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Popular: The Monopoly of Force and Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units

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Introduction/Research Question

A monopoly on violence is often considered one of the key characteristics of a state, if not the defining feature. The existence of government-supported militias worldwide contradicts this view, leaving the question of why a state would choose to outsource force to external groups. In Iraq, for example, the mostly-Shiite militias that make up *al-Hashd al-Sha'abi*, translated as the Popular Mobilization, operate with the support of the state, which, until their legal incorporation into the Iraqi military structure in 2016, contradicted a constitutional prohibition against "the formation of military militia outside the framework of the armed forces" (Washington Post 2015). Despite their current status as part of the state security apparatus, questions about the allegiances of the militias, many of whom have expressed loyalty to Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, show the risks to state sovereignty that come with outsourcing the use of force.

The exact nature of the Hashd's relationship to the Iraqi state has changed frequently during the lifetime of the component militias and of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) as an organization. Currently, the PMUs are legally affiliated with the state as a distinct branch of the military under the Ministry of Defense. According to a 2016 law, they are under the control of the prime minister, and as such, the designation of the Hashd as a nongovernment entity may seem incorrect (Iraqi Parliament 2016). There are several reasons why the militias make for a good case study in this context.

First, PMUs only recently reached their current level of integration into the state after years of independent operations—the Jaysh al-Mahdi, for example, fought against the Iraqi state and U.S. forces in the early 2000s before its tenuous membership in the PMUs. Second, there is reason to believe the Hashd's pledges of loyalty to the state may not be entirely sincere. Although some Iraqi political and religious figures have pushed

for the PMUs to be dissolved and their members incorporated into existing military units, the militias have preserved their leadership and organizational structures (Mansour and Jaba 2017). As a result, the component militias of the Hashd have maintained independence to pursue their political objectives, some of which appear to be more in line with Tehran than Baghdad (Ibid.). Third, although the 2016 law forbids Hashd leaders from running for political office, several are expected to seek the position of prime minister in next year's elections by transitioning out of militia leadership and into linked political parties. These issues highlight the risks pro-government militias pose to the state: They may wield their violent power against the state, they may pursue objectives that are in opposition to state policy, and their power may be leveraged to wrest political influence from state leaders. For these reasons, the Iraqi government's relationship with the Hashd is helpful in understanding governments' motivations for supporting paramilitaries.

Given these problems, why did the Iraqi state choose to support the PMUs, when doing so meant weakening its control over a critical state function? Baghdad has chosen to support the militias because of the weakness of the state military in the face of the Islamic state, sectarianism, and the influence of Iran.

Literature Review

According to Max Weber (1965), a monopoly on the legitimate use of force is the defining characteristic of a state, which uses violence to maintain its dominance over sub-state interests. The existence of pro-government militias, which Carey and Mitchell (2017) define as "armed groups that have a link to government but exist outside the regular security apparatus, and have some level of organization," defies the notion of the monopoly on force and poses a difficult question for scholars. Many have argued that militias are a cause, consequence, or indicator of failed states, but the presence of some type of pro-government militia in approximately one-third of the world's states defies easy conclusions (Bates 2008; Klare 2004).

A growing body of scholarship refutes the notion that paramilitaries are correlated with state weakness, arguing that states may authorize groups that are not part of the traditional military structure. Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell (2016) use the "logic of delegation" to understand the relationship: Just as a state might delegate its authority to private contractors to perform administrative tasks, it may delegate the use of force to militias. Phelps (2014) agrees that the state can bestow legitimacy upon non-state forces, such as security contractors.

Still, there are obvious risks to the state from allowing vigilante violence, including the possibility that militias could become competitors to the state and even replace it. The attributes of pro-government militias and the nature of their relationship to the state varies widely. At one extreme are groups like Hezbollah, which acts as a quasi-state in Lebanon even as it participates in Lebanese political institutions. At the other end of the continuum are local defense militias, which are organized ad hoc for the protection of communities. Powerful militias threaten the state and pose a danger to the citizenry. Koren (2014) claims that the existence of such groups is predictive of mass killings,

while Ahram (2014) posits that nongovernment militias can be either an incentive or a deterrent to genocides or other atrocities. Carey and Mitchell (2017) have developed a typology of pro-government militias based on their relationship to the state and their relationship to society, adding that certain types of militias are more or less dangerous to the state or the populace. The nature of the Hashd, which includes groups with differing aims and identities, makes it difficult to classify, but most units would be classified as ethnoreligious militias, which pose a high risk to the state and a very high risk to civilians.

Given the severity of those risks and the high incidence of pro-government militias, we can infer the existence of strong benefits that militias offer states. Perhaps the most obvious benefit is that loyal paramilitaries outside of the military structure can protect leaders from coups (Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2016). Another benefit is pro-government militias may give states the option to use violence in otherwise unacceptable ways while maintaining plausible deniability (Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015). Carey and Mitchell (2016) add that pro-government militias are cheap force multipliers, they provide local knowledge, and they grant the state legitimacy among the group from which the militia is drawn.

Method and Data

In this paper, I will undertake a qualitative case study using Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units to demonstrate benefits that motivate a state to permit and support the operations of pro-government militias. I derived possible reasons from the scholarly literature and from expert analysis, then used primary documents, including Iraqi laws and statements from influential figures, and secondary sources, including journalistic reports and expert analysis, to evaluate them.

Historical Background

The stage for a Shiite paramilitary mobilization was set by the invasion and occupation of Iraq by a U.S.-led coalition in 2003. The coalition's overthrow of Saddam Hussein ushered in a period of violent chaos, compounded by the actions of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), the group charged with building a democratic Iraqi state. After the expulsion of Baath party members from the government, its second order was the complete dissolution of the Iraqi security and intelligence apparatus, dominated by Sunnis under the Baathist regime.

Ambitious Shiite figures like Muqtada al-Sadr were poised to take advantage of the resulting security vacuum. Sadr had inherited a dormant Shiite movement developed by his father Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr in the 1980s, and he moved quickly after the invasion to mobilize his supporters and launch the *Jaysh al-Mahdi* (JAM) to fight the American occupiers. The Sadrist movement mostly consisted of undereducated slum-dwellers, and the JAM, which was "nothing more than a lightly armed and disorganized rabble," quickly proved itself unable to wage an effective campaign (Rayburn 2014, p. 181). JAM leaders who were dissatisfied with the Army's performance and disaffected

with Sadr's "erratic . . . dictatorial and mercurial" leadership decided to break away in 2004 to form a number of small, elite units to lead the insurgency (Ibid., pp. 180–88).

The founders of these "Special Groups," as they became known, sought the help of Qassem Soleimani, head of the Quds Force, a unit of the of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, which has been described as a "cross between the CIA, Special Operations Command, and State Department." Tehran, which wanted to expel the Americans from Iraq and to develop influence in Baghdad, was happy to oblige, and the Quds Force began sending weaponry and military advisors to Iraq and training Special Groups' forces in Iran (Ibid., p. 185). Two Iraqi leaders emerged as the most influential of the Special Groups. Qais al-Khazali, an acolyte of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr until the latter's assassination in 1999, presided over the creation in 2006 of the *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (AAH) militia, a group that considered itself allied with Iran but not under its direct control (Ibid., p. 187). Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis's *Kata'ib Hezbollah* (KH), on the other hand, was "controlled directly by the Quds Force and loyal to the Supreme Leader," Ayatollah Khamenei (Ibid.). Muhandis had a long history of Iran-sponsored paramilitary action, having participated in attacks against U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait and an assassination attempt against the emir of Kuwait. He was elected a member of parliament in 2005 before being ousted for his past militancy (Ibid., p. 200).

In addition to AAH, KH, and JAM, which continued to operate as the Promised Day Brigades after the breakoff of the Special Groups (Ibid., p. 197), the anarchic insurgency included a group known as the Badr Brigades. Badr, led by Hadi al-Amiri, was created in Iran in 1982 as the military wing of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), a Shiite political group opposed to Saddam Hussein (Lake 2015). While these four groups' primary foe was the U.S. military, they also became involved in sectarian warfare against Iraqi Sunnis. The bombing of the Askari mosque in Samarra in 2006 by al-Qaeda escalated the conflict into a full sectarian war, and Shiite militias participated in a campaign of ethnic cleansing that lead to the "balkanization of Baghdad." (Marr and al-Marashi 2014). They also fought amongst themselves: there was, for example, fighting between the JAM and Badr in 2007 and between the JAM and the AAH after the U.S. withdrawal in 2011 (Rayburn 2014, pp. 28–31, 205).

A decision in 2011 not to renew the agreement allowing U.S. forces to operate in Iraq, made by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and U.S. President Barack Obama, moved the burden of national security from the U.S. military to the reconstructed Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) (Karon 2011). Unfortunately, the ISF proved unable to bear that burden when the Islamic State (IS) burst into Iraq from Syria and began capturing territory. In 2014, a force of 1,500 IS fighters approached Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul, where 30,000 ISF troops were garrisoned (Marr and al-Marashi 2014, pp. 289–90). Alarmingly, the ISF fled the city without a fight, leaving their uniforms and a large cache of weapons behind (Schmitt and Gordon 2014).

The rapid progress of the Islamic state united the Shiite militias, which viewed the Sunni extremist group's advance with alarm. Ayatollah Sistani, influential head of

the Iraqi Shiite hierarchy, issued a *fatwa*, or religious ruling, in 2014, saying: "Citizens who are able to bear arms and fight terrorists, defending their country and their people and their holy places, should volunteer and join the security forces to achieve this holy purpose" (BBC 2014). Instead of joining the ISF, though, Shiites responded by joining militias, both pre-existing (JAM and AAH) and new.[1] The Iraqi national government, led by Maliki, subsequently formed the Commission for the Popular Mobilization to administer the militias and provide funding for their operations. The PMUs began participating in the war against the Islamic state, fighting alongside the ISF and becoming de facto allies of the U.S. military they had formed to defeat.[2]

The PMUs' battlefield success was undermined, however, by accusations of sectarian abuses against Sunnis. According to Amnesty International,

> PMU militias have extrajudicially executed or otherwise unlawfully killed, tortured and abducted thousands of men and boys. Victims were picked up from their homes, workplaces, camps for internally displaced persons, checkpoints or other public places. Some were later found shot dead. Thousands more are still missing, weeks, months and years after they were abducted. Amnesty International has documented such violations by PMU militias in and around Baghdad, and in the Anbar, Salah al-Din, Diyala and Kirkuk governorates. (2017)

Nevertheless, support for the militias in the highest levels of the Iraqi government has continued, with Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who replaced Maliki in 2014, calling the Hashd "the hope of country and the region" (Chmaytelli 2017). In late 2016, parliament passed a law moving the PMUs under the purview of the Ministry of Defense, effectively making them a discrete branch of the military, though the component militias continued to operate according to their own wills (Iraqi Parliament 2016).

Military Weakness

The most obvious reason for the Iraqi government's support for the PMUs is the weakness of the state military. The government was compelled to support the militias because their own military was incapable of policing the use of violence, particularly by the Islamic state, and because a lack of confidence in the ISF made it unlikely that Baghdad could have regained the monopoly on force through a conventional military buildup.

First, the Iraqi state military was unable to police the use of violence, the result of a series of decisions stretching back to 2003. After disbanding the ISF, the CPA had promised to "create in the near future a New Iraqi Corps, as the first step in forming a national self-defense capability for a free Iraq." The U.S. proceeded to spend billions of dollars recruiting, outfitting, and training a new military to shore up the authority of the state it was attempting to form. But, according to the International Crisis Group (2010), the rapidity with which Washington and Baghdad were forced to rebuild the ISF, as they rushed to fill the security vacuum created by the CPA decision, left a "legacy of expediency." Troops were recruited "without sufficient

regard to background or qualifications," and units were created without due regard for institutional structure, which resulted in political partisanship and fragmented ethnic loyalties.

The fall of Mosul to the Islamic state in 2014, three years after the U.S. withdrawal, proved the impotence of the ISF, but the Iraqi state's inability to govern the use of force was already evident before the extremist group's rise to power. For example, several of the militias now integrated into the PMUs were active years before the advent of the Islamic state. In 2006, in response to Baghdad's inability to "counter the insurgent groups that were . . . effectively challenging the hegemony of the state," the U.S. worked to form a Sunni anti-insurgency movement known as the *Sahwat*, a collection of tribal units that could be considered pro-government militias (though their support was later shown to be exclusively from the U.S and not from Baghdad) (Stansfield 2016, pp. 198–202). Of course, the U.S. military, rather than the ISF, was functioning as the protector and enforcer of the Iraqi state until the expiration of the Status of Forces Agreement in 2011 mandated the withdrawal of U.S. forces, marking the end of the ISF's gestation period (Ibid., pp. 210–11). It faced the Islamic state, then, as a fully formed military, providing the best example of its ineffectiveness.

Second, the Iraqi military's failure to defeat ISIS was a blow to its prestige and created recruitment problems, eliminating the possibility of recapturing the monopoly on force through a buildup of regular forces. Sistani's 2014 fatwa explicitly called for Iraqis to "volunteer and join the security forces" (BBC 2014). Later confirmed to refer to established, legal military units rather than militias (Sistani 2014), the statement was understood to represent his endorsement of the Shia militia movement. Mansour and Jafar, citing an interview with a civil servant in the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, claim that this misunderstanding was orchestrated and enabled by public distrust of the ISF: "Using the fatwa's message, Maliki and his allies pursued a wide-ranging campaign to recruit volunteers through hundreds of centers and offices. His recruitment was predicated on a smear campaign against the very Iraqi army that they had created—the same army that the fatwa had supposedly demanded the volunteers join" (Mansour and Jabar 2017, p. 7). The rapid expansion of the Hashd, in contrast to the contraction of the ISF, which in 2014 went from seventeen to five–seven brigades (Galbraith 2015), implies Hashd recruits' preference for the militias over the ISF. While this probably has something to do with sectarianism, which will be discussed below, the fact that Maliki's strategy focused on disparaging the ISF hints that the military's embarrassing defeat had diminished its reputation and made such a strategy effective.

The ISF weakness and Iraq's inability to strengthen it made state support for the Hashd a foregone conclusion. Not only would they have been unable to prevent the mobilization's formation if they had wanted, the state's survival was at risk in the absence of a capable military, and Baghdad had to take whatever help it could get. As will be shown below, however, there were other factors at play that encouraged the government to support the PMUs.

Sectarianism

Sectarian tension between Shiites and Sunnis is another reason Baghdad has chosen to support the Hashd. The Iraqi government, which fears its Sunni constituents but faces externally imposed quotas mandating sectarian balance in the military, supports the majority-Shiite PMUs as a means of ensuring Shiite dominance and security. Also it is a political move meant to maintain the support of a Shiite base among which the Hashd is extremely popular.

The origins of ethno-sectarianism in Iraq can be traced to the formation of the post–WWI order in the Middle East and the creation of the Iraqi state by Britain that combined Kurdish, Sunni, and Shiite-majority areas and established a Sunni monarchy. Subsequently, sectarian competition largely was kept under control by authoritarian rulers until the U.S. overthrew the Sunni establishment in its efforts to establish a liberal democracy in Iraq. The CPA, determined to block any group from dominating Iraqi politics, oversaw the creation of a new Iraqi constitution that codified an ethno-sectarian power-sharing system. Article 9 of the constitution, for example, dictated that "the Iraqi Armed Forces and Security Services," which had been predominantly Sunni under Hussein, would "be composed of the components of the Iraqi people with due consideration given to its balance and its similarity without discrimination or exclusion" (Washington Post 2015).

Such a system was understandably unpopular with Shiite politicians, as it prevented the majority group from dominating the country's politics. In particular, Nouri al-Maliki, a Shiite who became prime minister in 2006, "found the state's large bureaucracy inefficient, given its mandate under a sectarian quota system (*muhasasa ta'iya*), which included members from all major Kurdish, Shia, and Sunni political parties. Having loyal Shia militias, rather than the shaky cross-ethnic makeup of the Iraqi army, seemed a much more reliable way to secure a tighter command and control structure" (Mansour and Jabar 2017, p. 6), leading Maliki to support the creation of the PMU Commission in 2014.

Memories of Baathist brutality fed Shiite mistrust of Sunnis, which intensified with the rise in sectarian violence in 2006 and the emergence of the Sunni Islamic state as a dominant force in 2014. The perceived association between Sunnis and the Baath party, which continued long after the party was disbanded in 2003, and the general resentment of Sunnis by some Shiite politicians is evident in Maliki's rejection of the Sahwat brigades after the U.S. withdrawal in 2010. In response to escalating violence in 2006, coalition leaders had worked diligently to secure the cooperation of Sunni Arab tribesmen in western Iraq against insurgent groups like al-Qaeda, and by 2010, those efforts had paid off. In 2008, however, the Maliki government demanded that the U.S. turn over control of the Sahwat militias with the promise that the fighters would be given positions in the ISF (Oppel Jr. 2008). Instead, Baghdad disbanded the brigades and used the membership records to "round up and target" Sunni leaders. Stansfield attributes the decision to turn against the militias to a mixture of anti-Sunni sentiment and fears of a Ba'athist revival:

There was a deep-rooted fear of the Ba'th and the return of elements of Saddam's regime. There was also, of course, an even deeper angst concerning the expansion of Sunni *jihadists* and their visceral hatred of the adherents of Shi'ism. But, in effect, these fears merged into one. It would be difficult to exaggerate the level of concern that was felt among circles of Shi'i politicians in government of the possibility of the Ba'th, which was not becoming conflated with 'Sunnis,' returning to power. Even among Kurds, the leaderships in Erbil and Suleimani saw the hands of the Ba'th at every political juncture and insurgent assault (Stansfield 2016, p. 202).

The disparity between Baghdad's reaction to the Sunni Sahwat, which was to wrest control and destroy it, and its reaction to the Hashd, which was to support and incorporate it, betrays the sectarian motivations of Maliki and other Shiite leaders. Fears of Ba'athism became an avatar for anti-Sunni sectarianism, and a similar phenomenon occurred with the expansion of the Islamic State, evident in stories of human rights abuses committed by Shiite militias against local Sunnis, whom they accused of supporting the Islamic State (Human Rights Watch 2017).

Sectarianism drives the state's support for the Hashd from below as well—Shiite politicians are compelled to support the PMUs because of the militias' popularity among their voter base. According to Mansour and Jabar, 99 percent of respondents to an August 2015 poll supported the use of the Hashd to fight the Islamic State. Up to 75 percent of men between eighteen and thirty years of age in Shia-majority areas had enlisted to fight in the PMUs by spring 2016, though many are inactive because of funding restrictions (Mansour and Jabar 2017, pp. 10–11). The popular interpretation of Sistani's 2014 ruling inspired feelings of religious duty among Iraqi Shiites and gave the militias an air of religious legitimacy. One Hashd fighter interviewed by PBS in 2016 remarked: "I came in response to the fatwa, the doctrine to defend my country, my sacred places. My wish in life is the end of Da'esh [a synonym for the Islamic State] in Iraq. . . . The fatwa opened the door for us, so we volunteered with the Hashd militia. Ours is a belief and a will. We came because of our belief, not for a salary or anything else. We came because of our belief and our principles" (PBS NewsHour 2016). According to Renaud Mansour:

> Inside Iraq, the popular perception of the PMU among Iraqis—and particularly the Shia—is far more favorable than the group's reputation among Western politicians, analysts, and human rights groups.... Many Iraqis, and particularly the Shia, are convinced that had it not been for the PMU, ISIS would have taken over more territory and seriously threatened Baghdad. . . . The PMU occupies a new space in the Iraqi Shia imagination. As one fighter told the author, "you can criticize any politician or even religious cleric, but you cannot speak against the PMU and its martyrs." . . . Iraqi society is now full of popular songs, commercials, and banners, which display the leaders and martyrs of the different military groups. (2017)

Shiite politicians are constrained by the PMUs' high levels of participation and popularity among their base, especially with next year's election looming over them.

Support for the PMUs among Shiite political leaders has been motivated by sectarianism, including a desire to circumvent U.S.-imposed power-sharing rules and a desire to please Shiite constituents who strongly support the militias.

Iranian Influence

Another reason for the state's support of the Popular Mobilization Units is the influence of Iran, which has close connections with key politicians and militia leaders. Tehran's regional interests, coupled with its influence over key figures in the state and its willingness to provide support for Hashd, encouraged Iraq to support the militias.

According to scholars and commentators, Iran's interests in Iraq are best understood in the context of a greater Middle Eastern "cold war" between Iran and its allies on one side and Saudi Arabia and its allies on the other (Gause III 2014). More than a sectarian conflict, it is a battle for geopolitical influence. Iran, for example, supports Hezbollah in Lebanon, Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Iran's interests in the Levant have been characterized as the creation of a political, ideological, and physical "axis of resistance" to bolster its position against Saudi Arabia (and Israel), including the creation of two corridors from Iran to the Mediterranean (Mohseni and Kalout 2017). These land routes would be protected by Iranian proxy forces rather than Iranian troops. Of course, the defeat of the anti-Shiite Islamic state, whose border-crossing advance posed a threat to Iran, was also of grave importance to Tehran.

It is within this context that Iran has supported the growth of al-Hashd al-Sha'abi in Iraq. According to a December 2014 *Washington Post* article, "Iran [had] sent more than 1,000 military advisers to Iraq, as well as elite units, and [had] conducted airstrikes and spent more than $1 billion on military aid" in response to Islamic State gains that summer, a claim supported by Badr leader Hadi al-Amiri (Ryan and Morris 2014; Morris 2014). AAH, which is fighting in Syria as well as in Iraq, is said to receive $1.5–2 million per month from Tehran, though the PMUs generally have received a greater proportion of their funding from Baghdad, as they have developed a closer relationship with the state (Stanford University 2017a; Eisenstadt and Knights 2017). Iranian leadership in Iraq continues to be managed by Qassem Suleimani, who maintains close relationships with Hashd militia leaders (Chulov 2014; Chulov 2010). According to Mansour and Jabar, the PMUs play several roles in Iran's larger Iraqi and regional strategy. Some of the smaller pro-Iran militias are viewed by Tehran as border protection units, while larger ones are being groomed to enter or expand their role in Iraqi politics as friends of Iran.

> Their military resources—including heavy armor, drones, and military advisers—all come from Tehran. Their cash and political legitimacy come from Baghdad. These paramilitaries are either full-fledged political parties or in the process of establishing political representation in the lead-up to Iraq's planned 2018 provincial and parliamentary elections. (Mansour and Jabar 2017, p. 13)

The extent of Iranian influence in Middle Eastern conflicts may be generally overstated, but the case for Iranian power in Iraqi politics is strong, with abundant anecdotes

of Tehran's intrusion in Iraqi affairs (Kendall 2017). The circumstances of Nouri al-Maliki's appointment to a second term as prime minister offer one such case. In the 2011 election, Maliki's *Dawlat al-Qanun* coalition was defeated by the *Iraqiya* party, led by Ayad Allawi, after Maliki refused to join forces with the Iraqi National Alliance. The surprise upset was followed by a vote recount and nearly five months of negotiations that resulted in the Erbil Agreement, a compromise that gave Maliki the premiership in exchange for some concessions. The reasoning behind the decision to let Maliki remain in power is contested—Stansfield says that he had "managed to accrue significant power in the period running up to the election and . . . used them to maintain his premiership" (Stansfield 2016, pp. 207–9). Stansfield portrays Iran as merely acquiescent:

> The Iranian government, too, had little interest in encouraging Iraqi politicians to respect the results of the elections. Not only was Iraqiyya seen as a haven for Sunni voters; it was also seen as the new manifestation of the Ba'th. Furthermore, Allawi was not a man who Iran, even through the IRGC, could influence. Throughout his period heading a leading opposition movement to Saddam, the Iraqi National Accord (*Al-Wifaq al-Watani al-Iraq*), Allawi had been closer to Western governments and intelligence agencies. This, combined with this secularism and non-sectarian appeal, meant that the Iranian kingmakers would follow their U.S. counterparts and simply let Maliki bully his way back to the premiership. (Ibid., p. 209)

American official Ali Khedery, on the other hand, claims that Iran ordered the outcome. Speaking of debates among U.S. leadership over which candidate to support for the position of prime minister, he writes:

> Our debates mattered little, however, because the most powerful man in Iraq and the Middle East, Gen. Qassim Soleimani, the head of the Quds Force unit of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, was about to resolve the crisis for us. Within days of Biden's visit to Baghdad, Soleimani summoned Iraq's leaders to Tehran. Beholden to him after decades of receiving Iran's cash and support, the Iraqis recognized that U.S. influence in Iraq was waning as Iranian influence was surging. The Americans will leave you one day, but we will always remain your neighbors, Soleimani said, according to a former Iraqi official briefed on the meeting. After admonishing the feuding Iraqis to work together, Soleimani dictated the outcome on behalf of Iran's supreme leader: Maliki would remain premier; Jalal Talabani, a legendary Kurdish guerilla with decades-long ties to Iran, would remain president; and, most important, the American military would be made to leave at the end of 2011. Those Iraqi leaders who cooperated, Soleimani said, would continue to benefit from Iran's political cover and cash payments, but those who defied the will of the Islamic Republic would suffer the most dire of consequences. (Khedery 2014)

Marr and al-Marashi (p. 274) agree that Iran influenced the outcome by compelling Sadr to support Maliki.

Other instances of Iranian interference abound—a 2017 New York Times article, for example, claims that Iraqi parliamentarian Hoshyar Zebari was ousted from his role as finance minister at Iran's insistence, after Tehran found him too friendly to the United States,[3] but Iran's backing of Maliki has particular salience for the PMUs (Arango 2017; Patoon 2017). Mansour and Jabar claim that Tehran's support for Maliki was conditioned on his support for the Hashd, citing a pro-Iranian MP as saying that "[Iran] did not have any faith in the Iraqi army and groomed armed groups in almost all border provinces as a strategic asset to protect its national security" Mansour and Jabar 2017, p. 28). They argue that noticeable change occurred in Maliki's stance on non-state militias before and after 2010. He had, after all, attacked the Shiite Jaysh al-Mahdi, sending, in the words of a Shiite MP, "the message to all the militias including the Awakening that their days are numbered," only to staunchly support the PMUs six years later (Oppel Jr. 2008). This policy shift is consistent with the theory that the prime minister owed his allegiance to Iran after they intervened on his behalf in 2010. Speaking more generally, it indicates that Baghdad's support for the Hashd was a result of Tehran's interference in Iraqi politics. Iraqi leaders feared that they would lose Iranian support if they did not support the militias and therefore lose their positions.

Counter Arguments

Several other theories for state support of the Hashd exist that I find less compelling than those I have listed above. They focus first on the PMUs as political leverage and second on the state's desire to order atrocities while maintaining plausible deniability.

Political Leverage

The political leverage theory attributes state support for the PMUs to the interests of individual politicians, who see the militias as an opportunity to increase their power and protect their position. Mansour and Jabar write:

> Iraq is in the midst of an internal Shia political struggle over control of the state between former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, who wants to return to power; current Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who is trying to maintain the power of the state; and cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who is bent on ensuring that the Maliki faction does not return to power. A crucial factor that will help determine who gains an advantage in this struggle will be whether the PMF paramilitaries are integrated into the state's existing security apparatus and used to reinforce the country's political status quo, or if instead these paramilitary groups are retained as a separate parallel and independent military force that can be used to reshape Iraq's current political and security landscape. (Mansour and Jabar 2017, p. 4)

Maliki was and may still be the politician most able to take advantage of the political weight of the Hashd. Known as the "godfather" of the militias for his role in forming the PMU Commission in 2014, his premiership was marked by authoritarian efforts to consolidate control over all aspects of Iraqi security (Ibid. 25; Dodge 2012, pp. 124–30). If the Hashd militias were loyal to any one Iraqi leader, it would be Maliki, and taking advan-

tage of the PMUs would not be out of character for him. Perhaps the aforementioned change in Maliki's policy preference toward support for the militias in 2010 was not simply a product of Iranian pressure but an attempt to shore up his political position after the electoral loss made clear his weakness.

However, there is little evidence that he tried to use the units for that purpose when he lost the premiership in 2014. He had fared well in the elections, but the Shiite political establishment was unwilling to support him for a third term. Instead, they selected Haider al-Abadi as PM, infuriating Maliki, who adamantly opposed the decision (Stansfield 2016, pp. 238–40, 244). If he had intended to use his influence over the Hashd or the ISF to hold on to power, this would have been the moment, and observers feared he would do just that. Instead, although Maliki did "[deploy] security forces to strategic points across the capital," he "told security forces not to intervene in the political crisis and to protect the nation. . . . He said that members of the security forces had pulled back from the front lines of Iraq's conflict zones upon hearing he would be replaced but that he had ordered them to return to the fight" (Morris and Sly 2014; Arango, Reuben, and Gordon 2014). Days later, Maliki peacefully relinquished the premiership.

It is possible that Maliki intended to turn the PMUs and ISF against the opposition or that he expected to intimidate Abadi's supporters. He did "issue veiled threats," saying that he "could not be held responsible for those who might wish to fight on his behalf," but the apparent lack of effort to leverage military force to hold his position weakens the argument that support for the Hashd was intended as a kind of "coup-proofing." Another variant of the theory says that Maliki "will try and use the legitimacy of the PMU to regain power, himself, or via his protégés" in upcoming elections (Mansour 2017a). However, the reported electoral hopes of PMU leaders indicate they have accumulated their own political influence, effectively sidelining Maliki. Maliki's actions in the upcoming year should shed more light on this theory.

Plausible Deniability for Abuses

As mentioned above, scholars have found a strong correlation between the incidence of pro-government militias and human-rights abuses, leading to claims that governments choose to support paramilitaries out of a desire to order atrocities while keeping distance between themselves and the act (Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015). The Hashd has been accused of numerous human rights abuses, particularly in Sunni areas liberated from the Islamic state, where they are said to have detained and tortured innocent civilians whom they believed to be IS supporters (Frontline 2017).

These abuses, though tragic, only have relevance to the research question if it can be shown that the government desired the abuses, that they were unwilling to execute them through conventional military action, and that they supported the militias as a means of accomplishing them without direct responsibility. Given the sectarian tensions mentioned above and the way that Sunnism, Ba'athism, and support for the Islamic state became conflated in the eyes of the Shiite majority, it is possible

that the state supported violence against Sunnis as Islamic state supporters, whether or not the relationship truly existed. If the state wanted to distance itself from the Hashd's crimes, however, it would not have taken steps to incorporate them into the state military apparatus, which they have repeatedly done, and indeed the Hashd has deflected allegations of abuses by playing up its connection with the state (Al-Hashed 2017). Furthermore, Abadi has acknowledged the PMUs misdeeds rather than ignore or disassociate from them (Amnesty International 2017, p. 12). Although the human rights abuses are significant as such, it is unlikely that they cause government support for the militias.

Conclusion

Although Iraq has made changes to its relationship with the Hashd, the independence, political aspirations, and divided loyalties of the militia leaders continue to pose risks to Baghdad, threatening to sacrifice state sovereignty, alienate Sunni and Kurdish minorities, and inject violence into the state's politics (Sattar 2016). Despite the risks associated with delegating the use of force to these non-state militias, Iraq has supported the Popular Mobilization Units because of the weakness of their own military, the looming influence of Iran, and sectarian affiliation. With Iraq's military successes against the Islamic state, the apparent *raison d'être* of the Hashd, and the next year's elections, in which several PMU leaders are expected to participate, the true strength of the militias may become more apparent (Gurbuz 2017).

NOTES

1. For a list of the most significant militias of the Hashd, see Aymen Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Hashd Brigade Numbers Index," *Pundicity* blog, October 31, 2017, accessed November 6, 2017, www.aymennjawad.org/2017/10/Hashd-brigade-numbers-index or "Security and Politics Mix Inseparably in Iraqi Politics," *Inside Iraqi Politics* 111, July 20, 2015, accessed December 14, 2017, www.insideiraqipolitics.com/Files/Inside%20Iraq%20No111.pdf.

2. It is worth mentioning that the Hashd also contains non-Shiite militias, and that the motivations and loyalties of the component militias vary. I have included information about some of the most influential groups here, as they pose the greatest threat to the state and are therefore most relevant to the research question, but I have purposefully excluded many for simplicity.

3. The same article hints that Iran influenced the selection of former-Quds Force commander and Badr militia fighter Qasim al-Araji as to head the Ministry of Interior, which oversees the Federal Police and, until the month before his appointment, the PMUs.

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