

IRAQ'S FIFTH COLUMN

IRAN'S PROXY NETWORK





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MEI Policy Paper 2017-#2



Iraq's Fifth Column: Iran's Proxy Network

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Middle East Institute
Counterterrorism Series



ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|----------|-------------------------------------|
| C.I.A. | CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY |
| F.I.D. | FOREIGN INTERNAL DEFENSE |
| I.R.G.C. | ISLAMIC REVOLUTIONARY GRAUD CORPS |
| ISIS | THE ISLAMIC STATE IN IRAQ AND SYRIA |
| M.P. | MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT |
| P.M.U. | POPLULAR MOBILIZATION UNITS |
| SWAT | SPEACIALIZED WEAPONS AND TACTICS |

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SUMMARY

As Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (I.R.G.C.) campaigns against ISIS, the Islamic Republic is strengthening its Shiite militia proxy networks in Iraq. The I.R.G.C.'s expeditionary wing, the Quds Force, is using political connections in the Iraqi government and historical links to veteran Shiite groups to influence Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (P.M.U.s). P.M.U. groups that express support for Khomeini's wilayat-al faqih and hold the closest ties to the Quds Force are led by commanders that worked with the Quds Force as fighters in the Islamic Resistance of the 1980s and 1990s. However, Iran's extensive Shiite militia network does not extend to all P.M.U.s. Differences amongst P.M.U. groups will shape the future of Iraqi Shiite socio-political development as P.M.U. groups transition from active militia activity to participation in mass politics.

KEY FINDINGS

- ◆ 40 of an estimated 67 P.M.U. militias are believed to share close links with Iran's Quds Force, the largest being Badr Organization, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Kata'ib Hezbollah.
- ◆ The I.R.G.C.'s approach in Iraq is a concerted long-term strategy, which dates back to the early 1980s when it shaped armed internal resistance to Saddam Hussein's regime.
- ◆ P.M.U.s groups with the closest ties to the I.R.G.C. are led by commanders that were active in the Quds Force-supported opposition to U.S. military presence in the 2000s.
- ◆ Many pro Quds Forces-P.M.U.s share close ties with the Shiite political base.
- ◆ The role of P.M.U.s in mass politics in Iraq remains unclear and complex, given that many—but not all—P.M.U. groups support the institution of wilayat al-faqih, or Rule of the Jurisprudent, in Iraq and hold links to armed movements that support Iraqi political actors.



INTRODUCTION

Iraq is again becoming a critical site of contestation for influence in the Middle East between the United States and Iran, as the Trump administration and its regional partners seek to confront Iran's destabilizing activities in the region. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (I.R.G.C.), and its expeditionary branch, the Quds Force, are utilizing the campaign against the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq to expand Iran's proxy network of predominately Shiite militias, based on the model of Hezbollah, across the Middle East.¹ The Quds Force's growing network of loyal Iraqi Shiite militias is being integrated, particularly via the Syrian civil war, into a larger, multi-national force that can be activated and used around the Middle East to support Iranian national security policy goals.

An important recruitment pool for the Quds Force's proxy network is Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (P.M.U.s), a network of militias that is officially part of the Iraqi government's security apparatus and under the prime minister's authority. The P.M.U.s are shaped by the policy decisions made by their Deputy Commissioner Jamal Ja'far Muhammad Ali Ibrahim—*a.k.a.* Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis—one of the most important Iraqi Quds Force operatives. With the support of Muhandis and other Iraqi Shiite veterans of the Islamic Resistance Movement that was established to overthrow Saddam Hussein's government in the 1980s and 1990s, the Quds Force is building powerful networks of influence within the country that will have a strong impact on Iraq's future.

As the conflict against ISIS shifts to the stabilization phase in Iraq, the militias within the state that are backed by the Quds Force will continue to position themselves as powerbrokers within the Iraqi Shiite community. The transition from the P.M.U.s being a force for the mobilization of militias to being participants in mass politics will be highly important in defining the future dynamics of politicking within the Iraqi Shiite community. This transition will also test the Quds Force's ability to utilize Iraq as a talent incubator for its trans-national network. This paper analyzes the historical process through which the Quds Force has shaped Iraqi Shiite militant networks, and the impact that these shaping efforts are having on the development of the P.M.U.s.



THE P.M.U.s—A SECURITY STRUCTURE BEING BUILT TO LAST

Since July 2014, it is estimated that 67 constituent militias have been raised under the P.M.U. umbrella, of which 40 militias are believed to be closely tied to the Quds Force.² Analysts believe that most of the P.M.U. constituent militias and fighters come from Iraq's Shiite community, although the P.M.U. militias have also been raised from Iraq's Sunni, Christian, Yazidi, Turkmen communities during the counter-ISIS campaign.³

The Iraqi government estimates that there are 110,000-122,000 P.M.U. fighters, a figure that it arrives at due to the government's obligation to pay the salaries of the P.M.U. members.⁴ Despite this large mobilization, it is estimated that 70,000-90,000 P.M.U. fighters have been deployed, ranging from checkpoint duty to actual combat, either in Iraq or in Syria.⁵ Of this total, an estimated 50,000 P.M.U. fighters are mobilized in organizations that are under the influence of the Quds Force, particularly within the three largest I.R.G.C.-backed organizations—the,

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Kata'ib Hezbollah.⁶

Although the role of the P.M.U. network is now formalized within Iraq's national security architecture, the long-term impact of the P.M.U.s on the mass politics of Iraq,

50,000 P.M.U. fighters are mobilized in organizations under the influence of the Quds Force...

particularly in the Shiite community, is unclear.⁷ Formally, the law that made the P.M.U.s an official Iraqi government organization states that the P.M.U.s are to be apolitical, non-sectarian, and separate from non-governmental militia forces.⁸ However, the most powerful of the P.M.U. groups are still linked to armed movements that support powerful Iraqi political actors, such as Moqtada al-Sadr or Ammar al-Hakim, are proxies for the Quds Force and support the institution of the wilayat al-faqih—rule of the jurisprudent—in Iraq.⁹ Wilayat al-faqih governs Iran's Islamic Republic.¹⁰

It remains an open question whether the militia mobilization that has occurred through the P.M.U. system will also serve as a vehicle for mass politics, particularly within the Shiite community, in Iraq's upcoming provincial elections and parliamentary elections, currently scheduled for April 2018.



A HISTORY OF QUDS FORCE PROXY-SHAPING IN IRAQ

The Quds Force is fundamentally an organization that conducts irregular warfare, often combining asymmetric warfare and Foreign Internal Defense (F.I.D.). Not dissimilar to the U.S. Army’s Special Forces, the Quds Force operates in foreign countries and seeks to follow a “whole country” strategy that blends socio-politics and warfare.¹¹ Iraq and, since 2011, Syria are important arenas for the Quds Force to maintain friendly regime partners. The Quds Force upholds positive relationships through its F.I.D. operations, which facilitate the Quds Force’s mission to spread Khomeini’s Islamic Revolution across the Middle East.

In Iraq, the P.M.U.s represent a contemporary growth opportunity for the Quds Force, which allow it to identify, mobilize, and when necessary, cultivate a future generation of operatives

I.R.G.C. investment in the Iraqi Shiite population... dates back to the early 1980s.

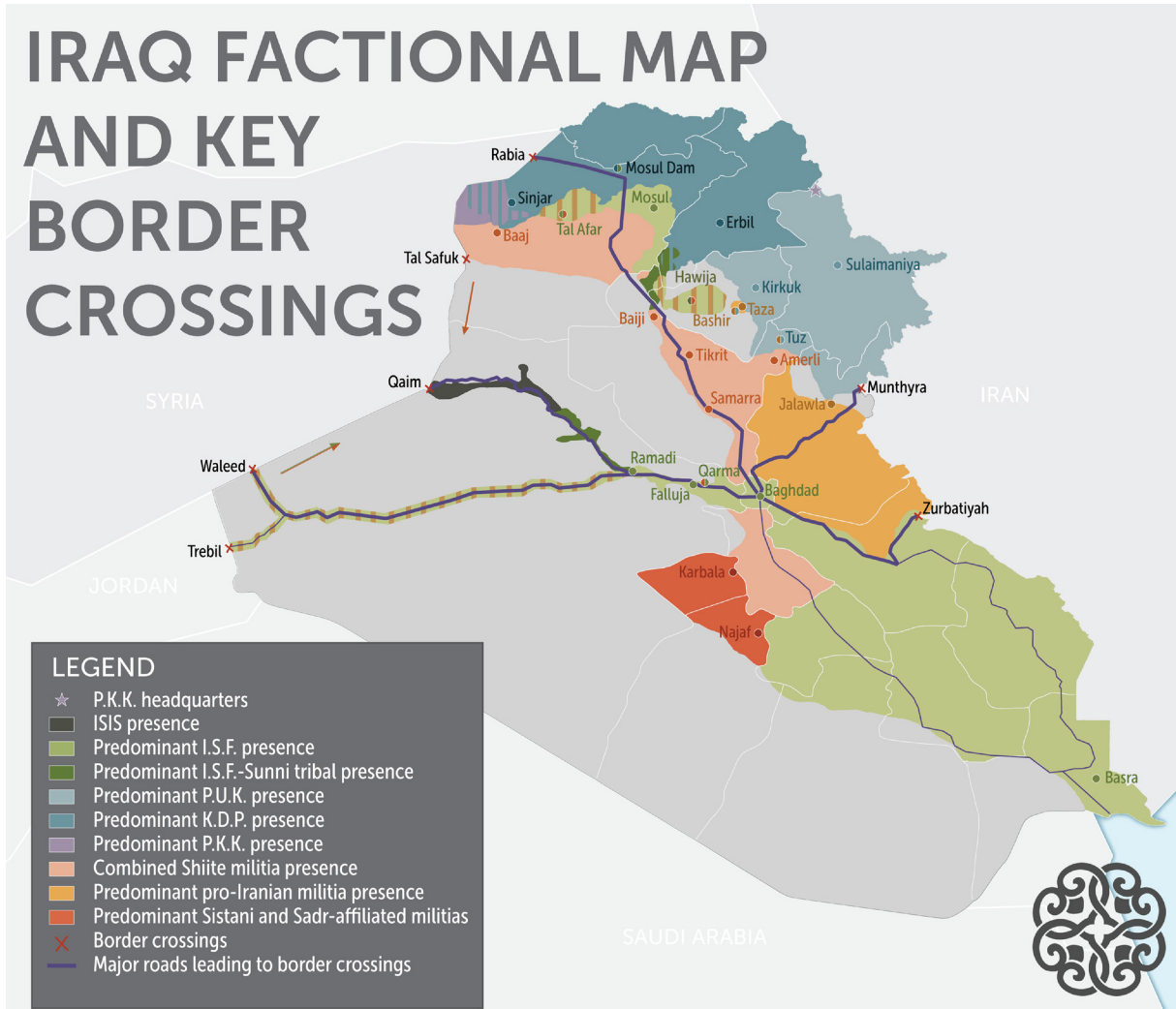
for its regional proxy network. Qassem Solaimani, the leader of the Quds Force, minced few words in describing his and his organization’s view on the importance of their proxy network to protect Iran from its enemies.

“No force or country except for Iran is capable of leading the Muslim world today due to Iran’s support for revolutionary and Islamic movements and fighters as well as its defense of Muslims against aggressors.”¹²

I.R.G.C. investment in the Iraqi Shiite population as a recruitment ground for the battle to spread Ayatollah Khomeini’s vision across the region dates back to the early 1980s. Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in September 1980, and Khomeini called for a pan-Islamic revolution to defeat Saddam Hussein and the regional and international governments that backed him. To achieve this national security objective, the I.R.G.C. created and empowered the Quds Force to build a strong organizational network between Iranian elite Shiite clerics, the I.R.G.C., and a nascent, external proxy militia network.¹³



FIGURE 1: IRAQ FACTIONAL MAP



At that time, the young Islamic Republic sought opportunities to subvert the Saddam regime. The I.R.G.C. was empowered by Khomeini to spread the Islamic Revolution throughout the Middle East, starting with Iraq and Lebanon, and the I.R.G.C. established an “Office of Liberation Movements” to achieve this goal. Eventually falling under the mandate of the Quds Force, the Office of Liberation Movements sought to provide military, ideological, and political training (shaping operations) to build a loyal proxy network—Lebanon’s Hezbollah being the prime example, and now serving as the model for replications elsewhere.

Therefore, the Quds Force’s interest in Iraq is not new, and the country has been a long-time proving ground for the I.R.G.C. effort to establish its proxy network. Since the early 1980s, Iraqi Shiite operatives have supported Khomeini’s message to spread the Islamic Revolution, both inside and outside of Iraq. The first generation of non-ethnic Iranian, Arab leadership of the proxy network was nurtured within the Iraqi Shiite, “Islamic Resistance”



armed opposition movement against Saddam during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War. The Islamic Resistance movement was a product of these shaping operations, and it was through this effort that the Quds Force was able to establish a deep network of influence within the security structures of the Iraqi state post-2003.¹⁴

The P.M.U. groups that currently have the closest relationship with the I.R.G.C. are led by commanders that began as fighters within the Islamic Resistance of the 1980s and 1990s, continued to be active in the Quds Force-supported armed opposition to the U.S. military presence in Iraq from 2003-2011, supported the Shiite jihad in the Syrian civil war, and are now working to implement wilayat al-faqih in Iraq. The Islamic Resistance was a formative period for

The Islamic Resistance was a formative period for many of the prominent I.R.G.C.-backed P.M.U. commanders.

many of the prominent I.R.G.C.-backed P.M.U. commanders, most of whom were young men that were active in the armed opposition against Saddam Hussein in the 1980s and 1990s. These commanders include Shaykh Auws al-Khafaji (Quwat Abu Fadhil al-Abbas), Shaykh Akram al-Ka'abi (Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba'), and Ali al-Yasseri (Saraya al-Khorasani).¹⁵

Although the Islamic Resistance was ultimately unsuccessful in overthrowing Saddam Hussein or cutting short the Iran-Iraq War, it did provide the Quds Force with a legacy network of young, motivated Iraqi Shiite operatives.¹⁶

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003 and the subsequent toppling of Iran's fiercest regional rival was considered a great opportunity for the Quds Force to expand its influence in Iraq and direct Iraq's politics to benefit Iran.¹⁷

According to former C.I.A. operative Robert Baer, shortly after Saddam was deposed, Iraqi Shiite operatives that were mobilized during the Islamic Resistance movement in the 1980s and 1990s and had subsequently joined the Quds Force's network and worked with Lebanese Hezbollah began returning to Iraq. Baer states that the Iraqi operatives' objective were to continue to enact the I.R.G.C.'s strategy of controlling Iraq. In order to fulfill this mission, they sought to develop proxy militias, indoctrinate a new generation of Iraqi Shiite operatives, and win revolutionary legitimacy by contesting the U.S. presence in the country through asymmetric warfare.¹⁸



The I.R.G.C. strategy to submerge Iraq under Iranian political control had reached such a point by 2004 that the Coalition Provisional Authority head, Paul Bremer, referred to it as a “concentrated long-term strategy.” Bremer recommended to then-U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld that Coalition forces act aggressively to capture Quds Force operatives in Iraq and close the Iranian embassy in Baghdad.¹⁹ Quds Force operatives frequently utilized the homes of powerful Iraqi Shiite politicians such as Abdul Aziz al-Hakim to coordinate the Quds Force’s Iraqi proxy militias and plan attacks against U.S.-led forces.²⁰ The success of the Quds Force’s Iraqi Shiite proxy militias motivated the U.S. Department of Treasury to designate the Quds Force as a Special Designated Global Terrorist on October 25, 2007 and its liaison in Iraq, Abdul Reza Shalai, as an individual supporting terrorism on September 16, 2008.²¹

The I.R.G.C. was not in complete control of the Iraqi Shiite armed opposition to the U.S.-led Coalition, and has been forced to compete with a range of local Iraqi clerical and political actors for influence within that community. However, the Quds Force’s current success in infiltrating the P.M.U.s rests on the power and influence that its Iraqi operatives, most

important among them Muhandis, developed during the early 2000s. The success of the Quds Force in shaping operations and providing financial and military support for Shiite armed opposition groups has enabled its Iraqi operatives to become powerbrokers, despite the efforts of U.S. military forces.

“The [Iranian] ambassador to Iraq is a Quds Force member.”
-Qassam Solaimani

Demonstrating the reach and effectiveness of the I.R.G.C. in Iraq, Solaimani is reported to have sent U.S. General David Petraeus a text message in 2007 that read:

“General Petraeus, you should know that I, Qassam Solaimani, control policy for Iran with respect to Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza, and Afghanistan. The [Iranian] ambassador to Iraq is a Quds Force member. The individual who is going to replace him is a Quds Force member.”²²

Muhandis was the decisive agent in the Quds Force’s Iraq operations, particularly in supporting the armed opposition campaign of the Special Groups from 2007-2010.²³ During that period, U.S. officials asserted that Muhandis was Solaimani’s envoy in Iraq, and that Solaimani used him to relay messages to Iraqi politicians, including all the way up



the hierarchy to Nouri al-Maliki.²⁴ For his part, Muhandis, in an April 2017 interview on Iranian television, stated that he was, “a soldier of Haj Qassam [Solaimani].” This statement demonstrated the lines of influence that the Quds Force has established at the highest levels of the Iraqi security infrastructure and the P.M.U.s.²⁵

Iran’s proxy network in Iraq, with the active support and encouragement of the I.R.G.C., was intimately involved in the development of the P.M.U.s prior to the Islamic State’s conquest of Mosul in June 2014. This effort, which led to the formation of the “Sons of Iraq” organization in the winter of 2014, was spearheaded by then Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and Iranian proxy groups including Faylaq al-Badr, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata’ib Hezbollah, and Jaysh al-Mukhtar.²⁶ The Sons of

Iraq, whose existence was first reported in March 2014, was created to fight against the rising Sunni armed opposition, including ISIS, in western Iraq. Both

The relationship between Muhandis and Solaimani actively shaped the P.M.U.s.

the Sons of Iraq and its successor, the P.M.U.s, were designed by Maliki and the proxy militias to be Iranian, Islamic Republic-style basij militia networks inside of Iraq.²⁷

The relationship between Muhandis and Solaimani actively shaped the P.M.U.s as they were being built up. In June 2014, Muhandis was appointed by Maliki as the deputy commissioner on the prime minister’s Commission on the Popular Mobilization.²⁸ Muhandis states that shortly after the fall of Mosul, Solaimani was sent to Iraq and the two leaders liaised with Kurdish peshmerga commanders in Erbil, and received Lebanese Hezbollah trainers that were then sent to Iraq to support the P.M.U.s’ counter ISIS campaign.²⁹

Following ISIS’s capture of Mosul, and under the supervision of Solaimani, Quds Force operatives and highly experienced Iraqi senior militia operatives from Faylaq al-Badr, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata’ib Hezbollah, and Jaysh al-Mukhtar trained and coordinated constituent militias in the nascent the P.M.U.s.³⁰ Even groups that were not part of Iran’s proxy network were subordinated to the Quds Force and its operatives. These groups included Sadr’s Saraya al-Salam (Peace Brigades) and the P.M.U. militias organized in the shrine city of Karbala such as Liwa Ali al-Akbar (Ali al-Akbar Brigade, organized by the Imam Husayn Mosque) and Firqa al-Abbas al-Qataliyya (al-Abbas Fighting Division, organized by the Al-Abbas



Mosque).³¹ This training process was a continuation of the proxy network’s strategy to infiltrate Iraq’s internal security forces, including its SWAT forces, in order to solidify I.R.G.C. influence in Iraq, as Baghdad grappled with the immense challenge presented by ISIS.³²

THE P.M.U.s, OR HEZBOLLAH 4.0, WALKING ON THE PATH OF THE WILAYAT AL-FAQIH

The history of the Quds Force’s activities in Iraq sowed the seeds of support for the establishment of an Islamic Republic in Iraq, in close connection with Iran, and in obedience to Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.³³ Since the start of the Syrian civil war, and the threat to the important Shiite shrines in the southern Damascus suburbs, obedience to the supreme leader has also come to mean jihad in protection of the broader Shiite population, wherever it is located.

Proxy groups in Iraq such as Faylaq al-Badr, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, and Kata’ib Hezbollah, as well as their splinter groups, have been incorporated into this latest “sacred defense” mission. By encouraging the jihad in Syria, the Quds Force has been able to identify and build influence over a new generation of Iraqi Shiite leaders, many of whom have joined the P.M.U.s. This progress will sustain the Quds Force’s proxy network for its future, transnational operations.³⁴

However, distinction should be made between the Shiite P.M.U. militias that support the

Whether groups support... wilayat al-faqih or not, a narrative of resistance is widespread.

imposition of wilayat al-faqih in Iraq and those that do not. Shiite P.M.U. militias can be Shiite Islamist in their ideological outlook while simultaneously supporting the current Iraqi state and pan-

sectarian peace in the country, such as is espoused by Sadr’s Saraya al-Salam.³⁵ These two factors do not necessarily contradict with one-another. Regardless of whether groups support the imposition of wilayat al-faqih or not, a narrative of resistance is widespread and important in the intra-Shiite politics of Iraq, and is woven into the ideology that motivates all P.M.U. militias. This resistance narrative does not necessarily imply support for “Khomeinism.”



Nevertheless, constituent groups within the P.M.U.s that are led by commanders who support the institution of the wilayat al-faqih or that have significant numbers of pro-wilayat al-faqih rank-and-file represent a growth pool of recruitment for the Quds Force's proxy network.

These groups that are controlled or significantly influenced by the I.R.G.C. categorically support the institution of the wilayat al-faqih in Iraq. At this point, the Quds Force has developed the fourth generation of its proxy network in Iraq and is currently nurturing the forces to support the imposition of the wilayat al-faqih in Iraq. The first and second generations of this network consisted of the Shiite armed opposition organizations that were organized inside the Islamic Resistance and emerged from the Dawa Party and the Badr Organization in

These groups that are controlled...by the I.R.G.C. categorically support the institution of the wilayat al-faqih in Iraq.

the 1980s and 1990s. The third generation of the Quds Force Iraq network was composed of Shiite Iraqi "Special Groups," the majority of which splintered off of Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi between 2007-2010, such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and Jaysh al-Mukhtar.

The fourth generation is made up of organizations that developed from Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah to wage jihad in Syria and groups formed by veteran Islamic Resistance leaders who were motivated to contribute to the defense of Iraq against ISIS after June 2014. A significant number of Iraq's fourth generation network groups were first mobilized to protect the Shiite shrines in Syria. These groups included Quwat Abu al-Fadhal al-Abbas (Abu al-Fadhal al-Abbas Force), Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba' (Movement of the Outstanding Ones of the Party of God), Saraya al-Khorasani (Khorasani Brigade), Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada' (Lord of the Martyrs Brigade), Liwa' Zulfiqar (Zulfiqar Brigade), Liwa' Ammar Ibn Yassir (Ammar Ibn Yassir Brigade), and Liwa' al-Yum al-Mawud (Brigade of the Promised Day).³⁶ Most of these groups also currently participate in the P.M.U.s' structure, while maintaining an expeditionary arm that fights alongside Bashar al-Assad's forces in Syria. Other pro-Iranian network groups in Iraq such as Kata'ib al-Imam Ali (Imam Ali Brigades) and Liwa Jund al-Imam (Soldiers of the Imam Brigade) were raised after the fall of Mosul to ISIS in June 2014, and are now starting to develop expeditionary forces to send to Syria.



Currently, the three most prominent proxy network groups in Hashd Shaab are Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Saraya al-Khorasani, and Quwat Abu Fadhil al-Abbas, all of which are led by commanders who were operatives for the Quds Force's Islamic Resistance in the 1980s

Hizb al-Tali'a al-Islamiyya is...slowly gaining power in the southern Iraqi provinces of Dhi Qar and Karbala.

and 1990s. Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, led by Akram al-Ka'abi with an estimated 4,000 fighters, began as a Special Group that developed from the larger Kata'ib Hezbollah organization. It is now

used as an expeditionary force that is frequently deployed to Syria. Saraya al-Khorasani, led by Ali al-Yasseri with an estimated 3,500 fighters, is associated with the political movement, Hizb al-Tali'a al-Islamiyya (Islamic Vanguard Party), which works toward the implementation of the wilayat al-faqih through the Iraqi political process. Hizb al-Tali'a al-Islamiyya is closely associated with Saraya al-Khorasani and is aligned with the objectives of the Quds Force. The party is gaining power in the southern Iraqi provinces of Dhi Qar and Karbala. Quwat Abu Fadhil al-Abbas, led by Auws al-Khafaji with an estimated 2,000 fighters, has an expeditionary force that is also frequently deployed to Syria. The group is aggressively seeking to participate in the counter-ISIS campaign in Iraq's Ninewah province with a focus on seizing territory on the Iraqi-Syrian border.³⁷

Other independent P.M.U. groups are also targets for influence and recruitment by the I.R.G.C., particularly Saraya al-Jihad (Jihad Brigade) and Kata'ib al-Risali (Missionaries' Brigades), led by Members of the Iraqi Parliament Hassan al-Sari and Adnan al-Shahmani, respectively. With a combined estimated strength of 10,000 fighters—5,000 in each group—Sarayah al-Jihad and Kata'ib al-Risali are among the most powerful non-Iranian proxy network, non-Sadrists groups in the P.M.U.s.³⁸ Kata'ib al-Risali has absorbed a large component of Liwa al-Sayyida Shuhada, a pro-Iranian group, so as to benefit from the fighting expertise that estimated hundreds of Liwa al-Sayyida Shuhada members earned in combat in Syria.

Both led by Iraqi M.P.s, Sarayah al-Jihad and Kata'ib al-Risali are examples of how Iraqi Shiite politicians have also used the P.M.U.s to mobilize militias to advance their socio-political power. The leaders of these two groups do not support the imposition of wilayat



al-faqih in Iraq, but both leaders maintain a good working relationship with Muhandis. Both groups also have constituent militias that are favorable to wilayat al-faqih and follow Khamenei as their marja' al-taqlid, or source of emulation. It is therefore possible for the Quds Force, through the role of individuals such as Muhandis as deputy commissioner of the P.M.U.s, to build networks among the rank-and-file of individual P.M.U. groups including Saraya al-Jihad and Kata'ib al-Risali. As result network development is possible, even when the leaders of those groups do not actively promote wilayat al-faqih. Because of its absorption of the pro-Iranian network group, Liwa al-Sayyida Shuhada, Saraya al-Jihad is a particularly inviting target for I.R.G.C. cooptation.³⁹

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF IRAQ

Iraq is a key focus in the Quds Force's mission to protect the Iranian homeland. Strong I.R.G.C. influence over Iraq also provides an opportunity for Iran to achieve several important foreign policy objectives. Fundamentally, the I.R.G.C.'s purpose since its founding has been to achieve Khomeini's vision of Iran as leader of the Islamic world. Iraq was the young Islamic Republic's first target in its effort to spread a pan-sectarian Islamic Revolution beyond the borders of Iran.⁴⁰

Due to regional geopolitics, for the time being Iran is limited to seeking control over the politics of Shiite-majority areas; in years to come it will focus on the larger mission of becoming the leader of the Islamic world. The P.M.U.s provide the I.R.G.C. with capability to prevent a repeat of the June 2014 security debacle in Mosul, which threatened the Iranian homeland. Quds Force influence over the P.M.U.s also provides the I.R.G.C. with the ability to shape the power dynamics of Iraqi Shiite politics, and thereby influence the socio-politics of the largest ethnically Arab Shiite population.

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However, the Quds Force's ability to control the P.M.U.s, and therefore major security structures of the Iraqi state, will not be uncontested, particularly from within the Shiite community. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who opposes the implementation of the wilayat



al-faqih in Iraq, will also be a constraining factor on the ability of the I.R.G.C. to assert its dominance over intra-Iraqi Shiite politics. Sistani's personal authority as the popular source of emulation for many Iraqi Shiites, combined with his heretofore resistance against the concept of wilayat al-faqih, presents a social and political challenge to P.M.U. groups backed by the Quds Force. Sistani's position could stunt the efforts of these P.M.U.s to use their participation in the counter-ISIS campaign to build the social capital needed to establish themselves as political movements within the Shiite community in Iraq, in the manner of Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Further, the I.R.G.C. may decide not to actively support the political efforts of the P.M.U. groups that are seeking to implement wilayat al-faqih, so as to avoid stoking greater tension within the Shiite community and between Shiite and Sunni communities. Iraq's stability and territorial integrity is a national security objective for policymakers in Tehran. To prevent

The I.R.G.C. is seeking to build stability in Iraq by alleviating Iraqi Sunni grievances.

communal violence in Iraq that would benefit ISIS or a successor organization, the I.R.G.C. could demand the cessation of controversial political activities of its proxy P.M.U. groups. This would include requiring the P.M.U. groups to stand down from participating in municipal

elections, and to refrain from running candidates in parliamentary elections. The I.R.G.C. is seeking to build stability in Iraq by alleviating Iraqi Sunni grievances. In an attempt to accomplish that objective, the I.R.G.C. could decide to support inter-communal dialogues as a process of national reconciliation, through the initiative of Sistani and the clerical establishment in Najaf and Karbala.⁴¹

The Quds Force-backed P.M.U. groups are also challenged in their objective to establish wilayat al-faqih in Iraq by Moqtada al-Sadr's Saraya al-Salam and groups such as Liwa Ali al-Akbar and Firqa al-Abbas al-Qataliyya. These groups are mobilized and funded by organizations tied to the prominent Shiite shrines in Najaf and Karbala, and are closer socially and politically to Sistani and his allies than the Quds Force. These shrine-backed groups have sought independence from the P.M.U. chain-of-command, and have even



attempted to receive support and funding from the defense ministry rather than from the Badr Organization-dominated interior ministry.⁴² Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has the opportunity, through the shrine-backed groups and Saraya al-Salam, to reduce the strength of the Quds Force-backed groups in the P.M.U.s.

Saraya al-Salam, under the command of Sadr's deputy, Kazim Hassan al-Issawi, supports Sadr's policy of a pan-sectarian, Iraqi nationalist political platform that is meant to counterweight the I.R.G.C.⁴³ Sadr's vision of a pan-sectarian, Iraqi nationalist political platform will be highly consequential to this simmering dispute, as his vision is also aims to oppose the Quds Force's promotion of wilayat al-faqih. This dynamic demonstrates the complexity of socio-politics of identity within the P.M.U.s. It also points to the looming and potentially violent competition between two main P.M.U. camps: groups that are close to the Quds Force and want to impose wilayat al-faqih, and groups that oppose that end state. The outcome of this intra-Shiite conflict is likely to have a decisive effect on the socio-politics of the Iraqi Shiite community and the future of Iraqi national politics, particularly regarding inter-communal harmony and the country's territorial integrity.

Since 2003, and particularly in the post-June 2014 period, the Quds Force has taken a "let a thousand flowers bloom" approach to shaping the socio-political development of Iraqi Shiite militia groups that are now incorporated into the state-sponsored P.M.U.s. As in the period between 2007-2010, when the Quds Force actively supported Special Groups operations while shaping their ideological development, the I.R.G.C. now has an officially Baghdad-sponsored opportunity to continue to seed its Iraqi operatives in the P.M.U.s. The overarching objective of the Quds Force strategy is to continually develop networks of influence, so as to identify, recruit, and mobilize future fighters for a regional proxy network, while making it difficult to root out the Islamic Resistance from Iraqi state security structures.



ENDNOTES

1. This a process that the analyst Phillip Smyth refers to as building the Quds Force's "Foreign Legion of Sorts." Smyth, Phillip. "Testimony of Phillip Smyth, Research Analyst at the University of Maryland-Laboratory for Computational Cultural Dynamics-House Foreign Affairs Committee-Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade-Hearing on Terrorist Groups in Syria." November 20, 2013.
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