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THESIS

FOREIGN-BACKED CLIENTS AND LEGITIMACY: THE POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT OF IRAQ'S SHIITE MILITIAS (2005–2018)
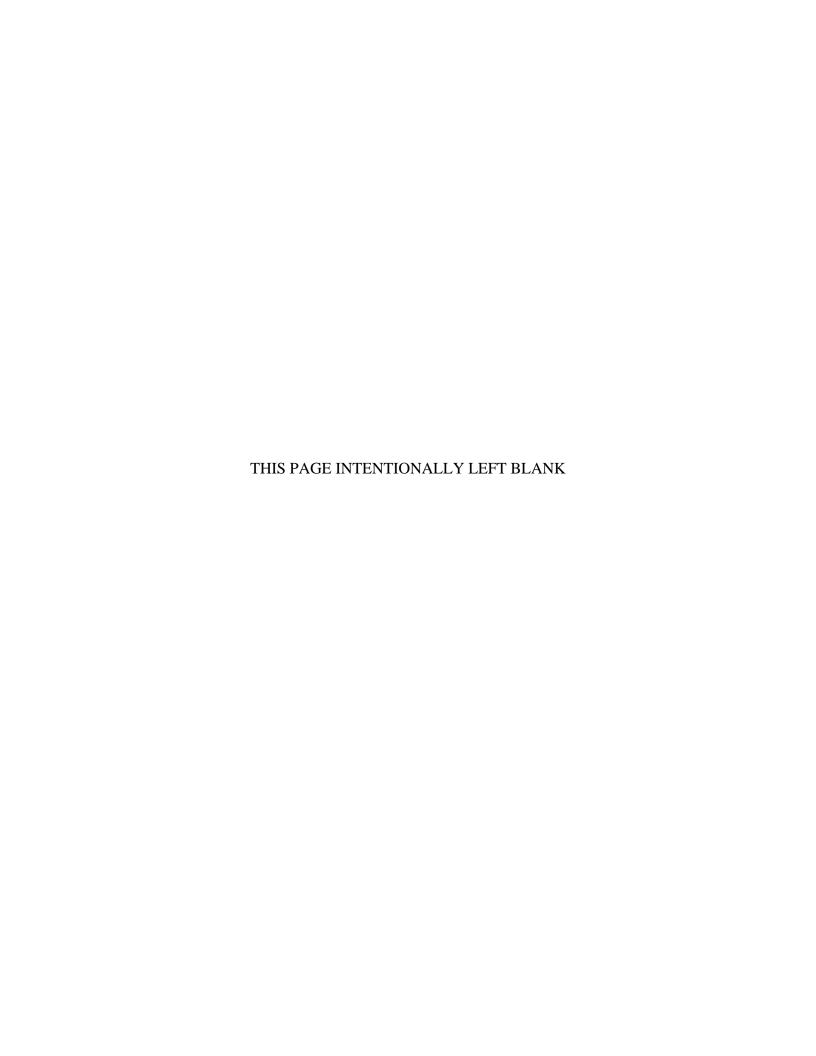
by

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13. ABSTRACT (maximum 200 words)

From fighting occupying foreign forces to successfully combating ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) across two countries, Iraqi Shiite militias appear to be transforming into a formal military with a transnational reach. What are the implications of the continued formalization of these militias in Iraq, especially since their incorporation into the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)—an umbrella organization that serves as an official auxiliary to Iraq's regular military but which has taken the lead in much of the fighting in the country's war against ISIS since 2015? The presence of a foreign patron affects an armed group's legitimacy, which we break down into three levels: popular legitimacy, legitimacy in domestic politics, and international legitimacy. Because some of the militias in the PMF are clients of Iran, this thesis argues that their close ties to Iran have had a broadly negative impact on their national standing and has limited their potential impact on the formation of the post-war Iraqi state.

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FOREIGN-BACKED CLIENTS AND LEGITIMACY: THE POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT OF IRAQ'S SHIITE MILITIAS (2005–2018)

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ABSTRACT

From fighting occupying foreign forces to successfully combating ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) across two countries, Iraqi Shiite militias appear to be transforming into a formal military with a transnational reach. What are the implications of the continued formalization of these militias in Iraq, especially since their incorporation into the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)—an umbrella organization that serves as an official auxiliary to Iraq's regular military but which has taken the lead in much of the fighting in the country's war against ISIS since 2015? The presence of a foreign patron affects an armed group's legitimacy, which we break down into three levels: popular legitimacy, legitimacy in domestic politics, and international legitimacy. Because some of the militias in the PMF are clients of Iran, this thesis argues that their close ties to Iran have had a broadly negative impact on their national standing and has limited their potential impact on the formation of the post-war Iraqi state.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AAH	Asaib Ahl al-Haq
Badr	Badr Organization
FAQ	Firqat al-Abbas al-Qitaliya
IDP	Internally Displaced People
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
KH	Kataib Hezbollah
LAFA	Liwa Abu Fadel al-Abbas
LNR	Lebanese National Resistance
NDF	National Defense Forces
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
QF	Quds Force
SA	Saraya Assalam
SCIRI	Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq
SICI	Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq

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I. IRREGULAR ARMED GROUPS WITH A PATRON AND STATE BUILDING

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

Throughout history, large militaries and their ability to wage wars have significantly contributed to the formation of states and impacted their style of governance. However, the scope of this phenomenon seems to be limited to certain times and places in the world. More recently, irregular armed forces have come to play an equally important role in the formation of states in parts of the world. They have influenced the path on which some states have evolved leading to the development of different types of states. In some states where patronage networks have been fundamental to the role of irregular armed forces in state formation, those networks have had a negative impact on state development and progress. While domestic patrons have been the focus of past scholarship, this thesis will expand the aperture of the discussion to examine the role of foreign patrons on irregular armed groups and their impact on state-building. It will further examine how the legitimacy of the armed groups has been affected (positively and negatively) by their connections to foreign patronage. These issues will be explored through the case of the Iraqi Shiite militias, which have grown from a collection of disparate, mostly Iran-backed armed groups to become a formidable and official armed force under the form of the PMF in Iraq.

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

1. Academic Significance

There has been a wide range of literature that discusses the role of militaries in state-building. Central to that literature is Charles Tilly's comprehensive framework based on the history of northwestern Europe. Also such authors as Achilles Batalas have acknowledged the participation of armed groups in the process of state-building. However, no work to date has adequately explored the influence of armed groups with a foreign patron on the process of state-building. I will shed light on this aspect of the literature through the case of the Iraqi Shiite militias and their main patron the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) of Iran.

2.   Regional Significance

Shiite militias have emerged as very effective military forces in both Iraq and Syria. They have been able to amass a large number of volunteers in a very short time and to constitute a coherent military entity under the umbrella of the PMF. Although not all militias in the PMF are backed by Iran, the most important groups in the PMF are Iranian clients and have played a central role in the decision making process of the organization. After ISIS seized large territory in Iraq, the PMF succeeded where the U.S.-trained Iraqi army had failed, and they were able to reverse the expansion of ISIS and have been able to eradicate its territorial possessions in Iraq almost completely. Furthermore, the Iran-backed militias in the PMF have played a very important role in fighting ISIS in Syria. Through their involvement in both wars, they have accumulated enormous military experience, and have become extremely capable especially in terms of operational coordination with other military entities. The broader alliance of Iraq's Shiite militias with their Iranian patrons, the Syrian military and paramilitary forces, the Lebanese Hezbollah, and other Iran-backed Shiite groups could be very beneficial for the PMF in the future.

Moreover, the fact that the PMF was embraced by the Iraqi government and officially declared as a governmental organization gives it legal and political legitimacy on top of its popular and social legitimacy. The scene of having two distinct officially recognized military organizations in a country reminds us of the similar circumstances in neighboring Iran, wherein the IRGC was established after the 1979 revolution as a counterpart to Iran's regular military, but has become far more politically important than its predecessor. A substantial part of the armed groups making up the PMF as well as most of their leadership enjoy direct support from the IRGC. This patronage is probably behind the growth and sustainment of the PMF as well as the ventures of some of its constituents into Syria. Nevertheless, there still exists a strong rivalry between three competing factions within the PMF. The PMF, though being able to coherently work against a common threat, is actually made of some 50 different groups.[1] While one faction is holding the support and the agenda of the IRGC, another faction falls under the influence of the prominent Shiite

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[1] Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jaber, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future," Middle East Center, April 1, 2017, 12.

religious leader al-Sistani and Prime Minister Haidar Al-Abadi, and a third is led by the Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. Therefore, the future face of the PMF, and by extension, an increasingly important part of the contemporary Iraqi state, will be likely determined by the prevailing of one of these factions over the others.

The majority of the PMF members and their senior leadership are Shi'a Muslim. With such a sectarian coloring, it is difficult to easily imagine the contribution of the PMF to a unified and stable Iraq. For example, could the effectiveness of this organization against Sunni insurgencies and Kurdish secessionists be regarded as a unifying factor? Alternatively, might their success be viewed through the lens of government (or even sectarian) suppression? Will the PMF be able to distinguish between the interests of Iraq and those of its patrons? Will it be able to act in a unified Iraq's interests if those interests run counter to Iran's? There is no doubt that should the faction supported by the IRGC prevail over the others, the IRGC would be able to help mold the PMF in its own image and help facilitate the export of Iran's revolutionary politics to its neighbor. On the other hand, if one of the opposing factions to Iran were able to dominate the PMF, how would the Iran-backed groups respond, and to what extent, if any, would they submit to Iraqi governmental authority if it meant a dilution or dissolution of their domestic power and influence?

C.   LITERATURE REVIEW

The formation of states is a question that still has historians debating it and the factors behind it while trying to separate the rules from the exceptions. Charles Tilly placed a major emphasis on centralized military forces and their tendencies to wage war as the rule behind the evolution of states in Northwestern Europe. On the other hand, many historians saw the formation of states in Northwestern Europe as the exception and not the rule as most developing countries recently took different paths.

This literature review will examine the contribution of regular militaries and their evolution to the formation of states and their subsequent shapes as portrayed by Charles Tilly. It will then explore some of the more recent literature focusing on the role of irregular armed groups in state formation. This perspective has been adopted by many contemporary

historians, one of whom is Achilles Batalas on the case of Greece in the 19th century. Finally, this review will consider the special case of armed groups with domestic patrons and how this nuance renders a destructive influence on the formation and stability of states. William Reno dissects the social order of some of the West African countries and explains the patronage networks ravaging through their societies.

1.   The Role of the Military in State-Building

Charles Tilly's work on state formation in Europe is foundational to our understanding of the role of militaries in that process. His main argument claims that military power has been formulating the primary factor in the formation of the modern state. Building up military power amounts to war making, which he considers essential for state making. Central to his argument is that the state should maintain monopolistic control over the means of coercion within its territory in order to sustain itself and develop its structure.[2] Therefore, all competition over the use of force must be either destroyed, neutralized, or absorbed to consolidate a monopoly on coercion.

Tilly brings to the table that the play between coercion, capital and connection determines the outcome of the state's capacity. Coercion would be the use of force or any means that causes damage to people or their possessions.[3] Capital constitutes resources that are of value and can be transferred and benefited from.[4] Connection encompasses the social ties among groups, people or any two social entities.[5] The accumulation and concentration of these three elements in European societies highly influenced the shape and function of the states they formed. Tilly concludes in this regard that the lack of any of these three ingredients or the high concentration of one over the others does not favor the development of a capable state. However, he argues that when coercion, capital and connection are

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2 Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," in *Bringing the State Back in*, eds. Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 175.

3 Charles Tilly, "Armed Force, Regimes, and Contention in Europe since 1650," in *Irregular Armed Forces and Their Role in Politics and State Formation*, eds. Diane E. Davis and Anthony W. Pereira (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 43.

4 Ibid., 45

5 Ibid.

present in moderate levels in a society, then the state develops its capacity in a more stable and sustainable manner.[6]

On the other hand, Tilly draws on differences between coercion-intensive, capital-intensive and capitalized-coercion state formation. Landlords with many dependent subjects pursued coercion intensive state formation, while city states with substantial resources turned to capital-intensive state formation.[7] Eventually both would be outlived by rulers who were successful in combining immense applications of coercion and capital through capitalized-coercion state formation.[8]

Moreover, because mainly I will be concerned with the role of sub-state armed group in state-building, I will focus more on the coercion aspect of the state formula. Tilly discusses in great detail the evolution of militaries and in the different forms that they were erected and the different means that they were used to provide the coercive force needed for the state. In earlier stages of European history, rulers summoned armies from groups and persons who owed them personal services.[9] Later, they relied on contracted mercenaries to maintain the ability to remain superior in using force.[10] Finally, the rulers began to form regular armies, in the modern sense, from the population that existed within the territories that they controlled.[11] This shift in the forms of the executer of the coercive force to its latter structure and form is what ultimately gave the military the significant role in state formation.

Consequently, war was the tool that the states used to manifest their grip on violence and as Tilly mentioned, "War made the state and the state made war." War gives the state context to accumulate more coercion means and enables it to further perfect the

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6Tilly, "Armed Force, Regimes, and Contention in Europe since 1650," 49.

7 Ibid., 53.

8 Ibid.

9 Tilly, "Armed Force, Regimes, and Contention in Europe since 1650," 52.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

functions of its centralized institutions.[12] Even if war were not imminent, the states would resort to fictitiously advertise external war in order to justify their steps in resource gathering and augmenting their coercive means.[13] In a progressive state formation process, the military of the state would remove internal competition over the use of force. One way to achieve that was by making bearing arms by civilians illegal and impractical.[14] In addition, external competition would be eliminated by waging wars. In addition, providing protection for its clients was what kept the state's existence relevant. Therefore, in order to achieve those three roles by the military, the state was able to justify the acquisition of resources from its clients.[15]

Despite the application of Charles Tilly's theory on the formation of northwestern European states, many authors criticize it for its limitation in time and place. For example, Anthony W. Pereira asserts that the monopoly of the use of force by the state is sometimes not the final chapter of the formation of the state and could be reversed.[16] Furthermore, the evolution that the military went through in northwestern Europe as described by Tilly did not happen everywhere else.[17] Moreover, Pereira stresses that irregular armed forces in some developing countries were more significant than the state's military or police.[18] Similarly, Miguel Angel Centeno recognizes the limitation of Tilly's theory when he tries to apply it to states in Central America. He deduces that the constrained nature of the wars in that part of the world allowed for a different outcome of the states.[19] In addition, Diane

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12 Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990 – 1992*, (Malden: Blackwell, 1992), 75.

13 Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," 171.

14 Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990 – 1992*, 69.

15 Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," 181.

16 Anthony W. Pereira, "Armed Forces, Coercive Monopolies, and Changing Patterns of State Formation and Violence," in *Irregular Armed Forces and Their Role in Politics and State Formation*, eds. Diane E. Davis and Anthony W. Pereira (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 388.

17 Ibid., 389.

18 Ibid., 390.

19 Miguel Angel Centeno, "Limited War and Limited States," in *Irregular Armed Forces and Their Role in Politics and State Formation*, eds. Diane E. Davis and Anthony W. Pereira (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 87.

E. Davis emphasizes that the role that irregular armed forces played in the formation of states during the era that Tilly inspects was undermined in the latter's writings.[20]

2. The Role of Irregular Armed Groups in State-Building

Achilles Batalas has similarly challenged Tilly's state formation framework by presenting a case where that framework was not applicable for various reasons. Batalas established that in some cases, what one would expect to occur given Tilly's state model did not occur at all. He presented the state of Greece in the nineteenth century, and gave evidence of the state requiring protection from irregular armed groups rather than becoming the supplier of protection. Furthermore, he showed how these irregular armed groups actually played a much more important role than the regular military in exercising the state's military aspiration as well as contributing to the formation of the state. The main question that Batalas addresses is the outcome from the state's elites inability to establish a monopoly on the coercive force.[21]

Therefore, when the state failed to eliminate irregular armed groups by force, it turned to bargaining with them and in some occasions employing them.[22] The author shows that this was the case in 19th century Greece. However, he was careful not to declare that the way in which this relationship unfolded between the state elites and irregular forces in Greece to be a universal trend. Rather, he emphasizes that the "sociopolitical environment" and the "international context" would shape that relationship and determine its form as well as its sense of utilization.[23]

In the case of Greece, during the Kapodistrian administration and the Bavarian regime, the state was unable to get rid of irregular armed groups and tended to incorporate

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20 Diane E. Davis, "Contemporary Challenges and Historical Reflections on the Study of Militaries, States, and Politics," in *Irregular Armed Forces and Their Role in Politics and State Formation*, eds. Diane E. Davis and Anthony W. Pereira (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 7.

21 Achilles Batalas, "Send a Thief to Catch a Thief: State-Building and the Employment of Irregular Military Formations in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Greece," in *Irregular Armed Forces and Their Role in Politics and State Formation*, eds. Diane E. Davis and Anthony W. Pereira (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 150.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

or employ them. The Kapodistrian administration integrated the irregular groups into semi-regular forces with the intent to turn them into a regular military.[24] Similarly, after the Bavarian regime failed to eliminate the irregular militaries, it employed large numbers of their groups in an attempt to change the men's allegiance from their captains and be able to absorb them into a regular formation.[25]

The ways in which the irregular groups were used by the state varied from providing protection to waging war. The state required their protection against the groups themselves and against other uncontracted groups.[26] Also since the Great Powers (France, Great Britain, and Russia) did not favor that Greece pursue the unification with the Greeks who were within the Ottoman empire, the state elites directed the irregular groups to support irredentist rebellions within the Ottoman Empire.[27] At some point, the Empire's army was overwhelmed by the irregular forces from Greece that were viewed as a Greek invading force.[28] Furthermore, the Kolettis administration regarded the irregular formations to be the principal military force in case a war erupted with the Ottoman Empire.[29]

Even though irregular armed groups may engage in hostilities against the state and its institutions, Greece was able to take advantage of their proliferation in the nineteenth century. The state was able to form centralized and autonomous institutions although it lacked a monopoly over the means of coercion. It was successful in that it became the "most powerful patron in Greek society."[30] Therefore, the employment of irregular armed groups did not obstruct the state formation, but was actually part of it.[31]

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24 Batalas, "Send a Thief to Catch a Thief," 159.

25 Ibid., 162.

26 Ibid., 150.

27 Ibid., 165.

28 Ibid., 166.

29 Ibid., 165.

30 Batalas, "Send a Thief to Catch a Thief," 169.

31 Ibid.

Batalas concluded that the Greek state was forced to resort to the use of irregular armed forces for several reasons.[32] First, it was unable to establish a monopoly on the means of power since it could not defeat the irregular forces. Second, the influence of the Great Powers and their objection over the intervention of Greece in the affairs of the Greek in the Ottoman Empire. Third, the state was unable to extract resources from its population. Fourth, the prevalence of an irregular military tradition within the Greek society.

3.   The Role of Armed Groups with Domestic Patron in State-Building

William Reno has examined armed groups in West Africa and their political role and influence on state-building capabilities. He has linked their emergence to "violent patronage networks" and "collapsing states."[33] The leaders of these countries seemed to rely on informal armed groups to secure their position and power rather than on state institutions. Moreover, these leaders exploited the state resources and purposefully withered the state capabilities in favor of accumulating enough personal resources to sustain their patronage over the armed groups.[34] In return, these armed groups with local patronage served no purpose in any state-building process, on the contrary, their existence was the very reason that states would collapse.

Reno reinforced this claim by pointing out that infrastructure and basic services in countries of West Africa became depleted before wars even broke up in them.[35] This was due to the actions of their patron in power and due to their coercive behavior over the citizens, the businesses and their patron's rivals. Reno also revealed that the opposition to the man in power did not intend to remove him to bring any change to the system, but rather to replace him in order to provide for their own needs and nourish their own networks. Furthermore, in many cases the armed groups became so efficient in their

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32 Ibid., 154.

33 William Reno, "The Changing Nature of Warfare and the Absence of State-Building in West Africa," in *Irregular Armed Forces and Their Role in Politics and State Formation*, eds. Diane E. Davis and Anthony W. Pereira (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 323.

34 Ibid., 326.

35 Ibid.

coercion practices that their leaders would develop the ability and boldness to replace their patron, resulting in consecutive coups and armed struggles in those countries.[36]

Therefore, Reno saw that these trends in West Africa of social and political dynamics defied the need of the ruler for a military with a monopoly on the coercive force as Tilly based the state-building strategy.[37] On the contrary, these rulers tended to promote division among the different factions in their country, diluted the capabilities of state institutions to resolve disputes and kept their own proxies dominant on the field. This prohibited any other rivals from organizing or rising against them and at the same time everyone sought their help, which kept them in power.[38] Consequently, Reno regarded that the ruler's purposeful spread of disorder to maintain his power did not allow him to appease, coopt or remove his rivals — a step set by Tilly as essential to state-building.[39]

Moreover, Reno asserted that the main fear of the rulers in West Africa was from internal threats rather than from external interventions or invasions. So they tended to divide and weaken their militaries, as those were the principal source of threat and the more likely to bread bold generals who would attempt coups. On the other hand, the rulers would establish patronage networks directly linked to them.[40] These networks depended totally on the ruler for the sustainability and they would be the primary source of protection for the ruler. However, all political leaders took similar approaches at their private security and consequently the state's coercive capability was split between private competing armies arising from the patronage networks.

In addition, Reno in his article titled "Patronage Politics and the Behavior of Armed Groups" went deeper into the behavior of armed groups based on the presence or lack of a local patron. This behavior was closely linked to the relationship with the local population and the source of legitimacy of the group. He related the protective behavior of some armed

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36 Reno, "The Changing Nature of Warfare and the Absence of State-Building in West Africa," 332.

37 Ibid., 329.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., 331.

40 Ibid., 327.

groups to the fact that they were not part of a patronage network.[41] Moreover, these groups were less likely to commit acts that violated human rights.[42] As an example of such groups, Reno described the Kamajors of Sierra Leone, which later became part of the Civil Defense Forces in that country.[43]

On the other hand, Reno described how a group with a patron on whom it relied upon for resources and political protection was more aggressive towards the local population.[44] Such a group would not need to rely on the local community for survival and was more disposed to commit violations of human rights.[45] Reno clearly deduced that the more an armed group was entangled in a patronage network the more predacious and socially threatening it became.[46]

Reno also highlighted how a change in the armed group's structure from community based to having a patron was reflected in that group members' behavior. One example he gave was that of the Bakassi Boys in Nigeria. Initially, this group was the protector of local merchants who provided its finances and it enjoyed good relations with the community.[47] However, when the state governor recruited the group to coerce political rivals, there was a shift in the group's behavior and its members started treating the civilians violently.[48] Reno ascribed this transition due to the gained protection from the patron and therefore there was no need to maintain relations with the locals anymore. Similarly, a violent group with a patron would shift its behavior to care about the locals and embrace good relations with them once it had lost its patron.[49]

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41 William Reno, "Patronage Politics and the Behavior of Armed Groups," *Civil Wars* 9, no. 4 (December 2007): 324.

42 Ibid.

43 Reno, "Patronage Politics and the Behavior of Armed Groups," 337.

44 Ibid., 333.

45 Ibid., 324.

46 Ibid., 336.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Reno, "Patronage Politics and the Behavior of Armed Groups," 332.

In conclusion, the patronage networks created by the rulers to ensure their personal protection and shield them from the perceived internal threat, undermined the formation of the state. This unstable form of the state was caused primarily because the coercive force was not concentrated nor was it unique for the state. Moreover, the rulers systematically weakened the state's military, the supposed monopolistic coercive force, in order to ensure no coups are attempted against them. Furthermore, in order to sustain their clients, the rulers took advantage of the state's resources, cut down on state expenditure and portrayed themselves as the sole provider of goods. Additionally, the presence of a patron rendered an armed group as aggressive and violent towards civilians, whereas the lack of a patron inclined an armed group to collaborate with the local population. Coinciding with that, the loss of a patron forced the group to turn to the locals, while the adoption by a patron pushed the group away from civilians and its members became violent and more likely to violate human rights.

4.   Conclusion

In the above review, we came across two divergent theories for the main drive behind state formation: regular and centralized military versus irregular armed forces. Both incorporated the importance of waging war and obtaining legitimacy. Furthermore, the existence of a domestic patron has negatively affected the role of the armed group in the stability and formation of the state. However, an armed group with a foreign patron requires closer examination to deduce the possible roles of such an armed group in state-building.

D.   POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The presence of a patron as a supporter and a guide for an armed group suggests that such a group is incentivized to advance the agenda of its patron more so over the interests of its state. Most probably the armed group with a patron will not have a constructive role in the state since the patron will prefer that this group remain dependent on it in order to be able to control its assets and behavior. Should the client group be part of a strong independent state or operate within a stable one, that would surely compromise that relationship and hinder the patron's ability to exert control over its client. Therefore,

the armed group and its patron behind it are de-incentivized from pursuing behavior that would lead to a stable, centralized and independent state.

1. First Hypothesis

It is likely that an armed group with a foreign patron would be disinclined to pursue objectives of the state should they run against the objectives of its patron. Even though the political groups in the country or other rival armed groups might grow to fear it due to the support it enjoys from its patron, my first hypothesis indicates that its popular legitimacy would be undermined if it were seen to be acting against national interests.

2. Second Hypothesis

The interaction between the armed group and local political groups and government organizations would have a great influence on its legitimacy in domestic politics. My second hypothesis indicates that the recognition from domestic politicians and other domestic players plays a significant part in the group's domestic political legitimacy.

3. Third Hypothesis

The international status of the group's patron might also have an influence on the international legitimacy of the group. My third hypothesis assumes that the better status the patron enjoys in the international arena, the more probable that the armed group will benefit from international legitimacy. Similarly, if the patron suffered from a bad reputation in the international arena, then that would negatively impact the international legitimacy of the armed group. This legitimacy would be one of the pillars for the armed group to be able to play a positive role in state-building.

E. RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis will look at the case of the Shiite militias in Iraq. To be able to quantify the effect of a foreign patron on the role of an irregular armed group in state-building, three dimensions of the group's legitimacy will be examined: the group's popular legitimacy, domestic political legitimacy and international legitimacy. These levels of legitimacy coincide with the three hypotheses suggested earlier. To measure popular legitimacy, the

group's relationship with the civilian population will be taken into account, as well as the extent to which this group is representative of that population. Moreover, to measure domestic political legitimacy, the group's relationship with political entities in the country will be taken into consideration, and especially the interaction with the government. Finally, to measure international legitimacy, the group's relationship with external entities will be considered, international reports that assess its conduct, as well as international support that it may be enjoying.

Research sources will encompass both primary and secondary material. Primary sources will include government websites, official militia websites and unofficial pages on social media, official PMF propaganda, organizational statements, and published interviews with PMF leadership. In addition, Arabic and Iraqi news reports about Iraqi Shiite militias and the PMF will also be used. Secondary sources will include academic books, analytical articles and Western media reports. All resources will be in English or Arabic as well as translated work in those languages.

F.   THESIS OVERVIEW

This thesis will consist of five chapters. The first chapter will include the introduction, and will lay the foundation for the argument. The second chapter will contain a historical background of the militias constituting the PMF with a focus on the period between 2005 and 2011. This chapter will also include a glance on the formation of the patronage between the Iraqi militia and the IRGC. The third chapter will dive into the contribution of the Iraqi militia on the Syrian arena from 2011 through the present. This period also witnessed the proliferation of Iraqi armed groups that converged into the PMF. Moreover, the presence on the Syrian fields allowed the Iraqi militia to gain combat experience as well as interact with other military entities such as the Lebanese Hezbollah. The fourth chapter will focus on Iraq from 2013 through the present. It will cover the establishment of the PMF and the evolution of the organization into its current form. Most significant in this chapter is the formal embrace of the PMF and its fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The final chapter will discuss the findings of this thesis, the validity of these findings and their applicability to other similar cases.

II.   ROOTS OF IRAQI SHIITE MILITIAS AND DEVELOPMENT OF PATRONAGE

There are a large number of Shiite militias in Iraq with varying sizes and different origins. This study will focus on the largest groups, which have had a significant role in Iraqi politics and regional conflicts from 2005 through the present. These militias include the Badr Organization (Badr), Kataib Hezbollah (KH), Saraya Assalam (SA), Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), Liwa Abu Fadel al-Abbas (LAFA), and Firqat al-Abbas al-Qitaliya (FAQ). Badr has existed for decades while the other organizations are younger, such as LAFA and FAQ, which were both formed in response to the war against ISIS in 2014. Also, the above organizations have different allegiances, which highly influence their agendas and by extension their organizational behavior and activities.

This chapter will describe the main Shiite militias in Iraq, their leadership, and how they formed. Then it will discuss the development of the Iranian patronage over some of Iraqi groups from the Islamic Revolution of 1979 through the present. Even though not all groups are allied with Iran, the Iranian-backed ones have a significant role in the country and have helped advance Iran's interests. We will also briefly touch on the increased Iranian influence over the Iraqi politics starting with the 2005 elections. The chapter will then inspect the level of popular legitimacy that the different Shiite groups enjoy in Iraq, where the views of different Iraqi communities are examined. It is important to look into different parts of Iraq to understand the different views towards the Iraqi groups. Finally, a comparison between Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iraqi Shiite militias will be observed. We take a brief look at the creation and development of Hezbollah, and try to define some differences and similarities with the Iraqi groups. Iran has continuously funded and supported Hezbollah, whose leadership has pledged allegiance to the supreme leader, and all of its members have embraced *wilayat al-faqih* ideology. Moreover, Hezbollah has leveraged popular support within some Lebanese communities, and has successfully integrated within the political system of Lebanon. Hezbollah has formed a political wing whose members are actively participating in both the Lebanese parliament and government. Therefore, it is relevant to consider the Hezbollah model when we talk about

Shiite militias in Iraq, especially with the possibility that one or some of these groups might regard Hezbollah as an applicable model in Iraq and adopt some of its characteristics.

A. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Not all Shiite groups adhere to the same ideology or follow the same religious marjaa. A religious marjaa for the Shia is the person who is a reference in matters of religion. However, this religious authority is accompanied by political influence, and in the case of the concept of *wilayat al-faqih* of Iran the political influence is materialized into political authority. Some Iraqi Shiite groups follow Iran's supreme leader and accept him as *wali al-faqih*. This comes with embracing his political and religious authority over any other forms. Other groups follow independent clerical authorities such as Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani or al-Haeri, whose political views are more of a guideline and less of an authority. Al-Sistani for example, rejects the concept of religious clerics practicing political authority and therefore opposes Iran's *wilayat al-faqih*.

The Badr Organization, known initially as the Badr Corps, was founded by the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) in Tehran in 1983.[50] The nucleus of this organization was established based on the fatwa issued by Sayed Mohamad Baqir al-Sadr—SCIRI's clerical leader— that called for fighting the Baath regime.[51] The IRGC played a significant role in establishing Badr, which fell under the IRGC command during the entirety of the Iran-Iraq war.[52] The primary constituents of Badr at the early stages were Iraqi Shiite expatriates who had fled to Iran to escape Saddam's oppression

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[50] Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 111.

[51] "Badr, the Military Wing," Al-Ghad Press, January 21, 2016, https://www.alghadpress.com/news/%D9%85%D9%84%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9/46257/%D8%A8%D8%A7F%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AD-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A.

[52] Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 111.

and Iraqi prisoners of war as well as deserters during the Iran—Iraq war.[53] Badr was headed by the Shiite cleric Mohamad Baqir al-Hakim, who was later assassinated in 2003.[54] Also in 2003, after the Baath regime was toppled, the group adopted the name "Badr Organization" in a context to signify an extension to the political arena.[55] In June 2007, SCIRI changed its name to the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq (SICI).[56] By removing the "revolution" component from the name, SICI was plotting a trajectory away from Iran. In 2012, Badr broke off from SICI and that was announced during a press conference without manifesting into violence.[57] Currently, the group is led by Hadi al-Ameri and is estimated to have 100 thousand combatants by 2016.[58] Badr leadership had accepted *wilayat al-faqih* concept from the beginning by acknowledging Khomeini as the group's religious marjaa.[59] This was evident as Iran's supreme leader appointed the leaders of Badr.[60]

The militia with the largest number of combatants was the Mehdi Army (later became known as Saraya Assalam), which was established in 2003. Its leader is the Shiite

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53 "Badr, an Iraqi Militia that Fought Against Saddam and Fought alongside Assad," Aljazeera.net, February 11, 2016,
http://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/movementsandparties/2016/2/10/%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%B1-
%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7-
%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-
%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%AA-%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%85-
%D9%88%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%B9-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF.

54 "The Most Significant Armed Shiite Groups in Iraq," Aljazeera.net, September 8, 2014,
http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2014/9/8/%D8%A3%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B2-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A9-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82.

55 "The Badr Corps," Almarefa, accessed April 8, 2018,
https://www.marefa.org/%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%82_%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%B1.

56 "Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI)," Global Security, November 19, 2014,
https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/sciri.htm.

57 Aljazeera.net, "Badr, an Iraqi Militia that Fought Against Saddam and Fought alongside Assad."

58 Ibid.

59 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 111.

60 "The Role of Badr Organization in Iraq and its Relationship with Iran," Aljazeera.net, March 17,
2015, http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/arab-present-situation/2015/3/17/%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B1-
%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%81%D9%8A-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-
%D9%88%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7-
%D8%A8%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86.

cleic Moqtada al-Sadr, and it included around 60 thousand fighters.[61] The goals of this group were to protect Shia holy places as well as to fight against U.S. troops. The members of the Mehdi Army participated in the sectarian conflict in Iraq that erupted after the destruction of al-Askari mosque in Samarra - the holy shrine of two Shiite Imams.[62] In 2009, al-Sadr announced the suspension of all his militia activities.[63] However, when ISIS occupied territory in Iraq, he declared the revival of his militia in June 2014 and rebranded it as Saraya Assalam (Peace Companies).[64] This group is very well organized and its members owe allegiance solely to al-Sadr. According to one article from Raseef22, an Arabic media platform that takes a balanced stand on Arab-related issues, Iraqi government officials have no control over SA, and neither do the Iranians.[65] Moqtada al-Sadr does not recognize the authority of Iran's supreme leader, or Iran's theocratic ideology (*wilayat al-faqih*), but rather follows a different religious marjaa. Al-Sadr falls behind the religious marjaa Kazim al-Haeri, who even though resides in Qom- Iran, does not subscribe to *wilayat al-faqih*.[66] Despite some Iraqi media portraying that al-Sadr did not at times enjoy the best relations with al-Haeri, there are more recent evidence that suggests otherwise. For example, according to Yakein, an Iraqi media platform known to be anti-Iraqi government, reported in February 2017 that al-Sadr "abandoned participation in protests against the government because he was ordered by al-Haeri."[67]

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[61] Soheib Al-Falahi, "Iraqi Shiite Militias: Creation, Strength and Armament," Noon Post, June 12, 2015, https://www.noonpost.org/content/5000.

62 Aljazeera.net, "The Most Significant Armed Shiite Groups in Iraq."

63 Ibid.

64 Al-Falahi, "Iraqi Shiite Militias: Creation, Strength and Armament."

65 Hasan Zalghout, "The Iraqi Shiite PMF: Identity and Affiliation," Raseef22, March 1, 2016, https://raseef22.com/politics/2015/02/25/iraqi-militias-identity-and-affiliation.

66 Shafiq Chqair, "Sadrist Movement: Religious Reference and Political Movement," Aljazeera.net, June 6, 2004, http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2004/6/6/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AC%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A.

67 "Al-Sadr Abandons Protests According to Orders from Kazim al-Haeri," Yaqein, February 12, 2017, http://yaqein.net/politics/19539.

The relationship between Iran and al-Sadr witnessed many ups and downs. The period between 2003 and 2011 could be described as a cooperation between the two sides. Iran helped train the Mehdi Army, especially since the Iraqi group was fighting against the U.S. presence in Iraq. Also, al-Sadr stayed in Iran from 2008 to 2011 after the Iraqi military conducted a campaign against the Mehdi Army.[68] In addition, after the 2010 parliamentary elections, Iran helped al-Sadr enter a coalition with the Iraqi prime minister al-Maliki.[69] However, after 2011, al-Sadr returned to Iraq and the relationship with Iran began to deteriorate. The antagonism between al-Sadr and the Iranians reached a high degree, and on many occasions, al-Sadr criticized the augmented influence of Iran in Iraq. During one of his speeches, al-Sadr described commander of the IRGC Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani, as "the strongest man in Iraq."[70] In addition, al-Sadr accused Iran of constantly invoking splinters to his organization in order to weaken him and nourish other pro-Iranian groups. The most recent episode in the al-Sadr - Iran relations exploded after al-Sadr visited Iran's regional rival, Saudi Arabia, in July 2017.[71]

One of the splinters from the Mehdi Army is Asaib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous), which sources disagree at what point in time exactly it formed. It started working independently from the Mehdi Army in 2004, renewed its ties again with al-Sadr

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68 Islam Al-Maraghi, "Muqtada Al-Sadr: The Shiite Leader Away from the Iranian Squadron," Idaat, May 28, 2017, https://www.ida2at.com/muqtada-al-sadr-away-from-the-iranian-squadron.

69 Ibid.

70 Radwan Assayyid, "Iraq and Al-Sham between Suleimani and Daesh," Alarabiya.net, June 10, 2014, https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/politics/2014/01/10/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4-.html.

71 "Muqtada Al-Sadr Visits Saudi Arabia and Meets Bin Salman," Aljazeera.net, July 30, 2017, http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2017/7/30/%D9%85%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%8A%D8%B2%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%86-%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86.

in 2005, only to break away completely by 2006.[72] The leader of AAH is Qais al-Khazali.[73] This group has performed many attacks on U.S. and Iraqi forces. In the consequence of one of those attacks in 2007, al-Khazali was arrested by Iraqi forces but was later released in 2010.[74] AAH members and leadership fall behind *wilayat al-faqih* as the group explains on its official website.[75] The group operates under the immediate supervision of the commander of the Quds Force.[76] As a result of the enhanced support that al-Khazali received from Iran and the methods in which he led the group, his relationship with al-Sadr became contentious. Al-Sadr went as far as accusing al-Khazali and AAH behind him of "committing sectarian crimes."[77] On the other hand, al-Khazali and former Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki enjoyed very good relations.[78]

According to Rawabet Center, an Iraqi research center that uses anti-Iran language, Kataib Hezbollah (Hezbollah Battalions) consists of several Iraqi militias, which combined into one organization on August 21, 2007.[79] These militias included Kataib Abu Fadel al-Abbas, Kataib Karbalaa, Kataib Assijad, and Kataib Zaid Bin Ali.[80] Its structure is enshrouded with secrecy and little is known about its leadership but it is believed that its secretary general is Jaafar al-Ghanimi.[81] When it was established, the main goal of KH was

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72 "Asaib Ahl Al-Haq," Aljazeera.net, December 11, 2014, http://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/movementsandparties/2014/12/10/%D8%B9%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%A8-%D8%A3%D9%87%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9.

73 Al-Falahi, "Iraqi Shiite Militias: Creation, Strength and Armament."

74 Zalghout, "The Iraqi Shiite PMF: Identity and Affiliation."

75 "School of Thought of Asaib Ahl Al-Haq," Asaib Ahlualhaq, March 26, 2013, http://ahlualhaq.com/index.php/permalink/3204.html.

76 Aljazeera.net, "The Most Significant Armed Shiite Groups in Iraq."

77 Ibid.

78 Farah Najjar, "Iraq's second army: Who are they, what do they want?" Aljazeera, October 31, 2017, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/iraq-army-171031063012795.html.

79 "Kataib Hizbollah of Iraq, the Strongest Iranian Arm," Rawabet Center, June 17, 2015, http://rawabetcenter.com/archives/8406.

80 Al-Falahi, "Iraqi Shiite Militias: Creation, Strength and Armament."

81 Rawabet Center, "Kataib Hizbollah of Iraq, the Strongest Iranian Arm."

to fight U.S. troops in Iraq and this is still clearly stated on the group's official website.[82] The spokesperson of the group, Jaafar al-Husseini, has also said during an interview in March 2017 to Almayadeen, a media network aligned with Iran, that "any U.S. military presence in Iraq under any form is considered to be an occupation force."[83] This is one of the groups that openly announced it belongs to *wilayat al-faqih* of Iran. Its leaders have gone as far as to declare that they would side with Iran should a war break with Iraq.[84] KH was responsible for numerous attacks on U.S. and Iraqi forces. In 2009, the U.S. Department of State labeled KH as a terrorist organization.[85]

One of the newest Iraqi Shiite groups is Liwa Abu Fadel al-Abbas (Abou Fadel al-Abbas Brigade), which was established at the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011.[86] Unlike other groups, its combatants are drawn from the members of other Shiite militias like AAH, KH, and SA.[87] Its leader is Sheikh Alaa al-Kaabi and this group was established based on a fatwa by the Ayatollah Qasem al-Tai.[88] The group's ideological goal is to defend the Shiite holy shrine of Sayyida Zainab in Damascus.[89] LAFA has also participated in battles against ISIS alongside the Iraqi Army in Iraq.[90] While the group had been formerly connected to Muqtada al-Sadr, the group chief cleric, al-Tai, split from al-Sadr and embraced Iran's *wilayat al-faqih*.[91] It is not clear at what point in time this split occurred, but one of the earliest disengagement between al-Tai and the Sadrist movement was

82 "About Kataib Hizbollah," Kataib Hizbollah Official Website, accessed March 9, 2018, http://www.kataibhizbollah.com.

83 "Al-Husseini: Any US military presence in Iraq is an occupation," Almayadeen.net, March 24, 2017, http://www.almayadeen.net/news/politics/763621.

84 Aljazeera.net, "Badr, an Iraqi Militia that Fought Against Saddam and Fought alongside Assad."

85 "Designation of Kata'ib Hizballah," U.S. Department of State, June 26, 2009, accessed March 11, 2018, https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/143209.htm.

86 Many sources have confused Liwa Abu Fadel al-Abbas and Kataib Abu Fadel al-Abbas. The former was established in 2011 after the eruption of the Syrian conflict. Whereas, the latter is composed of several smaller militias, which some of it later combined to create KH.

87 Aljazeera.net, "The Most Significant Armed Shiite Groups in Iraq."

88 Barq Research and Studies, "Iraq: The Country of Militias."

89 Ibid.

90 Aljazeera.net, "The Most Significant Armed Shiite Groups in Iraq."

91 Philip Smith, "Iranian Proxies Step up Their Role in Iraq," The Washington Institute, June 13, 2014, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iranian-proxies-step-up-their-role-in-iraq.

elaborated by Jawad al-Jabouri, who is a member of the Iraqi parliament and of Kutlat al-Ahrar, the political party affiliated with al-Sadr. In April 2013, the Iraqi online platform Almada, which is pro-PMF reported that al-Jabouri "denied any ties between al-Tai and the Sadrist movement and that there was no connection between LAFA and the Mehdi Army."[92]

The most significant pro-Sistani group is Firqat al-Abbas al-Qitaliya (al-Abbas Combat Division). It has around 7000 active fighters and almost 40000 reserves.[93] Initially this group was established in the summer of 2014 based on the fatwa of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani to protect the holy city of Karbala.[94] The leader of the group Maitham al-Zaidi announced in early 2015 that "the division was not affiliated with any political faction; however, it operated in coordination with the [Iraqi] security forces and within the guidance of the religious marjaa of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani."[95] FAQ is mainly funded from the religious shrine foundations (Atabat - a term that generally refers to the Shiite shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf) in addition to other governmental sources.[96] The group's main goal is to protect the Shiite shrines in Iraq. It has also worked closely with the government security forces.[97] FAQ, over the course of the conflict with ISIS, has expanded its participation in the battles alongside other Shiite militias as well as in cooperation with the Iraqi military.

B.   IRGC PATRONAGE AND RELATIONS WITH IRAN

The Islamic revolution in Iran sought to adopt Shiite populations beyond its borders with the ambition of exporting the ideas and politics of its Islamic revolution. Iraq's Shia

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92 "The Sadrist Movement: Al-Tai Not Our Religious Reference, and No Connection between Mehdi Army and LAFA," Almada Press, April 16, 2013, http://www.almadapress.com/ar/NewsDetails.aspx?NewsID=10204.

93 Michael Knights and Hamdi Malik, "The al-Abbas Combat Division Model: Reducing Iranian Influence in Iraq's Security Forces," The Washington Institute, August 22, 2017, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-al-abbas-combat-division-model.

94 "Commander of the al-Abbas Combat Division: Four Brigades Support the PMF and the Military," al-Aalem al-Jadeed, February 24, 2015, https://al-aalem.com/news/9593.

95 Ibid.

96 Knights and Malik, "The al-Abbas Combat Division Model."

97 Smith, "Iranian Proxies Step up Their Role in Iraq."

were one of the Islamic Republic's primary concerns for many reasons. They were under the oppression of Saddam Hussein's regime, and Khomeini having lived and studied in Iraq, had established strong ties with other Iraqi clergy as well as with political groups like Dawa party. Also, Iraq borders Iran, which implies many geostrategic interests of the latter in the former. Another significant reason was that Iraq contained many of the Shiite holy places. During the Iran-Iraq war, one of the early forms of cooperation formed between Iran and an Iraqi Shiite group, Badr. The latter, known at the time as the Badr Corps, fought alongside Iran and, as mentioned earlier, it was under the direct command of the IRGC. Even though the impact of Badr on the war effort was limited, later, its role became very significant in Iraq and the region. Badr and other more recent groups like AAH and KH turned into IRGC clients and helped advance Iran's agenda as well as maintain the Islamic Republic's interests in the region. Soon after the U.S. invasion and the fall of Saddam Hussein, Badr and the Mehdi Army became a significant political and military power within the new state of Iraq. Moreover, AAH, KH, and Badr served as an extension of Iranian power when the Assad regime in Syria needed support to survive the conflict that erupted in 2011.

The IRGC, as one of the main pillars of the Islamic Republic of Iran, is a military organization with immense political and social power within Iran. This organization also supervises the Quds Force, which is IRGC's special forces division, responsible for all external operations.[98] Specifically, the Quds Force has engaged in developing, funding, and training of mostly Shiite militias and other militant organizations across the Middle East.[99] These militia groups have turned into Iran's clients: Iran took care of their funds and training and in return, they advanced Iran's interests in the region, and practically became dependent on the Islamic Republic's support for survival. Also, the Shiite groups amongst these Islamic militias have adopted the ideology of the IRGC. Their leaderships have openly embraced *wilayat al-faqih* concept while declaring subordination to the supreme leader of Iran, *wali al-faqih*.

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98 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 6.

99 Ibid.

During the Iran-Iraq war, Badr fought under the IRGC and that marked the first form of cooperation between an Iraqi militia and Iran. This group, in addition to fighting against the Iraqi army, was tasked to hold Iraqi territory taken by Iran.[100] The relationships forged on the battlefields between Badr members and the IRGC, later paid off for both sides. For example, Hadi al-Ameri, during his fight with the IRGC, met people like Qasem Soleimani and Mourtada Qorbani who is an Iranian general, is currently head of the Iranian Revolution Museums Foundation, and is very close to Soleimani.[101] With these high ranked Iranian acquaintances, al-Ameri ensured himself a good spot in the Iraqi political system. Reciprocally, Iran enjoyed having one of its loyal clients get to influential positions in the Iraqi government and help maintain Iran's interests.

After the U.S. toppled Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, the Shiite population was on the rise and so was Iranian influence. Al-Ameri and his comrades returned to Iraq and became engaged in politics at the local and national levels. Shiite groups, like Badr and the Mehdi Army, who were supported by Iran either financially or with military training, resorted to the use of force to advance their status and gain power. With the fall of the Baathist regime, there was a shift of power in favor of the Shia who constituted the majority of the Iraqi population.[102] With elections under way, the leaders of the Iraqi Shiite militias at the time like Badr, the Mehdi Army and AAH were able to be holders of political seats or strong influencers on the outcome of votes. Al-Ameri of Badr was able to win a seat in the parliament in the 2005 elections.[103]

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100 Ibid., 111.

101 Mohamad al-Saeed, "The Iraqi Militias: Iran's Cross-Border Forces," Aljazeera.net, January 25, 2017,
http://midan.aljazeera.net/reality/politics/2017/1/25/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-
%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A9-
%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%AF.

102 Elaheh Rostami-Povay, Iran's Influence: A Religious-Political State and Society in Its Region (New York: Zed Books, 2010), 137.

103 Al-Saeed, "The Iraqi Militias."

Moreover, the IRGC and Iran behind it played a significant role in shaping the outcome of the 2005 and 2010 Iraqi parliamentary elections as well as intervene when different Iraqi groups clashed. By offering political advice and financial support to its preferred groups as well as resorting to coercion to get its way through, Iran was able to increase the odds of their candidates.[104] Al-Ameri's career is just one example of the IRGC's influence in the Iraqi political arena and the balance of power. Additionally, Iran have had an influential role in ending conflicts that involved its Iraqi Shiite clients. For example, it intervened when conflict broke between SCIRI and the Mehdi Army in 2007, and obliged them to reach a ceasefire.[105] Similarly, in 2008, Iran got involved to halt the clashes between the Mehdi Army and the Iraqi security forces, and the Islamic Republic housed al-Sadr for three years.[106]

C.   POPULAR RECOGNITION AND EMBRACEMENT OF MILITIA

The Iraqi Shiite militias have drawn their members from the Shiite communities. Some of these communities looked upon the militias as their defenders, and able men have joined them for a living or for religious duty. While other communities did not hold that same regard for the militias, especially when these militias adopted a role of violence. On the other hand, the Shiite militias have always tried to keep in touch with their base and different militias engaged in different cultural, social, and humanitarian activities. Some groups even established institutions that offered the communities assistance in the domain of health, education and financial support. Also, almost all of the militias offered some sort of compensation for their wounded and for the families of their "martyrs."

The regime of Saddam Hussein was very oppressive toward the Shiite communities and that was one of the initial reasons why the Shiite militias emerged. During this period, these militias were regarded as the defenders of the community and were embraced. The Shiite community saw the fighters as the ones sacrificing themselves to achieve a better

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104 Michael Eisenstadt, "Iran and Iraq," The Washington Institute, September 13, 2015, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/view/iran-and-iraq.

105 Eisenstadt, "Iran and Iraq."

106 Ibid.

life for its people. However, during the war with Iran when Badr was fighting on the side of the Iranians and the Iranians were sending messages to the Iraqi Shia to revolt, the Shiite community did not respond enthusiastically. Even Khomeini himself delivered a speech where he asked the Iraqis to rise against Saddam and he asked them to join Iran in its fight.[107] Despite, the bad conditions that the Shia were suffering, they did not answer to foreign calls and not many joined the militias fighting with the Iranians.

After the U.S. invasion and the creation of the new Iraqi state, the weaknesses of the governmental institutions left a void that the Shiite militias were eager to fill. This was obvious in the high rate of unemployment, the lack of development plans in rural areas, and the absence of social services. Many of the young men in the Shiite population have joined the militias to provide for their families as unemployment spread. In addition, the salaries of the militia members exceeded what the university professors were getting at the end of the month.[108] Also, belonging to one of the militias afforded these men with protection from abuses of other militias' members.[109]

Moreover, the Shiite militias have assumed development roles and carried out social services in the areas that they control or reside in. For example, SA displayed in its official magazine Rosol the group's contributions to the community. In the first edition of the magazine, the group claimed to distribute aids to the displaced families due to the fighting with ISIS.[110] Also included in that same edition, the group showed pictures of its members painting the walls in the city of Samaraa.[111] Similarly, FAQ declared on its official website a nationwide campaign to support the educational system in Iraq. The

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107 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 63.

108 Salam Al-Jaff, "Militias' Salaries Exceed those of College Professors," The New Arab, May 10, 2017,
https://www.alaraby.co.uk/society/2017/5/10/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-
%D8%A3%D8%AC%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%B1-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-
%D8%AA%D9%81%D9%88%D9%82-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-
%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%B0%D8%A9-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AA.

109 Ibid.

110 Alaa Al-Baghdadi, "Suprivising Aid Distribution," *Rosol*, September 20, 2016, 1-2,
http://www.sarayasalam.net/p/blog-page_18.html.

111 Ibid., 1.

campaign began in the governorate of al-Mathna and included educational courses for students as well as maintenance and rehabilitation for schools and educational facilities.[112]

In a similar approach, KH has established a number of institutions that take up different roles from religious to educational and social. A brief description of these institutions could be viewed on the official website of the group. For example, the Hadaf institution is involved in religious studies and in the safeguarding of the Islamic culture.[113] Another institution, the Zainabiyat, claims to promote the role of women in the society and holds awareness sessions, seminars, and festivals around the country, of course all within the religious ideology of the group.[114] In addition, the institution of al-Nokhob al-Akadimiya (the academic elite) asserts to support education and research as well as organizing seminars, lectures, and exhibitions.[115]

After al-Sistani issued his Fatwa of "al Jihad al Kafai" urging all able men to join the Iraqi security forces for the defense of the country against ISIS, almost all Shiite volunteers joined the militias instead of the military.[116] It is worth looking into this point to try to understand the overwhelming support the Shiite population showed for the militias and not for the Iraqi army or the security forces in general. One possible explanation is the increased level of Shia mistrust in the Army due to the catastrophic defeat that the Iraqi Army suffered from as a smaller number of ISIS fighters took over four cities in Iraq.[117] Even the head of government at the time hinted to a "conspiracy" being behind the retreat or defeat of the Iraqi Army.[118] It was clear that the Shiite population had lost faith in the

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112 "Educational Sponsorship," Al-Abbas Combat Division Official Website, February 19, 2018, http://alabbas.iq/view.php?act=news&id=430.

113 "The Hadaf Institute," Kataib Hezbollah Official Website, accessed March 8, 2018, http://www.kataibhizbollah.com/institute/2708.

114 "The Zainabiyat Institute," Kataib Hezbollah Official Website, accessed March 8, 2018, http://www.kataibhizbollah.com/institute/2709.

115 "Al-Nokhob Al-Akadimiya," Kataib Hezbollah Official Website, accessed March 8, 2018, http://www.kataibhizbollah.com/institute/2710.

116 Barq Research and Studies, "Iraq: The Country of Militias."

117 Martin Chulov, Fazel Hawramy, and Spencer Ackerman, "Iraq Army Capitulates to ISIS Militants in Four Cities," The Guardian, June 11, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/11/mosul-isis-gunmen-middle-east-states.

118 Ibid.

Army and saw the militias as more dedicated and able in fighting ISIS. Another explanation is the mistrust towards any governmental-run organization and its methods of recruitments. The possible absence of any mechanism to absorb such a large and sudden number of volunteers into the security forces may have deterred the Shia responding to the fatwa from seeking such channels. If the Iraqi government were maintaining a balance between the number of recruits and their corresponding religious and sectarian origins, then it would decline such large numbers from the Shiite population alone. Perhaps still a possible reason for joining the militia is the religious tendency of these groups. A pious Shiite man would assume that joining such organizations to be more fulfilling for his religious aspirations and for meeting the call of the religious fatwa.

The Sunni population in Iraq has a very different view of the Shiite militias. After the Baathist regime fell, the Sunnis, being the minority, soon realized the Shia's ambition for dominance. The Sunnis considered the presence and the growth of the Shiite militias as being the tools used to achieve that dominance and take control of the country by force. They accused those militias of sectarian violence and of practicing demographic changes by replacing Sunnis with Shias. According to some sources, the Shiite militias were accused of at least 17 demographic changes in places like Jirf Assakhir, al-Mahmoudiyi, Samuraa, Baakouba, al-Mikdadiyi and others.[119] In these cases, the militias expelled Sunni families and replaced them by others from the Shiite population. Also, the Sunnis have accused the AAH to have committed the most violent violations against them, where they claim that this group has executed many Sunnis without a trial and has attacked their mosques.[120]

Similarly, the Kurds, having their own ambitious plans of an independent nation, have clashed with the Shiite militias on several occasions. For example, after the Kurdish Peshmerga took control of the town of Sinjar from ISIS, tensions rose between the Kurds

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119 Othman Al-Mokhtar, "The World of Militias in Iraq: 53 Formation Supported by Iran," The New Arab, July 24, 2015, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2015/7/23/%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-53-%D8%AA%D8%B4%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%85-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A.

120 Aljazeera.net, "The Most Significant Armed Shiite Groups in Iraq."

and the Shiite militias. As a result, AAH engaged in terrorizing the Kurdish residents of Baghdad and expelled many Kurdish families from that city; such incidents were reported by Al-Quds Al Arabi, a populist Arab nationalist newspaper.[121] Also, after the Kurds overwhelmingly supported their independence from Iraq in the referendum on September 25, 2017, the Shiite militias moved to confront the Kurdish forces in Kirkuk. As a result, the militias took over the city and the surrounding oil fields where the Peshmerga quickly withdrew with a limited firefight between the two parties.[122]

D.　　COMPARISON TO THE LEBANESE HEZBOLLAH

We have taken a brief look at some of the main Iraqi Shiite militias, the circumstances of their formation, and their ideological alignment. Also, we have highlighted the groups that enjoyed the support of Iran the most and the role that Iran played for those groups. Then we attempted to weigh the degree to which the different Shiite groups had the backing of the Iraqi population, as well as evaluated the level of their engagement with the population. Since Lebanese Hezbollah present a similar Iranian venture but with a different outcome than the Iraqi counterpart, it seems relevant to look into the history of the Lebanese group and deduce where things went differently and why we do not have the Hezbollah model in Iraq yet. Hezbollah has, to a certain extent, gained the support of the Shiite population in Lebanon, and in some points in time of other Lebanese communities. Also, Hezbollah has formed a political wing that was effective and successful in riding the Lebanese political system, and continues to win seats in the Lebanese government and parliament. Additionally, Hezbollah has allied with other Lebanese political groups and exerts a level of influence within the Lebanese government. To discuss Lebanese Hezbollah in sufficient detail would require extensive writing, which is outside the scope of this study. For the purpose of this thesis, I will only go into the

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121 "Shiite Militias Forcibly Evict Kurds from the Iraqi Capital Baghdad," Al-Quds Al-Arabi, November 29, 2015, http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=442618.

122 "Kurds After the Referendum – Back to Square One," Aljazeera.net, November 1, 2017, http://www.aljazeera.net/news/presstour/2017/11/1/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%83%D8%B1%D8 %A7%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF- %D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A1- %D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%A7-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AD%D9%8A%D8%AB- %D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A4%D9%88%D8%A7.

origin of this group, the Iranian patronage, and some similarities and differences with the Iraqi Shiite militias.

On June 6, 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon and reached the outskirts of Beirut.[123] The Shiite population in Lebanon and especially in the occupied South did not resist the Israelis in the first few months.[124] However, by the end of 1983, attacks on the Israelis intensified and the Lebanese resistance started to manifest itself.[125] At the beginning, AMAL was the dominant resistance force and the prime Shiite group and it was in control of the Lebanese National Resistance (LNR).[126] Hezbollah fighters were operating under the LNR and the group did not declare its existence until 1985.[127] The two Shiite groups grew in rivalry and eventually engaged in a vicious conflict in May 1988.[128] The conflict did not end until an agreement was reached between Syria and Iran the respective sponsors of AMAL and Hezbollah.[129]

The Iranians had sent its Revolutionary Guards to Lebanon soon after the Israeli invasion and as Hezbollah grew and became more organized, Iran was investing more into this Shiite militia. It is estimated that 1500 Revolutionary Guards arrived to the Beqaa region of Lebanon following the Israeli invasion in 1982.[130] Many of the Lebanese clerics who had attended their theological studies in Najaf defected from AMAL and formed into Hezbollah as they ideologically aligned with the Islamic Republic. One of those clerics is Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, who became head of Hezbollah from 1992.[131] At the declaration of its existence, Hezbollah released a manifesto on 16 February 1985 orienting itself within *wilayat al-faqih* and accepting Khomeini as its supreme leader.[132] In return, Hezbollah was

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123 Hala Jaber, *Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1997), 7.

124 Jaber, *Hezbollah*, 14.

125 Ibid., 18.

126 Ibid., 19.

127 Ibid.

128 Ibid., 34.

129 Ibid., 35.

130 Ibid., 20.

131 Ibid.

132 Ibid., 54.

receiving financial and military support from Iran. According to some sources, the militia was getting around 140 million dollars a year.[133] Other sources put the figures received by Hezbollah between five and ten million dollars per month.[134]

Hezbollah enjoys a large public base in Lebanon, which is not limited to the Shiite population. This is mainly because Lebanese in general and southerners in particular considered that it was defending Lebanon from external aggressors, and because Hezbollah has formed a substantial social welfare that benefited different Lebanese constituents. The support of people from different parts of Lebanon was particularly obvious during the offense that Israel launched in 1996 under the name "The Grapes of Wrath." For example, a Christian woman donated 15,000 dollars to Hezbollah and she requested that they purchase rockets with that sum.[135] Also, after every attack that Israel carried out, the Shiite militia would rebuild the destruction that was caused.[136] Moreover, Hezbollah has created a social welfare system that offered a spectrum of services, which many non-Shia benefited from as well. The Health Committee of Hezbollah established more than forty health centers in different regions of the country.[137] Another of its institutions, Jihad al-Bina, engaged in construction where schools, low cost housing, and other infrastructure projects were carried out.[138]

As soon as Lebanon was ready to hold parliamentary elections at the end of the civil war in 1992, Hezbollah decided to have candidates run and created a political wing. The supreme leader of Iran at that time, Ali Khamenei, asked Hezbollah to participate in those elections.[139] It won several seats and ended up with eight members in the parliament.[140] Over the course of the years, politicians in Lebanon regarded Hezbollah's

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133 David Hirst, *Beware of Small States: Lebanon, Battleground of the Middle East* (New York: Nation Books, 2010), 239.

134 Jaber, *Hezbollah*, 150.

135 Jaber, *Hezbollah*, 197.

136 Ibid., 157.

137 Ibid., 158.

138 Hirst, *Beware of Small States*, 240.

139 Ibid., 242.

140 Jaber, *Hezbollah*, 72.

presentation as a political party to be remarkable.[141] Therefore, Hezbollah was able to work within the system and did not attempt to take over the order in Lebanon.[142]

Comparing the Lebanese Hezbollah to the Iraqi Shiite militias, we can see some similarities in the events surrounding both as well as some key differences that rendered different outcomes. Militias from both countries are from the Shiite population and both have been marginalized for a long time by their respective country's political system. Also, Iran has attempted to export its revolution to both places and has spread its ideology to the groups that it supported in both countries. However, the commitment of the Lebanese group and the Shia behind it are an indication of the success of Iran's goals in Lebanon whereas in Iraq, Iran was less successful in achieving dominance in the Shia realm.

The differences between the two countries stem from the circumstances arising in each as well as differences in Iran's approach. First, the Lebanese Hezbollah's main goal was to fight the Israeli occupation that gave the militia a popular legitimacy that surpassed its immediate population. While in Iraq, even though at the beginning the Shiite militias were confronting an oppressive regime, they were not representative of the whole population. Furthermore, in recent years, the Shiite militias were fighting against Sunni and Kurdish Iraqi groups. Second, Iran's support did not alienate Hezbollah in Lebanon as much as the Shiite groups in Iraq, especially during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. Third, Iran concentrated its support on one Shiite group in Lebanon, while in Iraq it supported several groups. This gave an advantage to Hezbollah who was able to maximize its efforts, while the Iraqi groups had to compete amongst each other to become favored and win more support, which distracted their efforts. Fourth, the presence of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani in Iraq as a major theological reference is a continuous challenge to the supremacy of *wali al-faqih*. On the other hand, in Lebanon it was much easier for the Shia to adopt the Iranian model in the absence of Shiite theological rivals to *wali al-faqih*. Finally, the welfare system created by Hezbollah benefited different populations although directed toward the

141 Ibid., 210.

142 Hirst, *Beware of Small States*, 241.

Shiite one, whereas in Iraq the community services offered by the militias were less sophisticated and were solely intended for the Shiite communities.

E.   CONCLUSION

This chapter has described the most important Shiite militias in Iraq. They belong to three different categories. The first category, which contains the groups that get the most support from Iran, includes Badr, AAH, KH, and LAFA. The second category contains the group that belongs to the political line of al-Sadr and that is the SA. The third category, which contains groups aligned with the Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, includes FAQ. This chapter has also discussed Iran's role and influence in Iraq, and how the Islamic Republic has intervened in that country on various occasions. Then the chapter considered the different communities in Iraq and their perspective of the Shiite militias' actions and how each community perceived these groups. While the Shiite communities may support the Shiite militias, the Sunni and the Kurdish communities are not comfortable with the roles that these groups have assumed. Finally, this chapter looked briefly into the Lebanese Hezbollah's history and development. There were some similarities between the Lebanese Shiite group and the Iraqi Shiite groups, but the circumstances in Iraq and Iran's approach in that country were different from in Lebanon, and those were enough to lead to a different outcome in Iraq.

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III. IRAQI SHIITE MILITIAS IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

The 2011 political protests that erupted in Syria during what became known to be the Arab Spring quickly broke into a fully-fledged civil war that encompassed all of Syria. The minority Alawite dominating the government found itself in direct conflict with the Sunni majority that formed many competing armed groups. The chaos was exploited by terrorist groups including Al Qaeda's affiliate, which quickly split into two—Nusra Front and ISIS—after entering the Syrian conflict. Outside powers also intervened at different levels, with the United States, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey all aiding elements of the rebellion, and Iran and Russia backing the Assad regime. Additionally, Israel kept a close eye on the shaping of events, and intermittently carried out airstrikes on occasions that Israeli officials described as crossing red lines by Hezbollah.

Iran's rush to aid the Assad regime included the introduction of Iraqi Shiite militias into Syria by 2013. For the Iraqi fighters and Iran, the militias were said to be involved in a religious task: the defense of the holy Shrine of Sayyida Zainab in Damascus. The Iraqis were not the only Iran-backed groups to show up for the fight. Combatants from Lebanese Hezbollah were actively participating in the conflict as soon as 2012, and the newly-established Iranian foreign legions (the Afghan Fatimaiyun, and the Pakistani Zainabiyun) also joined the Syria campaign by the end of 2013. The Iraqi Shiite militias in Syria became part of a transnational Shiite alliance whose efforts were commanded and coordinated by Iran.[143]

This chapter will start with a brief historical context of the Syrian conflict, and it will describe the interventions of the different countries that got directly and indirectly involved in the conflict. This section will introduce the intervening countries in the chronological order that they intervened, and therefore events will follow a chronological sequence only within the context of each country. We will then delve deeper into the Iranian intervention, which involved the Islamic Republic's Shiite clients in the region. Additionally, we will shed light on the dynamics playing within the Iraqi political arena

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143 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 217.

regarding the participation of Iraqi Shiite militias in the Syrian conflict. Finally, we will inspect the expertise that the Shiite Iraqi fighters have acquired in Syria, especially with regard to cooperating and coordinating with other military entities.

A.   HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE CONFLICT

In March 2011, demonstrations filled the cities of Syria. Government security forces cracked down on the protesters with extreme force, killing and injuring numerous people in the process. The regime's use of violence triggered more massive demonstrations across the country. Soon, the people started fighting back and "rebel" groups started forming as they called for a revolution similar to what had taken place in Tunisia and Egypt earlier that year. By the end of 2012, Syria had lapsed into an all-encompassing civil war where Arab Sunni rebels supported by some Arab countries were gaining ground fast.[144] In addition, some groups fighting the Assad regime had a more extreme agenda and turned into jihadist groups. Such jihadist groups were aiming to create an Islamic state and their ideology alienated non-jihadist groups.

The sectarian aspect in the Syrian conflict had its roots in the history of the country and in the way the Assad regimes ruled the country. Since the times of the Ottomans, sectarianism had been used to divide Syrian society, and the Assad family has used these divisions to consolidate its power.[145] Assad put Alawites in essential official positions and by 2011, 70% of state employees were Alawites.[146] In addition, the majority of the minority groups like the Christians and Druze plus the wealthy Sunnis who had built up their wealth due to good relations with the regime, sided with Assad. Therefore, non-Sunni, non-Muslim minorities and wealthy Sunnis did not join the rebels, which formed mostly from lower class Sunnis. Additionally, the regime unleashed the shabiha (pro-regime gangsters), who intimidated protestors and even participated in sectarian kidnappings and killings. According to a BBC report, witnesses have claimed that as early as June 2011, thousands

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144 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 193.

145 Fabrice Balanche and Andrew J. Tabler, "Charting Sectarianism in the Syria War," The Washington Institute, February 8, 2018, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/charting-sectarianism-in-the-syria-war.

146 Ibid.

of shabiha were engaged in such actions.[147] The crimes committed by the shabiha against Sunnis only aggravated the sectarian division and fueled the Jihadist narrative. The extremist groups then easily found recruits among the Sunni population who became polarized against Alawites and Shias. Later, ISIS would readily target Shiite and Alawite civilians and not just the Shiite combatants.[148]

Furthermore, almost every armed group in Syria, whether a rebel group or a jihadist group, fought against other such armed groups in its vicinity. In April 2016, ISIS killed a high-ranking member of Ahrar al-Sham.[149] Also, fighting often broke between ISIS on one side and Ahfad al-Rasoul in Rakka or the Northern Storm Brigade on the other.[150] Still the most recorded number of clashes took place between ISIS and al-Nusra Front. They fought against each other in different places in Syria from Deir Azour, to Kalamoun and Southern Damascus.

The Turkish involvement in the Syrian war started early on in the conflict. It began when Turkey hosted Syrian opposition members on its territory and allowed their forces to conduct attacks across its borders.[151] Turkey was also the destination of many Syrian officers who defected from the Syrian military.[152] Over the course of the war, the Turkish forces were directly involved in the Syrian conflict and have entered Syrian territories on two occasions so far. The first operation code-named "Diri' al-Fourat" was launched on

147 "Syria Unrest: Who are the Shabiha?" BBC, May 29, 2012, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14482968.

148 "Guide to the Syrian Rebels, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant," BBC, December 13, 2013, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003.

149 Nathir Rida, "The Assassination of Ahrar Cham's Chief of Staff," Asharq Al-Awsat, April 25, 2016, https://aawsat.com/home/article/624746.

150 BBC, "Guide to the Syrian Rebels, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant."

151 "Increase in the Pace of Defections from the Syrian Army," Al-Ittihad, July 18, 2012, http://www.alittihad.ae/details.php?id=69856&y=2012.

152 "The Most Important Defections During the Syrian Revolution," Aljazeera.net, June 24, 2012, http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2012/6/24/%D8%A3%D9%87%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B4%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A5%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AB%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7.

August 24, 2016 to capture the city of Jarablus.[153] The offensive contained large numbers of Syrian opposition group members and was directed against both ISIS and the Kurdish forces in Northern Syria.[154] The second operation code-named "Ghoson al-Zaitoun" or the Olive Branch began on January 20, 2018 with the purpose to capture the town of Efreen and the surrounding region.[155] Unlike the first operation, this one was directed solely against Kurdish forces, as Turkey aimed to clear the Syrian-Turkish borders from any Kurdish presence.[156]

Israel also began to gradually intervene in the conflict since May 2012. While Israel's role at first was limited to providing medical support for the rebels near its borders, it progressed to artillery shelling of bordering regions of the Golan heights, and then its operations became bolder over time and started reaching further into Syria. As early as February 2013, Israel took in seven injured rebels from the Golan Heights and accommodated them in a hospital in Safad.[157] Although Israel did not get boots on the ground in Syria, it continued to conduct airstrikes on what it described as Hezbollah

153 "Dirii Al-Fourat: A Multi-Purpose Military Campaign," Aljazeera.net, September 5, 2016, http://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/military/2016/9/5/%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AA.

154 Ibid.

155 "Turkish Forces Announce the Launch of Olive Branch Campaign in Afrin," Shaam Network, January 20, 2018, http://www.shaam.org/news/syria-news/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%BA%D8%B5%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B9%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%86.html.

156 Ibid.

157 "Israel Aids Seven Wounded Syrians," Aljazeera.net, February 17, 2013, http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2013/2/17/%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%81-7-%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%AD%D9%89-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86.

attempts to move strategic weapon systems to Lebanon.[158] Eventually, Israel was conducting strikes against Syrian military facilities as far as Damascus. On May 5, 2013, a military research facility was destroyed by Israeli rockets.[159] Israel was also already very sensitive to Syrian fighters flying close to its borders, and on September 23, 2014, Israeli air defense shot down a Syrian fighter jet over the Golan area after the Israelis claimed it had crossed the borders.[160] Another kind of Israeli intervention was assassinations of members of Hezbollah or of other organizations working with the Lebanese group to organize a resistance force against Israel in Southern Syria.[161] For example, Samir al-Qintar, who was a prominent member of Hezbollah was killed in an Israeli airstrike in Jermana South of Damascus on December 19, 2015.[162]

The U.S. became significantly involved in the Syrian conflict when it began conducting airstrikes against ISIS. The U.S. led coalition, which included Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Jordan, and Bahrain, started operating over Syria on September 22, 2014.[163] Later on as the air campaign continued, the airstrikes also targeted

158 "Russian Intervention in Syria… A Hundred Days' Harvest," Aljazeera.net, January 7, 2016, http://www.aljazeera.net/knowledgegate/newscoverage/2016/1/7/%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%AE%D9%84-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AD%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%A6%D8%A9-%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%85.

159 Frederik Pleitgen and Sara Sidner, "Syria: Attack on Military Facility was a 'Declaration of War' by Israel," CNN, May 6, 2013, https://www.cnn.com/2013/05/05/world/meast/syria-violence.

160 Peter Beaumont, "Israel Shoots Down Syrian Fighter Jet Which 'Infiltrated' Israeli Airspace," The Guardian, September 23, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/23/israel-says-shot-down-syrian-jet.

161 Saleh Al-Naami, "Israel's War Against Hezbollah in Syria: Environment and Consequences," Aljazeera.net, May 1, 2017, http://www.aljazeera.net/knowledgegate/opinions/2017/5/1/%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A6%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA.

162 "Hezbollah Confirms the Death of Samir Al-Qintar in Syria," Aljazeera.net, December 20, 2015, http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2015/12/20/%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%8A%D8%A4%D9%83%D8%AF-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84-%D8%B3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%86%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7.

163 "Syria: US Begins Air Strikes on Islamic State Targets," BBC, September 23, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29321136.

at least a couple of Syrian army posts, in addition to some pro-government fighters. In September 2016, a U.S. airstrike unintentionally targeted a Syrian post where 62 Syrian troops were killed and 100 were injured.[164] On April 6, 2017, the United States launched a missile attack on the al-Sharyat airfield in Syria as a response to a chemical attack carried out by the regime that killed civilians.[165] This attack was the first direct strike against Syrian government forces. Also, on May 19, 2017, the coalition executed an airstrike on a caravan of pro-regime forces in Southern Syria.[166] The following month on June 6, 2017, the coalition carried out another air strike against pro-regime forces near Tanaf, which is a region relatively close to the borders with Iraq and Jordon.[167] Additionally, In June 2017, a U.S. Navy Super Hornet shot down a Syrian Su-22 fighter over the town of Jaadin in Syria.[168] More recently, on February 8, 2018, 100 combatants from forces allied with the Syrian regime were killed when coalition forces conducted airstrikes and halted an attack on the headquarters of Syrian Democratic Forces in the countryside of Deir Ezzor in eastern Syria.[169]

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164 Anne Barnard and Mark Mazzetti, "U.S. Admits Airstrike in Syria, meant to Hit ISIS, Killed Syrian Troops," The New York Times, September 17, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/world/middleeast/us-airstrike-syrian-troops-isis-russia.html.

165 Michael R. Gordon, Helene Cooper, and Michael D. Shear, "Dozens of U.S. Missiles Hit Air Base in Syria," The New York Times, April 6, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/06/world/middleeast/us-said-to-weigh-military-responses-to-syrian-chemical-attack.html.

166 "The Coalition Strikes Pro-Regime Forces in The Syrian Desert," Aljazeera.net, May 19, 2017, http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/newsreports/2017/5/19/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81-%D9%8A%D8%B6%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9.

167 "Coalition Strikes Again on Pro-Regime Forces Near Tanaf," Al-Quds Al-Arabi, June 6, 2017, http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=731465.

168 Ryan Browne, "New Details on US Shoot Down of Syrian Jet," CNN, June 21, 2017, https://www.cnn.com/2017/06/21/politics/us-syria-russia-dogfight.

169 "Heavy Losses to The Syrian Regime Against Coalition Forces," Aljazeera.net, February 8, 2018, http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2018/2/8/%D8%AE%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1-%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D9%8A.

Russia caught the world by surprise when it announced on September 30, 2015 that it was sending aircrafts and troops into Syria to fight against what it labeled as terrorist groups.[170] This intervention came at a time when the Assad regime had lost control of most of the territory in the country, retained governance only of the capital and few minority towns, whereas the rest of the country was under the power of different rebel groups. Most of the Russian airstrikes came against what is considered the moderate rebel forces rather than against ISIS or other terrorist organizations.[171] There is some evidence to suggest that Iran was the sponsor of the agreement between Russia and Syria, and particularly, Qassem Soleimani, the IRGC Quds Force chief, to be the "architect of the Russian intervention in Syria."[172] The official story behind the Russian intervention was that the Syrian president requested Russian military support.[173] Moreover, one of the most notable and controversial Russian contributions to Syria was the deployment of sophisticated Air Defense systems in various locations throughout the country.[174]

170 Aljazeera.net, "Russian Intervention in Syria… A Hundred Days' Harvest."

171 Anshal Biber, "One Year Since the Russian Intervention in Syria: Putin Learns the Limits of Power," Al-Masdar, October 3, 2016, https://www.al-masdar.net/%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%AE%D9%84-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%85.

172 Ahmad Al-Sibai, "Russian Intervention in Syria… A Hundred Days' Harvest, Why Did Putin Mobilize?" Aljazeera.net, January 7, 2016, http://www.aljazeera.net/knowledgegate/newscoverage/2016/1/7/%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%AE%D9%84-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AD%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%A6%D8%A9-%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%85.

173 "When Did the Russian Intervention in Syria Begin?" Akhbar Alaan, January 6, 2017, https://www.akhbaralaan.net/news/arab-world/2017/1/6/%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%89-%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%AE%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7.

174 "Learn About the Outcome of Two Years of Russian Intervention in Syria," Aljazeera.net, December 28, 2016, http://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/military/2016/12/28/%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A3%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%B7%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A8.

B. MISSION TO SYRIA AND PROLIFERATION OF IRAQI MILITIA

For Iran, the war in Syria presented a challenge as well as an opportunity. On the one hand, its only Arab state ally was seriously threatened and along with it, the support route to Lebanese Hezbollah was compromised.[175] On the other hand, the conflict presented Iran with the opportunity to increase its influence over an important part of the Middle East and to extend the presence of its troops and allied proxies near the borders of Israel. Ideologically, providing protection for the shrine of Sayyida Zainab was used as a pretext for the IRGC to get involved in Syria and to muster its Iraqi clients for the fight in addition to other Shiite clients.[176] The mission to Syria became framed as a religious obligation to defend the family of the prophet against Sunni extremism. New groups were formed in Iraq for the purpose of this conflict and their attitude was shaped in ways to gain access to Iranian generosity. Furthermore, the importance of Syria for Iran was stressed by several former and current commanders of the IRGC and the Basij. On several occasions, such prominent figures would recall Syria's role in the past alongside the Islamic republic and reaffirm Iran's commitment to the security of Syria.[177] It was clear that Iran viewed the war in Syria as existential in nature and intervened accordingly.

Iran started with a limited covert support campaign that evolved into an extensive presence on the ground and Iranians participated in battles in almost every part of Syria. The Iranian secret support consisted of transferring of weapons and ammo as well as advisors into Damascus.[178] By May 2012, Quds Force officials were openly announcing that IRGC units were assisting the Syrian Army.[179] Perhaps the greatest contribution of the IRGC in the Syrian war was the formation of pro-regime paramilitary forces that came to be known as National Defense Forces (NDF).[180] The members of these forces were trained

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175 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 205.

176 Ibid.

177 Ibid.

178 Ibid., 208.

179 Ibid., 209.

180 Ibid., 210.

and equipped by the Iranians, and the NDF were involved in most major operations.[181] Meanwhile, the number of IRGC personnel in Syria was constantly increasing, and by February 2014, few hundred commanders as well as thousands of Basij members were there.[182] The Iranian public opinion remained supportive of the role Iran has assumed and the religious and strategic justification given effectively swayed their opinion in favor of intervention.[183]

Additionally, Iran directed its Shiite clients to participate in the war effort to support the Syrian regime. These groups were religiously motivated as well, and moved in to protect Sayyida Zainab shrine in addition to directly support Syrian forces. The main mission according to those Shiite combatants was to defend the honor of the prophet by protecting the holy shrine of Sayyida Zainab from the Sunni extremist groups. For the Iraqi groups, religious justification was not as abundant as one might assume. Both al-Sistani and Moqtada al-Sadr were not supportive of Iraqis going to Syria to join the fight.[184] Al-Sistani described going to Syria as "not of the general interest and did not achieve any reform."[185] Nonetheless, Grand Ayatollah Kazem Haeri, whom many Iraqi fighters emulate, considered fighting in Syria religiously acceptable.[186] Moreover, Iran's Supreme leader, Ali Khamenei continuously framed the conflict as a universal war between Islam and infidelity.[187] This alignment of religious leaders was no surprise and of course, it

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181 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 210.

182 Ibid., 212.

183 Peyman Asadzade, "Iran's Involvement in Syria is Costly. Here's Why Most Iranians Still Support It," The Washington Post, October 19, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/10/19/irans-involvement-in-syria-is-costly-heres-why-most-iranians-still-support-it.

184 "Al-Sistani and Sadr Prohibit Fighting Alongside Assad," Janoubia, October 9, 2013, http://janoubia.com/2013/10/09/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%8A%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%91%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%AC.

185 Ibid.

186 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 217.

187 "Khamenei: Our Fight in Syria is a War on Infidelity," Aljazeera.net, February 25, 2016, http://www.aljazeera.net/news/international/2016/2/25/%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A6%D9%8A-%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D9%81%D8%B1.

further justified the presence of the Iraqi groups in Syria. Such groups included Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), Kataib Hezbollah (KH), Liwa Abu Fadel al-Abbas (LAFA), and Badr Organization (Badr).[188]

This period witnessed a proliferation of Shiite militias in Iraq and many of the newly formed ones participated in the fight in Syria. A large number of these new militias could be seen as splinters from existing groups, yet it is unclear whether the recent groups operated autonomously or whether they were formations under the main groups. For example, Harakat al-Nujaba, which started operation under AAH soon broke off to form its own group and became active in Damascus and Aleppo.[189] Some groups were even formed with combatants from different militias. For example, LAFA, which first appeared in August 2012 near Sayyida Zainab, consisted of fighters from AAH, KH, SA, and Badr.[190] It was as though these groups were units within a larger formation where a higher authority was mixing and matching personnel to create the appropriate structure for each front. Other Iraqi groups fighting in Syria either were created under the direct supervision of the IRGC or instantly acquired its support. For example, Saraya al-Khorasani, which was established in 2013 as a military wing for the Islamic Taleaa party with the sole purpose of defending the holy shrines in Syria, quickly displayed allegiance for Khamenei and attained Iranian support.[191] According to Noon Post, which is an Arabic media platform

188 Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 217.

189 "Al-Nujbaa: Hezbollah Model in Iraq," Aljazeera.net, September 15, 2016, http://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/movementsandparties/2016/9/13/%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%AC%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%AE%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9.

190 Obeida Amer, "A complete Profile on the Shiite Militias Fighting in Syria," Noonpost, January 20, 2016, https://www.noonpost.org/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9/%D9%85%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%84-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7.

191 Hasan Zalghout, "The Iraqi Shiite PMF: Identity and Affiliation," Raseef22, March 1, 2016, https://raseef22.com/politics/2015/02/25/iraqi-militias-identity-and-affiliation.

that adopts a criticizing stand toward the PMF, by early 2016, we could count as many as 22 Iraqi groups actively fighting in Syria.[192] Most of these groups did not exist before the civil war broke out in that country. Consequently, new splinters, subgroups, and groups under Iranian command contributed to the proliferation of Iraqi Shiite militias between Syria and Iraq.

While the Shiite political constituents in Iraq either were involved with the militias or at least were silent about their participation, other political constituents raised their voices in protest. In December 2016, Ousama al-Noujeifi, the head of the Sunni political block "Moutahidoun" (United in English) and the Iraqi vice president demanded that the Iraqi government prohibit Iraqi militias from fighting in Syria alongside the Syrian regime.[193] Al-Noujeifi expressed his concern over the fact that these groups were part of the *al-hashd al-shaabi*, the Arabic term for PMF, which had become a governmental security institution by November 2016, and therefore they must be controlled by the government and can only be authorized by the parliament.[194] In return, spokesman Hashem al-Mousawi of Harakat al-Nujaba, which was fighting in Aleppo at the time, fired back at al-Noujeifi and accused him and his political line behind him of being traitors and of stirring up sectarian division among the people of Iraq and the region.[195] On the other hand, PM al-Abadi had an unclear position regarding the presence of members of the PMF in Syria. He said in August 2017 that "outside Iraq *al-hashd* does not exist. *Al-hashd al-shaabi* is an official body that exists inside of Iraq and its borders alone. You will not find

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192 Amer, "A complete Profile on the Shiite Militias Fighting in Syria."

193 "Al-Nujabaa: Accuses other Iraqi Forces with Treason for Demanding Abadi to Withdraw it from Aleppo," Arabi21, December 17, 2016, https://arabi21.com/story/967828.

194 "Are the Iraqi Militias in Syria Fighting Under Abadi's Orders?" Arabi 21, Accessed March 12, 2018, https://medium.com/arabi-21/%D9%87%D9%84-
%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%84-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-
%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%B1-
%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A-292f32fe8a74.

195 Arabi21, "Al-Nujabaa: Accuses other Iraqi Forces with Treason for Demanding Abadi to Withdraw it from Aleppo."

al-hashd forces outside of Iraq's borders."[196] It is as if the PMF members are held accountable by the Iraqi government only for what they do in Iraq.

The Kurds, being a constituent of Syria and Iraq, were part of conflicts on both sides of the borders. Despite facing a common enemy in Syria and Iraq, Iraqi Kurds and the Iraqi Shiite groups were on a collision course over the future of the Kurdish area as well as over disputed regions with the central government. Kurds exist in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran and have always had a dream of creating a nation. The best thing they had accomplished so far was regional autonomy in Northern Iraq. Additionally, since the Syrian regime allowed the Syrian Kurds to hold ground and did not fight them in Northern Syria, the Kurds and the Syrian regime along with its Iraqi supporters belonged in a way to the same camp against ISIS. Nonetheless, things in Iraq were heating up, especially since the Kurds were aiming for more independence and at the same time trying to expand the territory that they controlled. Eventually, Kurdish forces and Iraqi Shiite militias clashed, though to a limited extent, after the Kurdish independence referendum and over the disputed city of Kirkuk.[197] The Shiite militias were able to gain control over Kirkuk and many violations against Kurdish civilians were recorded.[198] Moreover, on one occasion in 2015, Masrour al-Barazani, the son of the Kurdish leader Masoud al-Barazani, announced that the Shiite militias in Iraq were more dangerous than ISIS.[199]

C.   COOPERATION AND COORDINATION WITH OTHER MILITARY ENTITIES

Since Iran was the prime supporter of the Syrian regime and the former had marshaled all its regional clients for the conflict, the Iraqi Shiite groups operating there evolved from simply being part of the IRGC's regional network into becoming part of a

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196 Nazli Tarzi, "Iraq's PMF Militia Coalition is Hindering Political Cohesion," Middle East Monitor, August 17, 2017, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170817-iraqs-pmf-militia-coalition-is-hindering-political-cohesion.

197 "PMF Chasing Kurds in Kirkuk: Execution, Violations, and Displacement," The Lebanese Forces, October 20, 2017, https://www.lebanese-forces.com/2017/10/20/hashed-chaabi-karkouk-kurds-violations-executions-displacement.

198 Ibid.

199 "A Surprising Kurdish Stand: The Shiite PMF More Dangerous than ISIS," Orient Net, March 17, 2015, http://www.orient-news.net/ar/news_show/85943.

transnational Shiite entity commanded by Iran. They learned to work in coordination with other militias, IRGC units, and the Syrian Army. The Iraqi groups were operating in different parts of Syria, with a concentration in Damascus and Aleppo. They coordinated with Lebanese Hezbollah, who in many occasions would be taking the lead in the offenses. The Iraqi groups also worked under the direct supervision of the IRGC. Moreover, they supported the Syrian Army in many of the battles, and benefited from air support provided by the Syrian regime and the Russians.

All of the Iraqi fighters on the fields of Syria belonged to groups that were backed by Iran. These groups were committed to the ideology of *wilayat al-faqih*, and the fight in Syria reinforced that identity as the Iraqi combatants connected with other like-minded groups holding similar religious commitments and objectives.[200] Moreover, the QF assumed operational command of these groups and was managing their tactical movements through direct presence of QF officers on the ground. These militias were trained, equipped and funded by the IRGC and the QF, and therefore, they were under extensive Iranian influence.[201] Working under the IRGC, these groups were gaining a new and different military experience, one that was closer to conventional warfare rather than irregular combat.

If the IRGC provided sponsorship, then Lebanese Hezbollah became the mentor of the Iraqi groups in Syria. It became evident as the war progressed that the IRGC depended on Lebanese Hezbollah to train the Shiite groups fighting in Syria and in some occasions to lead them.[202] For example, Hezbollah had the main role in coordinating the efforts of the Shiite fighters that included Iraqi groups to secure the Syria-Iraq border.[203] Moreover, getting in contact with the Lebanese fighters, the Iraqi groups were exposed to Hezbollah's fighting tactics as well as its members' commitment to the cause. It was a fact that Iran considered the Lebanese Hezbollah experience as one of its success stories in exporting the

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200 Hanin Ghaddar, "Iran's Foreign Legion: The Impact of Shia Militias on U.S. Foreign Policy," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Notes 46 (2018): 4.

201 Ghaddar, "Iran's Foreign Legion," 3.

202 Ibid., 5.

203 Ibid., 4.

revolution.[204] Iran would want its Iraqi clients to adopt a similar approach in growing to such an entity in their respective country. The battlefields of Syria provided the appropriate bond between these groups to learn from one another. However, it is hard to tell which of the Iraqi groups Iran was focusing on. Especially since it was continuously sponsoring new splinters, was not trying to maintain coherence among any group, and did not seem to be mindful of additional divisions among the Iraqi militias.

In addition to working with Hezbollah, the Iraqi militias were providing support for the Syrian Army. One of the main reasons why these groups were directed to Syria was the fact that the Syrian Army was losing ground and barely holding on. Although their early presence was around the Sayyida Zainab shrine near Damascus, Iraqi groups were soon needed in different parts of Syria. LAFA combatants were fighting in Qalamoun and along the Damascus airport highway front.[205] Liwa Zou al-Fiqar joined the battles in Aadra and on the airport highway.[206] Additionally, Badr fought in Southern Damascus and in the Ghouta al-Sharkiya.[207] It was not clear how much direct coordination happened between the Syrian Army and the Iraqi Shiite militias at the leadership level; however, at the tactical level, the fighters on both sides did not interact much. One captured Syrian officer talked about the conflict in South-West Aleppo and described the situation on the ground in detail:

> We were getting orders during the fight in Aleppo from an Iranian field commander through radio communications. We did not fight side by side with the foreign militias and we were not supposed to approach them. In addition, the militias used to hide from us the true numbers of casualties that they incurred. Our area of operations included fighters from Lebanese Hezbollah as well as Iraqi militias and some from Afghanistan. The members of these militias were getting paid 2000 U.S. dollars each month, while we were only getting 25 thousand Syrian Liras, which is the equivalent of 62 U.S. dollars.[208]

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204 Tony Badran, "Exporting the Islamic Revolution," NOW, March 6, 2015, https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentary/564933-exporting-the-islamic-revolution.

205 Karim Majdi, "Fifteen Military Forces Fighting Aaongside the Syrian Regime," Sasa Post, January 2, 2015, https://www.sasapost.com/15-military-organization-fighting-alongside-the-syrian-regime.

206 Ibid.

207 Ibid.

208 Mohamad Edelbi, "Officer from the Regime Reveals Secrets about the Shiite Militias in Syria," Orient Net, January 16, 2016, http://orient-news.net/ar/news_show/99977.

Furthermore, from the instance that the Russian air force started bombing targets in Syria, the leaders of the Iraqi Shiite groups rejoiced at the event. Hadi al-Ameri of Badr praised the Russian intervention in Syria and called that it should be extended to cover Iraq as well.[209] Similarly, a spokesperson from AAH described the effective results from the Russian airstrikes against ISIS and compared them with the "ineffective" campaign conducted by the international coalition.[210] Additionally, in the battle for Aleppo in 2016, the Iraqi Shiite militias fighting alongside the regime benefited from direct air support from the Russian air force.[211] Therefore, the Iraqi fighters were learning to conduct ground offences in conjunction with air strikes and support from conventional forces. This kind of experience would probably enhance their combat abilities beyond a militia's irregular warfare tactics and would shift it more toward conventional military tactics.

D.   CONCLUSION

This chapter has briefly looked into the Syrian conflict and described the various outside actors intervening in that war. The Syrian conflict started with popular demonstrations against the regime and soon turned into a civil war with Sunni rebel groups fighting against an Alawite dominated regime. We saw how some countries sided with the rebellion and other countries sided with the regime. However, it is worth commenting that the actors siding with the rebels had different and sometimes conflicting agendas and therefore did not coordinate that much. Whereas the actors supporting the regime were relatively more coherent and managed to coordinate better.

Additionally, we discussed how Shiite militias under the command of Iran converged into Syria and along with IRGC units supported the regime. Among those groups were some of the Iraqi Shiite militias. Many of the Shiite groups, foreign and local

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209 "The Iraqi Shiite Militias and the Russian Intervention in Syria," Rawabet Center, October 11, 2015, https://rawabetcenter.com/archives/13490.

210 Ibid.

211 "Campaign on Aleppo: Russian Air Support for the Shiite Militias, and a Deteriorating Humanitarian Situation," Syrian Mirror, October 18, 2016, https://syrian-mirror.net/ar/%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%BA%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%8A-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%85.

to Syria, were formed for the purpose of this conflict. They were united in their ideology and they perceived their mission as being religious and of a higher cause. Moreover, the Iranian presence was gradually increasing in Syria as the war progressed, and to the Iranians, this conflict had turned to an existential one and the Iranian public opinion remained in favor of intervention. On the other hand, the mood in Iraq was not as uniform, and there were many religious and political voices condemning participation in the Syrian war.

In this chapter, we have also made the point that the Iraqi Shiite militias fighting in Syria have gained additional military experiences. They have learned how to operate under air support from the Russians. They have also worked as support groups for the Syrian military, a conventional force. More importantly, they have become able to coordinate with other military entities and other Shiite militias in the region under Iranian command. This has allowed the Iraqi militias to create regional networks as well as learn from the more experienced groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah. All these dynamics indicate that the Iraqi Shiite militias have become part of a transnational Shiite force that will have an impact on the balance of power in the region and whose influence will not be limited to the Syrian battlefields as the Iranians might tend to use that force elsewhere.

IV.   FORMATION OF THE PMF

We have seen that members of some Iraqi Shiite militias crossed the borders into Syria and participated in the fight alongside the Syrian regime. However, in 2014 the militias' concentration shifted back home. The Popular Mobilization Forces (Arabic: al-*hashd al-shaabi*, or *al-hashd*) is the umbrella organization that holds the diverse factions of Iraqi Shiite militias. Many of the militias that became part of the PMF existed before it was established. However, the events in the second half of 2014 allowed these militias to grow enormously as well as to give way to the formation of new groups. This chapter will describe the events that led to the formation of the PMF as well as the religious and political factors that helped legitimize their existence and fortify their roles. Then it will delve into the fight against ISIS and how it progressed with continuous victories over the terrorist organization. We will also look into the details of the abuses and destruction inflicted by members of the PMF on non-Shia civilians in the midst of the fighting. Furthermore, we take a look at how the PMF is viewed by some of the main state actors in the region, and how they translated that into cooperation or conflict. Finally, we will discuss the role of the PMF after the defeat of ISIS, while taking into consideration the Iraqi government's options and the militias expectations for that role.

A.   HOW THE PMF FORMED

In June 2014, ISIS was able to take control of large spaces of territory in Iraq and to occupy some of the major cities. On June 10, the terrorist organization took over the city of Mosul, the second largest city of Iraq.[212] The fighting that went on for only five days ended with the sudden withdrawal of the entire police force from the city as well as three Iraqi army corps.[213] The overall number of Iraqi forces that deserted the city were estimated

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212 "How did the city of Mosul Fall?" Aljazeera.net, August 19, 2015, http://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/military/2015/8/19/%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%B3%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B5%D9%84.

213 Ibid.

between 40,000 and 50,000 men.[214] Whereas ISIS forces were estimated at only 800 men.[215] ISIS members went on then to capture the abandoned military weapons and vehicles. They also freed almost 12,000 prisoners from city jails.[216] In addition, ISIS looted cash from local banks, which was estimated at the equivalent of $480 million.[217]

The humiliating defeat of the Iraqi security forces and the fall of one of the largest cities in Iraq to a terrorist group triggered massive political and religious reactions. Usama al-Noujeifi, head of the Iraqi parliament at the time, declared in a press conference that "all of the province of Ninawa had fallen in the hands of the terrorists."[218] He blamed the security forces for abandoning their positions and said that "members of the Army and police took off their uniforms and deserted their posts in Mosul."[219] Similarly, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, declared a state of emergency in Iraq.[220] Meanwhile, the central government and the governor of Ninawa were exchanging blames for the catastrophic unfolding of events in that region.

Beyond government reactions, the Shiite religious leaders and clerics sensed an imminent threat from ISIS and started motivating the Iraqi people to join the fight. Most notably, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, one of the most revered Shia marjaa and who resides in Najaf in Iraq, joined these efforts. On June 13, 2014, during the Friday prayer's sermon, al-Sistani's representative Abdel Hadi al-Karbalai declared that al-Sistani has issued a fatwa for "al-jihad al-kafaii" (The sufficient Jihad).[221] This religious ruling called upon all able Iraqi men to carry arms and join the fight against ISIS.[222] The content of this

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214 Aljazeera.net, "How did the city of Mosul Fall?"

215 Chulov, Hawramy, andAckerman, "Iraq Army Capitulates to Isis Militants in Four Cities."

216 Fadel al-Nashmi, "The Iraqi Army Evaporates in Front of Daesh," Annahar, June 10, 2014, https://www.annahar.com/article/140521.

217 Chulov, Hawramy, and Ackerman, "Iraq Army Capitulates to Isis Militants in Four Cities."

218 Aljazeera.net, "How did the city of Mosul Fall?"

219 Ibid.

220 Al-Nashmi, "The Iraqi Army Evaporates in Front of Daesh."

221 "Content of Friday Sermon by Abdel Hadi al-Karbalai on June 13, 2014," al-Sistani, accessed May 3, 2018, https://www.sistani.org/arabic/archive/24918.

222 Ibid.

fatwa phrased the call as a religious duty and al-Sistani declared that anyone who dies during the fight would be considered a martyr. Even though al-Sistani called upon all the Iraqi people to fight, coming from a Shiite cleric and its Shiite context only resonated with the Shia of Iraq. The number of Sunnis who turned up at the security forces' volunteering centers did not exceed two percent of the total volunteer force.[223]

The call for Jihad was done by a Shiite religious leader, and it was natural for Shia civilians to identify with that more than Iraqis from other religions. Al-Sistani had phrased the attack as targeting all of Iraq, but he also hinted for the need to protect the Shiite holy shrines. Also, the promised reward for those who would be killed in the conflict was martyrdom. One would have to be a believer of the Shia religion to value such a promise and become motivated to give one's life for that. Additionally, in that call, al-Sistani mentioned at one point that the people of Iraq needed to secure Baghdad, Karbala, and Najaf. This as well would be referring to parts of Iraq that are predominantly Shia. Another reason why Shia responded to the call for Jihad was the news that came out a few days before the fatwa about hundreds of Shiite army recruits being massacred by ISIS in Tikrit. ISIS claimed on June 12, 2014 that it had executed around 1700 Shiite army recruits, who had fled Camp Speicher in Tikrit.[224] Human Rights Watch confirmed that at least 770 men were killed in that massacre.[225] This event confirmed the fear of the Shia population that ISIS was on the way to commit a genocide against them.

223 Abdallah al-Rifaii, "Tens of Thousands of Volunteers in Response to al-Sistani's Fatwa," Aljazeera.net, June 27, 2014,
http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2014/6/27/%D8%B9%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A2%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%B7%D9%88%D8%B9%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A.

224 Tim Arango, "Escaping Death in Northern Iraq," The New York Times, September 3, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/04/world/middleeast/surviving-isis-massacre-iraq-video.html.

225 Ibid.

Moreover, despite al-Sistani's call for the Iraqi citizens to join the security forces, the majority of volunteers signed up with the Shiite militias.[226] Al-Sistani's office even issued multiple reports to explain in details the content of the Fatwa. According to the official website of al-Sistani, the fatwa explicitly indicated that volunteers should sign up with the Iraqi security forces, and that only the later should be responsible for training them and assigning them their duties.[227] Furthermore, the website clarified the term "kafaii," which means sufficient, and that is even though the fatwa realized that it was the duty of every Iraqi to join the fight, when a sufficient number of men mustered to counter the threat from ISIS, then it was no longer an obligation for the rest of the Iraqis to take part.[228] Nonetheless, Shiite volunteers flocked the Shiite militias who did not turn down the excess of men.

Several decisions by Nouri al-Maliki's government before and after al-Sistani's fatwa constituted the political basis of the establishment of the PMF. Two days before al-Sistani's fatwa, al-Maliki called for the construction of an auxiliary force to mitigate the collapse of the armed forces in Ninawa province.[229] However, that did not materialize until after al-Sistani's fatwa and the thousands of volunteers it inspired to join the fight. According to al-Forat news, which is part of SICI's media platform, Iraq's national security advisor, Faleh al-Fayad, announced during a press conference on June 15, 2014 that Prime Minister al-Maliki had ordered the establishment of the directorate of *al-hashd al-shaabi*.[230] The directorate would be composed of regional committees in different Iraqi provinces and would manage volunteer forces in those provinces. However, the situation

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226 "Iraq: The Country of Militias," Barq Research and Studies, accessed March 11, 2018, http://barq-rs.com/barq/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA.

227 "Al-Sistani Clarifies the Content of Friday Sermon," al-Sistani, accessed May 3, 2018, https://www.sistani.org/arabic/archive/24909.

228 Ibid.

229 Raed al-Hamed, "Al-Hashd al-Shaabi: Alternative Regular Forces in Iraq," Aljazeera.net, March 24, 2015, http://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2015/01/201511141532221465.html.

230 "Al-Fayad: We Established the Directorate of al-Hashd al-Shaabi to Accommodate Volunteers of the Religious Call," Alforat News, June 15, 2014, http://alforatnews.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=56820.

on the ground reflected a different reality, soon the existing Shiite militias were in charge of the process, and they were accepting and reorganizing the volunteers within their own ranks. Therefore, the PMF became the umbrella organization for the Iraqi militias and it gave them a semi-legitimate status.

The governmental financing of the PMF as well as political sponsorship required additional legislation. For more than two years, the Iraqi parliament debated a draft for a law that would legitimize and organize the PMF. That draft was put off many times and was amended on many occasions, but still most non-Shia parliament members objected to it. Then, on November 26, 2016, the Iraqi parliament enacted the *al-hashd al-shaabi* law, which officially declared the PMF had become part of the Iraqi armed forces.[231] However, the non-Shia members of the parliament objected to that law, and only 208 of 328 members of the parliament were present during that session.[232] According to the Iraqi parliament official webpage, this law gave the members of the PMF similar rights and salaries as those of members of the state armed forces.[233]

The majority of the PMF is made up of Shiite volunteers and militias, but also contains a smaller proportion of Sunni volunteers and organizations. The Sunni component of the PMF seems to have been inflated at times by PMF leaders to portray the PMF as representative of all the constituents of Iraq. For example, in response to the claim of al-Maliki that the PMF included non-Shia groups, Mohamad al-Khalidi, a former member of the Iraqi parliament described the number of Sunnis in the PMF as vague and suggested that "most of the names and numbers for Sunnis in *al-hashd* were unreal."[234] Nonetheless, the PMF included a small number of members who were Sunnis, Christians, and

231 "The Iraqi Parliament Enacts al-Hashd al-Shaabi Law," CNN, November 26, 2016, https://arabic.cnn.com/middleeast/2016/11/26/iraq-parliament-pmf.

232 Ibid.

233 "Al-Hashd al-Shaabi Law," Iraqi Parliament, November 26, 2016, http://ar.parliament.iq/2016/11/26/%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%8A.

234 Mahmoud Aboubakr, "Iraqi PMF: From Irregular Forces to Formal Combat Formation," BBC, February 23, 2017, http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-38383048.

Turkman.[235] These volunteers turned out for the fight not because of al-Sistani's fatwa but rather to defend their regions from ISIS.

B.   FIGHTING ISIS

At the beginning of the phase following al-Sistani's fatwa, the crowds of Iraqi volunteers lining up to join the fight in response to the call for jihad were a mix of youth and elderly. The state did not have a ready apparatus to accommodate the flux of recruits but the Shiite militias were able to absorb the majority of volunteers. With a strong esprit de corps and a coherent mission, the PMF soon started accomplishing victories against ISIS. The PMF began by supporting the Iraqi Army but soon took the lead in many of the confrontations. Its early success was marred, however, by reports of abuses against Sunni civilians. Members of some of the Shiite militias were harming Sunni civilians and many such instances were recorded by the media and international organizations.

The first campaign that PMF units engaged ISIS was the liberation of the province of Diyala. This campaign was initiated in late July 2014 and witnessed some fierce clashes with ISIS.[236] It would take the PMF and the Iraqi forces until January 2015 to completely clear the province of ISIS forces.[237] The last standoff in Diyala cost the PMF and the Army 58 dead and 248 injured.[238] Another significant campaign was breaking the siege off the town of Amerli. During this campaign in August 2014, the PMF was in charge of the offensive whereas the Iraqi Army played a supporting role.[239] This dynamic would continue to repeat itself in many of the confrontations with ISIS.

The PMF rarely conducted offenses without the Iraqi Army, since the latter was able to call air support from the United States and coalition forces. Even though the coalition was not directly supporting the PMF, the air strikes were often targeting their

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235 Renad and Jaber. "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future."

236 Mahmoud, "Iraqi PMF: From Irregular Forces to Formal Combat Formation."

237 "Diyala Liberation Toll: 58 Dead and 248 Wounded Iraqi Forces and Volunteers," RT, January 26, 2015, https://arabic.rt.com/news/772022.

238 Ibid.

239 Mahmoud, "Iraqi PMF: From Irregular Forces to Formal Combat Formation."

adversary. For example, on October 24 2014, in the battle of Jirf al-Nasr, 50 kilometers south of Baghdad, the coalition conducted air strikes called in by the Iraqi Army who was fighting side by side with the PMF.[240] Similarly, Maj. Gen. Rupert Jones, who was a lead commander of the U.S.-led coalition, publicly acknowledged that PMF units were "incidentally" profiting from air support during coalition operations.[241] He specifically mentioned the battle of Tal Afar, which was launched August 20, 2017 when PMF forces were fighting next to Iraqi troops.[242]

The Kurdish Peshmerga was quick to fill some of the void left by the Iraqi Army in 2014, and was able to initiate offenses against ISIS. The Kurds were able to gain control of the city of Kirkuk in June 2014 after the Iraqi Army abandoned its posts in the region following the attack by ISIS.[243] On the other hand, in the following months, the Peshmerga forces were fighting a difficult fight against ISIS in Ninawa province. On August 3, 2014 they lost Sinjar and Zimmar, two strategic cities in that province, when they retreated after a confrontation with ISIS.[244] The Iraqi government recognized that the Peshmerga were fighting the same enemy and offered some help even though at many times they had their differences. On August 4, 2014, Kasem Atta, the military spokesperson for al-Maliki announced that the military ordered the Air Force to support the Kurdish Peshmerga against ISIS.[245]

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240 Mahmoud, "Iraqi PMF: From Irregular Forces to Formal Combat Formation."

241 Barbara Opal-Rome, "Commander: US-Led Assault in Iraq 'Incidentally' Benefits Iran-Backed Militias," Defense News, August 25, 2017, https://www.defensenews.com/global/mideast-africa/2017/08/25/commander-us-led-assault-in-iraq-incidentally-benefits-iran-backed-militias.

242 Ibid.

243 "The Iraqi Crisis: Kurdish Peshmerga Take Control of Kirkuk After Army Withdrawal," BBC, June 12, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2014/06/140612_iraq_isis_army_developments.

244 "Peshmerga Forces Advance Against Daesh, and al-Maliki Supports Them," Alarabiya, August 4, 2014, https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/iraq/2014/08/04/%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B4%D9%86-%D9%87%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%B6%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82.html.

245 Ibid.

Most of the PMF fighting against ISIS took place in non-Shia regions in Iraq, Journalists and human rights advocates have documented grave violations committed by members of the PMF against civilians in those non-Shia regions. For example, in 2017, Amnesty international published a detailed report that illustrated many of the abuses committed by PMF members and other actors in Iraq. The report covers the period from June 2014 to November 2016 in addition to October 24 to November 11, 2016.[246] Amnesty International conducted extensive interviews with victims, witnesses, local and security officials, and even militia members.[247] One of the challenges Amnesty faced was the fear of those interviewed to speak of what they had seen or experienced, or even give enough details.[248] Another challenge was the difficulty of identifying the perpetrators, especially since the militia members would at many times be wearing uniforms that were the same or similar to those of the Iraqi security forces.[249]

Amnesty International clearly stated in its report that some of the actions of the PMF members in the fight against ISIS amounted to "war crimes and other violations of the international humanitarian law and human rights law."[250] According to this report, Sunnis were the predominant victims of the atrocities committed by the PMF. This included extrajudicial executions, torture and killing of men and boys, abductions and extortion of the families of the abductees.[251] One of the places that witnessed the most abductions of Sunnis was the al-Razzaza checkpoint, which until December 2015 was the only safe passage between Anbar and Karbala.[252] This checkpoint was controlled by Kataib Hezbollah (KH), and almost 2200 people had been seized there.[253] In September 2015, Saraya Assalam (SA) fighters stormed into the Ishaqi camp, which had internally displaced

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246 Amnesty International, *Iraq: Turning a Blind Eye*, MDE 14/5386/2017 (London: Amnesty International, 2017), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde14/5386/2017/en, 7.

247 Ibid., 7.

248 Ibid.

249 Ibid.

250 Ibid., 11.

251 Ibid., 15.

252 Ibid., 21.

253 Ibid.

people (IDP) from Farhatiya in Salah al-Din governorate, and captured a number of Sunni men.[254] During the battle of Diyala, on January 26, 2015, members of the PMF killed 56 Sunnis in the village of Barwana.[255] Also on January 13, 2016, Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) members abducted 100 Sunni men from Miqdadiya, and they remain missing up to the date of the report.[256] Furthermore, in May 2016 during the battle of Falluja in Anbar, PMF fighters executed 12 men and boys from the Jumaila tribe.[257]

There is no doubt that war involves violence and that civilians can be unintentional victims of that violence, but in PMF operations, violations of civilian rights and properties, and sectarian discrimination seemed to be very common. In most of the incidents documented by Amnesty International, the victims were Sunnis and it was clear that the Iraqi Shiite militias were engaged in sectarian violence and were being indiscriminate between ISIS fighters and Sunni civilians. In addition to the abductions and killings discussed earlier, PMF members also engaged in the torture of Sunnis, the systematic destruction of their homes, and the louting of their properties.[258] Despite the continuous reports issued by Amnesty International, no members of the PMF have been locally or internationally indicted or prosecuted for human rights violations.[259]

C.   INTERNATIONAL VIEWPOINT OF THE PMF

As we have seen, Amnesty International has recorded many atrocities of the PMF against the Sunni population. Some of them amount to war crimes and violations of international humanitarian law. The reports of this organization have played a role in shaping the worldview about the PMF and in judging their actions. Similarly, Iran's support for some factions of the Iraqi militias painted the PMF in a certain way, where states at odds with Iran regarded the PMF as an extension of the Islamic Republic. Whereas, states

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254 Amnesty International, *Iraq: Turning a Blind Eye*, 20.

255 Ibid., 17.

256 Ibid.

257 Ibid., 18.

258 Ibid., 11.

259 Ibid., 13.

and non-state actors fighting ISIS, a common enemy of the PMF considered collaborating with the Iraqi militias.

Iran's support of a faction of the PMF is varied. There are ideological and religious ties between certain Shiite militias in the PMF and Iran. Also, some of the PMF leadership and at least six of its militias have long established relations with the Quds Force (QF). This reciprocal relationship and ideological alignment provided the militias access to financial and logistical support, and enabled Iran to increase its sway over Iraq and the region. Even prior to the war against ISIS, the Iran facilitated the entrance of Iraqi militias to Syria, which in turn helped Iran to realize further regional influence. Therefore, by setting up its Iraqi clients for the fight against ISIS and other Sunni groups in the region, these militias have become part of a mostly Shiite transnational army commanded by the Islamic Republic.

Saudi Arabia considers the PMF faction supported by Iran as a threat to the Sunnis, while other factions may present an opportunity to undermine Iran's dominance of the Shia world. Saudi Arabia is competing with Iran over both regional hegemony and the leadership of the Islamic World. The kingdom considers itself the protector of the Sunnis in the region and therefore the PMF groups persecuting the Iraqi Sunnis are seen as the enemy. The feelings between the Iran-backed Shiite militias and Saudi Arabia is reciprocal, and different Iraqi militias have threatened Saudi Arabia on different occasions. For example, in October 2015, the leader of the Iraqi militia Sayyid al-Shuhada, which is very close to the QF threatened to strike against Saudi Arabia.[260] Similarly, in February 2016, KH warned Saudi Arabia that if the latter sent troops to Syria then the "doors of hell would be opened" for the kingdom.[261] Also, in June 2017, Rudaw media network, which is an Iraqi Kurdish media organization, showed a video clip of the leader of the PMF, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, where he praised the accomplishments of the PMF at the Iraqi-Syrian border,

260 "US Concern over Baghdad's Silence on the Threat of an Iraqi Militia to Saudi Security," Alhayat, October 31, 2015, http://www.alhayat.com/article/704333.

261 "Iraqi Hezbollah Threatens Saudi Arabia with Opening the Gates of Hell if Arabian Troops Are Sent to Syria," CNN, February 9, 2016, https://arabic.cnn.com/middleeast/2016/02/09/arab-hezbullah-troops-iraq-syria.

and then boasted that the PMF was going to chase ISIS all the way to the Saudi capital.[262] Conversely, recent observations suggest that Saudi Arabia enjoys a different relationship with other factions of the PMF. Muqtada al-Sadr's visit to Jeddah on July 30 2017 and his meeting with Saudi crown prince Mohamad Bin Salman falls within that context.[263]

For Israel, allies of the Assad regime and Iranian proxies, including some of the PMF groups involved in the Syrian war are automatically considered enemies. Furthermore, Israel sees these groups as carrying out Iran's plans in the region, which include establishing and maintaining a route from Iran to Lebanon. The Iran backed PMF intentions towards Israel have also been manifested at least in a couple of occasions. In March 2017, al-Nujaba militia announced the establishment of the Golan Brigade for the purpose of freeing the Golan heights from the Israeli occupation.[264] Also, on December 9, 2017 a video was shared over social media showed Qais al-Khazaali, the leader of AAH in military uniform at the southern border of Lebanon.[265] The message he portrayed was loud and clear: AAH wants to be part of the fight against Israel in the next confrontation.[266]

Russia has worked directly and indirectly with members of Iraqi Shiite militias, especially in the Syrian arena where they have fought alongside the Assad regime. As early as March 2015, media reports talked about PMF groups reaching out to the Russian for supplies of ammunition and explosives.[267] Also, in September 2015, after the Russians announced the establishment of a quadruple alliance between Russia, Iran, Syria and Iraq

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262 "In Video, a Leader of the Hashd al-Shaabi Threatens Suadi Arabia," Rudaw Media Network, June 3, 2017, http://www.rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/030620177.

263 Aljazeera.net, "Muqtada Al-Sadr Visits Saudi Arabia and Meets Bin Salman."

264 Babak Dehghanpisheh, "The Iraqi Militia helping Iran Carve a Road to Damascus," Reuters, September 22, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/mideast-crisis-iraq-nujaba.

265 "On Video: PMF in Lebanon… al-Khazaali in Military Uniform at the Borders," Annahar, December 9, 2017, https://www.annahar.com/article/712973.

266 Ibid.

267 "Russia and the PMF in Iraq: Malicious Relationships," Aljazeera.net, March 31, 2015, http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2015/3/31/%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%88-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%84%D8%BA%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9.

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to fight ISIS, Russian military experts arrived in Baghdad and met with Iraqi militia leaders that are part of the PMF.[268] Furthermore, in the second half of 2016, the head of PMF, Faleh al-Fayad, visited Mosco on several occasions and met with Nikolai Patrushev, the director of the Russian Federal Security Service at the time to discuss supplying the PMF with weapons.[269] The Russian military intervention in Syria and the air support they provided for the Syrian Army also extended to the PMF fighters defending the Syrian regime. In November 2017, PMF combatants approaching the town of Albu Kamal, a Syrian town bordering Iraq, enjoyed Russian air support during their offensive.[270]

The U.S. has a different stance for the different factions in the PMF. According to the U.S., the presence of PMF militias in Syria is problematic, and so is the fact that these militias are financed, trained and commanded by Iran's Quds Force. Similarly, the influence of the Iran-backed faction of the PMF on the Iraqi government and its official institutions poses a threat to the U.S. efforts to help stabilize Iraq. Moreover, the role that these militias have taken in the fight against ISIS, and their rejection to disband or be integrated in the armed forces remains the biggest challenge for U.S. foreign policy in Iraq. The U.S. State Department has designated some of the Iran-backed militias as terrorist organizations such as KH. Also, on November 3, 2017, a bill was introduced into the U.S. House of Representatives entitled "Iranian Proxies Terrorist Sanctions Act of 2017," which

268 Othman al-Mokhtar, "Quadruple Alliance to Fight Daesh: Russian Intervention Extends to Iraq," The New Arab, September 28, 2015, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2015/9/27/%D8%AD%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%AE%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%AF-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82.

269 Ali al-Husseini and Abdallah al-Thuwainy, "Iraq: Russian Armament Agreements for the Militias of PMF," The New Arab, January 25, 2017, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2017/1/24/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%AD-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%8A.

270 "Iraqi Shi'ite Militia Says Will Fight IS in Syria Border Town," Reuters, November 4, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-syria/iraqi-shiite-militia-says-will-fight-is-in-syria-border-town-idUSKBN1D408H.

imposed sanctions on AAH and Harakat al-Nujaba.[271] Conversely, the PMF faction following al-Sistani has been regarded as more acceptable. These militias work better with the security forces and have shown willingness to be integrated into the Iraqi military. Michael Knights, a fellow of the Washington Institute and an expert in the military and security affairs of Iraq, highlighted the pros of the Firqat al-Abbas al-Qitaliya (FAQ) model and elaborated the need for the U.S. to support such a model in order to counter Iranian influence in Iraq.[272]

D.   THE ROLE OF PMF AFTER DEFEATING ISIS

On December 9, 2017, the Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi announced that Iraq has defeated ISIS, has regained control of all its territories, and has secured the borders with Syria.[273] This marked the end of a long struggle against the terrorist organization, which lasted for more than three years. The immediate question on everyone's mind was what was next for the PMF. So far, the PMF has established itself as a capable military power that played a significant role in turning the tide against ISIS. It has also gained political legitimacy through *al-hashd* law and has been accepted as a governmental organization. However, many aspects remain of concern to some Iraqis, the political class, and many international and regional actors. Mainly, the sectarian atrocities on the hands of some groups of the PMF, the participation of PMF members in the Syrian conflict, and the influence of Iran over one faction of the organization have stained the umbrella organization. These presented challenges and maybe obstacles in the way of possible future roles of the PMF in Iraq. The Iraqi government has to carefully weigh its options on what to do with the PMF while aiming at maintaining stability and security in the country. Whereas the leaders of the militias within the PMF were going to capitalize on their military successes and their current popularity to translate that into possible political gains.

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271 H.R. 4238, 115th Cong., 1st sess. (2017-2018), https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/4238.

272 Knights and Malik, "The al-Abbas Combat Division Model."

273 "Al-Abadi Officially Announces the Defeat of Daesh," al-Sharq al-Awsat, December 10, 2017, https://aawsat.com/home/article/1108456.

The Iraqi government has tried at least two similar yet distinct approaches when it came to dealing with the militias of the PMF. According to Paul Staniland, a political scientist who focuses on militia networks, there are four different approaches a government or a state can adopt when dealing with militias: collusion, incorporation, suppression, and containment.[274] The first strategy that the Iraqi government assumed was collusion with the Shiite militias as they confronted a common enemy, ISIS. However, soon afterwards, the government shifted to incorporation, albeit only being partially successful. Staniland indicates that incorporation requires the demobilization of the militias and the integration of their members into the state's security forces.[275] Even though the Iraqi government had declared that the militias became part of its armed forces under the PMF, it maintained the structures of these militias and did not demobilize them. This approach would hinder the ability of the state to monopolize the use of force, and would threaten to weaken its political system.

The other two options, suppression or containment, are out of the question in the foreseeable future. Suppression aims at destroying the military capabilities of the militia and either coercing it into giving in or breaking it down completely.[276] Whereas containment is less violent, and actions from the state are resorted to only when the militia exceeds a certain unacceptable threshold.[277] Both approaches are not practical in the Iraqi situation taking into consideration the relationship between the militias and the population on one hand, and the weakened capabilities of the Iraqi government on the other. The best strategy for the Iraqi state would be to pursue the incorporation option, but rather than keeping the militia structure intact, the government should break down that structure and integrate the members at the individual level.

The different factions of the PMF seem to have dissimilar visions about their future roles. While the faction stemming from the Atabat under the direct influence of al-Sistani

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274 Paul Staniland, "Militias, Ideology, and the State," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (2015): 773, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715576749.

275 Ibid.,775.

276 Ibid., 773.

277 Ibid., 774.

has shown clear indications that when al-Sistani "says the word," they will immediately disband, other factions had more ambitious expectations. The faction backed by Iran, for example, has been highly resistant to both the idea of demobilization and even the idea of completely integrating into the armed forces. Militias within that faction continuously reiterate that the PMF should remain independent from the Iraqi security forces and that they are the real defenders of Iraq. As for the al-Sadr faction, it has not been clear what its ultimate goal was and in the past, we have seen how the Mehdi Army was allegedly demobilized, only to resurge later as SA. However, al-Sadr has announced lately that he supported the integration of the PMF into the security forces.[278]

Nonetheless, the militia leaders have tried to capitalize on their victory over ISIS and their resulting positive reputation by trying to boost the image of the PMF as being the savior of Iraq. Both Moqtada al-Sadr and Hadi al-Ameri were lead political coalitions in the 2018 Iraqi elections. If we take a look at al-Ameri's "al-Fatah" (the conquest) coalition, many of its candidates were leaders of militias backed by Iran, who ended their official memberships in these militias in order to be able to run for the elections.[279] Iraq's constitution forbids members of the military and security forces to be candidates in the parliamentary elections.[280]

Pre-election polls showed a surge in the popularity of both al-Sadr and al-Ameri, and different predictions favored one or the other in the 2018 elections. Sure enough, the official results of the Iraqi 2018 parliament elections showed that Sairoun (Marching Toward Reform) coalition led by al-Sadr won a majority of 54 seats out of 329.[281] The al-Fatah coalition led by al-Ameri came in second with 47 seats.[282] Prime Minister al-Abadi's

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278 Mansour and Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future."

279 "Old U.S. Nemesis Muqtada al-Sadr and Iran Ally Fatah Fare Well in Iraq Vote," CBS News, May 14, 2018, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/iraq-election-2018-muqtada-al-sadr-iran-backed-fatah-pull-ahead-2018-5-14.

280 Haitham Numan, "The Upcoming Iraqi Elections: Military Coup through Democracy," The Washington Institute, February 1, 2018, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-upcoming-iraqi-elections-military-coup-through-democracy.

281 "Final Results of the Iraqi Elections," al-Hurra, May 17, 2018, https://www.alhurra.com/a/iraq-election-results/437148.html.

282 Ibid.

al-Nasr (The Victory) coalition came in third with 42 seats.[283] This was a clear indication of the PMF's growth in power and popularity after the ISIS war. Al-Sadr being the leader of SA and al-Ameri the leader of Badr Organization (Badr), the Iraqi Shiite militias have seemingly secured their role in the Iraqi political arena and their place in the future of Iraq.

E. CONCLUSION:

This chapter described the circumstances in which the PMF formed and how fatwa of al-Sistani gave the Shiite militias religious legitimacy, the decisions of the Iraqi government gave them political legitimacy, and the victories against ISIS afforded them with popular legitimacy. On the other hand, we also discussed the atrocities and destruction of properties that members of these militias committed against non-Shia civilians, and how that negatively affected the reputation of the PMF, alienated other Iraqi constituents from identifying with this organization, and contributed to the shaping of the worldview towards the PMF and the Iraqi Shiite militias. We found out that many state actors held different opinions about the different factions within the PMF. Moreover, we discussed the role of the PMF after defeating ISIS, the strategies that the Iraqi government have adopted to deal with the PMF so far, and what possible option would work best. We also looked into the vision the different factions of the PMF held about the future of the organization. Finally, we talked about the 2018 parliamentary election results and their implications.

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283 Al-Hurra, "Final Results of the Iraqi Elections."

V. CONCLUSION

A. SUMMARY

The preceding chapters have examined the roots of some key Iraqi Shiite militias and how they developed over time. The focus was mainly on the most influential militias and those that have played a significant role in Iraq and the region. From the oldest militia, the Badr Organization (Badr), which has existed since the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, to more recently formed militias such as Firqat al-Abbas al-Qitaliya (FAQ), these militias have come to occupy a central part of politics and the military sector in Iraq. One faction of these militias has been backed by Iran. The Islamic Republic has provided training, financing and support on various levels. This has helped Iran establish a substantial amount of influence in Iraq and they assumed the role of a patron over the militias that they backed.

The rest of the Shiite militias fell under two other different factions. One is composed of a single militia, albeit the largest in the number of fighters, and that is the Mehdi Army, which later became known as Saraya Assalam (SA). SA is led by Muqtada al-Sadr, and have recently had less coherent ties with Iran, and at sometimes came at odds with the Quds Force (QF) leadership. The other faction is directly related to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. This faction has several militias under its banner, and the most known of these militias is FAQ. Though the official mission of these forces was to protect the holy shrines, their operation focus has expanded to other aspects across Iraq. Al-Sistani is one of the most prominent Shia marjaa in the world, which has garnered him a substantial following of devotees. Also he opposes the direct interference of religious leaders in politics, and that is why he does not favor Iran's *wilayat al-faqih* system.

Another aspect examined in the previous chapters was the perception of the various communities in Iraq toward the Shiite militias. While much of the Shiite population supported these militias, young Shiite men joined them, other non-Shia communities, especially Iraq's Sunnis, felt differently. Sunni civilians caught up in the fighting between ISIS and the PMF often suffered from extrajudicial violence and retribution carried out by certain Shiite militias Such violence was documented by international organizations and

the media, both of which also found evidence of the forceful removal of Sunnis from certain areas. Moreover, the Kurds have also endured Shiite militias' violations against civilians, especially in Baghdad and other areas populated by Kurds. The Shiite militias have also directly clashed with the Kurdish Peshmerga at times. There is a perception that Sunni, Kurdish and other minority communities in Iraq remain fearful of the Shiite militias and are apprehensive of their increasing power.

Next, we took a brief look at the history of Lebanese Hezbollah and compared the circumstances in Lebanon with those in Iraq. Looking into the Hezbollah case was relevant in terms of understanding the different approaches Iran has taken in developing ties to militant groups in the region. Even though there existed some similarities between the Shiite militias in Iraq and Lebanon, the outcome has so far been different for the two countries. In both countries, perhaps in return for Iran's material support, militias allied with Iran adopted the *wilayat al-faqih* concept as their official doctrine, and their leaders pledged allegiance to Iran's supreme leader. However, while Hezbollah had to partner with other constituents of the Lebanese community for political survival since the Shia are not a majority in Lebanon, Iraqi militias have had to compromise less with non-Shia groups. Because the Shia are the largest confessional community in Iraq, Shiite groups have been able to dominate politics without much regard to other non-Shia constituencies. Moreover, Hezbollah is the dominant Shiite player in Lebanon and has an alliance with the other major Shiite group Amal, whereas the Iran-backed Shiite faction in Iraq is in constant competition with the other Shiite factions.

We then delved into the events of the Syrian civil war, and inspected the role of the major external actors interfering in the turn of those events. Countries supporting the rebels did not coordinate their support well, and sometimes had conflicting interests. This helped lead to a fracturing of the rebel movement and caused a multiplicity of armed rebel groups backed by foreign patrons. By contrast, the entities supporting the regime seemed to create a much more unified front.

Iran's military support to the al-Assad regime started as a covert operation, but gradually became exposed as Iran's involvement grew in scope. Iran committed IRGC units to Syria and brought Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militias into the Syrian

arena as well. Iran framed the conflict as an existential war against Sunni extremism and emphasized the need to protect Syria's Shia holy sites from destruction. Iran's supreme leader constantly gave the Shiite participants a religious justification for their part in the conflict. However, not all Iraqi religious and political leaders were in favor of Iraqis joining the fight in Syria. The most notable objectors were Moqtada al-Sadr and Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani. Similarly, other non-Shia leaders expressed their concern that Shiite Iraqis were fighting in Syria.

The Iraqi militias were deployed throughout Syria. They supported the Syrian military and worked under the supervision of the IRGC's QF. The Iraqi militias in Syria also learned how to coordinate their land operations with air support, provided by Russia and by the Syrian Air Force to a lesser extent. They worked closely with Lebanese Hezbollah, the Afghan Fatemiyoun, and the Pakistani Zeynabiyoun, where they acquired additional warfare experience. New Iraqi militias were formed for the purpose of fueling the Iran backed effort to support the regime and to increase Iranian influence in that part of the region. Soon, the Iraqi Shiite militias participating in the war in Syria emerged as part of a transnational Shiite force commanded by Iran.

After that, the discussion turned to the circumstances behind the formation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). The trigger was the capture of the city of Mosul by ISIS, which also took control of large territories in Iraq. This event was quickly followed by a religious fatwa from al-Sistani that called on jihad, which mobilized a large portion of the Shiite population. Also, it was followed by political actions by al-Maliki's government, which set up the basic frame for absorbing the Iraqi volunteers and the birth of the PMF. However, existing and newly formed Iraqi Shiite militias took over the process, as thousands of Shiite men joined them instead of going to the Iraqi security forces, whose image had been scorned after ISIS defeated them in Mosul. Eventually, the PMF turned into an umbrella organization that housed mostly Shiite militias. These militias preserved their own structure and belonged to three competing factions: Al-Sadr faction, al-Sistani faction, and al-Ameri faction.

The PMF began by supporting the Iraqi military in its battles against ISIS but soon took the lead in most of the fights. The Shiite militias were able to accomplish many

victories against ISIS and to liberate Iraqi territory, but they also clashed with other Iraqi constituents and committed human rights and human law violations. Clashes broke between the PMF and the Kurdish Peshmerga, especially after the Kurdish independence referendum and over disputed regions with the central government. Additionally, PMF members' violations against Sunni civilians and destruction of property were recorded by journalists and international organizations in many of the Sunni regions. The fight against ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and the atrocities committed by members of Shiite militias influenced the way the world viewed the PMF. While Russia, Iran, the Syrian regime and Lebanese Hezbollah viewed the PMF as part of their team, other regional actors like Turkey, Israel, the United States and Saudi Arabia had completely different positions with respect to the PMF in general and Iran-backed Iraqi Shiite militias specifically.

After the Iraqi government announced that ISIS has been defeated, that Iraq has regained all its territory, and was controlling the country's borders, the PMF suddenly became a pressing reality that the government had to smoothly figure out. The government's approach from 2014 shifted as it tried to deal with the PMF. Facing a common enemy, the Iraqi government at first colluded with the Shiite militias, especially since the military had just suffered a humiliating defeat against ISIS. Then the government switched to incorporation while preserving the internal structure of these militias. This was when we witnessed the creation of the PMF, its designation as an official military organization, and the issuance of *al-hashd al-shaabi* law. All these steps portrayed the PMF and the Shiite militias underneath it as part of the military institutions in Iraq and provided the PMF with an extra layer of legitimacy. However, their persisting independence from the Iraqi military undermined the latter, and to some extent this model has shaken the ability of the Iraqi government to monopolize the use of force. The increasing power of the Shiite militias was translated in the 2018 elections when al-Sadr coalition won the majority of seats and al-Ameri won the next biggest number of seats at the parliament.

The introduction advanced three hypotheses that broke down the role of armed groups with a foreign patron in state building in terms of popular, domestic political, and international legitimacy. Taking the case of the Iraqi Shiite militias, we will revisit these

hypotheses to see how those propositions fit with the evidences provided in the preceding chapters.

B.   FIRST HYPOTHESIS FINDINGS

The first hypothesis contended the presence of a foreign patron might undermine an armed group's legitimacy and domestic standing, especially if the group was seen as prioritizing the interests of its patron over those of its own country. In the case of the Iran-backed Shiite militias in Iraq, we need to look at the popularity of the armed groups from the perspective of different Iraqi communities, as there are sharp differences in opinion. While the Shiite armed groups were accepted within the Shiite community, the Kurdish and Sunni communities feared them more than anything. From the Shiite community's point of view, the presence of ISIS and the framing of the conflict as an existential one between Shiism and Sunni extremism, brought the confessional interests of Iraq and Iran close together. A large portion of the Shia in Iraq regarded Iran, the foreign patron, as their main ally against ISIS. Therefore, militias that had ties with Iran, such as Badr, Kataib Hezbollah (KH), and Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), have enjoyed an increased level of popular legitimacy within the Shiite population since the war with ISIS began.

Conversely, the Sunnis of Iraq perceived the activities of the Iran-backed Shiite militias as aimed against all Sunnis and not just at the extremists. This perception was reinforced as the Shiite militias swept through Sunni areas of Iraq in their operations against ISIS, where they were accused of indiscriminate violence against Sunni civilians. Moreover, the Sunnis were convinced that under direction from Iran, these militias were engaged in deliberate efforts to depopulate certain areas of Sunnis. For the Sunni community in Iraq, the Shiite militias were often seen a threat and not as a protector.

Similarly, the Kurdish population did not see their interests fully aligned with those of the Shiite militias' patron, and the folding of events affirmed the Kurds' fears. Even though, the Kurdish forces and the Shiite militias were both fighting ISIS for some time and even in some rare moments there might have been cooperation between both sides, Kurdish residents of Baghdad were intimidated and harassed by members of these militias. Furthermore, when the Kurds conducted the independence referendum and had control

over Kirkuk, neither Iran nor Iraq approved of the referendum results. The Shiite militias then moved in and took back Kirkuk, and the Kurdish Peshmerga retreated to the territories they controlled prior to June 2014. For the Kurds, the Shiite militias were an obstacle to realizing their independence, and at some point, their leaders were describing them as more dangerous than ISIS.

Therefore, the presence of a foreign patron actually harmed the popular legitimacy of the Iraqi Shiite militias. Both Kurdish and Sunni communities regarded the goals pursued by the Shiite militias and encouraged by Iran as serving the interests of Iran and threatening the existence of the Kurdish and Sunni populations. They also perceived that Iran was shifting the power distribution in Iraq to favor the Shiite population and attempting to alter the composition of the Iraqi society rather than allow for the building of a unified Iraq. Moreover, by strengthening the Iraqi Shiite militias over the Iraqi Army, Iran has compromised the representation of the diverse population in a single strong military institution, which further diminished the popular legitimacy of the Shiite militias.

C.   SECOND HYPOTHESIS FINDINGS

My second hypothesis proposes that recognition from domestic politicians plays an important role in attributing domestic political legitimacy to the militias. The Iran-backed Shiite militias in Iraq were housed with other Shiite militias under an umbrella organization, the PMF. Al-Maliki's government established the PMF and recognized it as a governmental organization. The PMF was also considered as an auxiliary military force to the Iraqi Army, and the members of its respective Shiite militias were given similar rights to those of the Iraqi Armed forces. This allowed the Shiite militias the lawful use of force in Iraq. Moreover, the issuance of *al-hashd al-shaabi* law by the Iraqi parliament, acknowledged the status of the PMF and the militias behind it, including the Iran-backed faction.

Nonetheless, when members of the Iran-backed militias were seen fighting in Syria alongside Assad regime and under the command of Iran, several Iraqi politicians criticized that and called for the prohibition of fighters going to Syria. This objection did not materialize into an influential force, even when some politicians tried to draw the image

that members of the PMF, an Iraqi governmental organization, were participating in the fight. The only response that came out of the government was when Prime Minister al-Abadi announced that there were no members of the PMF fighting in Syria.

The latest indication that the Iran-backed Shiite militias in Iraq have attained a high degree of political legitimacy was seen in the 2018 parliamentary election results. Despite the fact that the Iraqi constitution prohibits the participation of military personnel in governmental elections, and even though the PMF was established by *al-hashd* law as a military institution, the leaders of the Iran-backed militias were able to form a political coalition that ran for the parliament. The coalition, al-fatah, was headed by al-Ameri of Badr and with the participation of other Iran-backed militia leaders, who officially cut their ties with their respective militias. Al-fateh came second in the election results and secured 47 seats in the Iraqi parliament. This has reinforced the political legitimacy of the Iran-backed Shiite militias in Iraq.

D.   THIRD HYPOTHESIS FINDINGS

In my third hypothesis, I assumed that the international recognition and legitimacy of an armed group is directly related to the international status of its patron. Iran is at odds with many of the international actors, especially over its regional ambitions and its nuclear program. In addition, some countries accuse it of sponsoring terrorism, and it is currently under U.S. sanctions. The international status of Iran has directly impacted the international image of Iran-backed Shiite militias in Iraq, specifically as their members targeted U.S. forces after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and participated in the war in Syria under Iranian command. For example, the U.S. state department has designated KH as a terrorist organization since June 2009. Also the Iranian IRGC Quds Force, which works closely with and supervises this faction of the Iraqi Shiite militia, has been designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. department of treasury since October 2007.

However, the worldview of the Iran-backed Iraqi Shiite militias has also suffered due to other factors. Specifically, the human rights and human law violations committed by its members against Sunni and Kurdish civilians. This was very well documented by Amnesty International in its report which was discussed in chapter four. Such horrendous

activities revealed the intentions of such groups' disregard for the multi-ethnic composition of Iraq. These events confirmed for the international community, that the goals pursued by Iran-backed Iraqi Shiite militias were within Iran's interests more than in favor of a unified Iraqi state.

E.   CONCLUSION

Iraq's Shiite militias have assumed a greater role in the security and political system in Iraq. The participation of these groups in the fight against ISIS and the victories accomplished in that fight afforded them with legitimacy within the Shiite population. On the contrary, the violations against other non-Shia communities, especially by the Iran-backed faction, tainted the Shiite militias' reputation. This presents the first challenge the Iraqi government has to address to determine the future role of these militias.

By including these militias under the PMF and designating the latter as an official military organization, the Shiite militias have become a legitimate force. This in itself is the second challenge that the Iraqi government faces. Since the presence of an auxiliary military force with internal structures independent from the government, external affiliation, and a better military reputation than the Iraqi Army, undermines the role of the latter as well as shakes the Iraqi government's monopoly over the use of force.

The third challenge comes from the Iran-backed faction of the PMF's activities in Syria. The presence of members of Iraqi militias in the Syrian war seems not just be in the interest of an external actor, but also seems to be in contradiction to Iraq's general foreign policy agenda, which, since the end of the Baathist state, has shown no interest of interfering in the affairs of neighboring states. Thus involvement in a neighbor's civil war may eventually become harmful for Iraq. Even though the war in Syria has not yet been concluded, the participation of Iraqis in that conflict is surely to leave some animosity between a faction of the Syrian population and Iraqis.

Finally, the best option for the Iraqi government to pursue with regard to the PMF would be the full incorporation of PMF ranks into the regular military. In order to be able to get rid of external affiliations and promote the idea of a strong unified Iraq, the militias composing the PMF have to give up their current structure and turn full control to the Iraqi

government. This would counter the presence of an auxiliary military entity competing with the Iraqi Army. Furthermore, the militia members that become incorporated into the army would reinforce the military's capabilities and its reputation, and the Iraqi government would gain exclusive control over its command.

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