

MP-IDSA *Issue Brief*

PMF and Iraq's Foreign-Policy Autonomy

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Summary

Iraq's foreign-policy sovereignty is increasingly constrained by the Iran-aligned militias within the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF). The PMF's conduct in the two US–Israel wars on Iran illustrates this, wherein the choice of their response lay not with Baghdad but with the factions and with Tehran, which is one of the measures of how far Iraqi sovereignty has been eroded.

Introduction

The Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) is an umbrella body that contains dozens of armed groups. Known in Arabic as *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*, it was formed in 2014 from units with very different loyalties, and over time the Iran-aligned factions came to dominate, including Kata’ib Hezbollah, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq and the Badr Organisation. Most of Iraq’s Iran-backed armed groups operate inside this structure, though they also claim attacks under the banner of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq (IRI). These factions are the reason Iraq’s neutrality in the US–Israel wars on Iran has proved so fragile.

The Formation of the PMF

The PMF owes its existence to a religious ruling issued in a moment of emergency. On 13 June 2014, days after the Islamic State (IS) captured Mosul, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a *fatwa*, i.e., a formal opinion in Islamic law, delivered through his representative in Karbala, which required that it was the religious duty of every non-disabled Iraqi to defend the country.¹ Although the ruling was addressed to all citizens and contained no sectarian language, the men who responded to it in practice joined existing militias. The Badr Organisation, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata’ib Hezbollah, all with long ties to Iran, re-emerged with official approval and state uniforms.² The government formalised the arrangement within days by setting up the Popular Mobilisation Committee, and a force raised to meet a temporary threat thereby acquired a permanence that has long outlasted the war it was created to fight.

The Iraqi Parliament gave the force legal standing two years later, but in a way that created more problems than it solved. Law No. 40 of November 2016 designated the PMF as a component of the Iraqi armed forces and placed it under the Commander-in-Chief, i.e., the Prime Minister. Yet, it said almost nothing about how that authority was to be exercised.³ Because the law left unsettled who issued orders, who controlled the weapons and how the money was spent, it produced a paradox that has shaped Iraqi politics ever since: the PMF was absorbed into the state on paper

¹ [“Ma warada fi khutbat al-jumua li-mumaththil al-marjaiyya al-diniyya al-ulya fi Karbala al-muqaddasa al-Shaykh Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala’i”](#) (What was stated in the Friday sermon of the representative of the Supreme Religious Authority in holy Karbala, Sheikh Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala’i), Office of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, 13 June 2014. The sermon declares the defence of the country a duty “by way of collective obligation” (al-wujub al-kifai). For analysis in English, see Inna Rudolf, [“From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualising the Rise and Evolution of Iraq’s Popular Mobilisation Units”](#), ICSR, King’s College London, 2018.

² Renad Mansour, [“Networks of Power: The Popular Mobilization Forces and the State in Iraq”](#), Chatham House, February 2021.

³ Issam Saliba, [“Iraq: Legislating the Status of the Popular Mobilization Forces”](#), Library of Congress, 7 December 2016. The Arabic text appears as “Qanun Hayat al-Hashd al-Shaabi raqm (40) li-sanat 2016” (Popular Mobilisation Commission Law No. 40 of 2016), published in al-Waqai al-Iraqiyya (the Official Gazette), Issue No. 4429.

without the state ever gaining operational command over it. An attack on the PMF is therefore, in law, an attack on the Iraqi armed forces, even though the strongest units within it take their direction from Tehran rather than Baghdad.

No government since has managed to close that gap. Since 2019, the PMF Commission, headed by its chairman Falih al-Fayyadh, has pressed for a service and retirement law that would put the force on a permanent professional footing. The draft grew from 39 to more than 100 articles.⁴ The Council approved a version of the Ministers in February 2025. Still, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani withdrew it a month later under pressure from rival Shia parties and, more quietly, from Washington. One sticking point was that the law’s own retirement provision would have forced al-Fayyadh himself out.⁵

A separate and more far-reaching proposal, sometimes called the PMF authority law and first debated in parliament in March 2025, would have entrenched the force as a permanent parallel army, and it too remains unresolved. Meanwhile, the institution these laws would regulate has only grown larger: its authorised strength rose by about 95 per cent in the 2023 budget, from roughly 122,000 to 238,000 personnel, and its budget passed US\$ 3.4 billion in 2024.⁶ A force of that size, with its own members of parliament, is difficult for any Prime Minister to command, and especially so for one who depends on its political allies to keep his government in office.

The force’s reach is not only military but economic. In November 2022, the Council of Ministers approved the creation of the Muhandis General Company, a state-owned construction and engineering firm named after Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and owned by the PMF Commission. Analysts describe it as the PMF’s version of Khatam al-Anbiya, the engineering conglomerate through which Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) controls much of the Iranian economy, built to win state contracts without competitive tender.⁷ The US sanctioned the company in October 2025.⁸ Such holdings give the factions a source of revenue independent of the state budget, and so a further measure of autonomy from the government that nominally commands them.

⁴ Hamdi Malik and Michael Knights, [“Iraq’s PMF Law Is No Substitute for Real Security Reform”](#), The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 17 March 2025; see also [“The Future of the Popular Mobilization Forces Law in Iraq”](#), Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies (NESA), 2025.

⁵ [“Political Deadlock over the PMF Service and Retirement Law”](#), *Iraq Horizons*, 2025; [“al-Sudani yashabu qanun taqaud al-Hashd al-Shaabi min al-parlaman”](#) (Sudani withdraws the PMF retirement law from parliament), *Sky Press*, 11 March 2025.

⁶ Hamdi Malik and Michael Knights, [“Iraq’s PMF Law Is No Substitute for Real Security Reform”](#), no. 4.

⁷ [“The Muhandis Company: Iraq’s Khatam al-Anbia”](#), The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 21 March 2023.

⁸ [“Treasury Takes Aim at Iran-Backed Militia Groups Threatening the Safety of Americans”](#), U.S. Department of the Treasury, 9 October 2025.

Factions and Divided Loyalties

The PMF has never been a single body, and its internal divisions help explain its behaviour. The sharpest line runs between two camps. On one side stand the Iran-aligned resistance factions, tied to the Quds Force, the IRGC branch responsible for operations abroad. On the other stand the shrine units, four brigades raised by the Shia religious authorities in Najaf and Karbala: the Abbas Combat Division, Ali al-Akbar Brigade, the Imam Ali Combat Division and Ansar al-Marjaiya.

On 3 January 2020, the PMF’s deputy leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis was killed alongside the Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani in a US strike in Baghdad, and the Iran-aligned camp installed one of its own, Abdul Aziz al-Muhammadawi, known as Abu Fadak, as his successor. The four shrine brigades refused to accept him and were separated from the PMF Commission, the body that controls the force’s budget and weapons, and placed directly under the Prime Minister as Commander-in-Chief. Their departure stripped the resistance factions of much of the religious legitimacy the PMF had drawn from Najaf, leaving the Iran-aligned factions dominant within the Commission.⁹

That dominance did not translate into control. Al-Muhandis’s killing removed the one figure who had held the factions together, and in the view of close observers the PMF was left effectively leaderless, with individual factions increasingly acting on their own.¹⁰ Many now claim their attacks are perpetrated under a shared banner, the IRI, an arrangement that lets both Baghdad and the PMF leadership disown responsibility for what is done in the force’s name.¹¹ At the same time, these factions sit in parliament through the Coordination Framework, the Shia political bloc that selects the Prime Minister and that chose Sudani himself. They therefore hold weapons the government cannot control and votes it cannot ignore, and it is this combination, coercive power on the street and political leverage in parliament, that has defeated every serious attempt at reform.

The PMF in the 12-Day War

Israel launched a surprise air campaign against Iran on 13 June 2025, killing the IRGC chief, the armed forces chief of staff and several nuclear scientists.¹² The US

⁹ 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, 2020.

¹⁰ Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, [“US Kills Iran’s Qods Force Commander and Iraq’s Deputy PMF Leader in Strike in Baghdad”](#), *FDD’s Long War Journal*, 3 January 2020; [“Qassem Musleh and Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces”](#), Clingendael Institute, 2021.

¹¹ [“Who Are the Islamic Resistance in Iraq?”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 10 February 2024.

¹² [“Iran: Impacts of June 2025 Israel and US Strikes”](#), House of Commons Library, UK Parliament, 2025.

struck the enrichment sites at Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan on 22 June, and a ceasefire ended the 12-day war on 24 June.¹³ What made the episode striking was that the major PMF factions did not attack US forces at any point, and their restraint was plainly deliberate. Renad Mansour of Chatham House noted that it was the larger and better-established factions that urged the smaller pro-Iran groups to stay out, and analysts attribute this caution to three converging factors.¹⁴

The factions did not want to give Israel a reason to target their commanders, as it had done to Hezbollah in Lebanon; Iraqi elections were approaching, and the militia-linked parties stood to lose seats; and Tehran had decided to fight this round without opening an Iraqi front.¹⁵ The restraint went far enough that even Kata’ib Hezbollah, among the most hardline factions, publicly called on the government and the Coordination Framework to keep the war from spreading.¹⁶ The apparent lesson was that the PMF now had too much to lose, and that its stake in the state, the economy and electoral politics gave it strong reasons to hold back.

The PMF in the US–Israel War on Iran

The second war destroyed that conclusion within days. On 28 February 2026, the US and Israel began a far larger joint campaign against Iran, and the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was killed in its opening phase; Iranian state media confirmed his death, named his son Mojtaba as successor and declared 40 days of mourning.¹⁷ For the Iranian leadership, this was now a war of survival rather than a contained exchange, and as Tehran’s calculations changed, so did those of the Iraqi factions, whose restraint of the previous summer did not survive the shift.

This time the IRI entered the war at once. The Soufan Center recorded more than 300 missile and drone attacks by the factions against a target list that grew to include the US embassy in Baghdad, Baghdad international airport, airports in the Kurdistan Region and oil and gas facilities. In contrast, counts that take in all attacks launched against or from Iraqi territory put the number above 500.¹⁸ The US, and reportedly Israel, struck back on Iraqi soil, and by the Iraqi government’s own

¹³ [“Israel-Iran Conflict, US Strikes, and Ceasefire”](#), Congressional Research Service, 2025.

¹⁴ Mat Nashed, [“Will Iraq Integrate the Popular Mobilization Forces into the State?”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 18 August 2025.

¹⁵ Hamdi Malik and Michael Knights, [“Iraqi Militias Show Cohesion and Restraint During the Iran-Israel War”](#), The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 19 June 2025.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ [“Iran Begins 40-Day Mourning After Khamenei Killed in US-Israeli Attack”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 1 March 2026. Iranian state media confirmed the death and declared a forty-day mourning period after initial official denials.

¹⁸ [“Iraq Unable to Avoid the US-Iran Crossfire”](#); 2026 March 16 IntelBrief, Center, Soufan The [Militias and Iraq’s Role in a Multifaceted Regional War](#), Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 2026.

reckoning in early April 2026, US forces had carried out around 138 attacks inside the country, killing 73 PMF members along with Iraqi soldiers, police and civilians.¹⁹ The result was that Iraq became the only country on whose territory the US, Israel and Iran-aligned forces all fought at once, which was precisely the outcome that Sudani’s policy of balance had been designed to prevent.

Faced with this, the Prime Minister could neither restrain the factions nor distance the state from them. His appeals after Khamenei’s death went unheeded, and rather than hold the line, the government moved from restraint to endorsement. In March 2026, the National Security Council authorised the PMF to defend itself, and Sudani cast the protection of the force as a matter of state sovereignty, declaring that Iraq would respond to attacks on the PMF under the right of self-defence.²⁰ By doing so, the government made Iraq a party to the war and reversed the ordinary logic of civilian control, following the militia rather than directing it.²¹ The executive director of the Soufan Center observed that the government had become closely bound to the militias and that Iraq was therefore very likely to be drawn further in.²² A first ceasefire came in early April, followed by a 60-day understanding between the US and Iranian presidents in June, but the truce has held only loosely. On 26 June 2026, the US resumed strikes on Iran after accusing Tehran of violating the ceasefire in the Strait of Hormuz.²³

The 2026 war also turned Iraqi territory into a launching ground for attacks on Iraq’s neighbours. Factions launched drones and missiles from Iraq against Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), including a strike on the Barakah nuclear plant in Abu Dhabi.²⁴ On 25 March 2026, six Arab states jointly condemned the attacks carried out “by armed factions loyal to Iran from the Republic of Iraq” and invoked their right of self-defence under Article 51 of the

¹⁹ Iraqi government figures as reported in regional media, April 2026; see also “Militias and Iraq’s Role in a Multifaceted Regional War”, no. 18. On one such strike, see the PMF Commission statement [“Istishhad qaid amaliyyat al-Anbar Saad Dawai al-Buayji maa thullatin min rifaqih ithr darba jawwiyya amrikiyya”](#) (Martyrdom of Anbar operations commander Saad Dawai al-Buayji and a number of his comrades in a US airstrike), Hayat al-Hashd al-Shaabi, 24 March 2026, reporting fifteen members killed.

²⁰ [“Iraq to Summon US, Iran Envoys over Deadly Attacks: PM’s Office”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 24 March 2026. The Council authorised the Hashd and the security forces to confront the attacks “in accordance with the principle of the right of response and self-defence” (haqq al-radd wa-l-difa an al-nafs), while affirming that the State alone holds the decision of war and peace; the statement of the spokesman of the Commander-in-Chief was carried by the *Iraqi News Agency (INA)* and *al-Sumaria*.

²¹ [“Militias and Iraq’s Role in a Multifaceted Regional War”](#), no. 18.

²² Frud Bezhan, [“Iraq Pulled Into Iran War As Tehran Expands the Battlefield”](#), *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 2026.

²³ [“US Strikes Iran After Trump Accuses Tehran of Ceasefire Violation in Strait of Hormuz”](#), *CNBC*, 26 June 2026.

²⁴ Francesco Salesio Schiavi, [“Rese Gulf s’Iraq Jeopardize Militias Aligned-Iran”](#), Stimson Center, 6 May 2026. On the Barakah attack, see [s’UAE Targeted Drones Proxy s’Tehran How Militias: Backed-Iran s’Iraq Inside”](#) [“States Gulf and Plant Nuclear Barakah”](#), *Gulf News*, 20 May 2026.

UN Charter.²⁵ That right was exercised on 28 July and 29 July 2026, when Saudi Arabia joined the US in striking PMF positions across Iraq, in Riyadh’s first openly acknowledged strikes on Iraqi territory in the war. US Central Command said the strikes were a response to more than 30 IRGC-directed drone attacks on US forces and Saudi oil facilities over the preceding three days. The PMF reported at least 20 fighters killed and 32 wounded and called the strikes a violation of Iraqi sovereignty. Baghdad insisted that it had neither approved the strikes nor known of them in advance, convened an emergency meeting of the Ministerial Council for National Security and tasked the Foreign Ministry with asserting Iraq’s rights under international law.²⁶

Set side by side, the two wars have more in common than their opposite outcomes suggest. In each case Iraq’s declared policy was neutrality, and in each case the decision that actually mattered, whether Iraq would fight, was taken not in Baghdad but by the factions and their backers in Tehran. What changed between 2025 and 2026 was the decision itself rather than who made it: staying out suited the factions and fitted Iran’s strategy in the first war, and ceased to do so in the second, once the Iranian leadership judged its own survival to be at stake. Table 1 sets out the contrast.

Table 1. The PMF across the Two Wars on Iran

	June 2025 war (12 days)	2026 war (from February)
PMF posture	Restraint; the major factions did not strike US forces	Rupture; the factions joined the war
Attacks linked to Iraq	None by the major factions	Estimates range from 300 to over 500 missile and drone attacks
US, Saudi and reported Israeli strikes on Iraq	None	About 138 US attacks and roughly 73 PMF members killed by early April, per Iraqi government figures; joint US and Saudi strikes on 28 July and 29 July killed at least 20 more, per the PMF.

²⁵ [“Joint Statement by the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan on Iran’s Attacks”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, United Arab Emirates, 25 March 2026.

²⁶ Ali Mustafa, [“Iraq Calls Saudi-US Attacks a ‘Flagrant Violation of Sovereignty’”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 29 July 2026; [“Why Did Riyadh Join US Strikes on Tehran’s Allies in Iraq?”](#), *France 24*, 31 July 2026.

Baghdad’s response	Neutrality held	Authorised PMF self-defence in March; condemned the July strikes as a violation of sovereignty
Effect on autonomy	Preserved, by the factions’ own choice	Overridden; Iraq drawn into the war

Source: Author’s compilation from the references cited in this section.

Baghdad’s answer to this has been to go after the weapons themselves. A disarmament drive gathered pace through 2026, and groups linked to Moqtada al-Sadr disbanded or pledged to hand over their arsenals. Still, Kata’ib Hezbollah and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba refused until US forces leave Iraq entirely.²⁷ The task now falls to Ali al-Zaidi, who took office on 14 May 2026 with the defence and interior ministries vacant, leaving the Commander-in-Chief without security portfolios.²⁸

Conclusion

Both wars point back to the same institutional weakness. Law No. 40 made the PMF part of the armed forces but never settled who issues its orders or controls its weapons and money, and the force has since built businesses and a bloc in parliament of its own. This mix of arms and votes has defeated every attempt at reform since 2016, and it decided both wars. In 2025, the PMF held back because it suited its interests, not because the government ordered it; in 2026, once Iran’s survival was at stake, the same factions acted without regard for Baghdad. In neither case was the decision Baghdad’s to make.

The cost is no longer Iraq’s alone. After factions struck Iraq’s neighbours, six Arab states claimed the right to strike back, and in July 2026 Saudi Arabia did so alongside the US. Whether Baghdad can now succeed where it has failed since 2016 remains the open question. If the strongest factions keep their weapons, Iraq is likely to be drawn again into wars it has not chosen. Iraqi stability now rests on whether the Iraqi state can finally contain the force it long ago agreed to honour.

²⁷ [“Iraq’s Drive to Disarm Militias Could Stall After Hardliners Demand US Military Exit”](#), *The National*, 4 June 2026.

²⁸ [“A New President and Prime Minister for Iraq: What Challenges Face the Country in 2026?”](#), House of Commons Library, UK Parliament, 2026.

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