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# CONTAINING SHIITE MILITIAS: THE BATTLE FOR STABILITY IN IRAQ

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## BROOKINGS

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# CONTAINING SHIITE MILITIAS: THE BATTLE FOR STABILITY IN IRAQ

RANJ ALAALDIN<sup>1</sup>

The liberation of Mosul is complete. The so-called Islamic State (ISIS) is unlikely to govern and control large swaths of territory any time soon. However, while there are reasons to celebrate, the end of the so-called Caliphate does not mean the end of ISIS and militancy in Iraq. To make the liberation of Mosul count, the Iraqi government and its allies will now have to take on the more difficult long-term challenge of reconstructing the country and reconciling its communities and political factions. One particular challenge that could complicate such efforts is the ascendancy of Shiite militia groups, which could soon use their popular support to radically alter the political map of the country.

Many of Iraq's Shiite militias mobilized in response to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's fatwa that called on all able-bodied Iraqis to defend their country when the Iraqi army collapsed and Mosul fell to ISIS in June 2014. An umbrella militia organization known as the "Hashd al-Shaabi," or Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), was established in response. On the surface, the PMF constitutes a state-sanctioned organization that reports to the federal government, but in practice, it is dominated by Iran-aligned, pre-existing militia groups such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Hezbollah, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, and the Badr Brigade. These actors constitute the spearhead of the organization and report to its de facto leader, Hadi al-Amiri (the head of

the Badr Brigade), and his deputy, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (the head of Kataib Hezbollah). They have functioned with autonomy over the past decade with considerable resources and patronage from their sponsors in Tehran, and they have also capitalized on Sistani's call to arms to sustain, legitimize, and consolidate their presence.

International organizations have accused Iraq's Shiite militias of committing sectarian atrocities and human rights abuses.<sup>2</sup> Many have fought both Western coalition forces and the Iraqi army in the past. Along with their sectarian discourse, and the substantial support they receive from Iran, these militias have exacerbated sectarian tensions between Iraq's Arab Sunnis and Shiites, which militant groups like ISIS have exploited to swell their ranks. Shiite militias have also concerned other sections of Iraqi society. This includes the Kurds, who have been engaged with the militias in a series of skirmishes in key disputed territories, as well as those components of the Shiite community that do not want Iraq to be dominated by unaccountable armed groups.

Reformist politicians, including Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi, have criticized militias that operate independently of the state and have called on them to disarm. However, these calls have been met with fierce resistance from the militia factions, which have threatened to reorganize independently if the institution

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Ban Abusive Militias from Mosul Operation," July 31, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/07/31/iraq-ban-abusive-militias-mosul-operation>; Jeffrey Gettleman, "Bound, Blindfolded and Dead: The Face of Revenge in Baghdad," *New York Times*, March 26, 2006; Amnesty International, "Absolute Impunity, Militia Rule in Iraq," October 2014, [https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/absolute\\_impunity\\_iraq\\_report.pdf](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/absolute_impunity_iraq_report.pdf).

of the PMF is disbanded.<sup>3</sup> Disarming and demobilizing Shiite militia groups is challenging and complicated, not only because of their vast numbers, autonomy, financial resources and arms, but also because of their support bases—due to their significant overlap and interactions with the Iraqi state and society.

What compounds the challenge even further is that Iran-aligned Shiite militias have already established themselves as quasi versions of Lebanon's Hezbollah, having enjoyed the space to do so as a result of the fragility of the Iraqi state and society over the past decade. In other words, they have established themselves as socio-cultural movements that have military and social welfare wings and that operate independently of the state. Conversely, they have not yet amassed the same power and authority as their Lebanese counterparts. Moreover, the PMF was institutionalized into the Iraqi state only recently and now functions parallel to a much weaker Iraqi military. This could result in Iraq elevating the PMF into its own version of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Council (IRGC). Therefore, it is not too late to either resolve the problem of autonomous Shiite militias or, at least, contain them in the coming years.

Iraq's Shiite militias were once pushed to the margins after the Iraqi state and its institutions—particularly its armed forces—became more effective. With substantial U.S. military support, the country was stabilized between 2008-2011, rendering Shiite militias an unnecessary force. The militias were thereafter derided for their general lawlessness and for committing human rights abuses. The entities that aligned themselves with Iran were punished at the provincial and national

elections in 2009 and 2010. Therefore, the ascendancy of Shiite militia groups (and their Iranian patrons) is not irresistible. Reversing their prominence once again requires a holistic approach and a greater appreciation of the complex web of interpersonal and inter-organizational links that shape Iraq's Shiite community. This policy briefing calls for a three-pronged strategy focused on helping Iraqis reduce the space in which Shiite militias operate by establishing an environment and culture of accountability.

First, the United States should shift its resources away from the Iraqi state—specifically its political class—and recalibrate its policies toward the grassroots communal dynamics of the Shiite community. Moreover, the United States should empower the array of state-aligned militias, tribes, and clerical figures whose political and ideological alignments, as well as their day-to-day interactions and discourse, are characterized by pluralistic values and hostility to Iranian interference. These actors have been misunderstood and unappreciated by policymakers, but they display far-reaching influence and moral authority within the Shiite community, which should be utilized.

Second, the United States should use its influence to ensure international resources are directed toward Iraqi NGOs, humanitarian organizations, and civil-society actors, which generally have greater reach and credibility than international organizations. These local actors are better positioned to nudge armed groups into respecting human rights and adopting basic international norms, but they have received insufficient investment and remain vulnerable to becoming political fronts for corrupt elites.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>United States Institute of Peace, "Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi on U.S. Ties, War with ISIS," March 20, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/events/iraqi-prime-minister-abadi-us-ties-war-isis>; "Iraqi PM Haider al-Abadi Compares Shiite Militias to ISIS: We Did Not Fight the Baath Regime Only to be Ruled by Gangs," MEMRI TV, May 20, 2017, <https://www.memri.org/tv/iraqi-pm-abadi-slams-shiite-militias>; Hayder al-Khoei, Twitter Post, July 8, 2017, [https://twitter.com/Hayder\\_alKhoei/status/883461859717894145](https://twitter.com/Hayder_alKhoei/status/883461859717894145).

<sup>4</sup>For studies on this, see Oliver Kaplan, "Nudging Armed Groups: How Civilians Transmit Norms of Protection," *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* (December 2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/sta.cw>.

Finally, Shiite militias may have battlefield experience, but they are ill-equipped to engage in governance and administration. In the event that Shiite militia factions fail to deliver security and services to local communities, their popular support would diminish—as it did in the past—at which point other institutions must seize the opportunity and provide an alternative to their constituents. This requires helping the federal government establish pluralistic, non-sectarian institutions and investing more in outward looking, conciliatory politicians like Prime Minister al-Abadi. Through empowering security forces such as Iraq’s elite, U.S.-trained special forces (known as the Golden Division), the United States can also ensure that Iraq’s conventional armed forces do not become an ancillary force, which will limit the space for Iran-aligned militias to operate.

### YESTERDAY’S SHIITE ACTIVISTS BECOME TODAY’S MILITIAS

In contrast to the intellectual, ecumenical, and Islamic revivalist outlook that inspired Iraq’s older generation of Shiite activists, it is the 1990s period of violence and destitution that shapes the collective memory and political consciousness of today’s militia groups. As the Baath regime became more brutal during the course of its rule, the mold of the typical Iraqi Shiite activist became increasingly radical. The Baath regime’s brutal suppression of the 1991 Shiite uprising saw the systematic killing of tens of thousands of Shiites. Shiite shrines, centers of learning, or “hawzat,” and communities were decimated. According to witnesses, tanks were painted with the slogan, “No Shiites after today,” people were hung from electric poles, and tanks towed bodies in the streets.<sup>5</sup> Extreme poverty and repression followed the uprising.

<sup>5</sup> John Kifner, “After the War; Iraqi Refugees Tell U.S. Soldiers of Brutal Repression of Rebellion,” *New York Times*, March 28, 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/28/world/after-the-war-iraqi-refugees-tell-us-soldiers-of-brutal-repression-of-rebellion.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Krohley, *The Death of the Mehdi Army: The Rise, Fall, and Revival of Iraq’s Most Powerful Militia* (London: C Hurst & Co, 2015).

From this environment emerged Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr, the founder of the Sadrist movement that today, under the leadership of his son Muqtada, constitutes Iraq’s most powerful socio-political movement. Sadeq al-Sadr galvanized the Shiite underclass and provided them with an outlet for their political and economic grievances. Many of the fighters that comprise the Shiite militia groups today were teenagers or young men during this period. Sadeq al-Sadr mobilized these communities on the basis of his fierce Iraqi nationalist sentiments, as well as anti-Western, and even anti-Iran discourse.<sup>6</sup>

When the Iraqi state collapsed after 2003, the vast Sadrist network filled the vacuum. Sadeq al-Sadr had already established a powerful communal element to Shiite mobilization that combined religious zeal with a militant, Shiite-centric form of Iraqi nationalism. In addition to providing advice and counseling to the destitute, Sadeq al-Sadr sent emissaries to all Shiite areas of Iraq. To complement this existing socio-cultural and religious network, after 2003 the Sadrist movement, led by Muqtada, formally established “Jaysh al-Mahdi,” the Mahdi Army, later renamed the Peace Brigade. When communities needed protection, services, and leadership, the Sadrist movement stepped in. The organization established offices and local patrols, and provided social and religious services to its constituents in Baghdad, most notably in the slums of Sadr City.

### THE RISE OF THE MILITIAS

In the immediate aftermath of the 2003 war, two militia organizations dominated Iraq: the Badr Brigade and the Mahdi Army. The former was established during the Iran-Iraq war, during which it mobilized Iraqi prisoners of war and

drew support from Iraqi refugees who had fled to Iran. Initially led by officers from the IRGC, it later came under Iraqi leadership. As the former armed wing of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), the Badr Brigade has also benefited from integration into the post-2003 political order, even cooperating with coalition forces. The organization continues to control Iraq's largest institution, the Interior Ministry, and the 37,000-strong Federal Police. Therefore, it has demonstrated greater experience and discipline than the Mahdi Army.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, the Sadrist movement and its militia wing, the Mahdi Army, spawned a series of ill-disciplined and unaccountable militia groups into Iraqi society. The organization was unprepared for its growing responsibility. While the Mahdi Army swelled its ranks with more supporters and fighters during the course of the U.S. occupation, especially after sectarian conflict intensified and frustrations grew, its discipline and organizational capacity were tested and burdened by local administration and its confrontations with competing forces. The socio-economic background of the Sadrist base also meant that the organization's members were less inclined (or qualified) to engage in governance.

The Sadrist movement was mobilized around Muqtada al-Sadr's leadership, but it was still heavily decentralized in the way it operated. It was a vast, grass-roots organization that, over the course of the U.S. occupation, became shaped by autonomous and battle-hardened Shiite militia factions within the organization who became increasingly assertive and disloyal

to the Sadrist leadership.<sup>8</sup> After clashes with the coalition, as well as Iraqi armed forces, came the opportunity for these factions to acquire their own support bases at the local level, their own resources, and a willing patron in Iran. This ultimately led to these groups acquiring sufficient confidence and resources to splinter from the Sadrist organization. Nowhere else has this had a more far-reaching impact than in Baghdad, the Sadrists' most powerful constituency, where Shiite militias fought a bloody, full-scale sectarian civil war after the February 2006 bombing of the al-Askariya Mosque, a sacred Shiite shrine.<sup>9</sup> Previously, the movement was bound to Sadeq al-Sadr. However, the breakdown of the state and sectarian conflict altered the lines of authority among the Shiite underclass, unleashing, by 2007, multiple armed, battle-hardened, and autonomous militia groups into Iraqi society that no longer answered to the Sadrist leadership.

## MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

Various Shiite militias have emerged in different circumstances. The Badr Brigade is arguably Iraq's most powerful militia since it commands more active frontline fighters than any other militia. It demonstrates the complexities that define Iraq's Shiite militia groups. The Badr Brigade is integrated into the Iraqi state but that can operate autonomously. It engages with the international community, cooperating militarily with the United States, while also maintaining strong ties to Iran.

Conversely, militias such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada and others may be

<sup>7</sup> PMF official, interview with the author, Baghdad, January 22, 2017; President Fuad Masum, interview with the author, Baghdad, January 22, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Krohley, *The Death of the Mehdi Army*; Marisa Cochrane, "The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement," Institute for the Study of War, January 2009, <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/fragmentation-sadrist-movement>.

<sup>9</sup> The conflict claimed the lives of 34,452. Estimates put the number of Arab Sunnis killed by Shiite militias at 1,000 per month. See Sabrina Tavernise, "U.N. Puts '06 Death Toll in Iraq Above 34,000," New York Times, January 16, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/16/world/middleeast/16cnd-iraq.html>; Toby Dodge, "UK Iraq Inquiry Written Evidence," November 10, 2009, <http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/95834/2009-11-10-Submission-Dodge.pdf>.



described as opportunistic actors that have exploited the chaos and vacuum left by the fall of the former regime. With Iranian support, these groups have vehemently resisted the Iraqi state, as well as the United States and its coalition allies. Their ideological outlook is founded on Shiite supremacism and combatting Western imperialism. The aforementioned organizations splintered from pre-existing militias groups; for example, both Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada and Sayyid al-Shuhada are led by former members of the Badr Brigade, while Asaib Ahl al-Haq constitutes an offshoot of the Sadrist movement. These groups were established, empowered, and entrenched by Iran after 2003 to exploit state fragility and sectarian conflict. Unlike the Badr Brigade, these actors are all uncompromisingly averse to working and engaging with the United States.

Unsurprisingly, the plethora of groups has resulted in multiple clashes and rivalries among the militias. Muqtada al-Sadr, who orientated his organization around Iraqi nationalistic sentiments, has derided the Iran-aligned militias. He has attacked Asaib Ahl al-Haq for being beholden to Iranian interests, and dismisses their claim that they are part of the Sadr legacy because of their loyalty to Iran. In line with the true political outlook of his father and his followers, Muqtada's supporters chanted anti-Iran slogans and stormed the offices of the Dawa Party, ISCI, and the Badr Brigade when they protested against the government in May 2016.<sup>10</sup> The Sadrists joined forces with long-time rival ISCI—which commands the Ashura Brigades—to attack “brazen militias,” who were not under the command of the Iraqi army.<sup>11</sup>

Since Ayatollah Sistani's fatwa in June 2014, three categories of militias have amalgamated under the banner of the PMF: Iran-aligned militias, state-aligned militias, and “rebellious” militias, which is how Iraqis describe the Sadrist movement's Peace Brigades, because of their refusal to submit to the federal government, the religious establishment, Iran.<sup>12</sup> The state-aligned militias were only established after Grand Ayatollah Sistani's fatwa in 2014. Known as the religious establishment or “Sistani militias,” they are managed by the holy shrines—controlled by Sistani—and include the Imam Ali Brigade, Ali al-Akbar Brigade, and the Abbas Division. Sistani enjoys a large following within the PMF and commands respect across the ethnic and religious spectrum. Like Sistani, the fighters of these groups oppose Iranian encroachment into Iraqi affairs.<sup>13</sup> Their commanders refuse to meet with Iranian officials and advisors, unless other Iraqi officials are present, concurrently refusing direct Iranian military support.<sup>14</sup> Both the Ashura Brigades and the Peace Brigades interact daily and coordinate closely with the religious establishment militias.<sup>15</sup>

Almost every militia group in Iraq asserts its legitimacy and popular base, and describes itself as a socio-cultural or socio-political movement, challenging any suggestion that they are militias. Indeed, Iraqi officials expressed concern that militias will eventually transform themselves into socio-cultural actors and integrated components of the political system that will continue to weaken the Iraqi state from within. For example, despite its violent history, over the past decade, Asaib Ahl al-Haq has projected

<sup>10</sup> Saif Hameed and Aref Mohammed, “Iraqi Cleric Sadr Asks Followers to Stop Attacks on Rivals' Offices,” Reuters, June 11, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-sadr-idUSKCN0YX0DX>. For the Badr-Sadr rivalry, see International Crisis Group, “Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge,” February 7, 2008, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/iraq-s-civil-war-sadrists-and-surge>.

<sup>11</sup> Loveday Morris and Mustafa Salim, “Iraqi Shiite Cleric Recalls Militiamen from Fight Against Islamic State,” *Washington Post*, February 17, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/iraqi-shiite-cleric-recalls-militiamen-from-fight-against-islamic-state/2015/02/17/9e85321a-b6bb-11e4-bc30-a4e75503948a\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.3ebd6de31397](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iraqi-shiite-cleric-recalls-militiamen-from-fight-against-islamic-state/2015/02/17/9e85321a-b6bb-11e4-bc30-a4e75503948a_story.html?utm_term=.3ebd6de31397).

<sup>12</sup> Representative of the Ashura Brigades, interview with author, Baghdad, January 2017.

<sup>13</sup> PMF official, interview with author, Baghdad, January 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Member of the religious establishment, interview with the author, Baghdad, January 2017.

<sup>15</sup> ISCI official, interview with the author, Baghdad, January 2017.

itself as a socio-cultural movement engaged in the practice of state building.<sup>16</sup> Its leader, Qais al-Khazali, led attacks on Western targets. Renowned as a protégé of Sadeq al-Sadr, he led the Sadrist movement while in hiding after al-Sadr's assassination by the Baath regime in 1999.<sup>17</sup> Since its inception in 2006, Asaib Ahl al-Haq has evolved into a nascent movement with its own social and religious activities. It has offices in Baghdad and throughout the Shiite south. It produces publications and is aligned with members of the hawza, as part of its intellectual outreach to different sections of the Shiite population.<sup>18</sup> The group has adopted epistemological leanings in an effort to broaden its intellectual appeal to different strata of the Shiite community.

Many militias assert that they champion Sadeq al-Sadr's legacy in an attempt to historicize their claims to legitimacy, but they will actually struggle to develop beyond criminal gangs. In any event, the challenge for Iraqis and for international policymakers is in reducing the space that eventually allows both militia gangs and Iranian proxies to make the transition into integrated components of the Iraqi political system. In addition to their lawlessness, those groups' vision for the future of Iraq and ideological outlook are problematic. Iran-aligned militias within the PMF such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Hezbollah, and Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada are able to historicize and legitimize their existence, and may even plausibly argue they are socio-cultural movements. Regardless, in addition to their human rights abuses and record of violence, their populist and violent sectarian discourse enables the space for militant groups like ISIS. Away from the glare of the international

community, their propaganda regularly incites violence.<sup>19</sup> Such narratives remain central to their identity, making it unlikely that they can build the pluralistic, non-sectarian ties with different sections of the Iraqi society which are necessary to reduce the space that enables groups like ISIS.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### *CONTAINING, RATHER THAN ELIMINATING THE MILITIAS*

Shiite militias in Iraq cannot be militarily defeated. In fact, international intervention could lead to more costs for the fragile Iraqi state. Iraqis confess that there is little choice other than to accept and work with the militias even though they function autonomously of, and challenge, the state. They have faith in the capacity of existing institutions and socio-cultural dynamics to contain malevolent militia groups. The recently passed PMF law is seen—by both officials and state-aligned militia groups—as a means of regulating their presence.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, alliances among different components of the Shiite community and the different Shiite militias can shift. The problem is, therefore, a dynamic one. To forge a strategy that confronts Iraq's Shiite militias, it is first important to reframe the challenge not as one of dealing with Iranian proxies or criminal gangs, but as one of engaging Shiite communal grassroots dynamics. Containing the destructive behavior of Shiite militia groups, including their human rights abuses, refusal to submit to government or civilian oversight, sectarian discourse, and challenges

<sup>16</sup> Advisor to Prime Minister al-Abadi, interview with the author, Baghdad, January 2017; advisor to the Iraqi president, interview with the author, Baghdad, January 2017; Ranj Alaaldin, "Iran's Interference is Nothing New," *The Guardian*, December 31, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/dec/31/iran-iraq-hostages-moore>.

<sup>17</sup> Asaib Ahl al-Haq representative, interview with the author, London, December 2016. PMF official, interview.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. See also the Asaib's social media presence.

<sup>19</sup> "Shia Militia Leader Vows 'Revenge for Hussein' in Mosul Battle," *Middle East Eye*, October 14, 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/shia-militia-leader-describes-campaign-liberate-mosul-revenge-hussein-1867945098>.

<sup>20</sup> ISCI official, interview with author, Baghdad.

to the Iraqi state, requires interaction with, and investment in, the socio-cultural environment of these militias.

Any strategy for dealing with Iraq's Shiite militias must also consider Iran's role. Iran has enjoyed a largely uncontested space in Iraq since the withdrawal of U.S. troops. Its Shiite militia proxies act as a button and a buffer: a button that Iran can press to indirectly confront and intimidate those actors that threaten its interests, and a buffer that allows Iran to distance itself from these proxies when they commit human rights abuses and engage in criminal activities, lest it becomes accountable for their actions. Despite this, Iran's influence is reversible.<sup>21</sup>

It is an irony that large numbers of the traditionally Sadrist base now fight for Iran-aligned militia groups. These are people that were once mobilized on the basis of the fierce Iraqi nationalist values espoused by Sadeq al-Sadr, who challenged Iran during his sermons, while at the same time, provided the Baath regime with a unifying ideology that could mobilize the Arab consciousness of Iraq's Shiite community against what it framed as alien Persian Shiism. When the rank and file of these groups become more hostile to Iranian interference, as they were historically, militia leaders will also become less inclined to associate themselves with Iran.

#### *FOCUS ON COMMUNAL, INTRA-SHIITE DYNAMICS*

Since 2003, Iraq's Shiite militias have been fierce rivals.<sup>22</sup> While the PMF may refer to all Shiite militia groups, the concept means very little in reality. It is not too late to capitalize on

the substantial differences and divisions within the organization by working more closely with and emboldening actors whose political and ideological alignments, interactions, and discourse, are grounded in pluralistic, non-sectarian values. Even if these actors do not become integrated into the armed forces in their entirety, they provide an opportunity to create leverage that remains noticeably absent.

State-aligned militias constitute the majority of the fighters within the PMF. To ensure that these fighters do not shift toward the Iran-aligned groups, the United States and the international community can provide political and financial support to the religious establishment and state-aligned militia groups. Appropriate training and support will allow them to match the discipline of their rivals. These groups must be equipped with the capacity to match the more sophisticated propaganda output of their Iran-aligned counterparts. Enhancing their capacity to engage more effectively with the Iraqi population will enhance their capacity to project their conciliatory and Iraqi nationalist discourse and to leverage the powerful, far-reaching symbolism of Ayatollah Sistani. Their Iran-aligned rivals have a strategy that appropriates cultural space, as much as it does Iraq's institutions.<sup>23</sup> Left unchallenged, Iran-aligned factions will harness the political and symbolic power of the PMF in their efforts to mold the fabric of Iraqi society.

Similarly, the Sadrist movement has a violent history with the United States; however, Muqtada al-Sadr is receptive to engaging with the international community. He maintains strong ties to key U.S. allies in the Arab world, who see his movement as a bulwark against

<sup>21</sup> Ranj Alaaldin, "Iran's Weak Grip: How Much Control Does Tehran Have Over Shia Militias in Iraq?" *Foreign Affairs*, February 11, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2016-02-11/irans-weak-grip>.

<sup>22</sup> John F. Burns, "Precarious Cease-Fire in Amara Holds," *New York Times*, October 22, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/22/world/middleeast/22iraq.html>; "Hizb-Allah al-Iraqi yaqtahim mqraan lil-majlis al'aelaa fi al-basra" [Iraqi Hizbollah Breaks into Supreme Council in Basra], *al-Arabiya*, May 11, 2015, <http://www.alarabiya.net/ar/Arab-and-world/iraq/2015/05/11/حزب-الله-العراقي-يقتحم-مقر-المجلس-الاعلى-في-البيصرة>.html.

<sup>23</sup> Hassan al-Shanoun, "Shiite Militias Prepare for Education 'Revolution' in Iraq," *al-Monitor*, April 17, 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/04/university-iraq-cultural-revolution-pmu.html#ixzz4empnYkOg>.

rising Iranian influence in Iraq. The Sadrists currently constitute a counter-weight to Iran-aligned groups, but fear losing support to organizations such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq. Yet, the Sadrists lack strategic nous good governance capabilities and the ability to muster alliances with reformist actors that could, collectively, help translate recent protests in Iraq into public policy reforms.<sup>24</sup> Helping the Sadrists through capacity-building initiatives will remedy these shortcomings and could be leveraged to counter malevolent actors, while also nudging the movement into accepting international norms and basic human rights.

#### *IDENTIFY AND EMPOWER AGENTS OF CHANGE*

Empowering community leaders and investing in Iraq's bottom-up politics challenges the ability of corrupt elites and militant groups to use civil society as patronage networks. Rather than simply directing its resources and energy toward the political class and the country's weak institutions, the international community must appreciate that the battle for Iraq remains rooted within Shiite communal networks. These communal networks are collectively comprised of economies worth hundreds of millions of dollars, which manage projects that are autonomous of the state. This includes a vast network of charitable institutions that receive funds through religious donations from around the world. Since the emergence of ISIS and the ensuing humanitarian crisis, these institutions have used their status and wealth to provide sanctuary to internally displaced persons, including people from Iraq's different ethnic and religious minorities. These communal, grassroots actors are overlooked by policymakers as potential drivers of stability; yet they enjoy autonomy from the corrupt political class and command a loyal following, which could help combat militancy.

#### *EMPOWER CIVIL SOCIETY*

Iraq has a civil society that could hold politicians and militias accountable and engineer the space that enables change. As it stands, civil society in Iraq has been effective in mobilizing large swaths of the population for protests against the government, but it can also be disorganized and ineffective when it comes to influencing public policy and accountability. Civil-society actors, except those that are co-opted by political parties or form part of religious and family networks face political interference, intimidation, and have weak fund-raising capabilities.

Iraq's NGOs, humanitarian organizations, and other civil-society actors can sway armed groups into respecting human rights and adopting basic international norms.<sup>25</sup> The United States can use its international influence to help ensure international resources empower local NGOs, charities, and other civil-society groups. Iraqi organizations do not enjoy the same financial support that international organizations do and complain about symbolic, rather than effective assistance.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, international organizations have legitimate grievances, such as government interference and ineffective implementation, but conditionality and benchmarks can help manage future assistance to the Baghdad government. However, this will not allay concerns around security. The international community should consider establishing special arrangements that see international organizations protected by a combination of international and local security forces, akin to the arrangements afforded to international oil companies. This will also help strengthen the coordination between local and international organizations.

<sup>24</sup> Ranj Alaaldin, "Could Muqtada al-Sadr be the Best Hope for Iraq and the Region?" *Markaz* (blog), Brookings Institution, August 21, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/08/21/could-muqtada-al-sadr-be-the-best-hope-for-iraq-and-the-region/>.

<sup>25</sup> Kaplan, "Nudging Armed Groups."

<sup>26</sup> IRIN, "Local NGOs Appeal for More Financial Support," July 24, 2008, <http://www.irinnews.org/news/2008/07/24/local-ngos-appeal-more-financial-support>.

## *RELIGIOUS MOBILIZATION*

A fundamental aspect of Shiite political mobilization is the role of religion. Shiite activism in Iraq has historically been wedded to the Shiite clerical establishment. Shiite militias depend on the clerics for legitimacy, and have strived to align their discourse and intellectual output with those of the seminaries. Religious sermons facilitate the dissemination of political and social goals. The contestation that takes place within the seminaries of Najaf and Karbala is not too dissimilar from that unfolding within the politics of Baghdad or on the battlefield.

The options available to outsiders are limited when it comes to attempting to shape the sensitive aspects of Shiite religious mobilization and doctrinal thought. Despite this, the United States must still engage with the clerical community in coordination with its international allies. The United States must look at Shiite religious organization through the prism of civic development. The Europeans, particularly the British, have greater reach within these communities and are regarded as less hostile outside actors.<sup>27</sup> The moderate tribal, religious, and militia actors would benefit if the international community added a religious component to its policies in Iraq, so that political, military, and economic support appreciates the overlap and interaction between politics and religion.

## *REVITALIZING IRAQ'S INSTITUTIONS*

The above discussion may suggest that this policy briefing calls for decentralization and the devolution of power away from Baghdad. The notion that the answer to Iraq's problems lies in decentralization is a common misperception harbored by Iraqi, as well as Western officials and commentators. As others have noted,

decentralization requires a capable government able to ensure it takes place in a regulated and meaningful manner.<sup>28</sup> The local actors conducting the business of governance must also have the necessary legitimacy and administrative capacity.

The recommendations and analysis above do not disregard the influence of Iraq's institutions. The Iraqi government remains the only actor capable of shaping the country's constitutional and legal system. All Shiite militia groups believe their political future lies within the Iraqi state. If anything, Shiite militias seek to utilize the state and the benefits that come with sovereignty and international recognition. It is not inevitable that these actors will shape the Iraqi state according to their own political and ideological values and, therefore, establish a new political order. As it stands, the federal government lacks the credibility and capacity to stabilize Iraq.

While Shiite militia groups have one eye toward the coming local and national elections, their political ascendancy will be short-lived if they fail to deliver on security and governance or if Iraqis become inclined to back Prime Minister al-Abadi, whose support increased off the back of the Mosul liberation. Where the Shiite militias fail, the Iraqi state must supplant them with an organized and effective security force, the capacity to deliver basic services and the ability to revive the country's economy.

## *RESIST MALIKI'S RETURN*

Iraq will suffer if Prime Minister al-Abadi is replaced by the Maliki-led faction within his party, the Islamic Dawa Party. Aligned closely with Iran, this faction has sought to undermine al-Abadi since 2014. The collapse of the military in 2014 and its mismanagement is attributed to Maliki's tenure in power. The former premier

<sup>27</sup> President Masum, interview; member of the Shiite religious establishment, interview with the author, Baghdad, January 22, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Kenneth M. Pollack, "Iraq and a Policy Proposal for the Next Administration," Brookings Institution, September 29, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/iraq-a-policy-proposal-for-the-next-administration/>.

is closely aligned with Asaib Ahl-Alhaq and partnered with the group in the 2014 parliamentary elections. When the military collapsed in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Mosul in 2013, Maliki empowered Asaib Ahl-Alhaq and direct Iranian proxies such as Kataib Hezbollah and tasked them with securing Baghdad. That led to an escalation in sectarian attacks and further raised sectarian tensions at a critical moment for the country.<sup>29</sup> Maliki's tarnished reputation, stemming from his authoritarian, polarizing, and sectarian approach to governance means that his return as prime minister, or that of someone from his faction of the Dawa Party or his allies among the Iran-aligned militia factions, must be strongly resisted by the Shiite political and religious class.

#### *PRESENCE EQUALS POWER*

Iran-aligned Shiite militias have concerned Iraqis because of their ambitions to emulate Iranian security apparatuses.<sup>30</sup> While it may have limited military leverage on the ground, the United States can still create leverage. At the very least, Iraq's Iran-aligned militias and their Iranian patrons must consider America's position in their calculations as they move forward in Iraq. The political and symbolic importance of America's presence in Iraq and the region must not be understated. It reassures U.S. allies and Iraq's Western-aligned factions—and those that are hostile to Iranian interference. In addition to maintaining the current deployment of Western military personnel, there should be greater investment in Iraq's Counter-Terrorism Service, the Golden

Division. These forces have won widespread acclaim across Iraq's ethnic and religious spectrum. Its 10,000 fighters derived from Kurdish, Sunni, and Shiite Arab communities emerged as symbols of national unity. Greater investment in this force could breed national unity and alleviate ethnic and sectarian tensions in the long-run, as it would embolden state-aligned forces while weakening their Iran-aligned rivals.<sup>31</sup> Combined with technical, military, and financial support, an enhanced U.S. military presence will challenge Iran's projection of power in Iraq and its exploitation of Shiite fears of an ISIS resurgence.

#### **CONCLUSION**

This policy briefing has identified policies that aim to help Iraqis help themselves. By shifting the focus to bottom-up, grassroots governance, and capacity building, it has examined the avenues through which Shiite militias can be contained, and how the influence of armed groups can be reduced. Policymakers in the United States and internationally must look to the actors who envisage and aim for pluralistic, non-sect institutions. This includes state-aligned Shiite militias, even if they continue to retain some autonomy from the state in the near future. With international support, they can reduce the space in which their hostile counterparts operate. Simply isolating or marginalizing these militias will bring more problems than solutions.

The Iraqi state and the conciliatory, composed rule of Prime Minister al-Abadi, along with

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<sup>29</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Pro-Government Militias' Trail of Death," July 31, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/07/31/iraq-pro-government-militias-trail-death>.

<sup>30</sup> Hamza Hendawi and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Fears in Iraqi Government Army over Shiite Militias' Power," *Military Times*, March 21, 2016, <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/2016/03/21/fears-iraqi-government-army-over-shiite-militias-power/82101226/>.

<sup>31</sup> David Witty, "The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service," Brookings Institution, March 16, 2015, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/David-Witty-Paper\\_Final\\_Web.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/David-Witty-Paper_Final_Web.pdf).

other reformist and moderate actors within the political class, warrant greater support. It would be a grave mistake for the United States to reduce its support for Iraq, as some in Washington have suggested.<sup>32</sup>

Iraq will be presented with the twin threat of ISIS and Iran-aligned Shiite militias for the foreseeable future. While there are disgruntled voices in Washington and legitimate arguments based around Iraq's inability to capitalize on international blood and treasure, it does not have to be business as usual. The United States has friends both at the bottom and the top that wish to establish a culture of accountability in Iraq, which includes respect for human rights and international norms.

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<sup>32</sup> John Bolton, "America Needs a Post-ISIS Strategy," Wall Street Journal, June 28, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-needs-a-post-isis-strategy-1498688109>.

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