

## THE POPULAR MOBILIZATION FORCES AND IRAQ'S FUTURE

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In the fight against the self-proclaimed Islamic State, Iraq's fledgling security apparatus has fragmented into groups under, parallel to, and apart from the state. The largest organization outside direct government control is the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)—over 60,000 fighters who stepped in to secure Iraq after state forces collapsed in 2014. Yet this organization remains divisive, poorly understood, and plagued by internal divisions, as it is both recognized by the state and at the behest of nonstate leadership figures. Key challenges involving the PMF will shape Iraq's political and security future.

### Setting the Record Straight About the PMF

- The PMF contains three distinct factions, based on various subgroups' respective allegiances to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and Muqtada al-Sadr.
- The PMF was central to early efforts to roll back the Islamic State; however, the state's security apparatus has since regrouped, reducing the PMF's role in subsequent battles, including the ongoing campaign in Mosul.
- Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's government is in a struggle to control the PMF. Rather than integrate it into existing state military forces, he has thus far recognized the PMF as a legitimate, state-affiliated entity.
- The PMF has become part of a growing intra-Shia power contest. This pits Nouri al-Maliki, considered the "godfather" of the PMF, against Sadr, who calls for disbanding the "imprudent militias," and Abadi, who advocates reducing and controlling the PMF.
- Some PMF subgroups have assumed political roles and will seek to leverage their roles in combatting the Islamic State to win votes in Iraq's 2018 elections. They will focus on key battles in Tel Afar and Hawija, where the PMF is on the front line.

### Policy Implications for Like-Minded Allies

- Understanding subgroups is pivotal. The PMF is not a monolithic Shia militia. Policy recommendations must separately address Iranian proxy; right-wing, pro-Khamenei Iraqi; pro-Sistani; and pro-Sadr subgroups.
- Supporting the Iraqi government's move to reduce the authority of pro-Maliki, right-wing PMF subgroups will better facilitate eventual integration. Sadr and Sistani claim to be willing to be integrated.
- Integrating fighters on an individual, not a group, basis will better address the problem of multiple affiliations. Rather than assigning entire groups to new divisions, any integration of the PMF and Iraq's security forces should be based on individual admission, so as to avoid divided loyalties between the government and new members' former paramilitary affiliations.
- Continuing to provide needed support for the Iraqi government's attempt to separate security and political institutions and its decision to deny the PMF's bid to become an electoral entity. Attempts by any party to leverage the PMF's popularity and symbolism to win electoral votes should be discouraged.

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