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Networks of power

The Popular Mobilization Forces and the state in Iraq

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Summary

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- The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) continue to puzzle policymakers inside and outside of Iraq. Following the territorial defeat of the Islamic State (ISIS), PMF networks have developed into significant security, political and economic forces that compete for power in the Iraqi state. At the heart of unsuccessful attempts to understand, engage or navigate this dynamic is a fundamental misreading of the nature of both the Iraqi state and the PMF. The Iraqi state is best understood as a network of power and the PMF as an array of forces connected in this network.
 - Despite efforts from its senior leaders, the PMF is not a coherent, integrated organization. Instead, it remains a series of fluid and adaptive networks that vary in horizontal (leadership coherence) and vertical (ties to a social base) structure. Each network's structure sheds light on its strategies, capabilities and connectivity to the state. Some of these networks are closely linked to neighbouring Iran.
 - PMF networks enjoy a symbiotic relationship with Iraq's security services, political parties and economy. Their members include not only fighters, but also parliamentarians, cabinet ministers, local governors, provincial council members, business figures in both public and private companies, senior civil servants, humanitarian organizations and civilians.
 - The connectivity of PMF networks reveals the true nature of the Iraqi state, which does not fit the neo-Weberian or Westphalian ideals that conflate formal government institutions with state power. PMF networks enjoy state power – they are integrated into Iraqi politics and control a social base – but they do not necessarily always sit in a formal government.
 - Policymakers looking to reform or restrict the PMF have relied on a series of options: divide the constituent groups against each other, build alternative security institutions, impose sanctions on individuals, or strike with military force. Yet, these options have failed to reform PMF networks or the Iraqi state. This paper argues that these options have not been guided by a clear and coherent strategy that navigates reform programmes based on the Iraqi state and PMF network structures and nodal connections.
 - Engaging with PMF networks should be informed by two principles: (a) the nature of the network will determine its strategies, capabilities and role in any reform programme; and (b) the connectivity of the network to other Iraqi state actors means that any approach needs to focus on key structural challenges. This approach can help policymakers better anticipate reactions when they implement reform policies.

01

Introduction

While the PMF is a significant actor in the governance of Iraq, it is just one part of an array of forces that make up the incoherent state that struggles in its basic duties to its citizens.

In the early morning of 3 January 2020, the US conducted its highest profile assassination in the modern history of the Middle East, striking near Baghdad International Airport and killing Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, leader of Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), along with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the de facto leader of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (*al-hashd al-shaabi*, or PMF). That morning Muhandis had travelled to the airport to greet Soleimani to discuss regional strategy amid an escalation in the US–Iran dispute. A few days earlier, PMF fighters had stormed Baghdad's Green Zone and protested outside the American embassy. The two, along with their entourage, were killed as they drove out of the airport. Media attention after the assassinations focused almost exclusively on Soleimani, who was the target of the attack. Muhandis appeared to simply be at the wrong place at the wrong time.

The killing of Muhandis shook the precarious stabilization process in Iraq. While many argued that he was a major player in the Iraqi government's crackdown on protesters in 2019 and as such should be removed, the strike – like previous US military action in the country – has failed to either better protect protesters who continue to face state violence, or enhance Washington's interests of reducing Iranian influence or curbing the PMF in Iraq. Far from being part of a coherent strategy, it was another military strike without the necessary political or socio-economic solution to bring about lasting reform. Instead, it has contributed towards a more violent point in the repeated cycles of conflict that have gripped the country since 2003. The inner structure of the PMF has become less coherent; armed groups have proliferated seeking to avenge the killing; and key PMF social brokers in the Iraqi state have gone into hiding, limiting the chance for engagement. Even if Muhandis was an afterthought, events since the attack have revealed the significance of the killing – and the role of the PMF in the Iraqi state.

The PMF are at the centre of Iraq's recent history. In the summer of 2014, thousands of Iraqi men gave up their daily routines to join long queues for armed groups that were enlisting soldiers to fight. Many of them had seen videos on social media of Islamic State (ISIS) fighters swiftly capturing one-third of Iraq's territory while brutally killing their compatriots. The Iraqi army was fleeing without a fight. With ISIS fighters only a few kilometres from the capital, Baghdad, Shia cleric Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a religious ruling (*fatwa*) calling for men to enlist in Iraq's state security forces to defend the country's territory. Rather than join that crumbling army, thousands of men queued to join pre-existing and predominantly Shia armed groups.¹ Seeking to institutionalize these forces, the then prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, integrated the armed groups into the PMF Commission (*hayat al-hashd al-shaabi*), which came under the National Security Council (NSC).²

Following the fight against ISIS, PMF networks converted battlefield successes into ballot-box victories. The largest electoral blocs of the 2018 national elections – Muqtada al-Sadr's Sairoun (Alliance Towards Reform) and Hadi al-Ameri's Fateh (Conquest Alliance) – both drew support from PMF networks. While Sadr often maintained some distance between Sairoun and the PMF, Fateh candidates included several PMF officials turned (or returned) politicians. These electoral victories allowed the PMF to strengthen their connections to government ministries and institutions. The PMF also amassed an economic empire, working and competing with other Iraqi political parties to generate revenue from state coffers as well as from checkpoints, customs and other parts of the so-called 'informal economy'.

Becoming a part and a key defender of the political order – which increasingly relies on violence to silence the voices of many Iraqis – led to a decline in the popularity of PMF groups. While each group maintains varying degrees of a social base, they struggle to use ideological narratives – such as its anti-ISIS drive – to preserve public authority amid growing anti-establishment sentiment in southern Iraq and Baghdad.

Structurally, the PMF has never developed into a coherent organization. Instead, it remains a series of fluid and adaptive networks representing Iraq's full ethnic, sectarian and regional diversity. The networks have existed for many decades. Some, known as vanguard networks, have a tight-knit leadership but weak ties to society and remain closer to Iran. Others, known as parochial networks, have less coherent leadership but strong social bases in Iraq. Understanding the history and structure of these networks reveals clues to their strategies, capabilities and nature of engagement with the state.

Critically, these networks have a symbiotic relationship with Iraq's security services, political parties and economy. They are deeply embedded across state sectors and have formed relationships – sometimes adversarial (some networks

¹ Author interviews with recruits, summer and autumn 2014, Baghdad and Maysan, Iraq.

² During his second term as prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki relied on these armed groups at times to maintain public authority, including seven specific groups: the Badr Organization, Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), Kataib Hezbollah (KH), Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Kataib al-Imam Ali, and Kataib Jund al-Imam. Maliki had on occasion even referred to this loose network as a 'popular mobilization'. See Mansour, R. and Jabar, F. A. (2017), *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future*, Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_63_Mansour_PMF_Final_Web.pdf.

have threatened Iraq's prime minister) but more often cooperative – with a number of key actors and institutions, some of which are strategic allies of Western policymakers. Iran is a key ally to several of these networks.

US and Western policymakers, along with allied Iraqi leaders, have struggled to find a way to limit or integrate the PMF. In a recent discussion on the issue, a senior US policymaker claimed that the best strategy would be to isolate and remove the bad leaders and groups within the PMF, like a surgeon removing a 'cancerous tumour', while strengthening the more acceptable groups.³ The killing of Muhandis can be seen as part of this thinking. Since 2003, Washington has resorted to military solutions to remove adversaries in Iraq. But this strategy has had limited success in enhancing its interests or Iraq's stability. Without much attention paid to accompanying political solutions, the so-called surgical strategy has done little to stabilize the country.

This paper argues that this failure is based on a fundamental misreading of both the nature of the PMF and the state – best understood as a network. The PMF is not a symptom or even the root of the problem, but part of the array of forces that make up the incoherent Iraqi state. Its brokerage networks – those that link and negotiate between different groups – include not only fighters, but also parliamentarians, cabinet ministers, local governors, provincial council members, business figures in both public and private companies, senior civil servants, humanitarian organizations, and civilians. The diffusion of these networks means that removing one node – like Muhandis – will not change the nature of the problem. Understanding the PMF networks and their connectivity to the Iraqi state and society can help policymakers achieve a more coherent strategy that realizes reform and resolves problems in the country's governing structure. This strategy should not focus on ideals of how the Iraqi state should look, but on a realistic approach to ensuring more coherence and accountability in relationships between armed groups, political parties, the government and society.

³ Research interview carried out as part of the Chatham House Hybrid Armed Actors in the Middle East and North Africa project (hereafter references to interviews carried out as part of this project are referred to as 'Research interviews') with policymaker, who wished to remain anonymous, July 2020.

02

Past approaches to the PMF

The social nature of PMF network interconnections make them difficult to analyse. This research pushes past neo-Weberian assumptions to reach a closer understanding of the Iraqi state and the PMF.

The heterogeneity of the PMF has prompted those seeking to understand it to move away from considering it in monolithic terms, as a single organization or simply a proxy for Iran,⁴ and instead to cataloguing and specifying its different subparts. The PMF has variously been seen as an ‘umbrella group’ of social forces based on sources of religious emulation,⁵ or as a military institution with brigades and legal codes, or as a so-called hybrid actor that can stretch across the neo-Weberian state and non-state spaces.⁶

Earlier work challenged the monolith argument, categorizing larger internal dynamics and contestations within the PMF into sources of religious emulation to the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, or Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, or Muqtada al-Sadr.⁷ That approach offered a sociological understanding of the organization’s component parts. Yet, this still underplayed the linkages and interconnections that exist between seemingly oppositional groups. At times, a fighter would join one group but maintain ideological or social affinities to another group. In 2014, a senior Sadrist armed leader told the author that he had encouraged some of his fighters to join other PMF groups because that

⁴ See Gaston, E. and Ollivant, D. (2020), *US-Iran Proxy Competition in Iraq*, Washington, DC: New America, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/us-iran-proxy-competition-iraq>.

⁵ In Shiism, authority is based on the doctrine of emulation (*taqlid*), in which followers conform to the teaching and legal advice of a religious authority. See Mansour and Jabar (2017), *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq’s Future*.

⁶ A binary interpretation that assumes the formal government is the home of state power and anything outside the formal government is a non-state actor with limited authority.

⁷ Mansour and Jabar (2017), *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq’s Future*.

would ensure more access to funds.⁸ As such, PMF members and groups have interacted and depended on each other jointly, and at times stretched across sources of emulation.

Other analysts have focused on the PMF's formal structures, organizational charts, laws and military assets symbolized by the PMF Commission.⁹ However, as they note, the PMF is ultimately much more than its structures suggest. The PMF Commission's 50 or so brigades lack a systematic size, strength and affiliation.¹⁰ Faleh al-Fayadh is – on paper – the president of the PMF, yet he does not have a large dedicated staff and is often at the behest of the social brokers in the wider PMF network.¹¹ After the killing of Muhandis, network brokers such as Abu Zainab al-Lami, Abu Fadak, Abu Munthadhar al-Husseini, Abu Ali al-Basri and Abu Iman al-Bahli began cooperating and competing for leadership of the PMF. Some of these brokers are in the commission and some are not, but they all run PMF security, political and economic operations.

State power in Iraq cannot be isolated from society and is often found in so-called informal institutions – outside the government space.

Another approach views the PMF as a hybrid actor, defined as 'a type of armed group that sometimes operates in concert with the state and sometimes competes with it'.¹² This position argues that the PMF can simultaneously be state and non-state. While recognized in the government, it also operates outside government command and control, and runs economic networks that span formal and informal channels. However, approaching the PMF as a hybrid armed actor has meant accepting the neo-Weberian assumption that state power is found in formal institutions.¹³ In other words, the state is synonymous with the formal government. That is why the PMF can be in both state and non-state spaces. However, state power in Iraq cannot be isolated from society and is often found in so-called informal institutions – outside the government space – such as a political party's private economic office. This paper seeks to move past the hybridity compromise to argue

⁸ Author interview with Saraya al-Salam leader, who wished to remain anonymous, 2014.

⁹ See Knights, M., Malik, H. and al-Tamimi, A. J. (2020), *Honored, not Contained: The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces*, Policy Focus 163, Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, p. vii, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus163-KnightsMalikTamimi-v3.pdf>. The authors argue that an in-depth mapping of the PMF as a military institution can function 'as a primer for any international or Iraqi agency that is contemplating security-sector reform (SSR) or disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs'.

¹⁰ According to Executive Order 331, the PMF Commission's president directly controls the directorates of finance, administration, legal affairs, security (internal affairs), audit and monitoring, spiritual guidance, planning and procurement, and information. On paper, each brigade is meant to have 3,000 fighters, but there is wide variation.

¹¹ Executive Order 331 formally names this position 'President of the PMF Commission'. The PMF president holds the same level as a civilian minister, but without the same ministerial rank.

¹² Cambanis, T., Esfandiary, D., Ghaddar, S., Hanna, M. W., Lund, A. and Mansour, R. (2019), *Hybrid Actors: Armed Groups and State Fragmentation in the Middle East*, New York, NY: The Century Foundation Press; Haddad, F. (2020), 'Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units: A Hybrid Actor in a Hybrid State', in Day, A. (ed) (2020), *Hybrid Conflict, Hybrid Peace: How Militias and Paramilitary Groups Shape Post-conflict Transitions*, New York: United Nations University.

¹³ Skocpol, T. (1985), 'Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research', in Evans, P. E., Rueschmeyer, D. and Skocpol, T. (eds) (1985), *Bringing the State Back In*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

that separating state and society in Iraq hinders analysis and policy. Instead, this paper focuses on nodal connections of these groups all considered to be vying for state power, regardless of where they sit.

Each of the previous schools of thought has contributed to the contemporary understanding of the PMF in different ways. However, the deep social nature of network interconnections and ties has always made the PMF difficult to classify. Linkages and connections across PMF groups are based on generationally embedded social relations. Brigades inside the PMF Commission often feature brothers, cousins or relatives working together. Sometimes, these social networks reach into government spaces. At times, as this paper highlights, the same person can even occupy two roles – showcasing the political economy of corruption in Iraq. PMF affiliates, proxies, or representatives in the political space – whether parliamentary representatives or bureaucratic appointees – are nominated and selected based on complex social relations. In short, analysing networks allows research to push past neo-Weberian and other Westphalian assumptions to reach a closer understanding of both the PMF and the nature of the Iraqi state.

03

The PMF as a set of networks

The PMF is not an integrated organization, but a series of vanguard and parochial networks that stem back to pre-2003. Each network type has different strategies and capabilities.

The PMF is in fact made up of a series of networks, which vary in structure and connectivity to each other and other actors in the state. Paul Staniland argues that wartime organizations generally attempt to convert pre-war social networks. The organizations that form from these networks have varying degrees of coherence, both horizontally and vertically.

Box 1. Types of networks

- **Integrated networks:** strong horizontal (leadership) ties and strong vertical ties (between leaders and the social base).
- **Parochial networks:** weak horizontal (leadership) ties and strong vertical ties (between leaders and the social base).
- **Vanguard networks:** strong horizontal (leadership) ties and weak vertical ties (between leaders and social base).
- **Fragmented networks:** weak horizontal (leadership) ties and weak vertical ties (between leaders and social base).

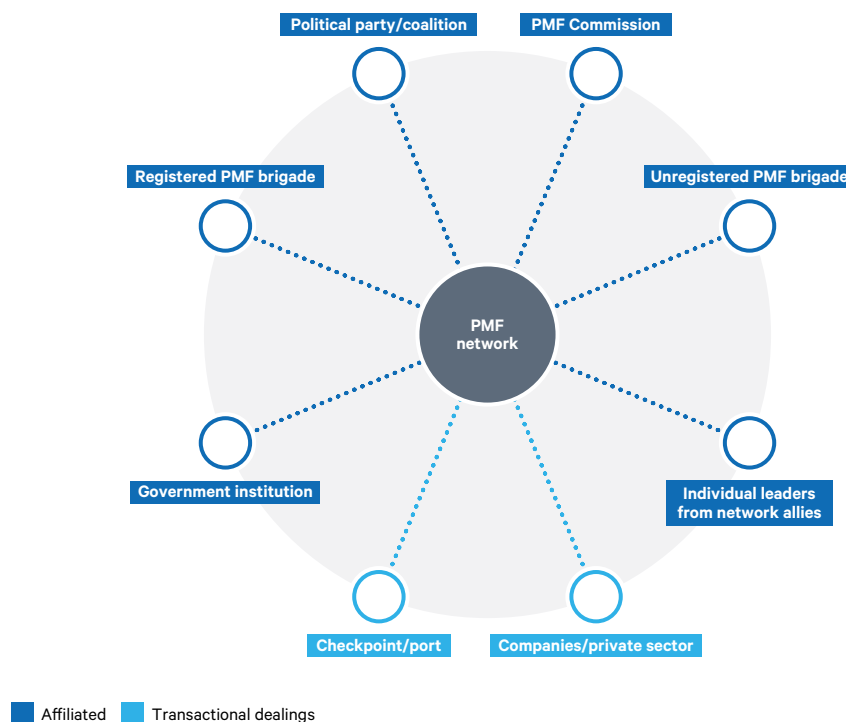
Source: Based on Staniland (2014), *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*.

Horizontal ties are relationships among the leaders in a group. Vertical ties are the relationships between leaders and their group's social base. Mass public support is less important than that of the specific social bases that allow leaders to maintain authority. Parochial groups emerge from networks with weak central

control (weak horizontal ties) but a strong social base (strong vertical ties). At the other end of this spectrum, vanguard organizations emerge from a network with coherent central leadership (strong horizontal ties) but with limited presence in a social base (weak vertical ties).¹⁴ An integrated organization emerges from a network that has both strong horizontal and vertical ties. The constituent groups that make up the PMF, however, are less coherent organizations and more fluid networks.

Following the fight against ISIS, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and senior PMF leaders attempted to transform various pre-existing networks – parochial and vanguard – into an integrated organization under the PMF Commission. However, this process never materialized. Instead, the PMF remains a loose series of different types of groups and networks.¹⁵

Figure 1. Example of a PMF network



Source: Compiled as part of the Hybrid Armed Actors project.

Though many PMF groups and forces emerged only after June 2014, most had a pre-existing presence in Iraq, where they have competed and cooperated with other actors for power since the 1980s. Most of the leading nodes that make up the PMF today can be traced back to one of two militant networks: the Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim network,¹⁶ which began in the 1980s and was close to the IRGC; and the Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr network,¹⁷ which emerged in the 1990s inside

¹⁴ Staniland, P. (2014), *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, p. 23.

¹⁵ The words 'group' and 'network' are used interchangeably in this paper, as each group maintains certain structures but is also fluid and as such a network.

¹⁶ Badr and Kataib Hezbollah officials such as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis or Abu Zainab al-Lami come from this Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim network.

¹⁷ Saraya al-Salam, AAH and Nujaba.

Iraq.¹⁸ In its early days, the Dawa Party – another major Shia Islamist political party at the time – also had militants among its members referred to as *mujahideen*. However, it soon dropped its militant wing, splitting from the IRGC and rejecting the principle of *wilayat al-faqih* (guardianship or rule by the Islamist jurist) and the role of militias, which migrated towards the Hakim-IRGC network.¹⁹

Over the years, these networks have transformed, re-invented themselves and gained greater power vis-à-vis the state, but they have always been present and never completely removed. Some of the networks, such as Kataib Hezbollah, operate as vanguard networks. Others, such as Saraya al-Salam or Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), operate as parochial networks. Some groups, such as Badr, have transformed from a vanguard network to a parochial one after 2003. Understanding the structure of each network is significant as it reveals its capabilities and strategies.

Vanguard networks

The vanguard networks in the PMF have weak ties to their social base. They have established few political party offices and have yet to formally run for elections. Their leaders have not engaged in much activity in local communities. In focus groups and interviews for this paper, many Iraqi respondents did not know the leaders of vanguard networks. Even rank-and-file members of these networks claimed not to know the identity of their commanders.²⁰

The main vanguard network in the PMF is Kataib Hezbollah (KH), which has strong relations with Iran. KH leaders have always remained largely unknown and elusive. Yet its relatively coherent leadership structure has been able to form different brigades and groups in order to effectively direct its fighters.

KH emerged after 2003 from the network of Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim, who established the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution of Iraq (SCIRI) in the early 1980s while in Iran, where he spent more than two decades in exile. SCIRI later formed its own armed wing, known at the time as the Badr Corps (Faylaq Badr). Many future KH leaders such as Muhandis came from the Badr network, which was supported by Iran. In the 1990s, the General Command of the Iranian Armed Forces paid around \$20 million to Badr to pay salaries and purchase weapons, foodstuffs, vehicles and equipment.²¹ According to the Iraqi sociologist Faleh Abd al-Jabbar, ‘Despite SCIRI’s talk of the Badr Army as an Iraqi organization, the force was under Iranian command. The commander of the force was an Iranian colonel’.²² In the nineties, Badr maintained underground military bases and networks throughout Iraq. Muhandis and his colleagues ran these bases.

¹⁸ The fighters and groups that answered Sistani’s call in 2014, known as the Atabat or shrine militias, do not feature as powerful political brokers in the PMF or the Iraqi state network. These groups remained loyal primarily to their source of emulation, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and opposed the groups in the networks that were close to Iran. Sistani himself has refused to recognize the PMF, and his representatives never mention the PMF in public statements or in private interviews with the author. Sistani and his Atabat networks, therefore, are not significant nodes at the centre of power in the PMF.

¹⁹ Research interview with Dawa party official; Jabar, F. A. (2003), *The Shi’ite Movement in Iraq*, London: Saqi Books, p. 87; Mansour and Jabar (2017), *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq’s Future*.

²⁰ Author interviews with rank-and-file fighters in brigades 45, 46 and 47, in Baghdad over several years.

²¹ Jabar (2003), *The Shi’ite Movement in Iraq*, p. 253.

²² Ibid.

After the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime, Badr moved around 10,000 fighters into Iraq and established itself along the eastern provinces bordering Iran,²³ from Diyala to Wasit. At this point, its chief of staff Hadi al-Ameri sought to vertically integrate the network more with a social base inside Iraq. Muhandis, however, split from Ameri and formed KH to maintain the vanguard structure. Unlike Badr, KH did not get involved in Iraqi government politics in the years immediately after 2003.²⁴ Instead, it rejected the US occupation. For many years, KH remained a small elite force of some 400 fighters. Despite the split, Muhandis remained part of the Iran-aligned network and worked alongside Ameri in several political, economic and security contexts.

Strong horizontal ties have allowed the KH leadership to pursue a clear vision, responding to threats and shocks in a more coherent way.

As a vanguard network, KH's leadership is united in an ideology of Shia supremacy and *wilayat al-faqih*, adopted from the Iranian Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini. Muhandis was known by many to be driven more by this ideological conviction than by a nationalism that split Iraq and Iran into two countries.²⁵ Many of the parochial networks, such as the Sadrists, rejected *wilayat al-faqih* because of its implications for undermining Iraqi nationalism.

Strong horizontal ties have allowed the KH leadership to pursue a clear vision, responding to threats and shocks in a more coherent way. While the killing of Muhandis presented a significant shock to this network, KH leaders swiftly regrouped and formed several new resistance groups. These included Usbat al-Thaireen, the Islamic Resistance Army (also known as JISIM in Iraq), Kataib al-Shaabaniya, Ashab al-Kahaf, al-Mahdi's Grip, Saraya Thair al-Muhandis, Liwa al-Montaqimoun, and a few others. These groups represent the KH network's retaliation strategy for the killing of Muhandis.

On paper, none of these new resistance groups was officially linked to the PMF Commission or any formal security force. Many of the other PMF networks rejected their apparent connection to these rogue groups. However, fighters in the new armed groups had migrated from existing PMF vanguard and parochial networks. They included KH fighters, as well as those from AAH and other Iranian-aligned groups in the PMF Commission. One of the new groups, the Islamic Resistance Army/JISIM, was formed 100 days after Muhandis's death to avenge his killing and claimed that the KH vanguard network had given it 2,500 fighters.²⁶ The creation

²³ Allawi, A. (2007), *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p. 111.

²⁴ In 2005, Muhandis briefly became a member of parliament, but this was a short stint and is not widely known.

²⁵ Author interview with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, February 2018, Baghdad.

²⁶ Research interviews with security analysts, who wished to remain anonymous, Baghdad, February 2020. See also Knights, M. (2020), 'Back into the Shadows? The Future of Kata'ib Hezbollah and Iran's Other Proxies in Iraq', *CTC Sentinel*, 13(10), <https://ctc.usma.edu/back-into-the-shadows-the-future-of-kataib-hezbollah-and-irans-other-proxies-in-iraq>.

of the Islamic Resistance Army with this specific objective, demonstrates the coherence of the KH leadership, which in the wake of a major shock successfully shifted fighters around and formed new groups to pursue its strategies.

As a vanguard network, KH has weak vertical ties to its base and the communities where it operates.²⁷ Though relatively small compared to parochial networks, KH remains an underground and largely unknown elite force that can rapidly mobilize under different banners and names.²⁸ At one point, even the identity of its so-called leader, Abu Ali al-Askari, was subject to debate. Some in the Iraqi prime minister's office questioned his existence.²⁹ After Muhandis was killed, KH attempted to become more embedded by creating public institutions like youth scout groups,³⁰ yet it struggled to compete with the parochial networks that were already integrated with their social base and mobilized through shared religious devotion.

Parochial networks

The main parochial network that became an organization after 2003 was the Sadrist movement's Mahdi Army (Jaysh al-Mahdi, or JAM), which, with its tens of thousands of members, was the largest Shia militia fighting the US occupying forces. The militia expanded rapidly thanks to the Office of the Martyr al-Sadr's network of local administrative offices and religious institutions, inherited from Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr's pre-2003 movement. Soon after, Jaysh al-Mahdi amassed a significant following among the lower classes of Iraqi Shia society – the Sadrist base – in Baghdad and southern Iraq.³¹

The Sadrist network was impaired by weak horizontal ties. In the mid-2000s, it splintered into smaller fighting units, known as the Special Groups, which included up to 5,000 fighters under the control of Qais al-Khazali. These Special Groups represented leadership structures within the Sadrist network that sought more autonomy from the leader Muqtada al-Sadr. Many of these leaders, like Khazali, were more loyal to his father, Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr, and challenged Muqtada.³²

As a result, leaders of the Special Groups moved closer to the Iranian-aligned networks. The IRGC leader, Qassim Soleimani, understood how to navigate between the competing networks to take advantage of their weak horizontal ties. He designed a military structure that interfaced effectively with smaller units across the Sadrist network.³³ According to Khazali, by this stage, Sadrist paramilitaries were receiving

²⁷ Malik, H. (2020), 'The Rise of Kata'ib Hezbollah's Hegemonic "Resistance"', WINEP *Fikra Forum* blog, 1 December 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/rise-kataib-hezbollah-hegemonic-resistance>.

²⁸ Knights (2020), 'Back into the Shadows? The Future of Kata'ib Hezbollah and Iran's Other Proxies in Iraq'.

²⁹ Research interview with Iraqi security officer, who wished to remain anonymous, Baghdad, February 2020.

³⁰ Malik, H. (@HamdiAMalik) (2020), 'Kata'ib Hezbollah is increasingly using its youth movements to make its presence felt throughout society', tweet, 11 November 2020, <https://twitter.com/HamdiAMalik/status/1326465073678839808>.

³¹ This even included members of Saddam Hussein's *fedayeen* who had lost their jobs due to Coalition Provisional Authority Order 2 (which disbanded Saddam Hussein's Iraqi military, security, and intelligence infrastructure). See Robin-D'Cruz, B. and Mansour, M. (2020), *Making Sense of the Sadrists: Fragmentation and Unstable Politics*, Pennsylvania: Foreign Policy Research Institute, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/iraq-chapter-1.pdf>.

³² Ibid.

³³ Author interview with Qassim Soleimani's adviser, who wished to remain anonymous, Sulaymaniya, April 2018.

around \$2 million per month from Iranian sources, totalling \$24 million per year (not including extensive training and other materiel).³⁴ Internal conflict was at times managed through Soleimani's mediation.³⁵

These contestations nonetheless continued and at times flared up into violence. From October 2019, fighters from the AAH and Saraya al-Salam fought each other in southern Iraq under the guise of protests. Their feud became a tit-for-tat exchange of violence and assassinations.³⁶ By the end of 2019, Muqtada al-Sadr left Iraq for temporary safe haven in Qom, Iran, due to threats from within the old Sadrist networks.³⁷

Despite the weak horizontal ties and constant infighting, these parochial networks have been successful in developing vertical ties to their social base. They have set up party offices in the localities where they are present and compete in local and national elections. Many of the parochial networks stem from the historical Sadrist networks – including Saraya al-Salam and AAH. These parochial networks seek to strengthen vertical ties by developing patronage networks and expanding their base. They rely on a mixture of ideological, economic, institutional and sometimes coercive tools to maintain these vertical ties.

Ideology plays a large part in attempts by parochial networks to gain a strong base. As the senior leadership sought to transform the PMF into a more vertically integrated organization (strengthening leadership ties to the social base), it relied on Sistani's *fatwa* that called for men to fight when recruiting to counter the ISIS insurgency. To further increase their appeal, the parochial networks differentiated themselves from the militias of the past by regularly reminding their bases and communities that the PMF was under the command of the *fatwa*. After protests erupted in Basra in 2018 and spread to the rest of southern Iraq and Baghdad in October 2019, many protesters accused the PMF of being behind the government's violent crackdown that killed over 600 and wounded tens of thousands.³⁸ Yet, to defend the PMF from these accusations, its social base readily refers to the *fatwa*. A father of a PMF fighter in Nassiriya explained that 'the PMF have nothing to do with these matters and events [counter-protest violence], and they [his sons] only responded to the *marja's* [Sistani's] call in 2014. We sent our children to fight ISIS'.³⁹ PMF networks sought to use the *fatwa* to overcome their waning ideological power as they transformed from a victorious anti-ISIS force to a counter-protest force.

The crucial caveat in the 2014 *fatwa* called for Iraqi citizens to join government 'armed forces', rather than militias.⁴⁰ Acquiring a connection to the government allowed PMF parochial network leaders to signal to their followers that they were

³⁴ Robin-D'Cruz and Mansour (2020), *Making Sense of the Sadrists: Fragmentation and Unstable Politics*.

³⁵ Cochrane, M. (2009), *The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement*, Iraq Report 12, Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Iraq%20Report%2012%20Sadrist%20Movement%20Fragmentation.pdf>.

³⁶ Mansour, R. and Robin-D'Cruz, B. (2020), 'After Latest Turn, Is Muqtada al-Sadr Losing Influence in Iraq?', Chatham House Expert Comment, 12 February 2020, www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/after-latest-turn-muqtada-al-sadr-losing-influence-iraq.

³⁷ Research interviews, Baghdad, February 2020.

³⁸ Salim, M. and Loveluck, L. (2020), 'New Iraqi leader tries to rein in Iran-backed militias, but task proves daunting', *Washington Post*, 3 July 2020, http://washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/new-iraqi-leader-tries-to-rein-in-iran-backed-militias-but-task-proves-daunting/2020/07/02/4963bcaa-baea-11ea-97c1-6cf116ffe26c_story.html.

³⁹ Research interview, Nassiriya, May 2020.

⁴⁰ Mansour and Jabar (2017), *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future*.

in compliance with the *fatwa*. In Basra, a civil society leader explained the difference in her province where many had begun to accuse the PMF of targeting protesters and civil society activists on numerous occasions, ‘Those who organize for the military wing are what we call the PMF. Those are the ones who participated in the battle against ISIS. The militias are the ones who carry out the eliminations [attacks on protestors and civil society activists].’⁴¹ This differentiation, between the PMF and the ‘militias’, or later between the PMF and the ‘factions’ (*fasayil*), helped the PMF parochial networks maintain some ideological power over their social bases, despite losing widespread popularity due to accusations of having targeted peaceful protests in Basra in 2018 and elsewhere after October 2019.

Parochial network tactics for building vertical ties included using their access to state networks to offer employment opportunities to their social bases. According to a lawyer from Baghdad, ‘the poor are unable to get loans to gain a fixed resource. Most of the youth in our areas resort to being hired by the PMF and Saraya al-Salam. Sometimes you think that this poverty is a methodology used by the factions to gain fighters. If job opportunities become available, they will go to the relatives and friends of the partisans.’⁴² A father whose children serve in the PMF said, ‘There is no need to fear [if your relatives are employed by the PMF], especially because your children receive salaries from the government. Sometimes they [the PMF] insist that orders must be followed, those who refuse will lose their [government] salary.’⁴³ This reveals how economic incentives and coercion connect and serve as tools for parochial networks to maintain their social base when ideological arguments wane.

Even those who are not part of the social base tend to go through the PMF networks for expediency and to avoid government red tape.

Even those who are not part of the social base tend to go through the PMF networks for expediency and to avoid government red tape. A tribal leader, who was critical of the PMF networks for blackmailing residents in his province of Kirkuk, acknowledged that if he encountered any trouble, his first resort was to go to the PMF. He found them quicker to respond and more effective because they were from the local area, unlike the federal police, who included officers from all over the country.⁴⁴ A resident from Baghdad, who the PMF had kidnapped and later released, acknowledged that in most cases working closely with PMF parties, companies, economic committees or leaders meant that ‘loans can be obtained’ and ‘projects will not be obstructed or rejected’.⁴⁵ Most interviewees – whether pro- or anti-PMF – agreed that its networks were key to delivering or facilitating public services.

To strengthen their public authority more generally, these parochial networks also rely on modes of coercion, which has created a sense of fear in the country. PMF networks have enforced their authority on citizens by specifically targeting

⁴¹ Research interview, Basra, May 2020.

⁴² Research interview, Baghdad, 2020.

⁴³ Research interview, Nassiriya, May 2020.

⁴⁴ Research interview, Kirkuk, 2020.

⁴⁵ Research interview, Baghdad, 2020.

those who have spoken out against them, from civil society activists to government leaders including criticisms of President Barham Salih and Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, whom they accused of being US agents. PMF networks are also implicated in a series of kidnappings and assassinations in the country.⁴⁶

This mixture of tactics has allowed parochial networks to hold varying degrees of vertical ties with their social bases. This translated into successes in elections in 2018, when the Sadrists won the most seats and the PMF electoral bloc, Fateh, came second (most of its seats went to Badr and AAH). The voter turnout in that election was its lowest since the US-led invasion, a sign that the wider Iraqi population was not necessarily happy with the ruling elite, including the PMF parochial networks.⁴⁷ However, the key to the PMF's electoral success was its strong social base, which went out to vote for the political parties of the parochial networks.

The struggle to integrate parochial and vanguard networks

In 2014, as ISIS began to take over large parts of Iraq's territory, PMF leaders wanted to transform these vanguard and parochial networks into an integrated organization. They focused efforts on the PMF Commission, which was legally recognized by the Iraqi parliament in November 2016 as 'an independent military formation as part of the Iraqi armed forces and linked to the Commander-in-Chief'.⁴⁸ Muhandis was the main driver of this integration effort. To strengthen horizontal ties by centralizing the command structure, he sought to take formal decision-making power over military strategy and revenue generation from the disparate networks and to create a hierarchical structure for the PMF.⁴⁹ He looked to Executive Order 331 of 2019 as the legal framework to strengthen these ties.

However, the networks did not neatly adhere to the new organization. Prior to his death, Muhandis confided that even he could not control all the networks.⁵⁰ Its leaders had divergent political interests and views about the future role and vision for the PMF. Some groups or actors appeared ambivalent about their membership and association with the PMF. For example, although the brigades under the command of Muqtada al-Sadr have always been part of the PMF Commission (Brigade 313 and 314), he has at times spoken out against the commission, once calling the PMF 'impudent militias' (*al-miliyat al-waqiha*) and has even denied he's part of the commission. Muhandis struggled to integrate local parochial networks.

⁴⁶ Human Rights Watch (2020), 'Iraq: Human Rights Watch Group Submission to the Working Group in Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances', <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/17/iraq-human-rights-watch-submission-working-group-enforced-or-involuntary>.

⁴⁷ Mansour, R. (2018), *Iraq's 2018 Government Formation: Unpacking the Friction between Reform and the Status Quo*, LSE Middle East Centre Report, London: London School of Economics, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100099/1/Mansour_Iraq_s_2018_government_formation_2019.pdf.

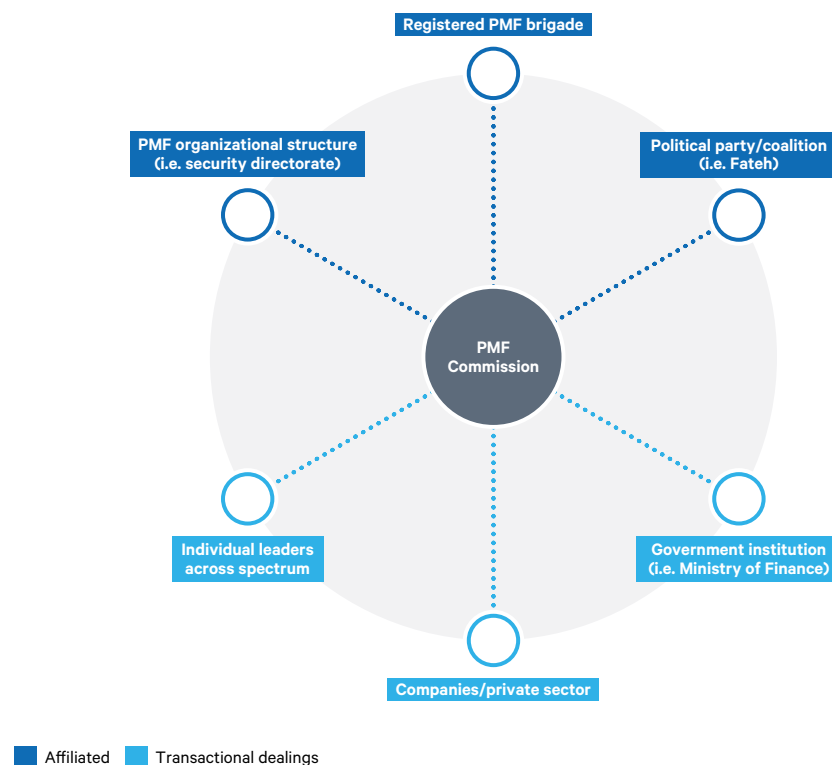
⁴⁸ Iraqi Ministry of Justice (2016), Law no. 40 (2016) Hayat al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Arabic), <https://www.moj.gov.iq/view.2899>.

⁴⁹ However, Muhandis was killed before the order was effectively implemented. After his killing, an informal committee within the PMF was set up to attempt to coordinate military affairs, as well as salaries and other organizational processes.

⁵⁰ Research interview with a security analyst, who wished to remain anonymous, January 2020.

Muhandis also struggled to control revenue generation. Near Mosul, the Shabak Brigade 30 conquered key territory including checkpoints that generate considerable revenue, such as on the road from Mosul to Erbil. Muhandis wanted to centralize these revenue generation schemes as part of forging a single organization. He ordered Brigade 30 to withdraw from the Ninewa Plains in August 2019. However, the brigade refused to do so, and Muhandis was forced to capitulate on his position and strike a new deal that allowed the brigade to maintain the checkpoint.

Figure 2. The PMF Commission network



Source: Compiled as part of the Hybrid Armed Actors project.

Shifting affiliations, group titles, formations and informal patterns of control or influence have frustrated attempts to document and understand the organizational structure of the PMF. These same factors have also prevented the PMF from becoming an integrated organization. Instead, it remains a series of networks – some vanguard and some parochial. The networks exist across all the different groups – both inside the commission as brigades or outside it as factions (*fasayil*); and not just at a leadership level, but at lower levels throughout the political, security and economic structures. This understanding of the inner workings of the PMF is key for policymakers who seek to reform the security sector, as discussed later in this paper.

04 PMF networks and the Iraqi state

PMF networks enjoy a symbiotic relationship with Iraq's security, political and economic arenas. Their ubiquity makes them a central consideration in efforts to bring stability to Iraq.

PMF networks have become indistinguishable from other networks that make up the Iraqi state. Not only do they cooperate and compete with each other, but they do so in coordination with other Iraqi officials and parties – including those who might on the surface appear to be ideologically or politically opposed to the PMF. The interlinkages and connections of its networks allow the PMF to permeate different security, political and economic spaces.⁵¹ Such interlinkages also traverse party, sectarian and neo-Weberian state/non-state lines.⁵² Networks within the PMF play a role in defending the post-2003 political system, of which they are a part and from which they benefit. This chapter analyses the connectivity between the PMF networks and the Iraqi state, revealing insights into the nature of both.

Engaging in the state security sector

The PMF is known primarily as a security actor. Its contributions in the fight against ISIS and in holding territory after ISIS was expelled are significant factors behind its current, powerful status. As a government-recognized security force, its

⁵¹ Mansour, R. (2018), 'More than Militias: Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces are Here to Stay', War on the Rocks, 3 April 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/more-than-militias-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces-are-here-to-stay/>; Rudolf, I. (2019), *The Hashd's Popular Gambit: Demystifying PMU Integration in Post-IS Iraq*, ICSR Report, King's College London: London, <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/ICSR-Report-The-Hashd%E2%80%99s-Popular-Gambit-Demystifying-PMU-Integration-in-Post%E2%80%91IS-Iraq.pdf>.

⁵² Skocpol (1985), 'Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research'.

members are in control of significant territory and strategic areas of Iraq, largely in cooperation with other state security authorities; sometimes, however, the PMF takes advantage of its position in control of local terrain to advance its own interests, including financially. It cooperates with and props up other security institutions, but also sometimes acts to fill in gaps or substitute where there are deficits in the state security space. In some areas, the PMF is the main security actor, which locals turn to when they need protection or an advocate in disputes or law enforcement, as discussed later.

On paper, the PMF networks appear integrated into the PMF Commission, which includes more than 150,000 personnel and had an annual budget of \$2.6 billion in 2020.⁵³ According to Executive Order 331, the commission's president controls the directorates of finance, administration, legal affairs, security (internal affairs), audit and monitoring, spiritual guidance, planning and procurement, and personnel information. The commission has sought to structure the networks into more formal entities such as brigades – each including 3,000 fighters. However, the reality is more opaque as the networks are reluctant to adhere to this stipulated number of fighters and other organizational by-laws. The commission's president is at the behest of brokers in the larger network.

Some network members are double-hatted, enjoying a position in the PMF and another position in a government security institution. According to security analysts, several PMF-affiliated members enjoy senior civil service positions – special grades (*al-darajat al-khasa*) – in the National Security Council (NSC). Other leaders have led PMF brigades while also holding a government job outside the NSC. At one point, for instance, Abu Dergham al-Maturi led PMF Brigade 5 (a Badr brigade) while also serving as deputy commander of the federal police inside the Ministry of Interior.⁵⁴ PMF networks are also heavily involved with the Iraq Security Forces (ISF). The Commander of Operations in Kirkuk is Brigadier Saad Harbiya, who works closely with Badr (Brigade 16) in Kirkuk. In Diyala, similarly, the ISF in the governorate is led by either Badr members or other members from the PMF networks. In the Green Zone, Commander of the Special Squad Lieutenant General Tahseen al-Aboudi (Abu Munthadhar al-Husseini) had been a member of Badr for decades.⁵⁵

Some groups sit outside the PMF Commission and Iraqi government but remain connected to the PMF security network. Although these groups – called the *fasayil* – appeared to operate outside the commission's formal command-and-control structure, at times their connection to the PMF became more obvious. In May 2019, one of these factions, the Free Revolutionaries Front, published a video calling for

⁵³ Knights, Malik and al-Tamimi (2020), *Honored, not Contained: The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces*.

⁵⁴ Abu Dergham al-Maturi has appeared in several social media posts from the same period identifying him alternately as a deputy commander of the Iraqi federal police and as the leader of PMF Brigade 5, see anonymous (2017), Social media posts relating to Abu Dergham al-Maturi (Arabic), 31 October 2017, <https://justpaste.it/abuderghammauri>.

⁵⁵ Research interviews with security analysts, who wished to remain anonymous, Diyala, December 2019.

a military confrontation against the US presence in Iraq.⁵⁶ The video featured flags from several PMF brigades, including Badr and AAH. However, the PMF Commission denied any connection to the video.⁵⁷

Playing party politics

The characteristics of PMF networks go beyond that of a traditional military organization, particularly in regard to politics. Formally, PMF groups are represented through their own political parties that compete in elections, appoint cabinet ministers and send proxies to serve in senior civil service positions across the government and its institutions. The PMF is also present in local governments, and in key non-government institutions involved in public service delivery and governance.

Since 2003, most of Iraq's political parties ranging from the Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), to the Shia Islamist parties, including the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI, which was formerly SCIRI), Dawa, the Sadrist movement, and Sunni politicians, have relied on their own armed networks. Similarly, PMF groups are comprised of an armed group and a formal political party. While Iraqi law – Article 8(3) of the Law on Political Parties (2015) – stipulates that a political party cannot be or work with an armed or paramilitary organization, the reality is different. State power is not found in formal laws but instead in the connectivity to armed networks.⁵⁸

To bypass such laws, PMF groups simply change their names, which undermines the efforts to use formal laws as a check on power. When the Badr Corps decided to enter politics, its name changed to the Badr Organization. In the lead-up to the 2014 elections, AAH established Sadiqoun as its political wing with members in parliament. However, its political leader, Qais al-Khazali, also led its armed group. Similarly, Kataib Jund al-Imam's political name is the Islamic Movement in Iraq. However, although the names have changed, the networks have largely remained the same. A senior PMF leader told the author that after the fight against ISIS and in the lead-up to the 2018 elections, he switched from army fatigues to suits, since he was returning to politics.⁵⁹ Moreover, several MPs are former or even current fighters. Several of Sadr's Sairoun MPs are former Mahdi Army fighters, such as Mudhafar Ismail al-Fadhil, who was in prison for murder but was released in 2018 and joined Sairoun. Ahmad al-Asadi and Qais al-Khazali are also MPs who would return to the battlefield when needed.

⁵⁶ YouTube (2019), 'The PMF announces the establishment of Jabhat al-Thuwar al-Ahrar' (Arabic), 29 May 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zhSuNPQA8M>.

⁵⁷ Almasalah (2019), 'What is the identity of Jabhat al-Thuwar al-Ahrar? And what is its relationship with the PMF?' (Arabic), 29 May 2019, <https://almasalah.com/ar/news/171976/ما-هوية-جبهة-الثوار-الأحرار-وما-علاقتها-بالحشد-الشعبي>.

⁵⁸ Council of Representatives of Iraq (2015), 'Law of Political Parties' (Arabic), <https://arb.parliament.iq/archive/2015/08/27/20218>. It should be noted that the Kurdish peshmerga is constitutionally recognized but remains primarily loyal to political parties rather than the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

⁵⁹ Mansour (2018), 'More than Militias: Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces are Here to Stay'.

Table 1. PMF political parties, leaders and affiliated armed groups that make up Fateh

PMF political party	PMF political party (Arabic)	PMF armed group	Political leader	Number of MPs in parliament
Badr Organization	منظمة بدر	Badr Organization	Hadi al-Ameri	22 ⁶⁰
Sadiqoun Movement	حركة صادقون	Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH)	Qais al-Khazali	15
Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq	المجلس الأعلى الإسلامي العراقي	Saraya al-Jihad and Saraya Ansar al-Aqidah	Humam Hamoudi	2
The Independent National Assembly	التجمع الشعبي المستقل	N/A	Falah al-Jazari	1
The Islamic Movement in Iraq	الحركة الإسلامية في العراق	Kataib Jund al-Imam	Ahmad al-Asadi	2
Victorious Bloc	كتلة منتصرون	Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhadah	Falih Hassan al-Khazali	1
Professionals Party for Construction	حزب مهنيون للاعمار	Kataib al-Imam Ali	Mohammed Sahib al-Darraj	1
Justice and Unity Gathering	تجمع العدالة والوحدة	N/A	Amir Hussein Jassim Ali al-Fayez	1
Iraq of the Future Gathering	تجمع عراق المستقبل	N/A	Ibrahim Mohammad Bahr Alom	1
Honesty and Giving Movement	حركة الصدق والعطاء	Harakat Ansar Allah al-Awfiya	Murtadha Ali Hamoud al-Saadi	2
Jihad and Development Movement	حركة الجهاد والبناء	Kataib Hezbollah (KH)	Hassan al-Sari	0
Islamic Vanguard Party	حزب الطليعة الإسلامي	Saraya al-Khurasani	Ali al-Yasiri	0
Kafa Gathering	تجمع كفى صرخة للتغيير	N/A	Rahim Darraj	0
Shabak Democratic Assembly	تجمع الشبك الديمقراطي	Shabak PMF	Haneen al-Qadu ⁶¹	0
Iraqi Islamic Action Organization	منظمة العمل الاسلامي العراقية	N/A	Ibrahim al-Mutairi	0
Loyalty and Change Bloc	كتلة الوفاء والتغيير	N/A	Iskandar Hassan Jawad Wtut	0
15th of Shaban Islamic Movement	حركة 15 شعبان الاسلامية	Mujahidi al-Haraka al-Shabaniya wa Muqatili al-Ahwar	Hamza al-Musawi	0

Source: Compiled as part of the Hybrid Armed Actors project.

The 2018 national election was not only the first vote since the defeat of ISIS but also resulted in the first ever parliamentary grouping that almost exclusively represents PMF networks. These groups, emboldened after defeating ISIS and gaining popularity, broke from other political associations to form their own

⁶⁰ One seat would later go to the Loyalty and Change Bloc of Iskandar Hassan Jawad Wtut.

⁶¹ Haneen al-Qadu passed away in December 2020.

electoral bloc: Fateh. With support from the large social bases of its parochial networks, 48 Fateh candidates were elected as MPs. Within this figure, Badr maintained its 22 seats that it won in the 2014 election;⁶² AAH increased its representation from one MP in 2014 to 15 MPs in 2018. Table 1 shows the seats won by the Fateh Alliance. The Fateh seats and other PMF parliamentary seats make up the Ameri-led Binaa alliance, which claims to be the largest bloc in parliament.⁶³ The PMF's political network stretches beyond Fateh and includes other political parties, electoral lists and parliamentary groupings that make up the Iraqi state.⁶⁴

A number of MPs from the PMF network also won parliamentary representation through the minority quota – which guarantees three seats for Christians and one seat each to Yazidi, Mandeian and Shabak groups. Rayan Kaldani's Babilyoon – the political wing of his Christian armed group Kataib Babilyoon (Brigade 50) of the PMF Commission – won two seats as part of the quota in 2018. According to a security analyst, some of Kaldani's votes came from the southern, predominantly Shia, provinces such as Wasit, where he has no constituency but where PMF networks were able to divert enough votes to take advantage of the quota.⁶⁵

In the span of one week in September 2018, as the government formation process was finalizing, Fateh increased its de facto number of seats from 48 to around 60. It gained these seats by tapping into individuals in its networks who were affiliated with other parties or blocs.

In the 2018 election, Sadr's Sairoun electoral bloc initially performed better than Fateh, winning the most seats with 54 MPs. Sairoun was primarily composed of the Sadrist movement, known as the al-Istiqama Party, with only a couple of seats going to its allied Iraqi Communist Party and the Republican Party. Sadr then formed the Islah parliamentary bloc, which was led by Sairoun and included the Victory Alliance, National Wisdom Party, and other groups. While Sairoun is not considered a PMF network, Sadr's parochial military network is connected to the PMF, both inside the PMF Commission, where he controls two brigades, and outside it, where he regularly meets and works with PMF senior leaders. In the span of one week in September 2018, as the government formation process was finalizing, Fateh increased its de facto number of seats from 48 to around 60. It gained these seats by tapping into individuals in its networks who were affiliated with other parties or blocs. For instance, Faleh al-Fayadh had run as part of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's Victory Alliance but switched allegiance to Fateh during the government

⁶² Historically, Badr has been the driving force in the parliamentary politics of PMF networks. It competed as part of ISCI in the 2005 and 2010 elections, and then split from ISCI to compete on its own in 2014.

⁶³ The largest bloc following the 2018 election has yet to be officially determined. Instead, parliament is operating under a loose 'understanding' between the two major blocs that claim to be the largest: Ameri's Binaa and Sadr's Islah.

⁶⁴ These include members of the State of Law Coalition, Fortress of the Masses (*qalat al-jamahir*) Coalition, National Wisdom Party (*tayar al-hikma al-watani*), the National Coalition, Tamdun Coalition, Babiliyoon Movement, Erada Movement, Iraqi Decision Coalition, the Solution Party, and the Salahaddin is Our Identity Alliance.

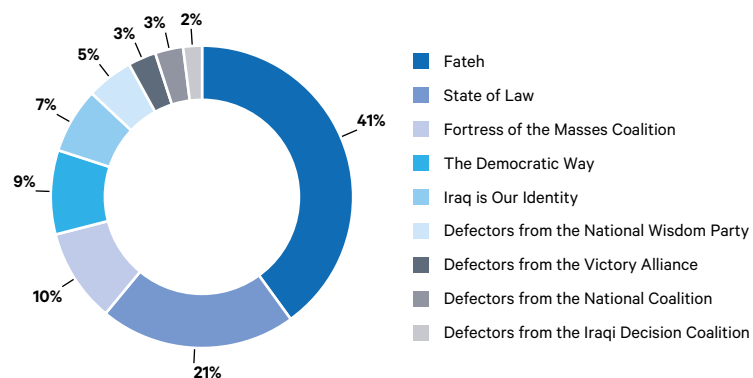
⁶⁵ Research interview with security analyst, who wished to remain anonymous, Baghdad, February 2020.

formation. Unable to reach a unified parliamentary bloc, Ameri and Sadr instead came to an understanding that guided Iraq's parliament after 2018. In this way, the government that dominated Iraqi politics after 2018 had a mandate through an alliance between two major power brokers with varying yet clear connections to PMF networks.

Acquiring influence in Iraq's formal bureaucracy

Post-2003 Iraqi politics is based on an ethno-sectarian power-sharing agreement or elite-pact between the main political party networks, which compete and cooperate over government positions and state coffers.⁶⁶ After each election, key government appointments – the gateway to ministerial control, government contracts and largesse – are negotiated among the brokers that represent the various networks, including the PMF. After 2014, the position of PMF networks strengthened to become a driving force at the heart of political negotiations, with an increasing number of brokers connected to the state. Some of these brokers engaged in closed-door meetings and backroom deals that determined everything from who will be the next prime minister to the appointment of senior civil servants.

Figure 3. Parties and blocs that make up the Binaa alliance



Source: Compiled as part of the Hybrid Armed Actors project.

Note: This data reflects the alliance on 3 September 2018. Not all members of the listed parties and blocs are affiliated with the Binaa alliance.

PMF networks and brokers are part of the Binaa alliance, which includes Fateh as well as other Shia Islamist leaders such as Nouri al-Maliki (State of Law coalition) and Sunni leaders such as Khamis al-Khanjar (who came from the Iraqi Decision Coalition) (see Figure 3). After 2018, on many issues, Binaa worked with political coalitions and individuals across the spectrum, including at times with Mohammed al-Halbousi, the speaker of the parliament, and Massoud Barzani's KDP. This loose coalition of networks was on the same side in parliamentary debates on

⁶⁶ Dodge, T. (2019), 'Muhasasa Ta'ifiya and its Others: Domination and Contestation in Iraq's Political Field', *POMEPS Studies 35: Religion, Violence, and the State in Iraq*, pp. 38–46, https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/POMEPS_Studies_35.1.pdf; Herring, E. and Rangwala, G. (2006), *Iraq in Fragments: The Occupation and its Legacy*, London: Hurst & Co., pp. 136–137; Mansour, R. (2017), *Iraq After the Fall of ISIS: The Struggle for The State*, Research Paper, London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://reader.chathamhouse.org/iraq-after-fall-struggle-state>.

the electoral law bill that was passed in 2020,⁶⁷ mounting general resistance to reform measures, or selecting the prime minister or president – this group in 2018 opposed the selection of Barham Salih, preferring Fuad Hussein for president.

PMF networks seek to expand their influence in central government and its institutions and to build patronage networks by employing their own people in public sector jobs. The longest-serving example of control over a ministry is that of Badr in the Ministry of Interior. This was a consequence of a push to integrate Badr into the ministry from 2004 onwards. However, the lack of accountability in the process meant that the ministry has instead become a tool for Badr networks to gain institutional power over the years.

Since 2003, but most explicitly in the years of so-called independent technocratic ministers, political parties have focused on gaining influence within each ministry and state institution by sending proxies into senior positions – known primarily as the special grades (*al-darajat al-khasa*). The approximately 5,000 senior civil servants who make up this system are a coveted prize for political parties. Many are often directors-general or deputy ministers in a ministry but report first to the political party they represent rather than to the minister. These proxies are essential for pressuring weak, independent ministers into ensuring that contracts and other ministerial decisions favour the parties of these civil servants.

Having significantly increased their political power in the 2018 election, PMF parochial networks sought to increase their representation across senior state bureaucratic institutions. In November 2019, the Minister of Communications Naim Thajeel hired Idris Khalid Abdul Rahman (an economic officer for Brigade 40, Kataib al-Imam Ali), as director-general of the Public Enterprise for Communication and Information. Rahman acquired this major position despite having only served one year in a junior position in the ministry. Jasib Abdul Zahra,⁶⁸ the political representative of KH in Basra, was appointed director-general of the Petrochemical Industries Company within the Ministry of Industry.⁶⁹ In 2020, AAH networks supported the appointment of Hussein al-Qasid as director-general of the cultural department at the ministry; Qasid was a university lecturer and also a member of the Iraqi Writers' Union and of AAH since 2016. In August 2019, the then prime minister, Adel Abd al-Mahdi, appointed Ziyad Khalifa Khazal al-Tamimi, a tribal figure from Diyala with close connections to Hadi al-Ameri and PMF Brigade 24, as inspector general at the Ministry of Defense.⁷⁰

These examples are not unique to PMF networks, but they represent the way in which politics is done in Iraq. Political parties send their proxies to reinforce their interests in each ministry and government institution, including positions where

⁶⁷ Iraqi Ministry of Justice (2020), Law no. 9 (2020) Law for Electing the Iraqi Council of Representatives (Arabic), <https://moj.gov.iq/view.5200>.

⁶⁸ Abdul Zahra joined Badr Organization in 2002; he started working as a political assistant to Muhandis in 2010; and joined KH in 2012.

⁶⁹ Alzawraa Company (2019), 'Engineer Jasib Abdul Zahra Yassin, General Manager of Alzawraa Company, attends the fourth annual conference for supporting Iraqi manufacturing' (Arabic), Facebook post, <https://www.facebook.com/1656216068006406/posts/2187889188172422>.

⁷⁰ Sky Press (2019), 'In the midst of political refusal, Abd al-Mahdi orders the appointment of Ziyad Khalifa al-Tamimi, a commander in the PMF, as inspector general in the Ministry of Defense' (Arabic), 8 August 2019, <https://www.skypressiq.net/2019/8/8/الوسط-رفض-سياسي-عبد-المهدي-يأمر-ب-تعيين-زياد-خليفة-التميمي-القيادي-في-الحشد-مفتشا-عاما-لوزارة-الدفاع>.

reform or accountability can threaten party influence. For these networks – like all Iraqi political parties and networks – gaining influence in state bureaucratic positions is key to acquiring and maintaining political power.

Across Iraq's localities, PMF networks negotiate with other political networks. Falah al-Jazairi, who was a member of the KH general secretariat, failed to win a seat with Fateh in the 2018 election but then cooperated with Maliki's State of Law coalition and was later appointed governor of Baghdad. Connectivity to the network via the Binaa alliance was key to his appointment. In Ninewa, parties across the ethnic and religious spectrum at times cooperate with each other in transactional relations. Hashim Mohammed Ali Taha al-Brefakani, a KDP member of the provincial council, worked closely with PMF networks and brokered several agreements between the KDP and PMF. Another provincial council member, Ali Khedayer al-Jabouri, was key to brokering relations between the parliamentary speaker Mohammad al-Halbousi and certain Sunni PMF networks. In Dhi Qar, Haji Jabbar al-Moussawi was a KH secretary-general and also a member of the provincial council, not as part of Fateh but rather the State of Law coalition. Also in Ninewa, Najm al-Din al-Jabouri became governor after reaching an agreement with the PMF leadership, which argued for a presence in certain districts under the control of PMF networks.⁷¹ In Kirkuk, Hadi al-Ameri played a crucial role in appointing Rakan al-Jabouri as the acting governor for the province. In the post-ISIS years, the PMF networks have relied on Jabouri for influence and he is publicly supportive of the PMF in Kirkuk. On many occasions, he has rejected calls for removing the PMF from the governorate, instead praising the PMF's security role in the province.

In some localities particularly in central and southern Iraq, PMF networks span into local government institutions as part of grand bargains often made in Baghdad.

In some localities, particularly in central and southern Iraq, PMF networks span into local government institutions as part of grand bargains often made in Baghdad. For example, the complex oil processes in Basra include a wide array of Shia political parties, ISCI, the Hakim network, PMF networks such as KH, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada and AAH, the Sadrist network, Dawa and the Fadhillah Party. Often, PMF influence is difficult to distinguish as it takes the form of state processes in which a host of networks work together under flexible agreements.

In the recently liberated areas, however, competition over local state institutions is more conspicuous. The defeat of ISIS in Ninewa presented an opportunity for national parties to compete for power. The dispute over who filled the post of education general-director in the governorate illustrates the violence that can accompany contestation of state institutions. Ahmad al-Asadi's Sanad Party – a network within Fateh – sought to employ its affiliate Khalid Taha Saeed in the

⁷¹ Research interviews with Ninewa MP Ahmad al-Jabouri, employees in the local provincial council and economic experts, 2020.

post. Sanad claimed this local position after a series of negotiations within the PMF networks once the government had been formed in 2018. According to local sources, Saeed stormed the building accompanied by PMF fighters linked to the Sanad network and called for the general-director, Khaled Jumaa Shaheen, to resign from the post. However, Shaheen refused. According to a security analyst, Ninewa's Governor Jabouri declined to investigate the case in order to reduce political tensions and told the Ministry of Education to speed up the process of issuing a ministerial decree to remove Shaheen. Shortly thereafter, Shaheen was replaced by Saeed.⁷² This story reveals not only how local government institutions are contested, but also the connectivity between federal and local state competition among these networks.

Reaching into non-government spaces

The PMF – like traditional political parties – is also involved in civil society and humanitarian organizations. Mohammed al-Khuzai, a member connected to KH's media office, was nominated in 2019 as assistant secretary general for the Iraqi Red Crescent Society. Khuzai, who worked for Abu Zainab al-Lami's militia faction between 1999 and 2004, was trained by Imad Mughniyeh and joined KH in 2007. He was pardoned during the 2008 National Reconciliation Pardon, after which he used his connection with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis to join the Iraqi Red Crescent Society in 2009 as director for media and youth.

Like most Iraqi political parties, PMF networks employ communications strategies, including a host of television channels, newspapers and social media groups. These channels allow the PMF networks to build ideational power to strengthen vertical ties.

Delivering state services

PMF networks use their connection to the state to perform the activities of government.⁷³ It is common for groups under the PMF to issue their own 'authorization' letters that allow civilians and businesses to pass through checkpoints across the country.⁷⁴ Moving through the province of Diyala, for instance, may be best facilitated with a letter from the Badr Organization or AAH, which have gained power in much of the province. Many former fighters still use their connection to the PMF to move across state lines, 'I still use my PMF identity card because it helps a lot in moving through official state checkpoints, especially because of the respect for Sistani PMF [the Atabat or shrine militias that are under Sistani's leadership]. Many prefer it to many of the other factions.'⁷⁵ In Kirkuk, a former fighter who fought with the tribal mobilization forces continued to maintain a connection to Brigade 56. He described Mulla Majeed, who headed the brigade, as someone who

⁷² Research interview with security analyst, who wished to remain anonymous, 2020; Kirkuk Now (2019), 'Ninewa governor and PMF enter conflict over the post of education general-director' (Arabic), 11 December 2019, <https://kirkuknow.com/ar/news/60913>.

⁷³ For more on performing the state, see, Ciro Martinez, J. and Eng, B. (2017), 'Struggling to Perform the State: The Politics of Bread in the Syrian Civil War', *International Political Sociology*, 11(2): pp. 130–147, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olw026>.

⁷⁴ Author interviews with PMF leaders, who wished to remain anonymous, 2016–18.

⁷⁵ Research interview, Babylon, 2020.

could ‘make things happen’ because of the network of relationships that Majeed had with different government officials.⁷⁶ This connectivity allowed the PMF’s parochial networks to maintain stronger vertical ties with its base, which benefited from this access in everyday life.

Many residents – from network social bases and communities – argue that the PMF networks are more efficient than government bureaucracy in solving problems. A businessman in Baghdad spoke of problems with threats and blackmail, ‘Frankly, I use the PMF and its factions because they have authority and respect in the central and southern governorates. There is no issue that they cannot solve.’⁷⁷ This ability to solve problems was based on the power that these networks had gained over government institutions. In many cases, they acted on behalf of the government.

Employment in the government also presented an opportunity for PMF networks to outsource labour costs and develop local patronage networks. In Kirkuk, members of Brigade 56 have been employed in around 40 per cent of public vacancies in various sectors, such as education, service provision, and other local and provincial directorates in Hawija, its subdistricts, and in Kirkuk city.⁷⁸ The PMF uses its control over institutions to hire its members, who become loyal to the brigade for employing them. The governor of Diyala has similarly employed Badr members and loyalists in various government offices and institutions (mayors and heads of towns and districts – except for areas that are Kurdish-dominated).

Tapping into state coffers

The pursuit of profits for PMF brokers involves connecting to the networks that make up the wealthy rentier state in Iraq – a connection that gives access to state coffers. Iraq’s annual government budget, which in some years has exceeded \$100 billion, offers the single largest source of revenue in the country.

The main method of wealth accumulation for the PMF is through government salaries. Each year, the government passes a federal budget that allocates funding to the PMF Commission for the salaries of members and martyr families, as well as non-cash material support such as weapons and ammunition. Muhandis was the PMF official responsible for negotiating this sum with the Iraqi government. He worked with Fateh parliamentarians to pass national budgets that favoured allocating sufficient resources to the PMF Commission. As a result of the political successes in the 2018 elections, Fateh MPs successfully increased the 2019 annual budget allocation to the PMF Commission by one-fifth to \$2.16 billion.⁷⁹ This budget also included funding for weapons, ammunition and other logistical support (around \$80 million), as well as for the families of PMF martyrs (around \$84 billion), and for PMF reconstruction projects in recently liberated areas (\$840,000). While salaries vary, in general a single PMF fighter receives 950,000 IQD (\$800) per month and a married PMF fighter receives 1,110,000 IQD (\$922) per month.

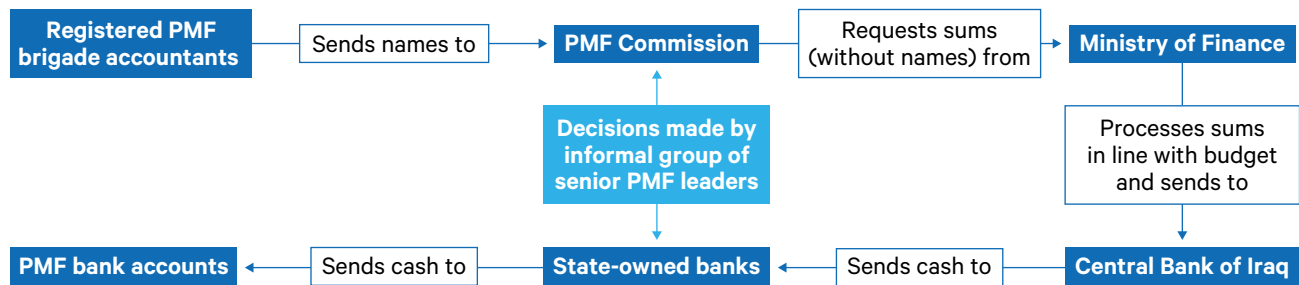
⁷⁶ Research interview, Kirkuk, 2020.

⁷⁷ Research interview, Baghdad, 2020.

⁷⁸ Research interview, Diyala, December 2019.

⁷⁹ Bayan Center (2019), *Iraq National Budget (Arabic)*, <https://www.bayancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/4529.pdf>.

Figure 4. PMF salary payment flow



Source: Compiled as part of the Hybrid Armed Actors project.

A formal integrated system of payments is meant to ensure accountability in salary distribution. But, decisions on salary allocation are another area where power is found outside formal government institutions. Each registered PMF brigade has an accountant who submits a list of names (to be paid) to the PMF Commission. On paper, the general manager of the finance department and the manager of the central administration must then review the names. However, these two formal government positions serve administrative roles and are removed from state power. Instead, senior PMF leaders intervene at this point to ensure payment goes to preferred groups. Prior to his assassination, Muhandis was the main leader responsible for these decisions.

Competition between networks for salary payments is intense. In the past, Sadrists and Sistani's (Atabat) networks complained that they were not getting a fair share of salaries from Muhandis. A Sistani representative confided to the author in 2016 that only 4,800 of the 14,500 expected salaries were paid. In the same time period, Saraya al-Salam put forward more than 20,000 recruits to the government for the approval of salaries, but PMF administrators only accepted 3,000.⁸⁰ Following the death of Muhandis, an informal committee within the PMF was set up to decide on the allocation of PMF fighters' salaries.⁸¹

After senior PMF leaders approve payment details, they send a total figure without names to the Ministry of Finance, which simply checks that the number is consistent with the national budget allocation then formally requests that the Central Bank of Iraq (CBI) send cash to bank accounts owned by the PMF Commission. Neither the ministry nor the CBI are aware of the names or purpose of the payments and only send lump sums. PMF network brokers have a degree of separation from the CBI, which cannot effectively monitor Qi Card transactions – the most common way of paying PMF salaries. The commission then has the autonomy to disburse its funds, based on decisions made by PMF leaders. In most cases, the commission uses the Qi Card system, linked to the al-Rafidain and al-Rasheed banks, to send money to its members. In some cases, it sends cash – particularly to the vanguard networks such as KH.⁸² As such, the payment process outlined on paper differs from the reality,

⁸⁰ Mansour and Jabar (2017), *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future*.

⁸¹ The committee includes Abu Fadak, Abu Zainab al-Lami, Abu Munthadhar al-Husseini, Abu Ali al-Basri and Abu Iman al-Bahli.

⁸² KH prefers not to use the Qi Card system and pays their fighters their salaries through local currency exchange offices.

which is based more on an understanding of the connectivity of networks and their brokers, revealing a truer nature of state power outside formal institutions. Again, this process is not specific to the PMF but represents the way that all political parties with state power accumulate wealth from salary payments.

Another major prize for PMF networks engaging in the formal economy is national and local government contracts. These contracts range from reconstruction in conflict-affected areas to investments throughout the country. Like all political parties, the PMF networks ensure that their economic interests are met by taking part in government negotiations to appoint ministers and senior civil servants. Once appointed, these government officials and bureaucrats promise not to cancel any pre-existing contracts that benefit PMF networks.

Like all political parties, the PMF networks ensure that their economic interests are met by taking part in government negotiations to appoint ministers and senior civil servants.

A final economic reason for PMF networks to connect with formal government institutions is land. The government owns more than 90 per cent of Iraq's territory – a situation that offers those with influence over the government the opportunity to acquire land. As capital becomes scarce during economic crises, PMF and other Iraqi state networks turn to land as a major economic asset. Across the country the PMF is acquiring land, which allows it to build businesses and profit through taxation. In 2019, Basra's governor distributed 2,000 plots of land among PMF martyrs' families in an area known as al-Khaldun.⁸³

Profiteering at checkpoints and borderlands

The links of the PMF networks to other actors in the Iraqi state are also clear in so-called 'informal' spaces, such as checkpoints and borders across the country. In transit areas and borderlands, there are opportunities to generate revenue through taxation and arbitrage.⁸⁴ According to Iraq's minister of finance, Ali Allawi, the government expects to make around \$9 billion from customs each year, but at most \$1 billion finds its way into government coffers.⁸⁵ The rest is shared by a network of political parties, armed groups, businesspeople and those serving in senior government positions. The PMF networks, operating at both a national and local level, are heavily leveraged to capture their share of these revenues. Other political networks utilize the same tactics, sometimes in partnership with the PMF and sometimes independently.

⁸³ Research interview with security analyst, who wished to remain anonymous, in Basra, February 2019.

⁸⁴ Eaton, T., Cheng, C., Mansour, M., Salisbury, P., Yazigi, J. and Khatib, L. (2019), *Conflict Economies in the Middle East and North Africa*, Chatham House Report, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/conflict-economies-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

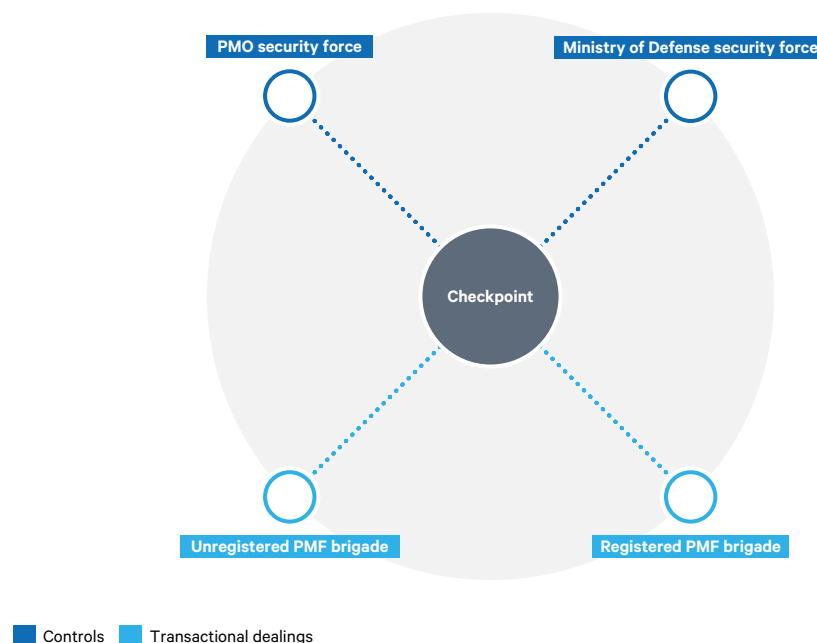
⁸⁵ Media Office of the Prime Minister (2020), 'Press conference of the Finance Minister Ali Allawi regarding the exceptional cabinet meeting' (Arabic), YouTube, <https://youtu.be/JgHWqulWeNM>.

In Iraq, internal checkpoints and border crossings – on land or sea – have become a space for both cooperation and competition between different networks.⁸⁶ According to a Chatham House report on conflict economies in the Middle East and North Africa:

[these] lines of territorial control have in turn distorted markets and created distinct sub-economies across the fault lines that divide areas controlled by different armed groups. ‘Transit areas’ have risen to prominence as sources of tax revenue (levied on the movement of goods) and arbitrage income (realized from cross-border differences in the prices and availability of goods). Outside of capital cities, trans-market taxation and arbitrage have turned transit areas into prized assets for armed groups and other conflict economy participants.⁸⁷

Rents from checkpoints vary in amount and type. The most profitable checkpoints can earn more than \$100,000 per day. At these checkpoints, many of which have been taxing traffic on strategic roads such as the road from Baghdad to Babil, ISF brigades share profits with PMF registered and unregistered groups and other forces in and outside the government. All the networks that converge at these checkpoints come from different parts of the Iraqi state. Yet the commanders on the ground, notwithstanding the network they represent, work together in pursuit of profit. This trade occurs even when these groups are politically opposed – for example, the Iraqi army is trained and equipped by the US while some of the PMF groups at the checkpoint are in a direct confrontation with the US.

Figure 5. Typical checkpoint network



Source: Compiled as part of the Hybrid Armed Actor project.

⁸⁶ See Sirri, O. (forthcoming), *Scarecrows of the State: Security Checkpoints in Contemporary Baghdad*, Doctoral dissertation, Toronto: University of Toronto; Sirri, O. (2020), 'When the Lights Go Out: Iraq in Revolution', *Society and Space Magazine*, 10 February 2020, <https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/when-the-lights-go-out-iraq-in-revolution>.

⁸⁷ Eaton, Cheng, Mansour, Salisbury, Yazigi and Khatib (2019), *Conflict Economies in the Middle East and North Africa*.

The PMF and other Iraqi armed groups charge fees per truck depending on the strategic location of the checkpoint. At Diyala's largest checkpoint, Safra, PMF groups such as Badr or AAH have variously worked with the Iraqi army's operations command and the province's governor, Muthana al-Tamimi, to collect anywhere between \$100 to \$500 per truck. This trade has at times brought in up to \$20,000 per day.⁸⁸

At some checkpoints, the PMF have developed more complex revenue generation schemes. In Salahaddin, the Abu Dalaf checkpoint, which connects the province to the capital, usually has long queues of trucks waiting hours and sometimes days to be processed. However, PMF groups have developed a queue-jumping system that allows cars to skip the line of trucks by paying an additional \$20.⁸⁹

Ports in Basra are another transit point where networks across the spectrum share in profits. Working together, a range of political parties control ports in a system of corruption, smuggling, customs and tax evasion. Each one of Basra's ports has been divided among political parties according to a constantly moving political settlement. With access to the sea at two coastal locations, the Umm Qasr Port generates significant profit. Political parties and PMF groups control 26 wharves of the port, under backroom agreements with the Iraqi government.

The network of political parties, armed groups, businesspeople and bureaucrats who make up the PMF also own or work with private enterprises. Businesses turn to brokers linked to the PMF networks, which promise to use political and armed power to provide state services such as security, reduced taxes and facilitate paperwork in the provincial council.

Controlling territories enables the networks to reap economic rewards through taxation and extortion – building their own version of a private sector. In Kirkuk, armed groups transform land that they have acquired into a variety of businesses, such as parking lots. After taking land originally designed to be public gardens and recreation sites, these groups help the private sector, with the opening of businesses such as shops and restaurants.⁹⁰ The well-known al-Arafa road is a significant site for this activity. The PMF groups there used their connections to the Iraqi government, the provincial council and the police to facilitate this practice.

⁸⁸ Research interview with security source, who wished to remain anonymous, March 2020.

⁸⁹ Research interview with security source, who wished to remain anonymous, March 2020.

⁹⁰ Sirri, O. (2020), 'Seeing the political in Baghdad's shopping malls', LSE Blog, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/01/09/seeing-the-political-in-baghdads-shopping-malls>.

05

Conclusions and policy implications

A deeper understanding of where state power lies in Iraq and the structure of the PMF as a series of networks will provide a stronger basis for future reform strategies.

For Western actors and the current government of Iraq, policy options on the PMF have focused on how best to remove perceived malign actors and to integrate those deemed acceptable into the government, with an eye to establishing a centralized command structure. To achieve this strategy, they have pursued a series of policy options that follow one of two approaches: eliminate or integrate. The former includes policies that seek to fragment, isolate and undermine, weaken or eliminate particular networks from the PMF – the surgical strategy described in the introduction. The second approach involves a series of policy options that seek to shape PMF behaviour or prospects by focusing on accountability to the central government. Policymakers have struggled to translate either approach into tangible results because they have not been guided by a clear, coherent and realistic strategy that recognizes and navigates the networks that currently make up the Iraqi state. This paper has argued that the neo-Weberian approach that sees formal government institutions as the source of state power and separates the state from the rest of society is not an accurate reflection of power dynamics and nodal connectivity. Instead, a more effective approach would be to base reform efforts on a strategy that understands the nature of state power, based on the connectivity of parochial and vanguard networks, and incorporates the PMF and other networks into a workable and accountable security structure that is more in line with the reality of the Iraqi state.

Achieving this strategy requires focusing on both the PMF networks and the structural problems that facilitated the establishment of the PMF and other political parties, each with its own armed wing, that operate without accountability. The following list of policy options have largely been ineffective in reform because they have not been based on this reading of the Iraqi state.

Co-opt and fragment

The struggle to build both horizontal and vertical ties has resulted in the PMF's failure to become an integrated organization. At times, this poor interconnection has created the impression that the organization is vulnerable to disruption and fragmentation. Yet, the nature of the networks and their symbiotic relationship with the Iraqi state make them more robust than they appear.

Some policymakers have suggested a 'divide-and-conquer' strategy, advocating the isolation of some PMF groups, to fragment or disrupt the networks, and to pressure some elements to defect. US officials have wondered whether certain 'reformist' or 'non-hardline' PMF leaders could be 'co-optable'. Considerations for this approach include figures such as Hadi al-Ameri or Faleh al-Fayadh, whose own personal ambitions could be exploited, which might result in a weakening of the more militaristic or pro-Iranian groups. The US has also sought to convince the Sistani Atabat networks to split from the PMF Commission.

However, attempts to co-opt such individuals or groups have thus far failed. Do disruption, co-opting and defection strategies work when dealing with an armed group that is comprised of multiple networks and highly integrated into other political and societal channels? Research carried out in another context sheds some light on this question. A study into the disruption of covert movements in the Democratic Republic of the Congo found that these networks were 'intractable' where they had become so deeply embedded in the state and in other societal and business networks to the extent that state/non-state and formal/informal dichotomies no longer applied. In such a context, the study concluded that 'covert' networks are impossible to disentangle from 'non-covert' ones. Furthermore, brokerage networks that are the essence of both state and societal functioning 'do not discriminate between nodes that are civilians, state representatives, warlords or other armed groups'.⁹¹

So many actors are 'double-hatted' in their positions, affiliations and loyalties, that even the distinctions between groups (within the PMF, as well as between the PMF and other state or non-state entities) are muddled.

This study offers a way to interpret the PMF as a series of networks that are deeply integrated across a range of government offices and private-sector businesses, which are interconnected through social ties that cannot easily be segregated and isolated. The current PMF networks have morphed far beyond their original political and societal bases. They cannot be defined as formal and informal, or

⁹¹ Stys, P., Verweijen, J., Muzuri, P., Muhindo, S., Vogel, C. and Koskinen, J. H. (2019), 'Brokering between (not so) overt and (not so) covert networks in conflict zones', *Global Crime*, 21(1): p. 75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17440572.2019.1596806>.

state and non-state. Even if elements might be isolated or co-opted, it would likely have a minimal impact on PMF networks since they are so widely diffused. The PMF is not a series of disparate groups with a few individuals playing a bridging role to other PMF groups or other political, religious or business interests in Iraq. Instead, a very high percentage of actors, or brokers, within each network play an interconnecting and bridging role. In fact, so many actors are ‘double-hatted’ in their positions, affiliations and loyalties, that even the distinctions between groups (within the PMF, as well as between the PMF and other state or non-state entities) are muddled. The networks do not depend on a cohesive whole or on an uninterrupted, institutionalized chain of command to operate. The series of networks that make up the PMF are fluid and adaptable to isolation strategies. Consequently, so-called ‘co-optable’ individuals have at times turned their backs on agreements made with US or foreign policymakers.

Building alternatives

Building competitors or rival institutions is another policy aimed at achieving a centralized governing command structure in Iraq. These institutions, the theory goes, if trained and equipped with foreign support, can both provide sufficient protection for the Iraqi government and at the same time weaken the influence of the PMF networks. Examples include US support for the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS), the prime minister’s office, local security or governance actors, or even to select groups within the PMF (namely the Tribal Mobilization Forces programme).⁹² In all these cases, one of the ambitions has been to pick away at the PMF’s control in the Iraqi state network.

However, this policy of building rival institutions has not worked. Instead, it has led to islands of institutions – groups that are far removed from centres of power or key brokers in either the PMF networks or the Iraqi state network.

However, this policy of building rival institutions has not worked. Instead, it has led to islands of institutions – groups that are far removed from centres of power or key brokers in either the PMF networks or the Iraqi state network. These islands have proven unable to defend themselves against larger challenges in the Iraqi state. Any attempt to empower competitors from within the network would need to be coupled with a broader, or longer-term, strategy based on establishing a more coherent organization that includes connecting such alternatives with the wider Iraqi state network. Although the CTS and PMF fought on the same side during the war against ISIS, they rarely sat in the same room. The CTS was isolated and powerless in regard to the Iraqi state network.

⁹² Gaston and Ollivant (2020), *US-Iran Proxy Competition in Iraq*.

Economic sanctions

The financial impropriety, corruption and embezzlement that exist in PMF networks suggest that economic penalties may be effective in eroding PMF power. Yet, much of the literature on sanctions casts doubt on how well they work. A number of PMF groups and leaders have been designated as terrorist organizations or individuals by the US State Department or been sanctioned under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act. Some leaders, such as Qais al-Khazali and Laith al-Khazali, are sanctioned under both.⁹³ Such sanctions are intended to be a punitive stick, but to function as such they need to exact real costs for the individuals or groups concerned. Some of those who support sanctions argue that the target is not necessarily the individual but rather it is others who make up the individual's network. Personal ambition in formal politics – which requires access to international travel and financial systems – may force these members to disconnect from the network of a targeted leader. Yet, in many cases the connectivity of nodes to a targeted leader has not changed.

These effects are weakened where those issuing the sanction have insufficient information about the nature of the networks, their strategies and capabilities, and, critically, their connectivity to the Iraqi state network. Both vanguard and parochial networks have evaded sanctions by cooperating with other leaders or groups in the Iraqi state. It has become more difficult to target specific sanctions and create disincentives or punishments. A sanctioned leader laughed when the topic came up in conversation with the author, bragging that he was still flying his private plane inside and outside Iraq.⁹⁴ Where individuals or groups easily evade the impact of sanctions, this undermines the credibility of the measure and the overall ability to achieve policy objectives.

Sanctions also produce consequences for domestic actors, such as government leaders or civil society activists who are perceived as too pro-American. They face threats of intimidation and even assassination, and vanishing job opportunities, while their families may be pressured and harassed. Given that one of the primary opportunities to counter the PMF would be by supporting and strengthening other state and societal actors who pursue a different vision for the Iraqi state, poorly targeted sanctions will likely fail to deter or punish PMF behaviour and could also create a backlash that would limit other avenues for reform.

Military attack

The most hard-line approach to eliminating certain PMF groups or leaders is through military action. In response to increasing tensions and threats, the US has conducted a number of strikes against PMF leaders, forces or facilities, including strikes on weapons depots and facilities in 2019 and 2020. Some security analysts

⁹³ U.S. Department of State (2020), 'Press release: State Department Terrorist Designations of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and its leaders, Qays and Laith al-Khazali', 3 January 2020, <https://translations.state.gov/2020/01/03/state-department-terrorist-designations-of-asaib-ahl-al-haq-and-its-leaders-qays-and-laith-al-khazali>; U.S. Department of the Treasury (2019), 'Treasury Sanctions Persons Associated with Serious Human Rights Abuse and Corrupt Actors in Iraq', 18 July 2019, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm735>.

⁹⁴ Author interview with sanctioned PMF network leader, who wished to remain anonymous, 2020.

in Washington champion this use of force, including the assassination of Muhandis, arguing that such military strikes can break the central node of the PMF.⁹⁵ Policy advisers have even argued that the US should send 100,000 troops back to Iraq to defeat the PMF – a policy akin to the US fight with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki against Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army in 2008. Despite the costs of that battle in 2008, the Mahdi Army networks remained intact. However, while the US has eliminated leaders in the past, they have been unable to eliminate the networks or reform the structures that produce PMF leaders.

However, while the US has eliminated leaders in the past, they have been unable to eliminate the networks or reform the structures that produce PMF leaders.

Targeting is more effective when it is against armed groups that are poorly linked to the state.⁹⁶ Although some US policymakers have referred to the PMF as the Shia version of ISIS, the comparison does not work.⁹⁷ The PMF may not have a fully institutionalized military structure, but it is not an insurgent network that might easily be decimated and disrupted by strikes. The PMF networks are diversified and span political and societal nodes. Thus, even if high-level and significant nodes are targeted, the networks can regenerate and at times be even more hostile to reform. Throughout the years, and although some analysts constantly beat the drums of war in Iraq, US military strikes on leaders from the PMF networks have failed to reform Iraq or achieve Washington's interests. Those who championed the strike on Muhandis argued it would be a blow to the counter-protest movement. However, a year later, the state continues to assassinate, arrest and intimidate protesters and activists.

Military attacks have generated immediate repercussions, including violent retaliatory attacks, significant limitations on engagement, wider targeting of those perceived to be aligned with US interests, and the general weakening of the position of key Iraqi stakeholders who might seek to limit or contain the PMF. The assassination of Muhandis further radicalized vanguard PMF networks and limited the ability to restrain aggressive behaviour in ways that threatened Iraqi and foreign interests. In the fallout, resistance groups emerged that were strengthened from within the PMF network. Prior to the strike, reformist elements of the PMF had

⁹⁵ One of the most prominent analysts that supported the Trump administration's kinetic policies in Iraq was Michael Knights, who argued this would strengthen Iraq. For more on this debate, see Knights, M. (2020), 'How Soleimani's Killing Could Make a Stronger Iraq', Politico, 5 January 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/01/05/soleimani-killing-stronger-iraq-093976>; Knights, M. (@MikeKnightsIraq) (2020) 'tweet, 2 November 2020, <https://twitter.com/Mikeknightsiraq/status/1323413746849619969>; Pregent, M. (2020), 'Empower regular Iraqis to end the country's forever war', Arab News, 3 December 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1772121>.

⁹⁶ Long, A. (2010), 'Assessing the Success of Leadership Targeting', *CTC Sentinel*, 31(11): pp. 19–21, <https://ctc.usma.edu/assessing-the-success-of-leadership-targeting>; Long, A. (2014), 'Whack-a-Mole or Coup de Grace? Institutionalization and Leadership Targeting in Iraq and Afghanistan', *Security Studies*, 23(3): pp. 471–512, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2014.935229>.

⁹⁷ Research interviews with officials, who wished to remain anonymous, in recent years.

been seeking engagement. Several key PMF leaders who were part of the political electioneering in 2018 had openly voiced support for US troops remaining engaged in Iraq.⁹⁸ While many Iraqi state officials, and members of society did not agree with the direction taken by Muhandis, there were options to debate issues of *ultra vires* behaviour of PMF groups. Several protest leaders confided in the author that even at the peak of counter-protest violence in late 2019, they had a line of communication with Muhandis. His removal reduced the possibility of engagement between either Iraqi government leaders or protesters and PMF leaders. Instead, senior PMF leaders who also had acted as intermediaries, such as Qais al-Khazali, went into hiding, fearful that they would be targeted next.

In late 2019, the author was at a meeting that included members from PMF networks, other Iraqi state officials and researchers, including Hisham al-Hashimi. Following the meeting, the PMF networks leaked a story in private WhatsApp groups that Hashimi had criticized the PMF for its role in attacking protesters who had been demonstrating since October. After this leak, Hashimi began to receive death threats. He immediately went to Qais al-Khazali – a key broker in the PMF networks. With a phone call, Khazali removed the threat against Hashimi. After the US strike on Muhandis, one month after this incident, groups linked to the KH vanguard network renewed their threats against Hashimi. This time, Khazali was in hiding and Muhandis was gone. Hashimi found it more difficult to get to the network brokers. He was assassinated by individuals linked to vanguard networks who then fled into Iran.⁹⁹

Targeting insurgent or armed group networks will be dramatically less effective in leading to their dissolution where those groups have a foreign sponsor and safe harbour on the border. Many benefit from their linkages to Iran. In 2008, Muqtada al-Sadr was able to escape to Iran where he remained in refuge while his networks re-formed.

Since 2003, the US and its allies have on several occasions used military strikes against their perceived enemies in Iraq. They have declared victories against a host of armed groups from salafi-jihadist networks such as ISIS to Shia armed groups such as the Mahdi Army. Yet, despite all their military efforts, these networks have remained, largely because the strikes have not been part of a clear, realistic and coherent strategy to achieve a centralized command structure in Iraq. The PMF is so well integrated into all aspects of the state and its influence so widespread and diffuse, that a military solution would likely trigger a society-wide, multiplayer conflict.

⁹⁸ Coles, I., Nabhan, A. and Adnan, G. (2018), 'Iraqi Who Once Killed Americans is a U.S. Dilemma as He Gains Political Power', *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 December 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iraqi-who-once-killed-americans-is-a-u-s-dilemma-as-he-gains-political-power-11544529601>.

⁹⁹ This information was eventually confirmed by a spokesperson for the prime minister in November 2020 on al-Iraqiya, see al-Iraqiya (2020), 'Ahmad Mala Talal – two participants in the assassination of the martyr Hisham al-Hashimi have been identified' (Arabic), 15 November 2020, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FIp6RIXVfvo&ab_channel=قناةالاعرافةالإخباريةHD.

Encouraging accountability and coherence in networks

Scholarly and policy approaches have framed the PMF variously as a non-state, hybrid or state actor, but they have all nonetheless tried to understand it in terms of being an organization. However, this paper argues that the PMF is not an integrated organization but rather a series of fluid and adaptive networks, each of which operates under divergent strategies and capabilities. Critically, these networks are not isolated from other Iraqi state networks, which cooperate and compete in the security, political and economic spaces. The PMF networks are just one part of the array of forces that make up the incoherent Iraqi state.

The policy options described above – divide and conquer, building alternatives, sanctions and military strikes – have failed to remove PMF networks or fundamentally reform their behaviour because they have not been guided by a clear and coherent strategy that understands the PMF as a series of networks and the nature of the Iraqi state.

Any ‘end state’ should not be guided by unrealistic ambitions that the Iraqi government can eliminate antagonistic parts of the PMF and, at some point, completely monopolize legitimate violence under a central node. Such ambitions have proven unsuccessful in Iraq as well as in the wider Middle East, where most states do not resemble the neo-Weberian ideal. Instead, a realistic approach to the PMF should be informed by two key principles: (a) the nature of the PMF network (parochial vs vanguard) will determine its strategies, capabilities and role in any reform programme; and (b) the connectivity of the network to other networks in the Iraqi state means that any approach needs to focus on key structural challenges.

Policymakers can work backwards to formulate tactics – short- and long-term – that operate simultaneously and remain focused on the structural goal of accountability of all networks and groups inside the Iraqi state.

The nature of the network will determine its strategies and capabilities

Policymakers looking at reducing the influence of the PMF and establishing a unified governing structure should first map and navigate the current PMF networks. An understanding of the nature of PMF networks – parochial or vanguard – would offer insights into their strategies and capabilities and allow policymakers to better anticipate reactions to any action taken.

More parochial networks, such as Saraya al-Salam, Badr or AAH, command a social base, which vote for them in elections and as such provide them with institutional power in the Iraqi state. As a result, the leaders of these networks enjoy authority based on ideational and economic capital linked to the Iraqi state. Their rhetoric at times has included the need for reform, to satisfy their own increasingly disgruntled

social base. As such, inducements, including funding and institutional reform, might elicit more of a response from these network leaders than punishments and sanctions.¹⁰⁰

However, the fractured leadership in parochial networks means that one leader cannot represent the whole network. Past attempts to negotiate with Sadr have not been fruitful because he does not speak on behalf of the entire network. Similarly, attempts to negotiate with Ameri, who formally leads Badr and Binaa, have not been successful because of the challenges he faces from other leaders in Badr and the wider network. Policymakers therefore need to navigate these networks carefully, understanding the limitations of each parochial leader.

Networks that resemble a more vanguard structure, such as KH, are less accountable to a large social base. These networks are ill-equipped to manage a transition into normal politics, to shift into non-violent protest, or to create innovative governance.¹⁰¹ They have less social power and rely on conflict and ideological disputes. The language of reform or nationalism does not appeal to them, nor does moving from war to peace. They may not be able to deliver on a political settlement like the parochial networks because of weak ties to a social base and communities, but they cannot be rooted out. Without a social base, they are more a product of top-down interference. This may make them seem more flexible, as the leadership can quickly agree on a course of action. However, the inability to command a base will impede the prospect of longer-term settlements. As a result, they are more likely to rely on a foreign patron like Iran.

Yet, vanguard leaders enjoy strong ties with each other. Their groups easily morph or move under their guidance. Coherence across the leadership allows these networks to easily distance themselves from certain actors, if needed – popping up in different places under different names. As such, vanguard groups cannot be completely discounted as policymakers look to deal with the influence of the PMF. Vanguard groups in Iraq should be considered much more of a by-product of conflict, Iranian meddling and failed governance. Their relevance therefore will diminish not through direct engagement but rather by reforming the structures that created them.

The civilian component of the PMF provides an opportunity for international actors to engage. Part of this strategy should include engagement with network brokers who can effectively speak on behalf of the PMF. Network brokers exist across this space in both parochial and vanguard networks. For the policymaker, these brokers serve as nodes to help reach a desired strategy. The key is to create sufficient incentives to push these brokers towards reform while minimizing their ability to reject the idea. Critically, these network brokers need not be directly in the PMF. They can also be in other parts of the Iraqi state network but may enjoy strong relations with PMF networks. For example, Nouri al-Maliki is a key network broker because he has strong relations to several parochial and vanguard PMF groups. In the past, his own network

¹⁰⁰ Ladwig, W. C. (2016), 'Influencing clients in counterinsurgency: U.S. involvement in El Salvador's Civil War, 1979-92', *International Security*, 41(1): pp. 99–146, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00251; Cortright, D. (1997), 'Incentives and Cooperation in International Affairs', in Cortright, D. (ed.) (2012), *The Price of Peace: Incentives and International Conflict Prevention*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, p. 10.

¹⁰¹ Staniland (2014), *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*.

has proven crucial in brokering agreements between vanguard groups and the Iraqi government, such as his role in settling a dispute between KH and Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi in June 2020.¹⁰²

Dealing with networks requires a structural approach in security and politics

The PMF is not an anomaly. Its strategies and activities are part and parcel of Iraqi politics, practised by the wide array of mainstream parties that at times directly connect to PMF networks. A reform initiative aimed at improving Iraq's governing command structure should not only focus on the PMF, but all other actors that make up the Iraqi state. The long-term ambition towards establishing a transparent, accountable and coherent Iraqi state requires an approach that embodies both security and political considerations.

In the security sector, policymakers should focus on a series of trade-offs that recognize the PMF as a state security institution – a form of national guard – but under a series of standardized operating procedures that hold its military leadership accountable to the NSC. The NSC should have the power to appoint the PMF Commission president, who legally should not have any political standing. It should have oversight over the commission and appoint an independent inspector general to be based in the commission. The NSC should prioritize transparency in PMF operations and activities including unit structure, number of fighters and their pay, and in economic transactions with public and private sector institutions. The PMF should serve as a guard – with some active forces and some reservists – that can be deployed.

Yet, over the years, policy recommendations have repeated similar suggestions that include variations of professionalizing the armed groups; strengthening judicial oversight and watchdog entities; centralizing the judicial jurisdiction of all security institutions including the PMF; making financial transactions more transparent; strengthening anti-corruption infrastructure; and enforcing political party law and other legal mechanisms. Western policymakers have devoted hundreds of millions of dollars to these recommendations, to no avail. In a Chatham House roundtable, senior US and European policymakers who had years of experience in Iraq had quite divergent ideas on how to achieve the desired end state of a coherent governing structure. However, the policymakers all agreed that these typical recommendations and current security sector reform (SSR) strategies have never worked in Iraq. They went so far as to suggest these policies end.¹⁰³ Blanket and vague recommendations and policies have failed because they have not grasped that these networks are structures that operate within the Iraqi state. Policymakers need to reassess and set aside their current security sector strategies and focus more on applying coherence and accountability to the Iraqi state – however different it may look to their idealized version.

¹⁰² Research interview with senior Iraqi official, who wished to remain anonymous, October 2020.

¹⁰³ Chatham House Roundtable on PMF networks, December 2020.

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This is dedicated to my friend Hisham al-Hashimi, who was assassinated outside his home in Baghdad in July 2020. Hisham is with me throughout this paper. He was there for many of the stories that now form footnotes on its pages. For years, we discussed the arguments and recommendations. Hisham was killed before his time, but his legacy remains with me and the many researchers who he taught across the country.

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Hybrid Armed Actors in the Middle East and North Africa Project

This paper is part of a Chatham House project on Hybrid Armed Actors in the Middle East and North Africa that aims to analyse the developing role of these actors in Iraq, Lebanon and Libya. It is the first in a planned series of papers on each of the three country contexts, with a respective focus on the PMF, Hezbollah and the Libyan Arab Armed Forces.

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Cover image: Supporters of the Popular Mobilization Forces and a group of Turkmens stage a protest against former Iraqi foreign minister and member of Iraq's Kurdish Democratic Party, Hoshyar Zebari, for his remarks against Hashdi Shabi, in Kirkuk, Iraq on 17 October 2020.

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