Iraq's Foreign Policy – Between Domestic Fragmentation and the Search for National Sovereignty

An Analytical Review of Non-State Actors and Implications of Current Conflicts in the Middle East

Foreword

Throughout its turbulent history, Iraq has always been a key country in shaping the geopolitics of the Middle East – whether as a key player itself or as a stage for regional power competition. Today, after long years of war, sectarian violence, and terrorism, Iraq has managed to regain a certain stability. However, non-state actors, particularly armed militias, continue to wield significant influence within Iraqi politics. The country also remains subject to external pressure, whether from Iran or the United States, with Baghdad striving to balance and hedge against these competing powers.

The Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023, have triggered a new and ongoing wave of violent escalation not only concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but also regionally, including direct mutual attacks between Israel and Iran. Also, Iraq has partly been drawn into that, becoming one of the frontlines of the battle between Israel and Iran's proxy forces. While the outcome of the transition in Syria remains uncertain, the sudden fall of the Assad regime in Damascus on December 8, 2024, is another formative event for the regional order that is being reshuffled.

What do these regional dynamics mean for Iraq? From various perspectives, the papers in this compilation shed light on the implications for the Iraqi domestic political scene. In doing so, they delve into the fragmented setup of Iraq's foreign policy agency, with non-state actors playing an important role, foremost among them the Iran-leaning Popular Mobilisation Forces. As Germany and Europe assert their international role and redefine their policies in the Middle East, we believe a better understanding of the actors and drivers of Iraq's foreign policy is paramount.

The future of Iraq is key for the further development of the Middle East. If the demographically diverse country of 46 million people becomes a playground for regional competition and disintegrates, conflict is likely to spill over beyond its borders. The rise of the terror organisation ISIS in 2014 and 2015 has shown the immense risks that a weak and divided Iraqi state would carry. However, located at the heart of the Middle East and blessed with important reserves of oil and gas, Iraq has lots of potential to unleash. And given the tense geopolitical situation the Middle East is experiencing, it is a remarkabley positive sign that Baghdad has decided – and largely managed – not to actively engage in conflicts. Instead, the government of Prime Minister Mohammed Al-Sudani and influential segments of the elite attempted to focus on the country's own stability and push for regional de-escalation.

If Baghdad manages to keep domestic stability through better and inclusive governance, if it asserts its sovereignty by reining in the militias, and if it continues a moderate and balanced foreign policy, it can contribute to a sustainable regional security architecture that will pave the way for the socio-economic development that the conflict-ridden Levant region so urgently needs. Germany and other European countries should be prepared to partner with Iraq in addressing these challenges.

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PMF in Iraq and Repercussions of the Current Middle East Conflict on Iraq's Foreign Relations

Katrina Sammour

Introduction

Iraq is no stranger to drastic political transitions throughout its history, each of which has reshaped the nation's identity and governance. After World War I and the collapse of Ottoman rule, Iraq came under British mandate, which later introduced the Hashemite rule in Iraq, becoming a constitutional monarchy under King Faisal. However, this monarchy was short-lived; a military coup toppled the regime, paving the way for Iraq's transformation into a Ba'athist republic. The Ba'athist era culminated in Saddam Hussein's authoritarian regime, which dominated the country until the US invasion in 2003.

The US invasion and occupation introduced a troubled and violent era for Iraqi society. It sparked a rise in sectarian violence between Shia and Sunni groups. This sectarian violence and a general state of lawlessness in the country ushered in the rise of the Al-Qaeda branch in Iraq, led by Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, later transformed into the Islamic State in Iraq. While a new constitution was introduced in 2005, Iraq still suffered from corruption, sectarian tensions and power struggles among different armed groups.

The ongoing sectarian violence, weak governance, and the chaos in neighbouring Syria contributed to the very fast and public rise of ISIL between 2014 and 2017. The group took over Sunni majority cities without any pushback from the local community and during the fast retreat of the Iraqi military. The radical Sunni group posed an existential threat to Iraq's Shia and minority groups, prompting the Shia community to organise into militias for defence against ISIL. These militias proved instrumental in defeating the terrorist organisation. However, this victory came at a cost for the central authority in Iraq.

It introduced a newly formed Shia militia, known as the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), which became a parallel security apparatus wielding power in both the legislative and executive branches of the government, operating its own military and security groups across the country. The PMF enveloped several groups with different alliances and capabilities. While the PMF has small Sunni, Christian and Yazidi forces, it is primarily a Shia militia umbrella. These groups have three distinct[1] alliances and loyalties:

1. Al-Walai' group, which is under the direct influence of Iran – the most capable and influential militias under the Walai' category are Al-Badr Organisation, Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq (AAH) and Katai'b Hizbollah.
2. Muqtada Al-Sadr aligned militias, Saraya as-Salam and the Islamic Supreme Council.
3. Hawza militias, which are aligned with Ali Al-Sisitani. These groups have officially become part of the Iraqi military.

Some main actors of the Popular Mobilisation Forces, and arguably the most influential, are directly linked and managed by the Iranian IRGC, posing a threat to Iraq's sovereignty and national interests. Their reach exceeds that of other armed groups, having infiltrated the Iraqi executive, legislative, and judicial branches, thus affecting policy on both national and international levels.

This paper seeks to provide insights into the origins of the PMF, its current level of influence in the Iraqi government, and ultimately analyse the influence it wields over Iraq's foreign relations, especially following regional upheaval following the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023, and the fall of Bashar Al-Assad in Syria. Both events impacted the role of Iranian proxies across the Middle East as they participated in attacks against Israel, most notably Hizbollah in Lebanon, Houthis in Yemen and the PMF.

PMF Between Past and Present

History and Evolution of the PMF

The Popular Mobilisation Forces are an organisational umbrella for multiple militia groups, formed in the aftermath of the ISIS offensive against Iraq. However, some of the key groups have been operating in Iraq for decades beforehand, entrenching their power in the security and political sphere. For example, following the 1979 Iranian revolution, the Supreme

[1] European Union Agency for Asylum, "Popular Mobilisation Forces and Tribal Mobilisation Militias," euaa, June, 2022, https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-iraq-2022/12-popular-mobilisation-forces-and-tribal-mobilisation-militias.

Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (which was initially based in Iran) created the Al-Badr Corps as its military wing in 1983.[2] Following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, it moved to Iraq and rebranded itself the Al-Badr Organisation, with a strong shift towards the political spectrum in Iraq.[3]

Additionally, amid the sectarian violence in Iraq and a continued US presence,[4] Groups like Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq were formed in 2006 as part of the Al-Sadr Mahdi army, and Katai'b Hizbollah was formed in 2007 with direct Iranian backing.[5] While these groups had been long established in Iraqi society, they reached the peak of their political and armed presence and influence following the ISIS offensive in 2014.

In January 2014, ISIS launched its offensive in Iraq, quickly advancing into the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi, both in the Anbar province.[6] Following a fast takeover of these two key cities, they later advanced on Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, followed by Tikrit (Saddam Hussein's hometown). These swift victories provided ISIS with logistical and operational wins, allowing them to declare the Islamic Caliphate in Syria and Iraq later that year.[7]

This sudden rise and expansion alarmed both regional and international players, prompting the US, along with Western and regional allies, to create what came to be known as the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS.[8] On the other side of the political spectrum, Iraq's most notable Shia cleric, Ali Al-Sistani issued a Fatwa – a religious edict – that became known as "Al-Wajib Al-Kifai" or "defensive Jihad".[9] The Fatwa made it mandatory for all Shia Iraqis to take up arms and fight the terrorist organisation. Following this, Iraq saw a surge of thousands of volunteers forming groups and taking up arms to fight against ISIS.[10] While Ali Al-Sistani's religious edict was intended to support Iraqi official forces and only be limited by the battle with ISIS, Iran had a different approach. It saw Al-Sistani's edict as an opening to create its presence.

[2] Joseph E. Kotinsly, "Brave New World Order: The Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq and the Rise of Iraqi Shīī Identity Politics," *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 13, 1 (2021): 49–65, doi:10.1080/21520844.2021.1988314.
[3] Mapping Militants Project (MMP), „Badr Organization of Reconstruction and Development," June, 2021, https://mappingmilitants.org/files/group-profiles/badr_organization_of_reconstruction_and_development.pdf.
[4] Harith H. Al-Qarawee, "Iraq's Sectarian Crisis: A Legacy of Exclusion," Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, April 23, 2014, https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/CMEC43_Hasan_Iraq_Brief.pdf.
[5] Reuters, „Who is Kataib Hezbollah, the group blamed for killing US troops?," January 30, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/who-is-kataib-hezbollah-group-blamed-killing-us-troops-2024-01-29/.
[6] John Wihbey, „The 2014 crisis in Iraq: Research perspectives and background," The Journalist's Resource, June 13, 2014, https://journalistsresource.org/politics-and-government/crisis-iraq-perspectives-research/.
[7] BBC, „ISIS rebels declare ‚Islamic state' in Iraq and Syria," June 30, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28082962.
[8] U.S. Department of State, "Members – The Global Coalition To Defeat ISIS," State.gov, n.d., https://www.state.gov/the-global-coalition-to-defeat-isis-partners/.
[9] Inna Rudolf, "Holy Mobilisation: The Religious Legitimation behind Iraq's Counter-ISIS Campaign," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2018, https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Holy-Mobilisation-The-Religious-Legitimation-behind-Iraq's-Counter-ISIS-Campaign.pdf.
[10] PBS News Hour, "Shia militias answer the call to fight Islamic State in Iraq," May 4, 2015, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/shia-militias-answer-call-fight-islamic-state-iraq.

Integration into the Iraqi State

International and domestic efforts succeeded in reclaiming all territory captured by ISIS, which splintered the group into cells that posed no large-scale threat to the country. The central government in Baghdad was then faced with the impossible task of dealing with the remaining PMF – which had grown in size and weaponry and also increased in influence and popularity among the citizenry for the central role they played in pushing back against ISIS.[11] Iraq's then-Prime Minister, Haider Al-Abadi, who had close ties to the Shia political forces, adopted a policy of containment towards the PMF.[12]

In 2016, the Iraqi parliament passed a law that formally integrated the PMF into the Iraqi security apparatus, granting the PMF a legal status on par with formal state security institutions, even securing them a seat on Iraq's national security council. In theory, this integration aimed to place the PMF directly under the command of the Iraqi Prime Minister, rather than subordinated to the Iraqi armed forces, ensuring tighter control. But allowing the PMF to be under the command of the Iraqi prime minister provided the group a large degree of autonomy, especially the groups that had the closest ties to Iran, operating with little to no oversight from Iraq's central government.

Locally, especially in regions liberated from ISIS, the PMF established itself as a local administrative body, parallel and in some cases more influential than the government's local officials.[13] The group established checkpoints, oversaw construction funds, and even mediated tribal and inter-family disputes – as evidenced in Diyala, Salah ad-Din, and Nineveh.

Financial Status and Sources of Income

The PMF relies on two primary revenue streams to finance its operations and expand its influence. The first stream is overt – official state funding and officially sanctioned business ventures. The second is through the shadow market through illicit economic activities and foreign support (primarily Iran). The PMF gained access to Iraq's national budget following the passing of the "PMF Law of 2016". This law gave the group access to direct state funds,

[11] Renad Mansour, "More Than Militias: Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces Are Here to Stay," War on the Rocks, April 3, 2018, https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/more-than-militias-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces-are-here-to-stay/.
[12] Maria L. Fantappie, "Men of Dawa: How the Personalities of one party shaped Iraq's new politics," The Century Foundation, June 26, 2023, https://tcf.org/content/report/men-of-dawa-how-the-personalities-of-one-party-shaped-iraqs-new-politics/.
[13] International Crisis Group, "Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State," July 30, 2018, https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/188-iraqs-paramilitary-groups_0.pdf.

allocating a budget averaging around USD 2.6 billion,[14] primarily intended to cover personnel salaries and operational expenses. While the law was initially intended to regulate and contain the PMF's influence by bringing it under a formal chain of command, it was a successful containment method only for groups within the PMF that operate independently of Iran. However, it legitimised the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and secured a stable source of funding and economic opportunities for them.

One of the most significant economic victories for the PMF occurred in 2022 with the establishment of the Al-Muhandis Group,[15] a $67 million investment project primarily funded by the Iraqi government, which provided roughly 90% of the capital. Framed as an endeavour focusing on construction, agriculture, and industrial projects, analysts have drawn parallels between this enterprise and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) economic model. Much like the IRGC's extensive business empire, the al-Muhandis Group provided the PMF with an economic platform which operated with relative autonomy from government oversight. This structure enabled the PMF to diversify its financial resources, not only funding military operations but also creating patronage networks, securing employment opportunities for its supporters, and deepening its influence at the local level. While this institutionalisation has legitimised the PMF in certain spheres, it has also entrenched its presence in Iraq's local economies and political landscape, raising concerns about unchecked power and influence.

Outside of state-sanctioned businesses and direct funding, PMF's informal and illicit sources of income are harder to analyse. One documented source are tariffs or "taxation" fees[16] the group imposes throughout territories where it maintains checkpoints and controls local infrastructures, this "taxation" method is imposed on any travellers or goods passing through these unofficial checkpoints and have generated substantial revenue streams, although the exact figures for this revenue prove hard to find.

Moreover, international monitoring bodies and legal experts, such as the US Department of State, have accused certain PMF factions of engaging in illicit trafficking activities, exploiting cross-border routes between Iran, Iraq, and Syria to move goods, weapons, and other contraband. In an interview with the author, Jordanian security officials, for example, have noted PMF involvement in drug trafficking since 2020. These unsanctioned businesses, alongside their other revenue streams, have allowed certain groups within the

[14] Julian Bechocha, "Iraq passes highly-contentious federal budget bill," Rudaw, June 12, 2023, https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/12062023.
[15] Camille Dubourg, "The Muhandis Company: Towards the Economic Autonomy of the Hashd al-Shaabi," Eismena, February 16, 2024, https://eismena.com/en/article/the-muhandis-company-towards-the-economic-autonomy-of-the-hashd-al-shaabi-2024-02-16.
[16] Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future," Carnegie Middle East Center, April 18, 2017, https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/CMEC_63_Mansour_PMF_Final_Web.pdf.

PMF to operate independently of the state and avoid government oversight. Finally, Iran provides another layer of unofficial financial aid, training, and equipment to groups that are closely aligned with Tehran. This logistical, operational and financial backing further merges the PMF with Tehran and solidifies its control over influential groups.

Political Representation and Influence in Government

PMF military victory against ISIS provided them with a powerful political platform to launch a successful campaign. Iraq's legislative 2018 elections proved to be a defining moment for the PMF's formal political participation. That election registered a success for Al-Fatah Alliance – Al-Fatah Alliance was an umbrella coalition of several Shia PMF groups (Al-Badr organisation, Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq, Katai'b Hizbollah and Katai'b Al-Imam Ali). This alliance has successfully transformed the PMF from armed militias to political entities. While the PMF capitalised on its military success, it also campaigned on service delivery, advocacy, and protection for local Shia communities.

However, once these groups reached parliament, they utilised their legislative power to further entrench the PMF's hold on the Iraqi state security apparatus, thereby increasing budget lines that supported the group.[17] The elected members further influenced Iraq's domestic and security spheres in favour of their militias – for example, occupying seats in Parliamentary committees that oversee defence, directly influencing the strategies, budgets, and oversight of the PMF. Additionally, these groups, specifically those aligned with Iran, further expanded into civil society and local governance.[18]

These groups began sponsoring religious, cultural, and media organisations, which further advanced their narratives and swayed public opinion in their favour. For instance, charity organisations directly associated with Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq and Kata'ib Hizbollah distribute aid to families affected by war, finance religious pilgrimages, and fund development projects in local communities. PMF members also have local offices at the governorate and municipal levels, where they directly oversee employment and budget distribution, making them indispensable to the local communities in which they operate. This is part of their outreach to their support base through providing services and promoting narratives that can translate into electoral victories and further bolster their standing in Iraq's security and political spheres.

[17] Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik, and Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Honored, Not Contained:
The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 23, 2020,
https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/honored-not-contained-future-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces.
[18] Mansour and Jabar, "Popular Mobilization Forces."

Implications of the October 2023 Hamas-Israel Conflict and Impact on Iraq's Foreign Policy

The Hamas 7 October attack and the Israeli response that followed created upheaval throughout the Middle East and a clear divide of state identities. On one hand we had the majority of Arab States who turned to international partners and bodies and used diplomatic channels to end the conflict[19] – and on the other hand Iran and Iranian proxies saw it as an opportunity to expand influence in their respective countries and exert pressure on neighbouring countries by adopting a policy of force and confrontation with Israel and the United States. From the start of the war, Iran, alongside its three main proxies – the Lebanese Hizbollah, the Houthis in Yemen and the PMF in Iraq – started applying pressure on Israel andUS interests in the region. While at the beginning of the war, the Lebanese Hizbollah shouldered the majority of attacks against Israel[20] – the continued Israeli attack on Lebanon and the targeted assassinations of virtually all of Hizbollah's first-class leadership weakened the Lebanese militias and immobilised the group.[21]

This sudden and fast fall of Hizbollah, Iran's most valuable proxy in the Middle East, ushered in an increased activity by Iran's other proxies – the Houthis in Yemen and groups within the Iraqi PMF that organised under the banner of The Islamic Resistance in Iraq, with Katai'b Hizbollah and Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq as the two most prominent groups within this umbrella network. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq began by targeting US interests in Iraq, Syria and in one attack on a US base on the Jordanian-Iraqi border.[22] The group saw an opportunity in advancing their own domestic goals – the withdrawal of American troops in Iraq. These targeted attacks against US interests and bases were declared as an effort to support the Palestinian resistance, citing the US's support for Israel in its war effort against the Palestinian Hamas in Gaza. However, it also served as a vehicle to carry out strategic attacks aimed at achieving two goals: increasing public support for the PMF and fast-tracking US withdrawal from Iraq. However, in the months following the collapse of Lebanon's Hizbollah, the PMF's attacks saw a remarkable increase.[23] For example, the Islamic Resistance Group's drone

[19] Matthew Lee, "Arab leaders push for an Israel-Hamas cease-fire now. Blinken says that could be counterproductiv," AP News, November 5, 2023, https://apnews.com/article/blinken-mideast-diplomacy-gaza-israel-hamas-war-9d9ada872b84699424f17f13df1c3560.
[20] Emanuel Fabian, " IDF strikes Hezbollah posts on border as terror group, Iran threaten to join war," The Times of Israel, October 13, 2023, https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-shells-hezbollah-post-on-border-as-terror-group-iran-threaten-to-join-war/.
[21] Kara Fox, „Israel has killed multiple Hezbollah leaders. Here's who they were – and the key players that remain," CNN, October 23, 2024, https://edition.cnn.com/2024/09/30/middleeast/hezbollah-leaders-assassinated-israel-intl/index.html.
[22] Jon Gambrell, "What is Tower 22, the military base that was attacked in Jordan where 3 US troops were killed?," AP News, January 30, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/us-jordan-drone-attack-iran-tower-22-israel-hamas-war-0265beed527e3009a966c0531c08838e.
[23] Michael Knights, Ameer al-Kaabi, and Crispin Smith, "Tripling of Iraqi Militia Claimed Attacks on Israel in October," The Washington Istitute for Near East Policy, October 15, 2024, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tripling-iraqi-militia-claimed-attacks-israel-october.

attacks rose from 6 in August, to 35 in September and almost 45 in October 2024. They were also able toreach Israeli sensitive areas and strike at the heart of the country. Moreover, while the attackson Israel have become limited to the Houthis – Iran is continuing its support for its proxies by supplying high-end drones, ballistic missiles and hypersonic missiles.

The PMF leveraged the Gaza conflict to advance its narrative within Iraqi society, widening divisions between the population and the government. Through coordinated disinformation campaigns on Telegram channels, they targeted rivals and the Iraqi government. False claims accused Muqtada al-Sadr of funneling donations to Israel rather than Palestinians, and similar allegations suggested Iraq's oil supply to Jordan was covertly benefiting Israel. These narratives culminated in protests at the Jordanian border to disrupt oil shipments. Additionally, PMF-aligned MPs criticised Iraq's foreign policy, particularly its relationships with the United States and Western allies. These escalations posed an immense challenge to the Iraqi government, which always struggled to hold a delicate balance between Tehran and Western and regional players. The government relies on the United States for the country's foreign reserve, which is housed in the US Federal Reserve and is deeply dependent on sanction waivers for electricity supply from Tehran.

The operational success of these militias, along with the accompanying flow of advanced Iranian weaponry, makes it harder for Baghdad to assert full control over its national security strategy. If the PMF's more pro-Iran elements further escalate their activities, the Iraqi leadership might find itself sidelined in its own foreign relations or domestic decision-making. This diminishes the Iraqi government's leverage in its dealings with Tehran, potentially relegating Baghdad to a secondary role in shaping its security landscape. Over time, this scenario could transform Iraq into a springboard for Iran's broader strategic aims, especially as proxy warfare becomes more technologically advanced. Finally, this undercuts any attempts by Iraqi policymakers to forge a distinct foreign policy path that prioritises sovereign interests over regional power plays.

The rapid transformation of the PMF from a force defending Iraqi territory against ISIS to an arm of Iran's regional strategy exemplifies Iraq's shifting foreign policy landscape. On one hand, PMF operations strengthen Iran's capacity to challenge adversaries like Israel and the US. On the other hand, this entanglement constrains Iraq's foreign policy flexibility, undermining efforts to maintain constructive relationships with diverse partners. The presence of heavily armed, autonomous militias under the banner of The Islamic Resistance in Iraq raises critical concerns about sovereignty, chain of command, and accountability, leaving Iraq's leadership with limited options for independent action.

In sum, the PMF's evolution poses a multifaceted dilemma for Iraq. While enabling Iran's strategic objectives, it restricts Baghdad's ability to assert control, chart its course in international relations, and prioritise national interests over external influences. This entanglement underscores the broader struggle to reconcile competing regional pressures with aspirations for a sovereign and stable Iraq.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the existence and strength of the PMF undermine Iraq's sovereignty and diminish its potential for investment, stability, development, and foreign relations. The PMF's origin was in response to the rise of ISIS during a period of sectarian conflict. However, its connections to Iran and entrenched influence allowed it not only to survive but also to evolve from a localised militia into a formalised security institution. This transformation was solidified by the 2016 PMF Law, which granted the group legal status and state funding. However, this institutionalisation enhances Iran's power projection through proxies, potentially positioning Iraq as an arena for broader regional conflicts or a target for Western sanctions.

Iraq has several potential pathways to remedy the situation, but few pathways for real implementation. There must be a strong implementation of robust monitoring systems over PMF funding, as well as clear legal frameworks to define the scope of operations and chain of command of the PMF. Transparency and clear guidelines are essential to mitigate the negative consequences of the PMF's power. Legislative reforms can limit direct militia influence in parliamentary committees overseeing defence and security.

More challenging, however, is reducing Iran's deep-seated influence in Iraqi society and politics. This requires dismantling patronage networks in governance and improving government-led service delivery to undercut the PMF's local control. Programs focusing on deradicalisation, disarmament, and reintegration of militia fighters into civilian life are essential. Additionally, engaging regional and international partners for capacity-building in state security institutions can provide incentives and establish accountability measures.

The overarching goal must be reclaiming sovereignty and full state control by addressing systemic corruption, sectarian divisions, and the PMF's parallel structures. This would contribute to restoring public confidence in national institutions and limit the PMF's grassroots appeal. Only then could Iraq effectively contribute to regional stability and build strong foreign relations.

While the PMF originally emerged to combat ISIS, it now poses a greater challenge to Baghdad's central authority by advancing Iran's interests. Sovereign governance must remain Iraq's priority. Without decisive reforms to ensure state primacy, Iraq risks deepening its vulnerabilities to regional proxies and forfeiting its ability to assert independence. Time is running out to implement this critical change.

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Between Revolution and Foreign Intervention: The Perils of Iraq's Conceptualisation as a "Non-State" Country

Lara Farag

Summary

This research paper seeks to analyse the conceptualisation of Iraq as a non-state actor, focusing on how this framing has shaped the country's internal political dynamics and facilitated external interference. It will trace the origins of the term "non-state actor", previously coined by Faleh Jabar, and examine its implications for Iraq's political and social cohesion. This analysis will further explore how this narrative, often invoked by Iraqi political elites, has been used to justify the suppression of opposition movements, such as the 2019 October revolution and to frame dissenting voices as collaborators with foreign entities.

The paper will also assess how Iraq's persistent instability – marked by sectarianism, a fragile central authority, and the influence of non-state actors – has made it a battleground for regional power struggles, particularly in the context of the ongoing conflicts in Gaza and the power changes in Syria. Special attention will be given to the role of Iranian-backed armed groups and the risks posed by external actors exploiting Iraq's internal fragmentation to advance their political agendas. Ultimately, the paper seeks to illuminate how the perception of Iraq as a "non-state" entity continues to undermine its sovereignty and exacerbate its domestic and regional challenges.

Introduction

On December 17, 2024, Ibrahim Al-Sumaidaei', advisor to Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani expressed in an interview to the Iraqi Al-Sumaria TV that, following the collapse of the Assad regime, "Iraqi militias should also dismantle and integrate into the national system", emphasising that Iraq has long enough served foreign interests and that Syria's decision to disarm all militias for the sake of creating a unified military constitutes a

positive paramount example.[1] In fact, Al-Sumaidaei's announcement addresses a core issue of how foreign power perceive Iraq, namely, as a country devoid of a central decision-making centre and controlled by belligerent militias, acting under the auspices of Iran – a status quo, referred to as a "La-Daula" ("Non-State").[2]

This conceptualisation of Iraq can be traced to the post-2003 phase, which set the stage for an unprecedentedly brutal period of sectarianism and created a power vacuum that enabled Iranian-backed parastatal armed groups to permeate the country's political system and occupy state institutions. As the majority of these militias also formed political parties and consequently managed to integrate into the formal state apparatus, their emergence and rise in power significantly shaped Iraq's external relations as well as the country's domestic political sphere. In fact, these dynamics have displayed the two-fold perils of Iraq's conceptualisation as a "non-state" actor – while foreign powers preponderantly resort to this ascription to justify attacks on Iraq's sovereignty, the Iraqi political elite uses the very same notion to publicly discredit dissidents and voices of revolution. In the wake of the war in Gaza and the power changes in Syria, the risk of Iraq being dragged into proxy warfare has again become imminent.

Iraq as a Non-State Actor ("La-Daula")

The notion of Iraq as a "non-state" ("La-Daula") actor has evolved into mainstream terminology of description, significantly coined by prominent Iraqi political sociologist Faleh Jabar. [3] This term does not refer to the existence of a parallel state. Instead, it describes an incoherent political entity, marked by a factual absence of central power, with various non-state actors vying for influence at the expense of formal state authority. The prevalence of societal polarisation, extra-governmental violence and an increasing informalization of political processes are considered an ineluctable repercussion of the "La-Daula".

In fact, its inherent constellation had already been seized on through different political concepts, until being designated this respective terminology. In Arabic, this term could also be translated as "anti-state" as it constitutes, in terms of its linguistic composition, a negation with a derogatory connotation, indicating a country's inability to assume proper control of its forces and institutions. In the case of Iraq, the ascription "non-state" has evolved into a circulating tool of condemnation, also used by Iraqi politicians on various occasions, such as by former Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi and his successor, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, during the 2019

[1] Sumaria TV Iraq (2024): Interview with Ibrahim Al-Sumaidaie, https://www.memri.org/tv/Ibrahim-al-sumaidaieadvisor-iraq-pm-militia-should-dismantle.
[2] Aziz, Sardar (2020): On the Non-state (Ladaula) in Iraq, in: Fikra Forum, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, in: https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/non-state-ladaula-iraq.
[3] Abdul Jabar, Faleh (2019): Kitab Al-La-Dawla: Prospects for the Iraqi Situation". *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, in: https://www.alaraby.co.uk/كتاب-اللادولة"-لفالح-عدب-الجبار-مآلات-الحالة-العراقية.

popular uprising. In this context, both politicians sought to frame the anti-government protests as a significant threat to the State apparatus by shifting the political discourse towards a purported clash between the government as the sole legitimate political authority and its antagonistic destabilising forces. In the Iraqi setting, the perils of this conceptualisation lie in the fact that "La-Daula" constitutes an abnormal political status, with an inherent desire to be terminated, thus exposing the country to a chronic vulnerability and rendering it more prone to foreign intervention.

Iraq's Non-State Actors

As a result of years of dictatorship and war, a lack of national unity and foreign interventions, the Iraqi political sphere contains a broad spectrum of non-state actors that epitomise the country's troubled historical trajectory. Nowadays, the relationship between the formal state and Iranian-aligned militias is characterized by an ambiguous nature: the majority of them are active as part of the Iraqi regular armed forces and are deeply embedded within the state apparatus, while also conducting operations outside the formal state's control.

While the existence of Iraq's Shia militias already predates to the Saddam-era, their rise in power occurred in the post-2003 period, when political institutions were disbanded in the wake of the "De Ba'athification" process, providing enough leeway for Iranian-affiliated militias, whose primary goal was to resist the US invasion of Iraq, to expand. With the rise of and fight against ISIS in 2014, the role of these militias increased, however, their presence evolved into a considerable menace to the state's formal authority, given their political and military autonomy, with Iraqi politicians, such as former Prime Ministers Mustafa Al-Kadhimi and Nouri Al-Maliki demanding the dissolution of these militias on multiple occasions.[4]

Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF)

The most prominent and influential non-state actor is the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), also known in Arabic as "Hashad Al-Shaa'bi". This military formation formerly constituted a loosely connected amalgamation of about 70 ideologically divergent armed groups, which were officially established in 2014 to fight the expansion of ISIS. Nowadays, this paramilitary umbrella group, spearheaded by Iraqi politician Falih Al-Fayyadh, falls under the command of the Prime Minister, having been formally integrated into the national army in 2016. In addition to the fight against ISIS, the PMF also drew its legitimisation from a fatwa issued by Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's most influential senior Shia leader. The PMF currently operates in areas

[4] Al Jazeera (2006): Iraq PM moves to ban all militias, in: https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/news/2006/5/30/iraqpm-moves-to-ban-all-militias.

such as Salah ad-Din and parts of southern Iraq. The ideological composition of the Shia groups within the PMF can be divided into three main groups, namely, Iranian backed militias, who maintain deep ties to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, in addition to militias, politically affiliated with Shia parties, but not aligned with Iran, such as populist Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's "Saraya As-Salam" (Peace Brigades), and those groups that are affiliated with Iraq's supreme Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani.

Moreover, the PMF also entails sizeable Sunni forces and a small number of minority militias, such as the Turkmen Brigade. In fact, no officially confirmed numbers on the exact number of PMF personnel exist; however, between 2016 and 2017, it was estimated that the PMF employs approximately 238,000 fighters.[5] The most prominent PMF members are the Iranian-affiliated "Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq" (Arabic: League of the Righteous), also known as the "Khaz'ali network", named after their founder Qais Al-Khaz'ali, the Katai'b Hizbollah (Arabic: Battalions of the Party of God) and the Badr Organisation, founded in 1982 as an Iran-loyalist political party and paramilitary organisation, which Hadi Al-Amiri spearheads. In addition to its vast political leverage, the PMF also oversees an extensive economic network and in 2022 founded "Muhandis Company", named in honour of Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, the founder of the Katai'b Hizbollah, who was assassinated on January 3, 2020 by a US drone strike alongside Qassem Soleimani. As of 2020, the PMF received an annual budget of nearly USD 6 billion.[6] Despite being dominated by Iranian-backed militias that seem to pursue a similar political agenda, internal rivalries caused multiple conflicts, particularly with Muqtada Al-Sadr.

Muqtada Al-Sadr

The son of assassinated Shia cleric and Saddam opponent Mohammed Sadiq Al-Sadr, Muqtada Al-Sadr is nowadays considered one of Iraq's most influential political figures, who rose to prominence following his resistance to the former US occupation with his 2003-formed "Mahdi Army". He currently leads the "Sadrist Movement", a Shia political movement and party as well as its armed military wing, the "Saraya As-Salam" (Arabic: Peace Brigades), established in 2014.

Muqatda Al-Sadr has always framed himself as a nationalist, seeking to fight and oppose all kinds of foreign intervention, particularly by the US and Iran. The scope of Al-Sadr's political leverage became particularly evident during the 2021-2022 Baghdad clashes, which almost pushed Iraq to the brink of civil war, further highlighting the internal frictions of Iraq's

[5] European Union Agency for Asylum (2021): Popular Mobilisation Units and Tribal Mobilization Militias, in: https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-iraq-2021/12-popular-mobilisation-units-and-tribal-mobilisation-militias.
[6] Chatham House (2021): Networks of power: The Popular Mobilization Forces and the State in Iraq, in: https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/02/networks-power/04-pmf-networks-and-iraqi-state.

numerous Shia armed groups. This crisis can be traced back to the results of the parliamentary elections on October 10, 2021, during which the Sadrist Movement achieved historic success. However, Al-Sadr subsequently refused to engage in the process of government formation due to his reluctance to cooperate with the "Shiite Coordination Framework", an umbrella bloc of Iranian-aligned parties, including Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq, whose head, Qais Al-Khaz'ali, is one of Sadr's most notorious political rivals.

Upon the subsequent political deadlock, during which the parliament was unable to convene and elect a president, Al-Sadr surprisingly announced his withdrawal from politics, precipitating his followers and affiliates of the "Saraya As-Salam" to storm Baghdad's Green Zone and occupy the Iraqi parliament building on August 29, 2022. These escalations quickly resulted in bloody clashes between Al-Sadr supporters and PMF-aligned forces, marking a significant shift in Iraqi politics. Previously, Sadrists and PMF forces had engaged in a series of tit-for-tat retaliatory acts but had maintained a certain power equilibrium.

Tishreen Revolution

Another decisive event which significantly shaped the political trajectory of contemporary Iraq and reactivated the political discourse on Iraq's external perception as a "non-state" actor and its perilous implications was the "Tishreen" uprising (Arabic for October). On October 1, 2019, the Iraqi people rose to the streets, decrying the rampant corruption and governmental mismanagement.

Although the demonstrations mainly took place in Baghdad and some southern provinces, the repercussions of the revolution reverberated nationwide, with protesters emphasising the unity of the Iraqi people that transcended sectarian and religious divisions. Given the Iraqi government's brutal response, with the help of Iranian-backed groups, the protestors' anger shifted from their initial desire to overthrow the corrupt Iraqi government and reform the political system to the popular demand of curbing Iranian influence. In this context, Iraqis enunciated their demand to abolish the still existing "Muhasasa system", which legally stipulates an ethnoreligious quota for the distribution of government positions amongst the country's Shia, Sunnis and Kurds.

The protestors largely criticised this system as the root cause of the government's structural dysfunction. In fact, the 2019 demonstrations garnered widespread attention due to their unique character, leading to a decisive shift in the political status quo and constituting the country's most significant protest movement since 2003. Iraqi politicians, however, attempted to justify the brutal crackdown of the protests by publicly vilifying the protesting

youth, pejoratively referring to them as "Abna' Al-Sifaraat" (Arabic: Sons of the embassies), as an attempt to frame them as collaborators of foreign destabilising forces, such as the US, Turkey and also Israel [7] – a paradoxical reaction as the Iraqi youth that united under the slogan "We want a homeland" (Arabic: "Nurid Watan") [8] particularly demanded the dismantling of foreign influence, especially Iran. Former Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi, who was forced to resign in the wake of the protests' peak in late 2019, subsequently reactivated the public discourse over the narrative of who could claim to being the defender of the Iraqi State and who seeks to undermine its authority[9] – it was during that time that Abdul Mahdi first used the expression of "La-Daula" during his speech from October 4, 2019, when saying that Iraq was on the verge of collapse and thus, had to "choose between the State (Daula) and the non-State (La-Daula)"[10].

In fact, even if original publications on the phenomena of "La-Daula" had not particularly referred to the Tishreen movement, the popularisation of this term increased amongst intellectuals after the movement's inception. Since then, the Iraqi political discourse has increasingly revolved around the "state versus the anti-state" construct, with the ruling political elite framing any criticism as foreign-orchestrated attempts to infiltrate the state authority. By 2020, the forces of the "La-Daula" had become synonymous with Iranian-backed Shia militias, considered to be inherently antithetical to the state. This portrayal, however, carries the risk of discrediting Iraq's Shia majority population, many of whom participated in the Tishreen protests and demanded the curbing of Iranian influence, as seditious enemies of the Iraqi State. This distorted narrative had always been historically misused but gained prominence in the post-2003 era.

Iraq as a Regional Actor

In the wake of the events after 2003, Iraq has evolved into a battleground of rival political interests between the US and Iran. Following ISIS's military defeat in Iraq in 2017, the control of many US-operated bases was largely transferred to the Iraqi government, further triggering subsequent bilateral discussions on the withdrawal of US troops in Iraq. In the wake of the "Tishreen" protest movement in 2019 and continuing massive protests in the following

[7] University of Texas at Austin (2023): The Role of Social Media in Iraq's Tishreen movement: digital activism, misinformation and propaganda, in: https://mediaengagement.org/research/social-media-iraq-tishreenmovement/.
[8] Bashkin, Orit (2011): Hybrid Nationalisms: Watania and Qawmi Vision in Iraq Under 'Abd Al-Karim Qasm, 1958-61". Cambridge, International Journal of Middle East Studies, Vol. 43, n°2, 2011, page 293-312.
[9] Al-Mawlawi, Ali (2022): Iraqi Shia Factions are supposedly "Anti-state". But State Power is what they want. The Century Foundation, https://tcf.org/content/report/iraqi-shia-factions-are-supposedly-anti-state-but-state-power-iswhat-they-want/.
[10] Al-Ghad TV (2019): Statement by Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi" (in Arabic), in: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=um72DWbyH0M.

years, the Iraqi Council of Representatives passed a non-binding decision that sought to expel all foreign troops from the country, which precipitated a partial withdrawal of US forces from Iraq.

In fact, foreign relations with Iraq, particularly with the US and Western governments, are significantly shaped by the categorisation of the Iraqi State as part of the so-called "Axis of Resistance", an informal political and military coalition, acting under the auspices of Iran. The "Islamic Resistance in Iraq (IRI)", an informal network of Iran-aligned Shia armed groups in Iraq, formed in 2020, are part of this informal alliance and has been responsible for the majority of retaliatory attacks against Israel since October 2023. In the wake of the most recent regional developments, Iraq-US relations have become further strained, again displaying the perils of Iraq's conceptualisation as a "non-state" actor, as the latter had subsequently been exposed to the risk of resurfacing as a battleground for proxy warfare.

Gaza – Israel

Israel's relentlessly waged war on Gaza, which on January 19, 2025, was brought to a halt following a negotiated ceasefire agreement, had sparked wide outrage in Iraq. Given the US's apparent unconditional support to the Israeli government and the rapidly increasing death toll in Gaza since 2023, an increase in US attacks against high-ranking leaders and bases of Shia militias, in concomitance with militia-led attacks against US bases, was the result. Historically, especially during the Saddam dictatorship, Iraq had always presented itself as a staunch supporter of the Palestinian cause, while also harbouring a significant number of descendants of Palestinian refugees in the Al-Waleed camp.

In 2022, upon the initiative of Sadr-loyalists, the Iraqi parliament passed an anti-normalisation law that criminalises any interaction with Israel or Israelis. Since October 2023, the "Islamic Resistance of Iraq" launched more than 150 attacks on US bases in Iraq, Syria and Jordan[11], resulting in the killing of three US soldiers on January 28, 2024, who had been deployed at the Tower 22 US bases in the Northeastern city of Rukban. This attack prompted the US to further launch multiple retaliatory airstrikes on Iraqi soil in February 2024, killing Abu Baqir Al-Sa'adi in Eastern Baghdad's Al-Mashtal neighbourhood, a former high-ranking commander of Katai'b Hizbollah, who was primarily in charge of orchestrating the group's ground operation in Syria. These escalations, on one hand, display the issues resulting from the military presence of Shia militias, which have the potential to constantly draw Iraq into full-

[11] Reuters (2024): Iraq's Nujaba says it will continue attacks on US forces, in: https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east-iraqs-nujaba-says-it-will-continue-attacks-us-forces-2024-02-02/.

scale armed conflicts, while also showing how the existence of these militias is used as a pretext to justify blatant infringements on Iraq's sovereignty.

Syria

Following the downfall of the Syrian Assad regime on December 8, 2024, an Iraqi delegation, comprising members from the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS) and led by Hamid Al-Shatri, visited Damascus on December 27, 2025. The apparent purpose of this meeting was to ensure Iraq's commitment to non-interference in Syria's domestic affairs and a retreat of Iraqi armed factions that previously supported Al-Assad.

The ascension to power of "Hayat Tahrir Ash-Sham" (HTS) and its leader Ahmad Al-Shar'aa, who has a troubled past as an Al-Qaeda member in Iraq, has stirred up fears of potential sectarian violence and acts of retaliation to also reverberate in Iraq. This trepidation stems from the military involvement of some of Iraq's Iranian-backed militias in support of former dictator Bashar Al-Assad. Among these militias, the Iranian-backed and 2013-founded "Harakat Hizbollah Al-Nujaba" (Movement of the Party of God's Nobles) had been the most active in Syria, with extraterritorial activities primarily focusing on Damascus, Latakia, Hama, and Aleppo. Claiming to contain about 10,000 fighters,[12] it played a significant role in the conquering of Aleppo by regime forces in 2016 and was amongst the first expeditionary forces to be sent to Syria.

The militia is currently spearheaded by Akram Al-Ka'abi, the co-founder of Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq, and operates in the Iraqi provinces of Anbar, Nineveh, and Salah Ad-Din, near the Iraqi-Syrian border. What makes this movement stand out amongst other Iranian-backed Shiite militias in Iraq, is its utmost loyalty to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. In 2017, "Harakat Al-Nujaba" announced the formation of the "Golan Liberation Brigade" offshoot, with the goal of liberating the Syrian Golan Heights from Israeli occupation. With the inception of the war on Gaza in October 2023, the majority of deterrent strikes were conducted by the "Harakat Al-Nujaba". The ousting of the Assad regime, in concomitance with the decline in Iran's political leverage in the region, also due to the killing of Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in September 2024 by Israel, prompted Iraq's expeditionary forces, like other Iranian-backed militias, to leave Syria. However, political changes in Syria further reverberated in Iraq in the form of a continuous reactivation of the political debate on a potential disarmament of Iran's proxy militias, which the latter vehemently opposes. In January 2025, during a visit of Iraq's Prime Minister Al-Sudani to Tehran, Khamenei emphasised the need for an immediate

[12] Reuters (2019): U.S. sanctions the Nujaba militia backed by Iran, in: https://www.reuters.com/article/world/ussanctions-the-nujaba-militia-backed-by-iran-idUSKCN1QM2J8/.

expulsion of all US troops, describing their presence as illegal, while highlighting the PMF's pertinent role in safeguarding Iraq's sovereignty.

Conclusion

Since the downfall of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship and the subsequent US occupation that set the stage for the brutal phase of sectarian violence and the rise in influence of Iranian-backed militias, Iraq has evolved into a battleground for vying political interests. Iranian-affiliated militias, who constitute the most pertinent non-state actors in contemporary Iraq, have significantly contributed to the incremental undermining of the country's political stability, with decision-making processes as well as internal and extraterritorial military operations taking place outside the formal state institutions. The increased activities of these militias, in concomitance with Iran's vast political leverage in Iraq, have precipitated and fuelled a public discourse on the role of Shia Islamist actors in politics and the extent to which they subordinate their actions to Iranian interests. In this context, the circulation and popularisation of the term "La-Daula", which used to characterise Iraq's inner political sphere, has become synonymous with the country's purported inability to control the actions of its militias properly.

This ascription is rooted in an ingrained perception of Iraq not being a proper state, and instead constituting a weak entity, easily susceptible to foreign infiltration, thus, turning it into an Iranian puppet state – this conceptualisation, in fact, has served as a justification for foreign intervention in Iraq. By exclusively regarding Iraq as a "non-state" actor, with its political stakeholders being inherently antagonistic to the state and relying on violence for their survival and political influence, regional proxy powers strip Iraq of its right to sovereignty while Iraq's perception marks international relations with the Iraqi Central Government as part of the Iranian-spearheaded "Axis of Resistance".

However, the discourse on Iraq's conceptualisation as a non-state actor has also gained a new dynamic in the wake of the 2019 anti-government protests, turning it into a domestic debate on who has the right to be considered a defender of the Iraqi State and who acts on behalf of foreign interests. In this regard, the portrayal of Iraq as an Iranian client state further touches upon a deeply entrenched identity crisis of the Iraqi State, where ethnic and religious identities are heavily politicised. This crisis particularly reappears in times of conflict and regional tensions, with Iraq being torn between the fundamental decision of averting a full-scale confrontation that might further destabilise the conflict-beset country, and an overall commitment to its innate values.

Particularly the war on Gaza has rendered this dilemma more evident: Given the war's high death toll and a purported unconditional support to Israel by Western governments, most notably the US, Iraq's Shia militias have seized the opportunity to portray themselves as the representatives of Iraqi and Arab interests and the defenders of the Palestinian cause – which Iraq historically dedicated itself to.

The perceived betrayal of Iraq's values and interests by its government, as the latter failed to confront Israel's crimes directly, in concomitance with the oppression of protests and years of government mismanagement, has rendered the Iraqi population increasingly estranged from the state. This climate of political disenchantment has bestowed Iranian-affiliated groups, who pursue anti-Western agendas, with the chance to present themselves as the sole representative of Iraqi and Shia interests, particularly due to acting on a unilateral basis against their designated opponents – a practice that has significantly shaped the inherently complicated and ambiguous relation between Iraq's population, its armed groups and the central government: While the Iraqi population is aware of Iran's suffocating political leverage in the country through its militias, whose presence is often exploited by foreign powers as a pretext for asserting their own geopolitical interests – a status that bears the risk of Iraq always getting entangled in regional conflicts – they find themselves officially represented by a government that not only contradicts their very interests, but also vilifies them when facing popular unrest and discontent.

In this tense climate, regional upheavals have the potential to function as a catalyst for conflicts spilling over to Iraq – a mechanism that is deeply-seated in the problematic conceptualisation of Iraq as an exclusively "non-state" actor. This ascription leads to Iraq being internationally perceived as a constant security threat, with every significant shift in power being sufficient to drag Iraq into an ongoing or looming crisis and precipitating the reemergence of its soil as a battleground for regional power struggle.

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The Religious De-Legitimisation of Non-State Actors in Iraq

Hamzeh Hadad

Introduction

Since the escalation of the Israeli war on Gaza into Lebanon, Israeli intelligence has signalled that Iraq poses a threat. Israeli intelligence reports claim that the next big attack on Israel from Iran will come through Iraqi armed groups. Additionally, on 18 November 2024, the Israeli Foreign Minister sent a letter to the president of the UN Security Council formally requesting that Iraq stop allowing armed groups to launch attacks on Israel.[1] Israel's focus has been on a small subset of armed actors in Iraq, those engaged in the broader Axis of Resistance. These actors do not represent the majority of Iraq's diverse security landscape, and in fact, are facing pressure from the Shia religious establishment to de-escalate. The Shia religious establishment, led by Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, had played a crucial role in legitimising non-state Shia armed factions to fight ISIS in 2014. Since then, most of these armed groups have tried to integrate – to various degrees – within the state's security structure.

Those established before 2003 ultimately integrated within state institutions through the formation of parallel political wings that ran for office. Those that were established after 2003 tended to be more aligned with Iran and less interested in being restricted to Iraq's borders. However, there are a number of groups more aligned with the religious establishment that have not only been uninterested in developments beyond Iraq's borders but have made approaches in the past to be more aligned with the Ministry of Defence and less with the Popular Mobilisation Command. Thus, there are about three different groups within the PMF, those closely aligned with the religious establishment in Najaf, those that are part of the PMF and follow orders of the Prime Minister but are not affiliated with the religious establishment, and then there is the final group that are technically part of the PMF but see themselves first and foremost as part of the Axis of Resistance led by Iran.

[1] AFP, "Israel urges UN to press Iraq over attacks by 'pro-Iranian militias," Al-Arabiya News, November 19, 2024, https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2024/11/19/israel-urges-un-to-press-iraq-over-attacks-by-pro-iranian-militias-.

The Axis of Resistance groups remain outliers and have rebranded themselves as the Islamic Resistance in Iraq since October 2023. This paper examines the perspective of the Shia religious establishment, also a non-state actor, in de-legitimising these groups and, in the process, striving to protect Iraq from being Israel's target. Simultaneously, the Shia religious establishment seeks to put a healthy distance between Iraq and Iran, a project it's been committed to since the inception of the new Iraqi state. Still, now it has become increasingly vocal due to the risks of regional war.

Background: Paramilitary Activity in Iraq

The issue of paramilitary groups is not a new phenomenon in Iraq. There have been armed loyalist groups to various Iraqi regimes over the years. Two weeks after the 14 July 1958 revolution that overthrew the Hashemite monarchy, which had been ruling since 1921, the Popular Resistance Force was formed, a civil militia that was loyal to the revolution's leader, Abdul Karim Qasim.[2] Five years later, another militia known as the National Guard would overthrow the Qasim government.[3] Eleven years later, another militia known as the Popular Militia was formed to support the Ba'ath Party's second attempt at ruling Iraq.[4] There is no paramilitary group more infamous than Fedayeen Saddam, a militia formed in 1995 under former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's son, Uday.[5] When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, these fighters were seen fighting until the collapse of the regime, far after the Iraqi Army disintegrated.

The post-2003 regime change in Iraq brought the end of the Ba'ath in power, created a power vacuum in the country, and opened the space for chaos and uncertainty. With no one group taking onus of governing Iraq, various armed groups came into existence, and not one particular militia like in the past. Different paramilitary groups that were formed in years past to fight the Ba'ath regime came to power; this includes both Shia and Kurdish groups. The latter are the party militias of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) based in Erbil and Duhok, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), based in Sulaymaniyah. These militias, known as the Peshmerga, have yet to be formally integrated under one umbrella.[6] They are technically the security forces of the Iraqi Kurdistan region and fall under the Iraqi Security Forces; however, the relationship is far more complex than that between the two parties and the

[2] Majid Khadduri, *Republican 'Iraq: A Study in 'Iraqi Politics since the Revolution of 1958*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 83.
[3] Khadduri, *Republican 'Iraq*, 84.
[4] Majid Khadduri, "*Socialist Iraq: A Study in Iraqi Politics since 1968*". (Washington, D.C.: The Middle East Institute, 1978), 43-44.
[5] Sharon Otterman, "IRAQ: What is the Fedayeen Saddam?," Council on Foreign Relations, February 3, 2005, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/iraq-what-fedayeen-saddam.
[6] Hamzah Hadad and Brandon L. Wallace, "The Iraqi Kurdish Security Apparatus: Vulnerability and Structure," *Small Wars Journal,* 2017, https://archive.smallwarsjournal.com/index.php/jrnl/art/the-iraqi-kurdish-security-apparatus-vulnerability-and-structure.

broader Iraqi Security Forces.[7] Like their Kurdish counterparts, Shia militias like the Badr Corps were also empowered by the overthrow of Saddam. Still, they could not replace the preexisting security institutions, like in Iraqi Kurdistan, which had gained semi-autonomy in 1992. Instead, groups like Badr took over institutions such as the Ministry of Interior and began to embed their members within the police and other state security forces.[8]

While former armed groups began to embed themselves into the new Iraqi state, others were formed, like the Mahdi Army to fight both the American occupation and insurgent groups like Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Iraq was embroiled in sectarian violence between 2005 and 2008. While violence subsided, terrorist attacks would be a regular occurrence throughout Iraq, particularly in the capital Baghdad. This would remain the case until nearly a third of Iraqi territory fell to the militant group the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The group, which had many members who were part of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, had taken over the city of Mosul in northern Iraq and the surrounding territory in 2014. Taking over Iraqi territory meant Iraqi Security Forces had either abandoned their posts or retreated further south. With state security forces in disarray and the threat of ISIS approaching Baghdad, the Iraqi state launched the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), an umbrella of militias, some preexisting and others formed in response to the crisis at hand.[9]

The PMF, known in Arabic as Al-Hashd Al-Sha'abi, or Hashd in short, was greenlit by the state. Still, its actual legitimacy stemmed from the call of the Shia religious authority in Najaf, under the leadership of Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani. On 13 June 2014, the representative of Sistani, Sheikh Mahdi Al-Karbalai, delivered a Friday sermon, in which he stated that it was a religious obligation for able-bodied Iraqi men to volunteer and help the state fight ISIS, to protect and liberate their country. With the Iraqi Security Forces in disarray and unable to take on recruits at the rapid level that were volunteering after the religious call to arms, many volunteers joined the various paramilitaries that were formed. To ensure that the fighters were heeding Sistani's call to support state security forces, the state legitimised the volunteers in 2016.[10] The PMF achieved official status in 2016 after the parliament voted to make it a legitimate branch of the Iraqi Security Forces, using the Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) as an example of what it closely resembles.[11] These non-traditional security forces directly answer to the Commander-in-Chief (Prime Minister), rather than to the Minister of Interior, as is the case with the Federal Police, or to the Minister of Defence, as is the case with the Iraqi Army.

[7] Ibid.
[8] Roger D. Petersen, *Death, Dominance, and State-building: The US in Iraq and the Future of American Military Intervention*. (Oxford University Press, 2024), 171-177.
[9] Petersen, *Death, Dominance, and State-building*, 329.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.

Religious Identity and Political Loyalty

Despite the territorial defeat of ISIS in December 2017 and the formal integration of the PMF into the Iraqi state, there was a lot of concern over the nature of the armed actors and whether their integration into the state was genuine. Many questioned whether their loyalty was with Iraq or with the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei. Although Sistani's fatwa was the spark of legitimation for the various groups that comprise the PMF, his role in their creation did not necessarily ensure their loyalty to him. Instead, the PMF groups are split in their religious leadership. Moreover, there is no clear-cut definition adopted by these groups as to where religious authority ends and political authority begins. This is no doubt complicated by Iran, whose head of state, Khamenei, also happens to be a spiritual leader of Sistani's rank. For Khamenei and others who have adopted the Iranian theocratic model, religious and political authority are deeply intertwined. Sistani, on the other hand, holds a clear respect for state institutions and his original fatwa clearly directed volunteers to join state security forces. Moreover, Sistani views himself as a last-resort defender of Iraqi society, only getting involved politically if a situation seems particularly tenuous, as occurred with the ISIS invasion.[12]

Some of the armed groups claim that their loyalty is to Iraq first and foremost, but that their spiritual leader is Khamenei, as a Grand Ayatollah, and not Sistani. These groups are toeing a fine line: they are state-recognised by Baghdad, their legitimacy is gained by Sistani in Najaf, but they are backed by Tehran. These distinctions are important to note, both to understand the various dynamics between the groups within the PMF and to understand how the Iraqi public views different groups. Iraq's majority Shia community mostly follow Grand Ayatollah Sistani as their spiritual leader. Even for Iraq's non-Shia groups, there is strong respect towards Sistani and the Shia religious establishment in Najaf altogether. For example, the Grand Ayatollah at the time in the 1960s, Abdul-Muhsin Al-Hakim, issued a fatwa against killing Kurds. This fatwa came during a period of heavy fighting between the Iraqi government and Kurdish paramilitaries.[13] Decades later, Sistani's stance towards the Sunni community during sectarian violence was also notable, in helping calm sectarian tension as much as possible, despite sectarian violence engulfing the country post-invasion.

[12] Marsin al-shamary, "The Pope Goes to Najaf: The Person and the Institution of Sistani," 1001 Iraqi Thoughts, March 4, 2021, https://1001iraqithoughts.com/2021/03/04/the-pope-goes-to-najaf-the-person-and-the-institution-of-sistani/.
[13] Hamid al-Bayati, *From Dictatorship to Democracy: An Insider's Account of the Iraqi Opposition to Saddam*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 18-19.

Before the war with ISIS even ended, questions and concerns arose about the future of the PMF. Despite their formal integration into the state in 2016, questions remained about their involvement in Iraqi politics. The Iraqi constitution prevents the involvement of the members of the security forces.[14] With elections in 2018, Iraqis would soon find out that a number of armed groups within the PMF had established political wings, from which they distanced themselves on a technical level to comply with the law. This was similar to the Kurdish parties or Badr, which transformed from a paramilitary organisation into a separate party that ran in elections. Following 2014, there were now more groups, such as Badr and the SadristMovement, that had affiliated paramilitary groups. Since 2018, these political parties, affiliated with armed groups, have grown, with Kata'ib Hizbollah forming a party called Huqooq, which ran in the 2021 elections and won one seat in parliament. Huqooq's numbers in parliament only grew after the Sadrist Movement MPs resigned, resulting in 5 more seats reallocated to Huqooq.

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq

Since the events of 7 October 2023, the groups more closely aligned with Tehran have sought to distance themselves from the PMF. The distancing serves multiple purposes: first, it is a form of protecting the PMF as a security force that is part of the Iraqi Security Forces. Second, it allows these groups to gain more autonomy from the Iraqi Prime Minister's command. These groups also gave themselves the new name of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq. This name created distance from the PMF but also made them easily recognisable with the broader Resistance Axis pushed by the Islamic Republic of Iran. The groups that make up the Islamic Resistance in Iraq are Katai'b Hizbollah, Katai'b Sayyid Al-Shuhada, and Harakat Hizbollah Al-Nujaba.[15]

It is important to note that groups like Badr or Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq are not included in the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, even though they have older ties with Iran. However, they have integrated into the Iraqi state, they see their fate tied more to the fate of the Iraqi state and therefore have more to lose by putting the Iraqi state in harm's way. This is why a more recent paramilitary like Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq, which is seen as one of the main backers of Prime Minister Muhammed Al-Sudani's government, was distancing itself from groups in the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, during which anger was at a high towards Israel for the war in Gaza. Before them, Badr, an older group often seen as a parallel to Hizbollah in Iraq, quickly became less

[14] Petersen, *Death, Dominance, and State-building*, 342.
[15] Hamzeh Hadad, "Proxy battles: Iraq, Iran, and the turmoil in the Middle East," European Council on Foreign Relations, April 16, 2024.

so. They transitioned from an armed group to a political group. While their resistance body became relevant again with the war against ISIS, they have once again fallen more to politics, and their leader, Hadi Al-Ameri, a former Minister of Transport, lobbied hard for himself to be nominated as Prime Minister after the 2018[16] elections and again in 2021.[17]

The case of Badr is illustrative of an interesting dynamic in Iraq, akin to the "inclusion-moderation" hypothesis, which suggests that the inclusion of Islamist parties in government moderates their political position. Obviously, Badr is more than just an Islamist party, but there is an element of inclusion-moderation that is at play. It is a reminder that a proxy group has its own interests and maintains a level of autonomy from its backers, which includes the very country that helped create it.

When groups, like Badr, enter the political scene both through elections and through the recognition of their armed wing into the security forces, this reduces, but crucially does not eliminate, their ties to Iran. This raises the question: Will Iran always have the most influence over the weakest groups at any given time? And is Iran – or other state sponsors - continuously going to create more armed groups?

The Growing Distance between Najaf and Tehran

Iran's attempts to influence Iraqi politics have extended to Najaf. In fact, Iran tried to groom a successor to Grand Ayatollah Sistani in Ayatollah Mahmoud Shahroudi, an Iraqi-Iranian cleric.[18] While Shahroudi had passed away before Sistani, during his lifetime, Sistani did not take this attempt lightly, which is why he refused to meet with Shahroudi on his last visit to Najaf.[19] Sistani and those around him have always been cautious of the Islamic Republic's involvement in the Hawza in Najaf.

From the Iranian perspective, Sistani represents a genuine rival to Khamanei's religious authority, with many observant Iranians opting to emulate him. A survey of Iranian and Iraqi pilgrims to Karbala reveals that Sistani is among the top three most emulated clerics in Iran, alongside Khamenei and Makarem al-Shirazi.[20] Meanwhile, Khamanei's followers in Iraq are negligible, with the overwhelming majority of Iraqi Shia emulating Sistani. Additionally, there

[16] Tamer El-Ghobashy and Mustafa Salim, "Iraqi election seen as a contest between Iran's challenger and America's incumbent," The Washington Post, May 11, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iraqi-election-seen-as-a-contest-between-irans-challenger-and-americas-incumbent/2018/05/10/7bfc4912-538f-11e8-a6d4-ca1d035642ce_story.html.
[17] Hamzeh Hadad, "Deadlocked and loaded: Iraq's political inertia," European Council on Foreign Relations, July 25, 2022, https://ecfr.eu/article/deadlocked-and-loaded-iraqs-political-inertia/.
[18] Hamzeh Hadad, "Demystifying The Shia Religious Ties Between Iraq and Iran," Democracy in Exile (DAWN), May 2, 2024, https://dawnmena.org/demystifying-the-shia-religious-ties-between-iraq-and-iran/.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Fotini Christia et al., "To Karbala: Surveying Religious Shi'a from Iran and Iraq," Massachusetts Institute of Technology, October 20, 2016, https://web.mit.edu/cfotini/www/Shia_Pilgrims_Survey.pdf.

is sensitivity amongst the Iraqi public towards Iranian political leadership, not to be mistaken with clerics. The fact that Khamenei plays both does not give him the benefit of a cleric. He is seen as a political figure in Iraq.

As a result, Sistani is cautious in his stance towards paramilitaries who are open about the fact that they follow Khamenei as their spiritual leader. This is compounded by the fact that Khamanei espouses a much more expansive view of religious authority than the clerics of Najaf. Khamenei is seen as the leader of a sovereign state. While Sistani is a religious leader, his messaging has always been to operate within the confines of the Iraqi state and has emphasised the importance of prioritising the Iraqi state's interests.

After the defeat of ISIS, tensions arose between the different groups that make up the PMF. Four brigades were affiliated with the authorities that manage the religious shrines across Iraq. These shrines belong to the Shia Religious Endowment and fall under the influence of Sistani. Unlike other factions in the PMF, these groups sought to integrate into the Ministry of Defence and resented that the more Iran-aligned group controlled the finances of the overall umbrella organisation. The shrine militias, as they are called, reflect Sistani's vision for the role of paramilitary groups in the state. Sistani views them as volunteers who need to fall under the control of the state. The groups that respond directly to him reflect that vision, but other groups challenge it.

Yet, these other groups still try to derive their legitimacy from Sistani's fatwa, given his immense popularity and following in Iraq. At first, Sistani's messaging was subtle – his sermons and statements eschewed the title "Popular Mobilisation Forces" and continued to refer to them as volunteers. After the ISIS war, he never explicitly called for their demobilisation, although many Iraqis eagerly awaited to see if he would request their formal demobilisation ahead of the 2018 elections. Instead, the sermons of his representatives focused on issues such as fighting corruption, upholding the rule of law, and maintaining Iraqi sovereignty. There are many hypotheses for why he didn't formally call for their demobilisation: first, he perhaps feared provoking an intra-Shia civil war; secondly, he may have feared appearing weak if his fatwa was not obeyed (and it was not likely to be); thirdly, parliament had already recognised the group and Sistani had traditionally respected Iraqi law; and finally, he may have feared that Iraq was still too vulnerable to ISIS in early 2018 to demobilise one of its key security actors.

Nevertheless, Sistani's messaging with regards to these groups remained subtle throughout the October protest movement, in which activists explicitly demanded that the state regain its monopoly on arms, and which accused certain PMF groups of targeted assassinations and discriminatory violence against protestors.[21] The sermons of Sistani's representatives focused on maintaining peace and stability, and criticised violence against protestors. The sermons also criticised foreign intervention and promoted a sovereign Iraq, likely in response to the fears of escalation between the United States and Iran after the Soleimani-Muhandis assassination.

In recent months, we've seen the most explicit, yet still subtle, de-legitimisation of armed groups from Sistani. In early November, Sistani met with the UN Secretary-General's Representative to Iraq, where Sistani stressed the importance of the state having a monopoly over arms and the need to stem foreign interference in Iraq. These messages are not new from Sistani, but the timing coincided with Israel's decimation of Hizbollah, and with the looming threat of Iraq becoming the next target in Israel's line of fire towards Iran. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq had been attacking Israel with drones, though resulting in insignificant damage. The attacks did not impact Israeli security forces and were only seen as giving the Israelis an excuse to attack Iraq in retaliation. Up until that point, Israel attacked near the Iraqi-Syrian border, but not on Iraqi territory. In this context, it becomes clear why Sistani decided to speak up again, and it is obvious that he is referring to Iran when mentioning foreign interference, as the armed groups that make up the Islamic Resistance in Iraq are taking orders from Tehran and not Baghdad.

After the ISIS war, there were a number of issues that drove a wedge between the different groups that make up the PMF. The issue of the chain of command and salary distribution between the shrine authorities and the factions more aligned with Iran almost led to the group splitting. However, it was the war between Israel and Hamas that ultimately drove the wedge. Unlike the past, when the shrine authorities attempted to break away, it was the Iran-aligned factions that did, by establishing the Islamic Resistance in Iraq.

[21] Marsin al-Shamary, "The protester paradox: Why do anti-Islamist activists look toward clerical leadership?," The Brookings Institution, April, 2022, *https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-protester-paradox-why-do-anti-islamist-activists-look-toward-clerical-leadership/*.

In the long term, this may help cement the PMF as a credible security institution of the state. However, the key will be to address the groups that make up the Islamic Resistance of Iraq, who are pushing the limitations of being hybrid actors, by having one foot within the PMF and the other as a separate entity within the broader Resistance Axis. Sistani will not come out and speak publicly in such specifics, but his actions have made it clear which groups he and the Shia religious establishment in Najaf view as credible and which they do not.

Conclusion

The issue of paramilitaries in Iraq is not new, and like the groups that make up the Popular Mobilisation Forces, those that preceded them will either become further integrated into the state or become outliers that the Iraqi state will have to contain. When rebel forces in Syria began their campaign to remove the Ba'ath regime in Damascus in late November, armed groups aligned with Iran demanded that they fight in Syria like they had done in the past. Prime Minister Mohammed al-Sudani and several prominent political leaders, including Haider al-Abadi and Muqtada al-Sadr, supported the government in its stance to prevent any group from becoming involved in Syria. This was a crucial step in exerting state authority over all armed groups. The fact that other armed groups backed by Iran have been weakened in the region, primarily Hizbollah in Lebanon, added further incentive. The Shia religious establishment has been in lockstep with the Iraqi government on this and we can expect it to continuously prioritise Iraqi security and stability in the future.

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Armed Non-State Actors and the Reconfiguration of Iraq's Foreign Policy

Zahra Baqer

Summary

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, Iraq has witnessed several political and security challenges. While the constitution was meant to create a strong democratic state, Iraq remains fragmented and fragile, as non-state actors such as sectarian armed groups, tribal leaders, and religious clerics still operate outside constitutional constraints. This paper will initially explore Iraq's current formal and informal power dynamics over the past two decades. As the most controversial discourse today concerns the existence of armed militias, a thorough investigation of the historical formation and development of these groups will be presented. Although the title may refer to a diverse range of actors, the main argument here revolves around the Shia militias operating under the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) umbrella.

The PMF's main mandate at its establishment was to liberate the country from ISIS and prevent further invasion by these terrorist groups. Since its creation, the PMF has played a pivotal role in shaping the country's internal politics and foreign policy. The legal framework and structure of this entity have created a hybrid system in which state and non-state powers overlap. This paper will argue that although the main task of the PMF is national defence, its activities are influenced by external actors and have extended to areas outside Iraq. Such operations will continue to undermine the state's efforts to maintain balanced external foreign relations. Following recent regional developments in the Middle East, including the Iran-Israel conflict and the decline of Iran's influence, Iraq is facing calls from both national and international communities to redefine and reform its political alliances and security forces. Furthermore, this paper will assess the repercussions of armed militias and recent regional developments on Iraq's foreign relations. With expected scenarios and policy recommendations, this paper will highlight the importance of decision-makers adopting pragmatic internal and external policies to prevent the country from further fragmentation.

Iraq's Formal and Informal Powers

Since 2005, Iraq has been governed through consociationalism, where power is shared and distributed to ensure the inclusion of the main sectarian and political groups. While the constitution never formally referred to this pattern, it has become the core of Iraq's political culture. All governments formed after the fall of Saddam's regime included a Shia Prime Minister, Sunni Parliament Speaker, and Kurdish President.

Theoretically, consociationalism is an approach designed for divided societies, such as Iraq. However, a weak system has enabled dominant players to become more politically and financially empowered through corruption and violence. Shia political blocs hold the main power, ruling the country through executive and judicial authority. The Coordination Framework is divided mainly over external influence and foreign relations policies, as the majority align with Iran.

Muqtada Al-Sadr remains internally influential, despite his bloc's withdrawal from parliament at an early stage, while continuing to hold senior administrative positions. Sunni blocs, which share power and are represented by the Parliament Speaker and other senior positions, have been fragmented since the dramatic loss of Mohamed Al-Halbousi,[1] and are trying to rebuild their influence within society before the upcoming elections.

Kurdish power is distributed between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which dominates Erbil and Dohuk, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which holds a stronger presence in Sulaymaniyah. The KDP has ongoing disputes with the central government over salaries and oil revenues, while the PUK enjoys better relations with Baghdad and Iran. Moreover, Kurdistan, along with economic challenges, is facing a major internal security breach caused by armed conflicts between tribal and Peshmerga leaders.

Power distribution among all political blocs and parties was never limited to senior executive positions; it extends to ministerial roles, deputy ministers, director generals, and military ranks. After nearly two decades of governing, the sustainability of this system in Iraq is highly questionable, while power dynamics remain complex. In 2019, thousands of frustrated youths from different sectarian groups and areas, supported by the international community, participated in the Tishreen uprising to express their anger and rejection of the current ruling parties, regardless of religious or ethnic background. This event reflects the

[1] Abbas Kadhim, "Iraq's Parliament Speaker Was Removed. What's Next for the Country," *Atlantic Council*, November 17, 2023, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/halbousi-iraq-parliament-sadr.

failure of the power-sharing system, which aimed for inclusion but resulted in broader tensions.

Iraq is one of the few countries in the Middle East governed through a democratic system, with formal institutions connected to either the executive or legislative authority. Yet, the impact of informal powers operating outside constitutional frameworks, and represented in several forms, remains influential and challenging. In political science, informal power theory refers to actors or pathways that can influence public opinion and policymakers, regardless of how legitimate they appear. "In every constitutional regime, informal avenues of power not only exist, but can be highly significant."[2] For example, since 2003, actors such as armed militias, religious figures, tribal leaders, civil society organisations, and activists have become strongly influential in Iraq. Moreover, empowered networks have emerged within major political parties, utilising gender and corruption.

Examining the positive and negative impacts of each power on the rule of law and the progress of good governance, particularly in a young democratic state, requires a structured investigation, which can be challenging due to security and political sensitivity. However, the direct and indirect involvement of informal powers in events that have shaped Iraq's politics over the last two decades is evident and recognisable. In 2007, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in Basra engaged in an offensive battle against armed militias affiliated with Muqtada Al-Sadr after the security file was transferred from British forces to the ISF.[3] The second largest Iraqi city, and the country's main port, was partially controlled by gangs engaged in oil and drug smuggling. Maliki's announced goal was to regain control, while some accused him of serving a political agreement with the Iraqi Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) to secure higher representation in parliament by limiting Muqtada's influence and power. Al-Sadr is one of the main Shia religious clerics in Najaf, the prominent centre and home to other notable clerics, including Ayatullah Sistani. Shia constitute the majority of Iraq's population, and their traditional connection with Najaf has been evident since the fall of Saddam's regime. Sistani played a key role in drafting the constitution, overseeing elections, forming political alliances, combating ISIS, and resolving disputes between the government and the opposition.

[2] James Gardner, *Formal and Informal Power in a Democracy*, June 2024, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/381301622_FORMAL_AND_INFORMAL_POWER_IN_A_DEMOCRACY.
[3] Nazar Janabi, "Who Won the Battle for Basra," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, April 10, 2008, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/who-won-battle-basra.

Another significant informal power is the role of tribes in mediation and peacekeeping, in addition to their political engagement. Tribes in Iraq have existed for centuries and are not limited to specific geographic areas or sects, while remaining structurally diverse.[4] The relationship between the government and tribes is dynamic and complex, as their strength appears to increase when the state is weak and fragile.

Tribes have supported government efforts in fighting ISIS, helping internally displaced persons, as well as securing borders, but they continue to threaten the state's role in good governance. Recently in Erbil, which is relatively safe and stable, gunfire broke out between the Kurdish Security Forces and a tribe called Herki because of a dispute over water irrigation. The incident highlighted the negative impact of armed power that is capable of disturbing peace and terrifying civilians while evading justice.

Investigating the role of informal powers cannot be completed without presenting an overview of the evolution of CSOs in Iraq. Independent civil society organisations expanded visibly after the fall of the dictatorship regime. Since then, thousands of organisations across the country, working in social, humanitarian, women's empowerment, youth initiatives, and environmental causes, have registered to operate legally as NGOs. However, most of these organisations face severe limitations and threats from state and non-state actors, especially after the Tishreen protests in 2019, which led to the end of Adel Abdul Mahdi's government. The movement began with demonstrations by unemployed youths, mobilised by different agencies and groups, and was eventually suppressed with violence and intimidation.

The aftermath of this event placed tremendous pressure on every CSO when their political and financial affiliations were investigated by security and intelligence authorities in Baghdad. International development agencies, such as the UN, USAID, JICA, GIZ, and the EU Commission, have financed and invested significant amounts of aid to reconstruct, build, and stabilise the new Iraq through short-, mid-, and long-term programs, mainly implemented via partnerships with local NGOs. The overall objectives were to enhance democracy, promote peace, increase citizen participation and build bridges between civil society and government with the support of the international community. While policy-making remains elite-driven, the sustainability of this approach is questioned, as the government restricts movements and monitors cooperation with international donors who partner with local NGOs.

[4] "Map of Tribes in Iraq," *ecoi.net*, 2007, https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1317514/1222_1189764344_tribes-in-iraq.pdf.

Since 2020, international funding to Iraqi organisations has been decreasing, risking the existence and sustainability of this sector.[5] Moreover, Prime Minister Sudani and political parties are connecting with selected NGOs, research centres and think tanks, offering financial and logistical support in exchange for loyalty as parliamentary elections approach.

Non-State Actors and Iraqi Politics

The narrative of armed non-state actors in Iraq refers mainly to the Shia militias that have operated since 2003 under prominent leaderships, each with different objectives. The US invasion of Iraq was followed by the formation of the Mahdi Army, headed by Muqtada Al-Sadr in Sadr City (previously Al-Thawra City). It began with a small number of followers in limited areas, then expanded rapidly and became actively engaged in direct clashes with US forces in Baghdad and southern cities. This group was disbanded in 2008 but re-emerged in 2014 as Saraya Al-Salam, with the intention of fighting ISIS.

In 2005, members of the Badr militia[6] joined the Ministry of Interior as security personnel when Bayan Jaber became minister. During his term, human rights violations were documented by activists and international watchdogs. Between 2005 and 2007, the group was continuously accused of torture in secret detention centres and of sectarian-based arrests. In 2008, with direct support and influence from Iran, two splinter groups were formed. The first, Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq (AAH), was founded and led by Qais Al-Khazali, a former senior Mahdi Army member who was captured and jailed by US forces between 2007 and 2010. This militia continuously received funding, training, and weapons from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and became a loyal proxy to Iran.

The second militia, Kata'ib Hezbollah, was founded by Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis,[7] a former Badr fighter with strong ties to Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah. This group is known for rocket and drone attacks against US bases and interests in Iraq. In 2013, due to internal disputes with Qais Al-Khazali, Akram Al-Kaabi announced his separation from AAH and formed Harakat Al-Nujaba. Both Kata'ib Hezbollah and Al-Nujaba were heavily involved in Syria, fighting for the Assad regime as instructed by the IRGC. Almost all the above-mentioned groups now operate both formally and informally under the official umbrella of the Popular

[5] Abdulsalam Medani, "Whither Iraqi Civil Society?," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, November 5, 2024, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/whither-iraqi-civil-society.
[6] Badr Organisation, initially known as Bader Brigade, was founded in 1982 in Iran as a military wing of the Supreme Council of Revaluation in Iraq. Some Shia exiles in Iran joined to fight Saddam Hussein under the Iranian command. They participated in the 1991 uprising and returned to operate in Iraq after the fall of the regime in 2003.
[7] Matthew S. Schwartz, "Who Was the Iraqi Commander Also Killed in Baghdad Drone Strike?," *NPR*, January 4, 2020, https://www.npr.org/2020/01/04/793618490/who-was-the-iraqi-commander-also-killed-in-baghdad-drone-strike

Mobilisation Forces (PMF), which was established following a major security breach. In 2014, the Islamic State occupied almost one-third of Iraq's territory, including the large city of Mosul.

With the genuine intention of preventing terrorist fighters from advancing towards Baghdad, tens of thousands of Iraqi men were encouraged and mobilised to defend the country after a historic call from the respected religious figure in Najaf, Ayatollah Sistani. The collapse of the security forces motivated volunteers, regardless of their background or experience, to join the popular mobilisation supporting the official security forces. Almost all the aforementioned factions, along with other Sunni and Christian groups, joined the establishment in a common goal to protect Iraqi lands from being occupied by a terrorist group.

Later, in 2016, the PMF's existence was legitimised through Law Number 40, passed by parliament. The law formally recognised the establishment as an "Independent Military Institution" operating under the Commander-in-Chief, with an allocated budget, legal status, and other benefits like those of other Iraqi security institutions. Since then, the discourse surrounding this entity has remained controversial, mainly for the Sunni political blocs, and issues related to transparency, accountability, and human rights abuses are raised regularly.

Moreover, the PMF has been criticised for its close ties with Iran, particularly after the participation of some brigades in external activities in Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, following a call from the IRGC. Many argue that the entity is following Iran's example and is perceived as adopting an ideological approach. Accusations from national and international parties - such as facilitating regional drug and currency smuggling, failing to provide accurate financial data to relevant authorities, and, most importantly, undermining state efforts to keep Iraq from being drawn into regional conflicts - threaten the existence of the PMF.

In March 2025, the Parliamentary Security and Defence Committee presented an amendment proposal to Law Nr.40; however, the government withdrew the draft after facing objections and disputes from political leaders regarding various articles.[8] Although these armed militias are mostly affiliated with the Shia, in practice, all other sectarian groups - including Sunnis, Christians, Yezidis, and Kurds - have their own independent militias, albeit with less visibility and power. The US administration is raising concerns through diplomatic representatives in Iraq regarding the role of Iran-backed factions within the PMF, as they are engaged in illegal activities that risk Iraq's stabilisation process. US sanctions on some senior

[8] *The New Region*, "Iraqi Lawmakers Divided Over PMF Reform Amid Political Power Struggle," February 24, 2025, *The New Region*, https://thenewregion.com/posts/1651/iraqi-lawmakers-divided-over-pmf-reform-amid-political-power-struggle.

figures and financial arms have resulted in disruptions to salary payments. Although payment alternatives have been approved through other local banking solutions, this step has not only escalated tensions between the PMF and government, but also created further problems.

In addition, the main Shia religious institution, represented by Ayatollah Sistani, has repeatedly raised security concerns both privately and publicly about the status of the armed factions within the PMF and called for arms to be restricted solely to government hands. A statement was issued by the office of UN Representative Mohammed Alhassan, following a meeting with Ayatollah Sistani, confirming that their discussion included measures needed to distance Iraq from regional tensions.[9] Media sources also mentioned that the meeting addressed the future of the PMF. Armed group leaders presented different interpretations of this event; yet, Najaf continues to emphasise the importance of disarming informal actors.

External Influence and Foreign Relations

In recent years, the involvement of external actors in Iraq has become deeply rooted, benefiting from the fragmented and fragile state while influencing both formal and informal local players. The impact of internal political and economic dynamics will undoubtedly shape international relations and foreign policies.

Traditionally, the main dominant actors in Iraq have been Iran and the United States. At the same time, Turkey, China, and the Gulf States have only joined in the past five years, mainly engaging in the economic sector. Studying the strategy and impact of each actor is crucial for understanding the implications of these interventions on Iraq's relationships with its regional partners. Iran has pursued an intervention strategy in Iraq similar to the one it applied earlier in Lebanon, where Hezbollah was empowered through formal institutions. In Iraq, Shia armed militias were initially created to defeat ISIS and prevent further invasions; however, over time, they developed into both military and political forces, securing senior positions in government after winning seats in the 2018 parliamentary elections.

With a sectarian approach, Iran continued to supply these groups with arms - including rockets, drones, and missiles capable of reaching neighbouring countries - igniting security concerns among Gulf states and even evoking memories of August 1990, when Saddam invaded Kuwait. Today, Iran-backed groups and allies have established significant economic and political influence, in addition to shaping Iraq's foreign relations policies.

[9] UNAMI. "Statement to the Press by SRSG for Iraq and Head of UNAMI Dr. Mohamed Al Hassan." December 12, 2024. https://iraq.un.org/en/285764-statement-press-srsg-iraq-and-head-unami-dr-mohamed-al-hassan.

Currently, political blocs in Iraq are preparing for the upcoming parliamentary elections in November 2025, and Iran-backed groups are empowered enough to secure more votes and seats, potentially increasing their control, unless developments in regional conflicts lead to a different outcome. The recent escalation of Middle East conflicts directly targeted Iranian-aligned proxy groups in the region. These confrontations have weakened Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as brought about the end of Assad's regime in Syria. Moreover, the recent war between Israel and Iran resulted in a significant reduction of Iran's direct and indirect interference in Iraq, which helped the government maintain neutrality and keep the country away from the conflict. As a result, only a few militia voices were raised, threatening to attack US bases and interests; however, no armed activity was observed.

Under a Strategic Framework Agreement, the United States constructed the largest embassy compound in the region within the Green Zone, thereby establishing a strong diplomatic and military presence. The bilateral relationship between the US and the central government remains complex, fluctuating between cooperation and tension. Creating and maintaining a balanced relationship with Iran and the United States is a challenging task for Iraq's Shia ruling parties, especially as they are regularly accused of leaning towards Iran due to religious and sectarian ties. Michael Knights, a Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute, has suggested that the US should take advantage of Iran's decline in Iraq and increase its presence and influence, including protecting personnel and interests.[10]

Another concern for Iraq is the indirect competition between Turkey and Iran. Turkey's ongoing ambition to increase its regional influence has grown following the fall of the Assad regime and the decline of Iranian influence. Iraq appears increasingly accessible to Turkish involvement, especially with military forces present in the north. Kurdistan's current politics exemplify this dynamic: the KDP, the main party ruling the north, maintains close ties with Ankara, while the PUK in Sulaymaniyah is more closely aligned with Iran and Shia parties. Although several overlapping political and sectarian activities have fed societal division among Iraqi communities, Iran and Turkey share one common interest: opposing Kurdish independence, fearing similar demands may arise from Kurdish minorities in their own countries.[11]

[10] Michael Knights, "Leveraging Iran's Defeat to Strengthen U.S.–Iraq Security Relations," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, July 10, 2025.
[11] Kamaran Palani, "Rivals Within: How Iran and Turkey Compete Inside Iraq's Fractured Policies," *Chatham House – The Royal Institute of International Affairs*, June 23, 2025, https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/rivals-within-how-iran-and-turkey-compete-inside-iraqs-fractured-politics.

Political and economic factors drive China and the Gulf States' engagement in Iraq through diplomacy and investment. Beijing's strategy differs from that of all other external actors, as it expands cooperation without obvious interference, maintaining good relations with both state and non-state actors, including armed groups and companies under international sanctions. Investment contracts have been signed with the Al Muhandis Group, a PMF-managed construction company operating in the southern cities.[12] Chinese companies are implementing large reconstruction projects in exchange for oil deals. Furthermore, Chinese leadership focuses on building relationships between the Communist Party and major political parties in Iraq, regardless of their affiliations or reputations.

For sectarian reasons, Gulf States - mainly Saudi Arabia and the UAE - backed Sunni factions against Shia-led governments for years. However, a shift in Gulf policies towards Iraq has been noticeable since the defeat of ISIS. More investment and reconstruction opportunities have been offered as a step to reduce dependency on, and the influence of, Iran in Iraq's economy. Cooperation has increased under the current government, led by Mohamed Shia Al-Sudani, despite his maintaining closer ties with Iran. Gulf countries are working to strengthen Iraq as an independent Arab partner without interfering in its politics or security.[13]

Regarding Syria, Iraq's western border has become increasingly vulnerable after the fall of the Assad regime, heightening security risks and creating opportunities for extremist groups to resurface. At the same time, this shift also undermines Iran's regional axis of influence, compelling Iraqi militias to reassess their position in the region. For Baghdad, the challenge remains in managing intensified regional rivalries as external powers compete to influence its foreign policy.

Predicted Scenarios

The upcoming parliamentary election in November 2025 is crucial and will significantly impact Iraq's internal political trajectory and its external position in the Middle East. The outcome may result in a scenario where armed affiliated groups secure significant gains through political and legal avenues. This expected victory would have a direct impact on both domestic and external policy. It could further formalise the position of militias within the state, weaken the judiciary, increase violence against the opposition, and reinforce Iraq's alignment with Iran.

[12] Sardar Aziz, "Why the Iraqi Ruling Elites Pivot to China," *Chatham House – The Royal Institute of International Affairs*, March 21, 2024, https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/why-the-iraqi-ruling-elites-pivot-to-china.
[13] Máté Szalai, "Saudi and Emirati Engagement in Iraq: From Sectarianism to Investment," Clingendael Policy Brief, May 28, 2025, Clingendael — the Netherlands Institute of International Relations.

Currently, the Iraqi government faces internal and external pressure to limit the role of the PMF and armed factions. Several possible solutions may define the future path for these groups. One proposed trajectory involves demobilising and integrating them within other formal state institutions. As public dissatisfaction increases, disarming these groups could be achieved through mobilising civil society with the support of religious and tribal leaders. With decreased Iranian influence and increased pressure from the US, transitioning these actors into political entities or integrating them into formal security institutions controlled and monitored directly by the government seems more practical than ever.

A second scenario for Iraq is to continue as a hybrid state, where formal and informal powers operate within semi-official political agreements. With this approach, non-state actors would retain formal recognition and considerable power, particularly in areas where state control is weak. This would further empower them to be influential in domestic policy while continuing to risk Iraq's external position and foreign relations with its allies. Furthermore, it would define Iraq's role in the new Middle East.

The least desirable scenario is the intensification of external actors' engagement, which could result in Iraq once again becoming a battleground for regional competition and control based on sectarian and political desires. The United States may decide to enforce military engagement; Turkey may expand its presence and influence in the north; Gulf states could support Sunni political and tribal groups; and Israel may conduct operations or assassinations or continue to use Iraqi airspace for strikes against Iran. All these actions would likely provoke armed factions to become violent, dragging Iraq into an unwanted war.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The evolution of informal powers and non-state armed actors, particularly Shia-dominated factions, has profoundly influenced the Iraqi state. While shaping both internal and external politics, over time, they appear to be threatening Iraq's political, security, and societal fabric. The PMF, which initially emerged as a popular response to an existential threat (fighting ISIS), have over time evolved into a structured armed power with extra-legal authority, operating outside state constraints. Backed by Iran, they continue to undermine the government's efforts to develop pragmatic foreign policies with the US, Turkey, and Gulf States.

With new developments in the Middle East, Iraq is entering a critical transitional phase with internal challenges. In addition to issues posed by armed groups, the traditional partnership between Kurdistan and Baghdad is almost collapsing. The religious institution in Najaf, represented by Ayatollah Sistani, is visibly criticising the policies of the current government led by the Coordination Framework. Furthermore, public dissatisfaction with the economy and essential services is increasing dramatically, and the prospect of another uprising is now closer than ever, expected to be backed by some politically driven tools, especially in the lead-up to the elections.

Externally, the regional setback of Iran in Syria and Lebanon, the fall of the Assad regime, and the recent war between Iran and Israel have visibly weakened the ideological backing of the militias in Iraq. This has been accompanied by diplomatic pressure from the United States on the Iraqi government and financial institutions to take serious action against currency smuggling to Iran. At the same time, sanctions are imposed on some banks and individuals. Meanwhile, China's pragmatic economic policy and the Gulf's investment engagement are creating more partnership opportunities for Iraq. To address and resolve the current problems, a multidimensional approach is needed.

Internally, Baghdad can seek stronger and more strategic coordination with Erbil to end longstanding security and administrative disputes between the federal government and the KRG, which have created a gap and space for external actors (Iran and Turkey) to gain influence and control. A consolidated agreement can enforce state sovereignty and reduce the influence of foreign-backed groups and actors.

In the meantime, the decline in visibility and activity of Iranian proxies during the recent escalation in the Middle East suggests an opportunity to marginalise and limit all armed groups and their activities through legal and administrative processes. Iraq continues to enjoy support from Western partners and should capitalise on this opportunity to implement strategic reforms within its security institutions. This will eventually reduce the autonomy of armed groups. The government should also take advantage of the current position of the religious institution in Najaf, particularly after continued confirmation and calls to limit arms to the government's control. It is noticeable that Najaf is taking a clear stance against the politicisation of armed groups, regardless of their formation background, and this could be instrumental in building a reform platform.

Iraq's current relationship with Saudi Arabia and the UAE is economically driven, through investment partnerships in infrastructure, energy, and reconstruction projects, mainly in the Sunni-dominated areas. Unlike Iran, the Gulf's role in Iraq is far from ideological or political intervention, and this engagement can be deepened and expanded to reach other areas and sectors in Iraq. China's economic engagement, with a pragmatic non-interference approach, presents an opportunity for diversified external relations where sovereignty is not compromised. With this form of partnership, Iraq can gradually shift away from Iranian influence and interference.

Finally, the most crucial step should come from the government, which should revisit the legal and administrative framework of the Popular Mobilisation Forces, especially as the proposed amendment to the law presents a significant opportunity to initiate a serious set of discussions between political blocs to reach agreed-upon measures that can strengthen state control over armed factions. Furthermore, all formal and informal actors and powers should contribute to the implementation of reform measures to prevent a democratic Iraq from collapsing during this sensitive period.

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Repercussions of the Current Middle East Conflict on Iraq's Foreign Policy: The Role of State and Non-State Actors

Dlawer Ala'Aldeen

Summary

This policy note explores Iraq's multifaceted response to the ongoing regional upheaval, examines the role and agency of non-state actors, and evaluates the broader strategic challenges confronting Iraq as the Middle East crisis continues to unfold. Iraq's foreign policy is constrained by deep internal fragmentation and external entanglements. Internally, Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish actors remain divided, with Iran-aligned non-state actors (NSAs) challenging state authority and undermining Baghdad's diplomatic coherence.

The Government of Iraq has sought to maintain a position of neutrality amid escalating regional conflicts. Nonetheless, some armed NSAs launched attacks on US assets during earlier phases of the crisis. They refrained from directly engaging Israel during the 12-Day War, temporarily aligning with Baghdad's de-escalation strategy, only to resume attacks recently on US, Iraqi and Kurdistan Region's targets inside the country.

Iraq continues to balance strategic relations with regional and global powers while managing economic dependencies and limited security capacity. Repeated violations of Iraqi sovereignty by external actors underscore the government's insufficient control over national territory. Unless Baghdad can reassert authority over NSAs and implement meaningful political reform, Iraq will remain reactive and vulnerable, more a battleground for others than a sovereign actor in its own right.

Fragmented Sovereignty and the Limits of Foreign Policy

While the federal Government of Iraq (GoI) is formally responsible for foreign policy and national security, its authority remains persistently undermined by a dense network of sectarian parties, armed groups, and transnational loyalties. Similarly, Iraq's sovereignty remains contested, both internally by rival security actors, and externally by regional and global powers.[1]

Since the regional escalation of conflict that began on 7 October 2023, Iraq's foreign policy has increasingly reflected its internal fractures. Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani has attempted to maintain a stance of neutrality amid intensifying regional tensions, a posture that might be described as 'guarded neutrality'.[2] However, this position has been repeatedly tested by powerful non-state actors (NSAs). Hard-line factions within the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), such as Kata'ib Hizbollah and Harakat Al-Nujaba, both ideologically and operationally aligned with Tehran, have carried out missile and drone attacks on US targets and expressed vocal support for Hamas and Hizbollah in their confrontations with Israel.[3]

These actions risk drawing Iraq into broader regional conflicts and exposing it to retaliatory strikes, often without government approval or coordination. As a result, Iraq's foreign policy appears less the outcome of strategic planning than a reflection of fragmented authority and shifting domestic power dynamics. During the June 2025 Iran-Israel war, however, these same factions showed rare restraint.[4] By avoiding direct attacks on US or Israeli interests, they aligned - at least temporarily - with the government's de-escalation strategy. This anomaly shielded Iraq from becoming a battleground in the confrontation but also underscored the volatility of militia behaviour and the fragility of the government's authority.

[1] Hamzeh Hadad, "Proxy battles: Iraq, Iran, and the turmoil in the Middle East," ECFR Publication, April 16, 2024, https://ecfr.eu/publication/proxy-battles-iraq-iran-and-the-turmoil-in-the-middle-east/
[2] AFP, "Iraq walks fine line with pro-Iran factions to avoid war," October 13, 2024, https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20241013-iraq-walks-fine-line-with-pro-iran-factions-to-avoid-war
[3] Ibrahim Elfadil, "Iraq on razor's edge between Iran and US interests in new war. Responsible Statecraft," Responsible Statecraft, June 18, 2025, https://responsiblestatecraft.org/iraq-iran-israel-war; Hadad, "Proxy battles"; AFP, "Iraq walks fine line."
[4] Louisa Loveluck and Mustafa Salim, " Why powerful pro-Tehran militias in Iraq stayed quiet amid Iran conflict," The Washington Post, June 25, 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/06/25/iraq-militias-iran-attack

Internal Power Dynamics: A Fractured Political Landscape

Iraq's internal political order remains deeply fragmented. Although Shi'a parties dominate the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, the Shi'a political sphere itself is divided. Meanwhile, PMF factions, though nominally integrated into the state since 2016, retain considerable autonomy, operating parallel military, intelligence, economic and political structures that inevitably dilute Baghdad's control over governance and state policy.[5]

These dynamics weaken the state's monopoly on force and leave the country vulnerable to regional proxy conflicts. While some PMF factions advocate for greater alignment with the state policy, others prioritise ideological loyalty to the Iran-led Axis of Resistance (AoR) over national governance.[6] Their unilateral actions frequently draw Iraq close to regional confrontations, eroding diplomatic credibility and undermining national unity.

Sunni political actors, historically marginalised since 2003, are deeply fragmented, rendered ineffective and lack a coherent common vision. Some Sunni leaders are gradually regaining influence in western Iraq, ostensibly backed by Gulf states and Turkey, and seek to counterbalance Iranian influence by challenging PMF control in Sunni-majority areas.

Kurdish parties continue to exercise autonomy in the Kurdistan Region, including in matters of foreign and security policy, though internal Kurdish rivalries limit their collective impact at the federal level. Relations between the Kurdish political actors with Shiites vary considerably while tensions between Baghdad and Erbil remain over a range of unresolved constitutional issues. Taken together, these overlapping fractures hinder the development of a coherent foreign policy, leaving Iraq susceptible to internal fragility and regional shocks, and vulnerable to external manipulation.

[5] Loveluck and Salim, "Pro-Teheran militias"; Muriel Di Dio, "Caught in Between: Iraq Amid Domestic and Regional Challenges," Italian Institute for International political Studies, April 24, 2024, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/caught-in-between-iraq-amid-domestic-and-regional-challenges-17177.

[6] Giorgio Cafiero, "Above the Fray: How Iraq and Iran-Aligned Militias Responded to the 12-Day War," Gulf International Forum, July 14, 2025, https://gulfif.org/above-the-fray-how-iraq-and-iran-aligned-militias-responded-to-the-12-day-war/; Clara May, "Beyond the unity of arenas: Understanding the agency and domestic motivations of Iraq's Shi'a resistance militants," XCEPT, March 30, 2025, https://www.xcept-research.org/beyond-the-unity-of-arenas-understanding-the-agency-and-domestic-motivations-of-iraqs-shia-resistance-militants/.

Strategic Dilemmas and Diplomatic Constraints

Iraq possesses modest but meaningful diplomatic potential. Baghdad has previously hosted pivotal mediation efforts, most notably the Iran-Saudi dialogue and the successful organisation of recent Arab Summits. It could serve again as a venue for broader regional de-escalation. However, this potential is constrained by its fragmented domestic sovereignty and the persistent influence of external powers operating through entrenched local proxies.

The government's strategic calculus is defined by three core priorities: maintaining internal stability, safeguarding economic lifelines and infrastructure development, and avoiding entanglement in regional hostilities. Yet each of these goals is increasingly difficult to sustain. Any perceived tilt toward Tehran risks alienating Western partners and threatening critical economic and security cooperation. Conversely, distancing from Iran could provoke backlash from powerful militias and further destabilise the security environment.

In recent years, AoR-aligned groups have grown increasingly assertive. They have called for the expulsion of US forces, opposed maritime agreements such as the 2012 Khor Abdullah accord with Kuwait, and rejected any normalisation with Syria's new Sunni-Islamist regime. These factions have also antagonised regional actors, including Jordan and Gulf countries, particularly in response to interceptions of Iranian missiles or diplomatic overtures toward Israel. Militarily, some AoR factions have reportedly sabotaged Iraqi radar systems, at locations such as Camp Taji and Imam Ali Base, and launched attacks on Kurdish Peshmerga forces for unclear reasons. Their threats of unilateral action against foreign and national targets further elevate the risk of Iraq becoming a battlefield for regional reprisals. Iraq's inadequate air defence systems only heighten this vulnerability.[7]

Economic Fragility and the Governance Conundrum

Iraq's economy remains acutely sensitive to regional turbulence. The country depends on oil exports, trade routes through the Gulf, electricity imports from Iran, and US military support for counterterrorism. Any disruption, such as in the Strait of Hormuz or near critical infrastructure in the south, could derail reconstruction efforts, deter investment, and exacerbate fiscal instability.

[7] Elfadil, "Iraq on razor's edge."

In keeping with his predecessors, Prime Minister Al-Sudani faces a delicate balancing act. He must manage a parliament dominated by fractious alliances, placate powerful non-state actors, and preserve strategic ties with foreign partners, all while navigating a crisis-prone region. The GoI's capacity to implement coherent policy is further weakened by institutional fragmentation and contested legitimacy, which limits its ability to respond decisively to both domestic and international crises.

Proxy Competition and External Influence

Regional powers, particularly Iran, Turkey, and the Gulf states, continue to shape Iraq's internal and external behaviour. Iran maintains the deepest footprint, supporting Shi'a armed groups, cultivating religious institutions, and leveraging media and cultural networks to maintain influence.[8] For Tehran, Iraq remains a critical buffer zone in its confrontation with the US and Israel.

Turkey, meanwhile, justifies its military presence in Kurdistan Region through anti-PKK operations and supports Sunni and Turkmen actors in other parts of Iraq, particularly in Kirkuk and Nineveh. Gulf states, although less militarily involved, utilise economic engagement and tribal networks to counter Iranian dominance and influence political developments.

These layered influences further erode Baghdad's sovereignty and complicate foreign policymaking. While Iraq remains closely tied to Iran in the energy and internal security sectors, growing nationalist and clerical dissent, especially among Najaf-based religious authorities, could drive efforts to rebalance these relationships. Yet a sudden weakening of Iran's influence may produce a destabilising vacuum, prompting militia backlash and new cycles of internal contestation.

US-Iraq cooperation, particularly in counterterrorism, remains essential but increasingly strained. Frequent attacks on US assets by Iraqi militias have sparked debates in Washington over the future of the American presence. A complete withdrawal could accelerate Iraq's descent into deeper proxy entanglement and further empower non-state actors.[9]

[8] Ranj Alaaldin, "The Iraqi Prime Minister's Tricky Balancing Act," Middle East Council on Global Affairs, January, 2025, https://mecouncil.org/publication/iraqs-prime-minister-sudanis-tricky-balancing-act.

[9] Mohammed Salih, "Iraq at a Crossroads," The National Interest, October 30, 2024, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/iraq-crossroads-213462.

Iraq's "Partial Impartiality" in the Iran-Israel Conflict

Since the outbreak of the Gaza war in October 2023, Iraq has attempted to maintain a position of biased neutrality. However, the GoI officially condemned Israeli operations in Gaza and advocated for a ceasefire, while refraining from direct military involvement. Baghdad positioned itself as a mediator during Arab-Islamic summits, seeking to de-escalate tensions.

In contrast, AoR-affiliated militias voiced solidarity with Hamas and launched sporadic attacks against US bases in Iraq and Syria, citing American support for Israel. These actions, conducted without state consent, directly challenged the GoI's policy and exposed Iraq to retaliatory risks.

Following Israel's targeting of Hizbollah, Baghdad again urged de-escalation and emphasised humanitarian concerns, while several AoR-affiliated militias threatened to intervene. Their rhetoric, coupled with logistical support to Lebanese fronts, strained Iraq's diplomatic standing with Western allies.

Remarkably, during the June 2025 12-Day War, the GoI managed to prevent Iraqi territory from being used as a launchpad and successfully kept AoR groups from engaging directly. While Iraq's airspace was violated by all parties, including Iran, Israel, and the US, the central government's combination of backchannel diplomacy and internal political pressure preserved a delicate neutrality.[10]

Still, this neutrality required rhetorical alignment with Iran. Government spokesman Bassem al-Awadi condemned Israel's offensive of 13 June as a violation of international law, and criticised the subsequent US strike on Iranian nuclear facilities.[11] While this language appeased domestic constituencies, it risked alienating Western partners and underscored Iraq's diplomatic tightrope.

[10] Neil Quilliam, "Iraq on the Sidelines of Regional Conflict," ORF Middle East, July 07, 2025, https://orfme.org/research/iraq-strategic-recalibration-iran-israel-conflict.
[11] Kurdistan 24, „Iraq Condemns Israeli Airstrikes on Iran," June 13, 2025, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/845484/iraq-condemns-israeli-airstrikes-on-iran.

Conclusion: Reclaiming Strategic Agency in a Fragmented State

Iraq's foreign policy remains at the mercy of both internal power struggles and regional geopolitics. It will remain constrained as long as internal sovereignty is contested and NSAs retain operational autonomy. The tension between formal neutrality and informal bias towards Iran encapsulates the dilemmas facing the incumbent, and future, governments.

The recent direct and indirect Israel-Iranian confrontations have all underscored Iraq's vulnerability. If regional conflict continues to escalate, Iraq risks becoming a permanent theatre for proxy warfare, its territory used for strategic signalling by actors beyond its control. Conversely, a regional de-escalation, particularly between Iran and the US, could offer Baghdad a narrow window of opportunity to reassert its central authority, integrate cooperative PMF elements, and recalibrate its foreign policy toward a more balanced pragmatism.

But without deeper political reform, institutional consolidation, and a reconfiguration of civil-military relations, Iraq's foreign policy will remain reactive, fragmented, and vulnerable to external pressures. Only by addressing the crisis of internal sovereignty can Baghdad reclaim its place as a strategic actor, rather than a passive arena, in regional geopolitics.

In short, the challenge ahead is clear: if Iraq is to preserve its sovereignty and play a constructive regional role, it must resolve the fundamental contradiction between a state-based foreign policy and the actions of NSA serving external agendas. Strengthening state institutions, enforcing a monopoly on force, and carefully navigating foreign partnerships will be crucial to ensuring that Iraq does not become a casualty or a conduit of another generation of regional warfare.

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