leader	Political Bloc
<p><b>Badr Organization</b></p> 	<p><b>Hadi al Ameri</b></p> 	<p><b>Fatah Alliance</b></p> 
<p><b>Asaib Ahl al Haq</b></p> 	<p><b>Qais Khazali</b></p> 	<p><b>Sadiqoun</b></p> 
<p><b>Kataib Hezbollah</b></p> 	<p><b>Abu Hussein al Hamidawi</b></p> 	<p><b>Hoquq Movement</b></p> 

Iranian-backed Iraqi proxies are currently conducting a campaign that combines their military power in the PMF with their influence in the Iraqi political sphere to try to expel US forces from Iraq.<sup>[26]</sup> Iranian-backed Iraqi militias are exploiting the Israel-Hamas war to fulfill Tehran's long-standing strategic objective of expelling the United States from the region. Kataib Hezbollah, which controls the PMF's 45th, 46th, and 47th Brigades, has attacked US forces dozens of times since October 2023 under the pretext of opposing the United States' support for Israel in the war.<sup>[27]</sup> Other groups closely aligned with Kataib Hezbollah — such as Liwa al Tafuf — closely collaborate with Iranian-backed Iraqi militias and enable their attacks.<sup>[28]</sup> Iranian and Iranian proxy leaders are likely operating under the assumption that military pressure and US casualties will erode US willingness to sustain deployments in the Middle East. Iran and its proxies in Iraq regularly cite the US withdrawal from Lebanon after the

1983 Beirut barracks bombings and the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 as evidence to support this theory that they can push US forces out of the region “under the influence of weapons.”<sup>[29]</sup>

Iranian-backed Iraqi militia attacks trigger US self-defense strikes against militia positions in Iraq.<sup>[30]</sup> The United States has a legitimate right to respond to militia attacks in order to protect its service members. The Iraqi proxies use their PMF membership to misrepresent US self-defense strikes as “crimes” against an Iraqi state institution when, in reality, US self-defense strikes target the Iranian-backed personnel and infrastructure that threaten US forces.<sup>[31]</sup> Iranian-backed Iraqi actors exploit these strikes, framing them as “violations” of Iraqi sovereignty and territorial integrity to pressure the Iraqi federal government to pursue the removal of US forces.<sup>[32]</sup>

The following order of battle (ORBAT) draws on open-source information available on social media and in Western, regional, and Iraqi media published by the PMF and its supporters, Iraqi journalists, the Iraqi government, and Western journalists. The sourcing for commanders relies heavily on Iraqi journalists as the PMF does not regularly publish new appointments. This ORBAT also uses previously published information from other think tanks. All sourcing for the information in this ORBAT is available in the endnotes. The command structure below highlights the role of Iranian-backed actors in the PMF down to the operations command level. CTP-ISW will continue to develop this data layer in future editions of this ORBAT over the coming months.

### **Popular Mobilization Forces**

Chief of Staff: Abu Fadak al Muhammadawi (Abdul Aziz al Muhammadawi)<sup>[33]</sup>

Popular Mobilization Committee Chairman: Faleh al Fayyadh<sup>[34]</sup>

### **Anbar Operations Command**

Commander: Qasim Musleh al Khafaji. Khafaji also commands the 13<sup>th</sup> PMF Brigade (Liwa al Tafuf) and is close to Kataib Hezbollah.<sup>[35]</sup> He previously commanded the 11<sup>th</sup> PMF Brigade (Liwa Ali al Akbar) until November 2015.<sup>[36]</sup> Iraqi authorities arrested Khafaji in May 2021, in part due to his involvement in attacks targeting US forces in Iraq.<sup>[37]</sup> Iraqi authorities released Khafaji in June 2021.<sup>[38]</sup>

### **Baghdad Operations Command**

Commander: Hussein al Samahi.<sup>[39]</sup> Samahi is a member of Asaib Ahl al Haq and reportedly supported Iranian-backed Iraqi militias fighting in Syria in the early 2010s to support Syrian President Bashar al Assad’s regime.<sup>[40]</sup> Iraqi activists have also accused Samahi of being behind the killing of Sadrists during clashes between Sadrists and Iranian-backed factions in Baghdad in August 2022.<sup>[41]</sup>

### **Basra Operations Command**

Commander: Mahdi Saleh Abdul Wahab (Haj Abu Jinan al Basri).<sup>[42]</sup> Abdul Wahab also commands the 1<sup>st</sup> PMF Brigade (Imam Muhammad al Jawad), which is a Badr militia.<sup>[43]</sup>

## Diyala Operations Command

Commander: Talib al Musawi.<sup>[44]</sup> Musawi is affiliated with the Badr Organization.<sup>[45]</sup>

## Kirkuk and East Tigris Operations Command

Commander: Abu Hussam al Sahlani.<sup>[46]</sup> Sahlani is affiliated with the Badr Organization.<sup>[47]</sup>

- **Northern Axis Command**

- Commander: Abu Ridha Yilmaz al Najjar<sup>[48]</sup>

## Jazeera and Badia Operations Command

Commander: Unknown. The Jazeera and Badia Operations Deputy Commander is Hajj Abu Nasser, which is presumably a pseudonym.<sup>[49]</sup> Kataib Hezbollah's 45th, 46th, and 47th PMF Brigades comprise the Jazeera and Badia Operations Command.<sup>[50]</sup> This command likely possesses Iranian-provided drones such as the Mohajer-6.<sup>[51]</sup>

## Middle Euphrates Operations Command

Commander: Ali al Hamdani.<sup>[52]</sup> Hamdani replaced Qasim Musleh al Khafaji as the commander of the 11th PMF Brigade (Liwa Ali al Akbar) in late 2015 or early 2016.<sup>[53]</sup>

## Ninewa Operations Command

Commander: Khadhir al Matrohi.<sup>[54]</sup> Matrohi is affiliated with the Badr Organization.<sup>[55]</sup>

## Rafidain Operations Command

Commander: Nazim Kazem Musa al Saadi (Abu Huda al Saadi).<sup>[56]</sup> Saadi also commands the 10<sup>th</sup> PMF Brigade, which is a Badr militia.<sup>[57]</sup>

## Salah ad Din Operations Command

Commander: Safaa al Saadi.<sup>[58]</sup> Saadi is affiliated with Asaib Ahl al Haq.<sup>[59]</sup>

## Samarra Operations Command

Commander: Hussein al Saedi (Abu Zainab al Saedi).<sup>[60]</sup> Saedi is affiliated with the Sadrist Movement.

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