



The Role of Iraq's Shiite Militias in the 2018 Elections

Shia militias banded together under the banner of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) are key participants in Iraq's upcoming national and provincial elections. Since Iraq's constitution prohibits militias from participating in the elections, these outfits have sought to establish political parties. Baghdad has found it difficult to absorb these militias into the state's armed forces. However, it will need to contend with these groups, which could enter parliament and the government. This policy brief provides an analysis of these various PMF factions and their electoral platforms. The main takeaways are:

- Multiple Shiite parties are competing to benefit from the PMF's reputation in Iraq's upcoming elections, hoping to translate field victories into political scores.
- While Washington remains optimistic about Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi offering effective leadership, the premier appears to be stuck between Muqtada al-Sadr and Hadi al-Amiri, two main Shiite leaders whose popularity is on the rise.
- U.S. policy makers should actively support Iraq's efforts to establish an integrated, nonsectarian national army and support Iraqi state institutions to lessen the chances of Iraq splitting apart.

Summary

DIVISIONS WITHIN THE PMF

With Iraq's national and provincial elections fast approaching, the influence of the Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces, or PMF) in the political arena is becoming more obvious. Some PMF leaders, seeking to gain political scores,¹ have already started demanding the withdrawal of U.S. forces that were deployed in Iraq to degrade Daesh. Multiple Shiite parties with conflicting agendas are trying to benefit from

the PMF's reputation and translate victories on the battlefield into political points. With somewhere between 60,000 and 140,000 fighters in a vast array of distinct militias, the PMF is not monolithic.²

However, the Iranian-backed militias have overwhelming influence within the PMF structure -- a circumstance that has raised questions about the future role of the Shiite militias. A

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ABOUT CGP

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closer look at the PMF suggests that if Baghdad attempts to fully integrate all PMF militias into the Iraqi security apparatus, it will find it a challenging task, especially if pro-Iranian militia leaders gain power in the upcoming elections.

The PMF's umbrella structure came out of the religious edict (fatwa) from the Iraqi Shiite authority in Najaf, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, calling all able-bodied men to arms after Iraqi security forces' failures against Daesh in 2014. Although al-Sistani's edict carefully avoided sectarian language, the PMF structure incorporated many groups that had already been established as sectarian militias after the fall of Saddam Hussein.

Aware of the challenges of overcoming sectarianism, and with a hope of incorporating the PMF militias into the Iraqi national army, in November 2016 Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi led efforts to pass legislation that would put the PMF under the state's command. However, al-Abadi's actions prompted protests from Sunni lawmakers because such legislation would have legitimized the Shiite militias whose leaders continued acting independently from the government.

Worse, Amnesty International and other independent agencies documented atrocities carried out by some PMF militias, drawing global attention to "war crimes"

and Baghdad's "blind eye."³ Shiites are not the only fighters in the PMF militias; numerous PMF factions are Sunni, Christian and Yazidi. However, this policy brief pays particular attention to the PMF leadership and the Shiite militias that will likely shape the outcome of the 2018 election.

The competition between the two global Shiite centers – Iran's Qom and Iraq's Najaf – is relevant to the ability to grasp the complexity of the PMF.⁴ Most militias demanding a permanent privileged status for the PMF outside of the Iraqi military have strong ties to Tehran and swear allegiance to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Those groups that are loyal to Najaf and Iraq's top spiritual leader, al-Sistani, differ dramatically from the pro-Qom militias. Having an emphasis on Iraqi national identity, pro-Najaf units are skeptical of the PMF leadership and support the integration of the PMF into the Iraqi army. A third major Shiite group within the PMF is the Saraya al-Salaam forces, rallied around renowned Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who perceives Iranian-backed groups as a serious threat to Iraqi unity.

PRO-QOM MILITIAS

Although the PMF is vastly diverse, its leadership is dominated by militia members who have close relations with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The former PMF deputy chairman, Abu Mahdi

al-Muhandis, for example, is the founding father of Kataib Hezbollah (Hezbollah Brigades) – the Iraqi branch of IRGC's Quds Force, which was founded in 2007 and which the United States considers a terrorist organization.⁵ Furthermore, senior PMF official Hadi al-Amiri is the leader of Iraq's largest and oldest Shiite militia: the Badr Organization. There are an estimated 20,000 Badr fighters, though the group claims to have mobilized 50,000 armed men.⁶

The Badr Organization's journey to Iraq's political mainstream is most notable. The group formed in 1982 as a subunit of the IRGC and served as the armed wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) until the American invasion in 2003. In post-Saddam Iraq, under the leadership of Ammar al-Hakim, SCIRI gradually turned away from Tehran and toward al-Sistani, but the Badr Organization remains committed to the IRGC.⁷ Al-Amiri has become a bitter opponent of al-Hakim's SCIRI (which renamed itself the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq in 2007).

The Badr Organization shrewdly cultivated strong relations with then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and as a result, al-Amiri acquired the post of Minister of Transportation in 2010. Al-Maliki's feelings of vulnerability, especially after the 2010 elections, played an important role in this engagement.⁸ The Badr group's influence was most remarkable in the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior, where 70

percent of the personnel have given their allegiance to particular militias instead of the central government – and most are Badr members.⁹

The Badr Organization has flexed both its political and military muscle in the past few years. To exert more political influence, the organization joined the al-Maliki-led State of Law Coalition in the 2014 elections and won 22 seats in the Iraqi Parliament (out of 328) – a remarkable historic first for a Shiite militia group. In May 2015, for instance, Badr politician Muthanna al-Tamimi was appointed as the governor of Diyala province, where Shiites are a minority.

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Fighting in the Syrian civil war and later in Iraq against Daesh, the Badr Organization has proven its capacity to handle military operations and political maneuvers simultaneously. The Badr Organization's strategy to reach out to the larger Shiite community is also noteworthy. The group named its expeditionary force to Syria after Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (1935-1980), who was one of the founding fathers of the Dawa Party – the oldest Shiite political party in Iraq.¹⁰

Similar to the Badr group, Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), a major Shiite militia with 10,000 fighters, played a key role in helping al-Maliki consolidate

power between 2011 and 2014.¹¹ As a result of joining the 2014 elections, AAH's political wing, al-Sadiqun, won a seat in the Iraqi Parliament. Before founding AAH, the group's leader, Qais al-Khazali, commanded a military brigade within Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. AAH was heavily involved in attacks against coalition forces and the Iraqi government until 2011. Since joining the PMF, the group has employed aggressive sectarian discourse and celebrated its pro-Iranian identity, disseminating thousands of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei posters.¹²

Human Rights Watch accused AAH of committing atrocities against Sunni civilians.¹³ Most recently, Lebanon issued an arrest warrant for al-Khazali if he re-enters the country following his visit to Israeli border in southern Lebanon accompanied by Hezbollah military officials.¹⁴ The U.S. military arrested al-Khazali in 2007 due to his alleged role in killing five American soldiers in an ambush, and then released him in 2009 along with other AAH members.¹⁵

Apart from the groups actively participating in Iraqi politics, there are smaller militias the IRGC has established, trained, and funded in the past decade.¹⁶ For example, Kataib Hezbollah was established to fight U.S. forces in 2007 when the Badr Organization and ISCI began engaging in Iraqi politics by accommodating Washington to a certain extent. The group's founder, al-Muhandis, has long been a close

associate of IRGC top general Qasem Soleimani and currently acts as a chief commander in the PMF structure. Al-Muhandis is most blatant in expressing his loyalty to Iran, taking a pride of "being a soldier of Soleimani."¹⁷

What disturbs Washington most, perhaps, is the fact that al-Muhandis and his group continue to play a key role in the PMF even though in 2009, under Executive Order 13438, the United States designated Kataib Hezbollah as a "terrorist" group that "committed, directed, supported, or posed a significant risk of committing acts of violence against Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces".¹⁸

In fact, there are many other PMF militias in the mold of Kataib Hezbollah such as Saraya Khorasani, Kataib Abu Fadhl al-Abbas, Kataib Jund al-Imam, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, and Harakat al-Nujaba. The main aim of these groups is the advancement of Tehran's corridor to the Mediterranean.¹⁹ Most recently, on November 3, 2017, the U.S. House of Representatives introduced a bill to impose terrorism-related sanctions against AAH and Harakat al-Nujaba.²⁰

Despite these groups' diverse strategies and tactics, they share a firm belief in Khamenei's doctrine of wilayat al-faqih (guardianship of the jurist, which gives an Islamic expert in law authority over the people) and an allegiance to Khamenei.

PRO-NAJAF MILITIAS

Some of the groups under the PMF umbrella have a strong allegiance to the Najaf school of Shiism and Iraq's top Shiite religious authority, al-Sistani. For years, al-Sistani's emphasis on Iraqi identity has been a bulwark against the IRGC's influence in southern Iraq. Unlike the pro-Qom militias within the PMF, the armed groups centered on al-Sistani formed as a direct response to the imminent threat posed by Daesh.

Fearing that Shiite holy sites were potential targets of the extremists, and seeing that the Iraqi army was in ruins, al-Sistani called for the formation of civilian defense forces in June 2014. Such groups within the PMF umbrella are named after major holy shrines in Karbala, Najaf and Kadhimiyya and are 20,000 fighters strong in total.²¹

Another major characteristic that distinguishes the pro-Najaf militias from the pro-Qom groups is their willingness to be integrated into the Iraqi security apparatus with a selective process. A leading figure in the Abbas Division, for example, believes that some PMF members would like to return to their civic duties within the Iraqi institutions and all those remaining "units, brigades, and companies should join the Iraqi Army."²²

It is important to note that it is the Iraqi Army, not IRGC, that provides the pro-Najaf militias with weaponry and training. The groups' emphasis

on local Iraqi identity enabled them to recruit large and diverse segments of the population, even including Sunni Arabs, in their fight against Daesh. About 16 to 20 percent of the Ali al-Akbar Brigade, for example, is Sunni.²³

Al-Sistani's strong relations with ISCI are noteworthy. Following the Badr-ISCI split, ISCI leader al-Hakim formed new militia groups, namely Saraya Ashura, Saraya al-Jihad, and Saraya al-Aqida. Most recently, Hakim announced his retreat from the ISCI leadership and established a new political party, the Wisdom (Hikma) Movement, for the 2018 elections.

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AL-SADR'S MILITIAS

The most critical voice within the PMF against the umbrella group's leadership is al-Sadr, the son of renowned Iraqi Shiite marjah Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr (1943-1999). Al-Sadr's militia, Saraya al-Salam, has no allegiance to either Qom or Najaf. Carrying the flag of Iraqi popular nationalism and Shiite resistance in post-Saddam Iraq, al-Sadr organized the Mahdi Army, which was responsible for many attacks on coalition forces and received limited support from Iran until 2010. At that time, the Mahdi Army was in a violent clash with Badr fighters in several cities across southern Iraq.²⁴

In the past decade, however, al-Sadr's relations with Iran have soured severely. In Syria, while pro-Iran militias fought hard to save Bashar al-Assad's government, al-Sadr criticized the Assad regime's brutality against its own people and demanded the president's resignation.²⁵ Surprising many, al-Sadr paid a visit to Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman in Riyadh in 2017.²⁶

Tensions between al-Sadr and the PMF leadership have been obvious. Although al-Sadr's Saraya al-Salam was operating as a part of PMF against Daesh, PMF leaders have not allocated the necessary funding and equipment as they would for other PMF factions. In return, al-Sadr's tone has become acidic, calling pro-Qom groups "imprudent militias" (al-miliyat al-waqiha) as a denunciation of those individuals, including former Iraqi premier al-Maliki, who called the PMF "holy mobilization units" (al-hashd al-muqaddas).²⁷

Al-Sadr also calls for the disbanding of PMF units as the war against Daesh ends.²⁸ In December 2017, al-Sadr's Saraya al-Salam agreed to disband and hand its weapons over to the Iraqi Army, becoming the first Shiite militia to disarm after the victory over Daesh.²⁹ Refusing to remain silent, Iran blasted al-Sadr's militias as being "irrelevant" in the fight against Daesh and thus "not qualified" to talk about the future of the PMF.³⁰

militia, Liwa Qudsiu al-Sadr (al-Sadr's Jerusalem Brigades), in defense of Palestine following U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, raised questions about al-Sadr's willingness to disarm. The new group could serve as an armed front for al-Sadr in case of a perceived threat and a need to deter rival Shiite militias in the near future.³¹ Al-Sadr's followers tend to overstate their power, claiming that they can mobilize 100,000 volunteer fighters if needed.³²

Although al-Sadr did not run as a candidate in any Iraqi elections, his movement has remarkable political clout, currently commanding 34 seats in the parliament. The group's ability to touch the hearts and minds of Iraq's lower-middle class Shiite population, combined with its image of "purity" compared to "corrupt" Iraqi politicians, is an asset for al-Sadr. Another asset is al-Sadr's emphasis on his movement's Iraqi identity – a challenge to those elites who had fled and then returned to Iraq following the American invasion.³³ Such Iraqi nationalist sentiment could explain why the movement was the first to organize mass protests to end the Turkish troops' presence in the town of Bashiqa.³⁴

THE PMF'S CRUCIAL ROLE IN THE COMING ELECTIONS

The PMF militias are so popular among ordinary Iraqi citizens that competing political players have benefited from the group's battle-ground success against Daesh. For

instance, the PMF's field victories have clearly expanded al-Abadi's influence. According to nationwide polls, he received almost 60 percent approval in April 2017, while only one third of Iraqis favored him in January 2016.³⁵

Al-Abadi protested al-Sadr's call to disband the PMF, promising to keep the militias active for a few more years and increase fighters' wages "despite some people's attempt to oppose them."³⁶ Given al-Abadi's attempts to bring the PMF under state control, his statement seemed to be a sheer reaction to al-Sadr. Nonetheless, the prime minister's balance between supporting the militias as they are and wanting to bring them into the Iraqi security apparatus indicates how delicate the political situation is on the eve of the elections.

The rise in public support for the militias has also benefited PMF leaders competing against al-Abadi for power. Iraq's constitution does not allow armed militias to participate in elections, but in the past few months numerous fledgling political parties have developed that are affiliated with specific PMF factions. It is no secret that former prime minister (and current vice president) al-Maliki hopes to return to the premiership and counts on the support of the PMF leaders to form a larger coalition to win the ticket.

Al-Maliki's relations with the pro-Qom Shiite militias run deep. During

al-Maliki's second term (2010-2014), the rise of al-Iraqiyya, a secular Arab party, led the premier to embolden the pro-Qom militias. Thus, al-Maliki's potential alliance with Badr leader al-Amiri could play a critical role after the elections and in leading to al-Abadi's downfall – a scenario that the United States would consider catastrophic.

Yet the recent flirtation between al-Abadi and al-Amiri has raised serious questions in Washington.³⁷ Al-Abadi had been seen for a long time as a bulwark against the PMF's influence, given his plans to take back the militias' heavy weapons and cut their strength by half.³⁸ On Jan. 14, al-Abadi surprisingly announced an electoral alliance – only to cancel it the next day – with the al-Amiri-led coalition, Al-Fatah. Especially after the Iraqi Kurdish referendum, al-Abadi has developed strong relations with al-Amiri and the PMF leadership, because the Shiite militias ensured the retaking of Kirkuk and Iraq's other disputed areas by use of force.³⁹

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Thus, despite Washington's strong hopes for al-Abadi's leadership capabilities, the premier appears to be squeezed between al-Sadr and al-Amiri. Public opinion polls show that both of the Shiite leaders are enjoying increasing popularity (see Table 1 and 2). Al-Sadr reached an

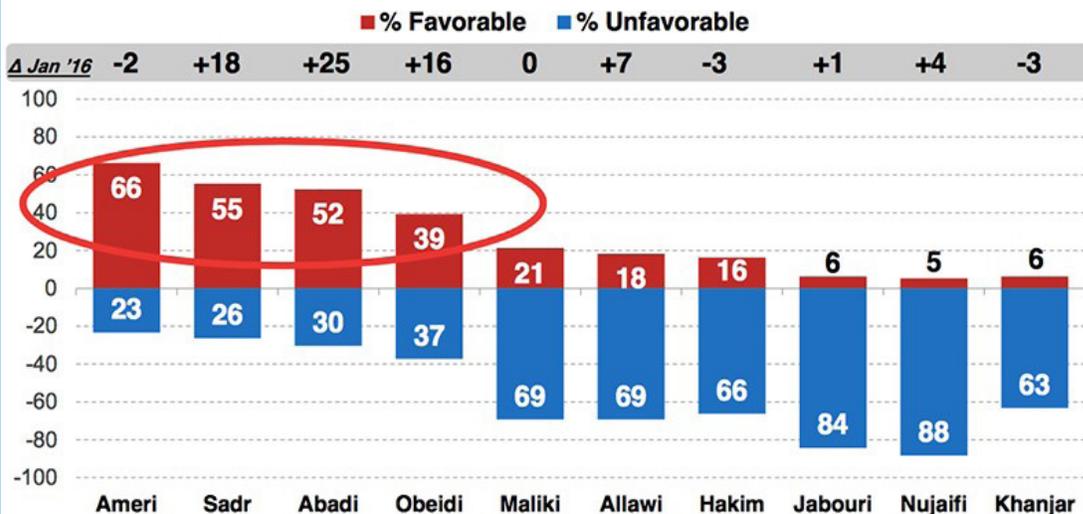


Table 1. National Democratic Institute poll results in April 2017 in Iraq (excluding Iraqi Kurdistan) in comparison with a January 2016 NDI poll.

agreement with al-Wataniyyah, the secular Arab party of Iyad Allawi and Khaled Obaidi, as a signal for potential collaboration after the elections.⁴⁰ If al-Sadr's pitch for Iraqi national identity turns out to be a bad strategy, however, al-Amiri will reap the benefits even if al-Abadi remains in power. In that case, al-Abadi would likely accommodate the PMF militias rather than try to curb their influence.

In previous elections, Iraq saw a unified Shiite national alliance. But in May, competing Shiite factions will be in the running, including:

1. The Nasr coalition, led by al-Abadi
2. The State of Law coalition, led by al-Maliki
3. The Fatah coalition of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), led by al-Amiri
4. The Sairoon coalition, supported by al-Sadr,
5. al-Hakim's Wisdom Movement, which has not joined any of the coalitions yet⁴¹

The latest public opinion polls indicate that al-Abadi will need to form a coalition with one of these factions to form his government after the elections (see Table 2). For most parties, including Iraqi Kurdish ones, receiving as many votes as possible is the key to shaping the post-election negotiations.

AL-FATAH: AMIRI'S ELECTORAL COALITION

Badr leader al-Amiri is the key figure for an electoral coalition of pro-Qom militias. The political wings of several militias have recently united under the umbrella of a new coalition called al-Fatah al-Mubin (The Manifest Victory), with Badr, AAH, and Harakat al-Nujaba being the "nucleus" of the alliance.⁴³

Although the coalition does not represent all PMF units, al-Fatah capitalizes on the PMF's popularity and demands a permanent special status for the PMF in Iraq's future. The Fatah's election campaign includes

public relations efforts via traditional and social media that promote PMF martyrs.⁴⁴ In his tours to Iraqi universities, the AAH's leader Khazali calls students to "organize their ranks" and establish a "PMF university" that could deter "enemies," telling them, "If you fear us now, you must know that the PMF is present in every university, college, and department."⁴⁵

CAN AL-SADR'S COALITION BECOME A KINGMAKER?

A recent New York Times story depicted al-Sadr as a potential kingmaker, given that al-Abadi is likely to have no choice but to ally with al-Amiri or al-Sadr to form the government.⁴⁶ Mostly referred as "Iraq's firebrand cleric," al-Sadr was viewed with a deep skepticism in the West. Yet his wide-tent alliance and Iraqi nationalist rhetoric could attract secular and Sunni voters as well.

The Sairoon coalition surprisingly includes the Iraqi Communist Party of

Raed Fahmi, which cultivated closer relations with al-Sadr's movement after their collaboration in the 2015 reform protests.⁴⁷ In fact, this alliance between a Shiite party and a secular leftist party is an historic first in Iraq.

Unlike other Shiite party leaders, al-Sadr also reached out to Sunni politicians and the al-Wataniyya party. Thus, he has rebranded himself as a leader for Iraqi unity -- something that could make him an appealing coalition partner for al-Abadi.

PRO-NAJAF GROUPS: A WILD CARD

The parties aligned with Shiite militias that are affiliated with al-Sistani in Najaf -- especially al-Hakim's Wisdom party -- could be unpredictable factors in the election. The pro-Najaf groups are in favor of integrating PMF militias into the Iraqi army and thus have legitimate concerns about Badr and other pro-Qom militias. Yet they are not unified around one single political party, and al-Sistani

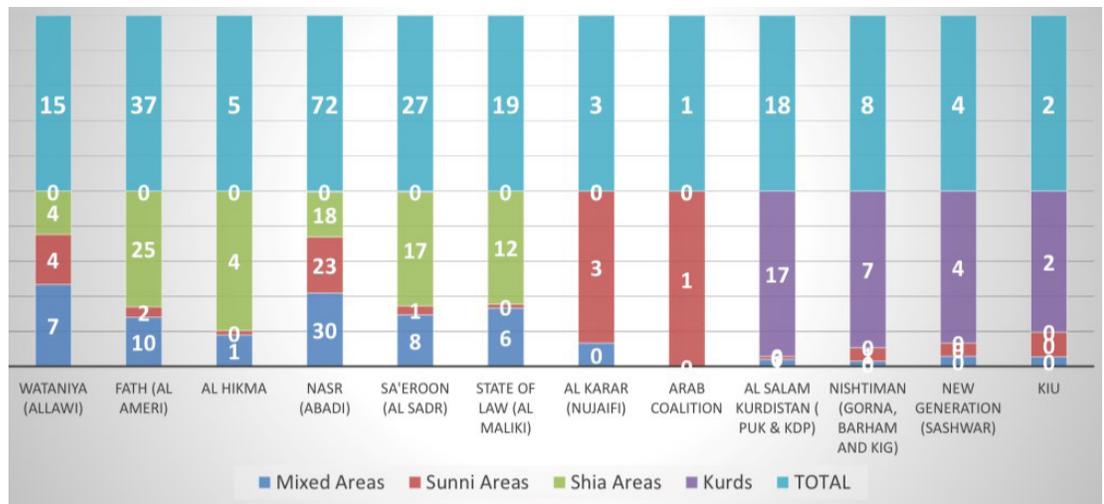


Table 2. Predicted parliamentary seats as an outcome of May election, according to four nationwide surveys conducted by Al Mustakilla in February and March 2018.⁴²

carefully avoids everyday politics. The ayatollah recently released a statement to call for all weapons to come under the government's control, which was followed by al-Abadi's declaration of "welcoming the Shia cleric's call against exploiting PMF volunteers and fighters politically."

However, al-Sistani's carefully worded statement also legitimized some of the pro-Qom militias' claims. For example, "The victory over Daesh does not mean the end of the battle with terrorism," resonates with a similar recent statement by PMF leader al-Muhandis that paramilitary forces will now play a key role in the country's security sector and counter-terrorism.⁴⁸

It is important to note that the Wisdom party is unlikely to reach a deal with al-Sadr, as the two groups are historic rivals among Iraqi Shiites.⁴⁹ Thus, if Wisdom receives significant voter support, al-Hakim could play a critical role in the government formation negotiations following the elections.

In fact, when the controversial alliance between al-Abadi and al-Amiri was taking shape a few weeks ago, the prime minister included the Wisdom party to form "a trilateral alliance" -- though that decision caused disputes within the alliance.⁵⁰ When asked why al-Abadi's alliance with Fatah collapsed the next day, Fatah leaders explicitly stated their beliefs that "merging too many alliances into one is harmful to all" as an electoral

tactic.⁵¹ Nonetheless, Fatah leaders hinted that they would be open to a similar coalition after the elections.

POST-ELECTION SECTARIAN CHALLENGES

Iraq's sectarian militias could present obstacles for the government in Baghdad following the crucial May elections. Direct threats and defiance provide the best evidence of the severity of the challenges some of the militias pose. Most recently, on Jan. 29, 2018, Kataib Hezbollah -- a group that operates under the PMF structure -- warned Baghdad that it would operate independently against American troops if the government and Iraqi Parliament fail to "take a firm decision to expel foreign forces from the country."⁵²

For such groups, Baghdad's call for the integration of PMF militias into the Iraqi military would amount to an invitation to infiltrate key positions in the Iraqi army -- reminiscent of the Badr Organization's spread and eventual dominance within the Interior Ministry and Iraqi police. As the PMF leaders clearly indicate their willingness to become "counter-terrorism" forces, the pro-Qom militias' sway over Iraqi military intelligence looks highly likely. If the PMF's pro-Iranian factions turn out to be Iraq's "deep state," internal divisions within the country may erupt once again, including unending cycles of Sunni insurgency.

In the short term, it is realistic to expect that PMF leaders will try to

secure the militias' place as Iraq's institutional defense mechanism after the elections, negotiating with the incumbent in Baghdad. In fact, they already demanded a larger share in the state budget to pay salaries, pensions, and benefits. However, this trend is reminiscent of the Iranian Basij structure: A temporary commission for the PMF could turn the group into a permanent institution "with its own permanent facilities, hospitals, headquarters, and equipment procurement program."⁵³

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Washington appears to be at a pivotal moment in the quest to save Iraqi unity. Baghdad's efforts to create an integrated, non-partisan national army should be a priority for U.S. policy makers. The post-Daesh era is a test for Iraq's resilience. Baghdad needs Washington's genuine support to improve the state's institutional capacity, including judicial and legislative bodies and a healthy system of checks and balances.

Policy makers in Baghdad and Washington should consider the following points in crafting a way forward:

- A proper vetting system and non-partisan procedures should be applied in incorporating militia fighters into the Iraqi national army. Sectarian impulses should not pollute or splinter an institutional body and thus further alienate Sunni citizens.
- Given the potential threat of

impunity, the militias should not be allowed to form counter-terrorism special units. Even if they are allowed to operate legally under judicial supervision, it is likely that their relatively independent structure could cause tensions within the security apparatus.

- The Iraqi government should pursue thorough investigations into the charges of human rights abuses and extrajudicial killings at the hands of militiamen. Such bold steps will ensure the central government's success in rehabilitation efforts in the country.

"Baghdad needs Washington's genuine support to improve the state's institutional capacity, including judicial and legislative bodies and a healthy system of checks and balances."

- To lessen militarization in Iraq's disputed territories, the Iraqi police forces should swiftly replace the Shiite militias. The police should also receive better educational training and forensic tools. In the disputed territories, Sunni locals and other minorities should be encouraged to become law enforcement officers. In fact, Iraq's long-term stability is dependent upon better community engagement, especially since the weakened Daesh has reverted to using guerilla tactics as well as exploiting Sunni locals' frustrations and deep fear from Shia militias.
- Given the mistrust among Iraqi

communities and the wounds of war, the resettlement of internally displaced populations should be a main priority. Unless the structural grievances that gave birth to Daesh are addressed, Iraq is not immune from threats of retaliation and cycles of violence.

- Cross-sectarian messages and the idea of a shared Iraqi identity should be amplified. Sunni religious leaders and Shiite authorities such as al-Sistani should be called upon to help in national reconciliation efforts.

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