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Between State and Militia: The Multidimensional Legitimacy of
the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq

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Abstract

This thesis examines the legitimacy of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq since their formation in 2014. It is based on Podder's (2017) relational approach, which understands legitimacy not as a static property but as the result of dynamic and context-dependent interactions. Methodologically, the study is based on a qualitative, narrative literature analysis that incorporates academic and gray literature as well as empirical findings. The analysis shows that the PMF is not a homogeneous organization, but a diverse alliance of different factions: in addition to pro-Iranian groups, there are also movements aligned with the clerics Sistani or Sadr, as well as minority formations such as Christian, Sunni, and Yazidi brigades. This diversity is reflected in their respective strategies for gaining legitimacy. While parts of the PMF gain support through security services and social services, violent practices, political power struggles, and external dependencies diminish their recognition. Their relationship with the state also remains contradictory – between integration, parallel structures, and open confrontation – while external actors tend to evaluate the PMF based on strategic utility rather than normative criteria. Overall, the study shows that as hybrid and diverse actors, the PMF can both enable stabilization and deepen fragmentation, and that legitimacy in this context always remains situational, relational, and contested.

Zusammenfassung

Diese Arbeit untersucht die Legitimität der Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) im Irak seit ihrer Gründung 2014. Grundlage ist der relationale Ansatz nach Podder (2017), der Legitimität nicht als statische Eigenschaft, sondern als Ergebnis dynamischer und kontextabhängiger Interaktionen begreift. Methodisch basiert die Studie auf einer qualitativen, narrativen Literaturanalyse, die wissenschaftliche und graue Literatur sowie empirische Befunde einbezieht. Die Analyse verdeutlicht, dass die PMF keine homogene Organisation sind, sondern ein vielfältiges Bündnis aus unterschiedlichen Fraktionen: neben pro-iranischen Gruppen auch Strömungen, die sich an den Klerikern Sistani oder Sadr orientieren, sowie Minderheitenformationen wie christliche, sunnitische oder yezidische Brigaden. Diese Diversität spiegelt sich in ihren jeweiligen Strategien zur Erlangung von Legitimität wider. Während Teile der PMF durch Sicherheitsleistungen und soziale Dienste Unterstützung gewinnen, mindern Gewaltpraktiken, politische Machtkämpfe und externe Abhängigkeiten ihre Anerkennung. Auch das Verhältnis zum Staat bleibt widersprüchlich – zwischen Integration, Parallelstrukturen und offener Konfrontation – während externe Akteure die PMF eher nach strategischem Nutzen als nach normativen Kriterien bewerten. Insgesamt zeigt die Studie, dass die PMF als hybride und diverse Akteure sowohl Stabilisierung ermöglichen als auch Fragmentierung vertiefen und dass Legitimität in diesem Kontext stets situativ, relational und umkämpft bleibt.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	vi
List of Abbreviations	vii
1. Introduction.....	1
1.1. Research Questions and Objectives	2
1.2. Methodology.....	4
1.3. Delimitations.....	5
1.4. Structure of the Thesis	6
2. Theoretical Framework	7
2.1 Conceptualizing Legitimacy	7
2.2 Armed Groups, Hybridity and Legitimacy	10
2.3 Relational Perspective on Legitimacy.....	13
2.3.1 Relations with the Community.....	15
2.3.2 Relations with the State	16
2.3.3 Relations with External Actors.....	19
3. The Popular Mobilization Forces	22
3.1 History of Militias in Iraq	22
3.2 Emergence of the PMF	26
3.3 Composition of the PMF	29
3.3.1 Pro-Khamenei Faction	29
3.3.2 Pro-Sistani Faction.....	32
3.3.3 Pro-Sadr Faction	33
3.3.4 Minority Factions	34
4. Relational Analysis.....	38
4.1 PMF and Iraqi Civilian Population	38
4.1.1 Pro-Khamenei Faction	38
4.1.2 Pro-Sistani Faction.....	42
4.1.3 Pro-Sadr Faction	44
4.1.4 Minority Factions	47
4.2 PMF and Iraqi State	53
4.2.1 Pro-Khamenei Faction	53
4.2.2 Pro-Sistani Faction.....	58
4.2.3 Pro-Sadr Faction	61
4.2.4 Minority Factions	64
4.3 PMF and External Actors.....	70
4.3.1 Pro-Khamenei Faction	70
4.3.2 Pro-Sistani Faction.....	74

4.3.3 Pro-Sadr Faction	77
4.3.4 Minority Factions	80
5. Conclusion	86
5.1 Summary of Key Findings	86
5.2 Theoretical and Analytical Implications	89
5.3 Outlook and Further Research	90
Bibliography.....	93

List of Figures

Figure 1: Map of Iraq displaying its 19 governorates	viii
Figure 2: Relational Legitimacy Framework.....	14
Figure 3: Territorial control of ISIS at its peak in Iraq and Syria in January 2015	27

List of Abbreviations

AAH	Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq
HaN	Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba
HPÊ	Defense Force of Êzîdxan
HPŞ	Defense Force of Sinjar
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRI	Islamic Resistance in Iraq
ISCI	Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq
KH	Kata'ib Hezbollah
KIA	Kata'ib al-Imam Ali
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
NPU	Ninewa Plains Protection Unit
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
SaS	Saraya al-Salam
SDGT	Specially Designated Global Terrorist
TMF	Tribal Mobilization Forces
YBŞ	Sinjar Resistance Units



Figure 1: Map of Iraq displaying its 19 governorates (Wikimedia Commons 2024)

1. Introduction

In recent decades, non-state armed actors have emerged as central players in many conflict settings worldwide. Contrary to the assumption that such groups are inherently disruptive, they frequently assume enduring political and social roles that challenge the state's monopoly on violence and reshape local governance structures. Research has shown that armed groups do not operate solely as military organizations, but also as providers of order, services, and authority. This phenomenon is particularly evident in areas where the state is weak or absent (Mampilly 2011: 2, 28). Their capacity to integrate coercion and governance enables them to function as hybrid actors, whose organizational structures and relationships with communities have a significant impact on both the dynamics of violence and the extent of their influence (Ahram 2021). As such, these developments raise fundamental questions about how legitimacy is established and maintained in contexts where the distinction between state and non-state authority becomes increasingly blurred.

In this regard, Iraq is a particularly revealing case: Following the 2003 invasion and the removal of Saddam Hussein, Iraq has been confronted with the challenges of weak institutions, deep sectarian fractures, and persistent cycles of violence. The rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014 further highlighted the weakness of the Iraqi state, as evidenced by the collapse of the country's security apparatus and the significant loss of territory under government control. In this context, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) rapidly evolved into a substantial military and political entity, mobilizing tens of thousands of volunteers and assuming a crucial role in securing Iraq following the incapacitation of the Iraqi state forces (Mansour/Jabar 2017: 1-5).

As of today, the PMF has evolved into a far more substantial entity than a mere temporary wartime coalition. They have embedded themselves within Iraq's security architecture and have become a major political force by exercising influence in parliament, the economy, and society. Their hybrid nature – simultaneously integrated into state structures while maintaining autonomy and close ties to external patrons – challenges traditional conceptions of state sovereignty and the monopoly on violence. Consequently, the PMF represents the interplay between state and non-state authority, domestic governance and foreign interference, as well as legitimacy and coercion (Cambanis et al 2019: 23 ff.).

While the PMF have been widely studied, most accounts have concentrated on their battlefield role, sectarian identity, or formal integration into state institutions. However, less attention has been paid to the ways in which their authority is shaped through ongoing interactions with different audiences. Consequently, it is this dimension that provides the foundation for the subsequent research questions.

1.1. Research Questions and Objectives

The central research question guiding this thesis is as follows:

How has the PMF built and maintained its legitimacy in Iraq since 2014 through its interactions with civilians, the state, and external actors?

To answer this question, the relational approach to the study of legitimacy is adopted. Contrary to traditional approaches, which perceive legitimacy as a static property of states or institutions, the relational perspective concentrates on the relationships between actors and their audiences. As such, it examines how legitimacy is negotiated, challenged, and maintained through ongoing interactions (Podder 2017: 687). Consequently, in order to address the overarching question, the thesis is structured into three specific research questions, each exploring a distinct dimension of the PMF's legitimacy:

1. *What mechanisms of civilian compliance – ranging from voluntary to coercive – shape the PMF's relation with the Iraqi civilian population?*

The legitimacy of the PMF among the Iraqi population is determined by a combination of voluntary compliance, conditional cooperation (or quasi-voluntary compliance), and coercion. Therefore, the objective of this question is to examine the dynamics of the PMFs' engagement with the civilian population, focusing on the mechanisms by which the PMF secure support, provide services, and exercise control. Through a comprehensive examination of the relationship between the PMF and the Shia, Sunni, and minority communities, this thesis will identify the factors that both contribute to and challenge their legitimacy.

2. *How do collusive, conciliatory, and conflictual dynamics define the PMF's relationship with the Iraqi state?*

The PMF's hybrid character, operating simultaneously within and outside the state apparatus, complicates their relationship with the Iraqi government. Thus, the question arises of how the PMF navigates these complexities – focusing on whether the PMF collaborates with the state (collusive), negotiates a balance of power (conciliatory), or engages in direct confrontation (conflictual). By examining the PMF's integration into formal state structures and their occasional defiance of government authority, this question therefore aims to clarify the mechanisms by which the PMF balance their roles as both state and non-state actors.

3. To what extent do international norms and political interests influence the PMF's relationships with external actors?

Besides their domestic relationships with the civilian population and the state, the PMF's legitimacy is also influenced by their interactions with external actors, including regional powers, international organizations, and transnational networks. Therefore, this question explores how normative factors (such as adherence to international humanitarian law and human rights standards) and political considerations (such as alliances and strategic interests) shape the PMF's relationships with such external actors. By analyzing the PMF's engagement with actors like Iran, the United States, and other international stakeholders, this question aims to uncover the dynamics between normative legitimacy and political pragmatism in the PMF's external relations.

As mentioned above, the main aim of this thesis is to analyze the PMF and their approach to legitimacy. However, the thesis also contributes to the broader academic debate. In this context, it advances the discussion on hybrid actors by exploring the dynamics of the PMF in the spectrum between state integration and autonomy, thereby challenging the conventional distinction between state and non-state forces. Furthermore, this research adds to the existing literature on conflict in Iraq by studying militia governance, sectarian dynamics and foreign interference.

A particular novelty is the application of the relational perspective to the PMF's legitimacy, which extends beyond conventional approaches that regard legitimacy as a static attribute of institutions. By highlighting the interactive and contested nature of legitimacy, this thesis demonstrates how the PMF continuously negotiate their authority by collaborating with civilians, the state, and external actors. This perspective thus emphasizes the dynamic and strategic approaches the PMF employ to maintain their influence in Iraq – a nation that is characterized by a highly volatile political

environment. As a result, the findings provide valuable insights into the security landscape of contemporary Iraq and demonstrate the evolving role of armed groups in the processes of state-building, governance, and regional geopolitics.

1.2. Methodology

The methodological framework of this thesis is rooted in a narrative literature review, which seeks to analyze how the PMF establish and sustain their legitimacy in Iraq through their engagement with civil society, the state, and international actors. The narrative literature review constitutes a qualitative research method, whereby existing academic research is synthesized and evaluated without the need for statistical or quantitative techniques. This approach is particularly well-suited for examining intricate socio-political processes, as it facilitates a flexible and comprehensive analysis that incorporates multiple perspectives and interpretations. In contrast to the systematic literature review, which is subject to strict inclusion and exclusion criteria, a narrative literature review allows for a more detailed examination of topics that may not be fully covered by quantitative studies or meta-analyses (Bourhis 2017: 1076 f.). Consequently, the objective of this study is to critically examine existing research in order to address key questions regarding the PMF's interactions with various stakeholders. In order to provide a comprehensive account of their efforts to build legitimacy, insights from a variety of sources will be integrated.

In terms of material, the analysis primarily draws on peer-reviewed journal articles as well as gray literature – including research reports, working papers, and publications from reputable NGOs, research institutions, and think tanks. The inclusion of gray literature is necessary due to the rapidly evolving nature of hybrid actors in Iraq. Therefore, its incorporation is justified because it offers valuable, up-to-date insights that may not be reflected yet in peer-reviewed academic literature. However, in the absence of a formal peer review process for gray literature, it is necessary to thoroughly review the material to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the results. Accordingly, the materials are evaluated for credibility based on their source, methodology, and consistency with established scientific literature.

To evaluate the PMF's relationship with the civilian population, this thesis also incorporates available survey data and empirical studies, as these sources can offer

direct insights into societal perceptions and levels of support. Regarding other dimensions, such as interactions with the state and external actors, additional sources are considered, including legal texts and official policy documents. By incorporating a range of literary sources, this thesis seeks to offer a balanced and informed analysis, while also acknowledging the strengths and limitations of each material.¹

1.3. Delimitations

This thesis seeks to provide a comprehensive yet focused analysis of the PMF and their legitimacy in Iraq since 2014. To achieve this, the research is structured around three key dimensions. While these aspects are central to understanding the PMF's legitimacy, it is important to clarify the scope and boundaries of this thesis to situate its contributions and limitations within the broader academic discourse.

First, the primary focus of this thesis is on the *relationships* that shape the PMF's legitimacy, rather than the *sources* of legitimacy itself. While legitimacy is often conceptualized through frameworks such as traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational legitimacy – as articulated by Max Weber – this research does not delve deeply into these theoretical constructs. Traditional legitimacy, rooted in long-standing customs and historical continuity; charismatic legitimacy, derived from the exceptional qualities of a leader; and legal-rational legitimacy, based on adherence to formal rules and bureaucratic institutions, are not the primary lenses through which this study examines the PMF (Galan 2011: 32 ff.). Instead, the analysis centers on the practical dynamics of how the PMF interacts with civilians, the state, and external actors to build and maintain its legitimacy. By focusing on these relational dimensions, the research provides a detailed understanding of the mechanisms through which the PMF operates, without engaging in an in-depth exploration of the theoretical underpinnings of legitimacy itself.

Second, by addressing all three dimensions of the PMF's legitimacy – civilian, state, and external – and incorporating an analysis of its internal factions, this research aims to provide a holistic overview of the PMF's role in Iraq. However, this breadth of focus

¹ For translation of selected passages and for stylistic refinement, the tools DeepL Translator and DeepL Write were used. Their application was limited to linguistic support – the conceptual and analytical work was carried out independently.

necessarily limits the depth of analysis that can be applied to any single dimension or faction. While the study does not delve deeply into the intricacies of individual factions, it offers a valuable synthesis of the PMF's multifaceted legitimacy, highlighting the interplay between its internal diversity and external relationships. This approach ensures that the research remains accessible and relevant to a broad audience, including scholars, policymakers, and practitioners, while still providing meaningful insights into the PMF's complex dynamics.

1.4. Structure of the Thesis

Following the introduction, the theoretical framework establishes the conceptual foundation for the analysis. It begins by conceptualizing legitimacy, followed by an exploration of armed groups, hybridity, as well as the relational perspective on legitimacy, focusing on three key dimensions: relations with the community, relations with the state, and relations with external actors. The next chapter delves into the PMF and provides the historical and contextual background necessary to understand the group. It traces the history of militias in Iraq, examines the emergence of the PMF, and analyzes its composition, including the pro-Khamenei, pro-Sistani, pro-Sadr, and minority factions.

The fourth chapter, the relational analysis, forms the core of the thesis, offering a detailed examination of the PMF's legitimacy through its relationships with civilians, the state, and external actors, with subsections dedicated to each of the factions of the PMF. Lastly, the conclusion synthesizes the findings of the research and reflects on the implications of the findings for understanding the PMF's legitimacy and its role in Iraq's political and social landscape.

2. Theoretical Framework

Legitimacy is a key element in all power dynamics. Thus, legitimacy is usually considered to be at the core of the relationship between the state and its citizens and, by extension, of the entire state-building agenda (McCullough 2015: 7). In the context of this thesis, however, legitimacy also plays a pivotal role in the survival and long-term success of armed groups. In order to gain and maintain power, these groups must justify their actions and garner support, as without legitimacy, it is impossible to sustain power over an extended period. Success is thereby determined not solely by power itself, but also by the group's capacity to legitimize that power within a political context (Schlichte/Schneckener 2015: 409 f.).

Consequently, this chapter outlines the relational approach to legitimacy adopted in this thesis, starting from the initial conceptualizations of legitimacy. The objective is twofold: to illustrate the framework of the theoretical model utilized and to demonstrate why this approach is particularly well-suited, especially with regard to the hybrid nature of the PMF.

2.1 Conceptualizing Legitimacy

The contemporary political interpretations of the terms "legitimacy" and "legitimation" first emerged in Europe during the 19th century, evolving from a concept that was previously grounded in legal and philosophical discourse. Among the most influential theories developed on the subject of legitimacy are those of the German sociologist Max Weber, whose concepts on the forms and foundations of legitimacy continue to shape scholarly debates (Galan 2011: 13, 20). In his work "The Theory of Social and Economic Organization", Weber (1947) emphasizes the centrality of the concepts of power (*Macht*) and imperative control (*Herrschaft*) to his understanding of legitimacy and rule. He defines power as the probability that an actor can impose their will despite resistance, whereas imperative control refers to a form of rule in which the subordinates recognize and accept the authority of the ruler as legitimate. In contrast to mere coercion, *Herrschaft* is thus characterized by voluntary obedience grounded in shared beliefs about legitimacy.

Legitimacy, in this sense, plays a key role in transforming unstable forms of power into stable and organized systems of rule. Since coercion alone is likely to result in instability and resistance, a legitimate order is based on the belief among the ruled that authority is justified. This belief stabilizes rule as long as it is maintained (Weber 1947: 153, 124). According to Weber, legitimacy can stem from three sources: traditional legitimacy, rooted in long-standing customs; charismatic legitimacy, based on a leader's exceptional qualities; and legal-rational legitimacy, derived from belief in legal rules and bureaucratic institutions (Galan 2011: 32 ff.).

In general, Weber's key contribution lies in shifting legitimacy from a normative political-philosophical concept to an empirical one (ibid.: 20). His theories have had a profound influence on the study of international relations, particularly in the realm of state-building, emphasizing the significance of institution-building for the establishment of a Weberian, legal-rational regime. However, more recent research has begun to challenge these assumptions by incorporating social and contextual factors into legitimacy studies. Today, legitimacy research in international relations often blends normative and functionalist dimensions, focusing both on societal perceptions and institutional performance (Andersen 2012: 208).

While Weber laid the foundation for the empirical study of legitimacy, the debate today revolves around two main approaches: a normative perspective, which defines legitimacy based on pre-established principles, and an empirical approach, which focuses on societal perceptions. The first perspective, also known the "state institutional-normative approach", focuses on normative standards that an actor, an institution or a political order must fulfill in order to be accepted as legitimate. In this way, it is assumed that there is a fixed "right" way to exercise power. A normative approach grounded in Western liberal values usually defines a legitimate state by characteristics such as democratic elections and respect for human rights. As this perspective views legitimacy in relation to the functionality of institutions, as described in a Weberian conception of the state, the approach is also referred to as "neo-Weberian" (McCullough 2015: 7).

Among the proponents of this approach is Fukuyama (2004: ix), who describes state-building as the creation of new and the strengthening of existing governmental institutions. Consequently, legitimacy is based on the existence of these institutions. In terms of its normative nature, the focus on the democratic form of government makes

it morally superior to other forms of government because of its foundations in human rights and popular sovereignty. Thus, Fukuyama (ibid.: 26) claims that "in today's world the only serious source of legitimacy is democracy". Rotberg (2004: 3) also emphasizes the normative nature of legitimacy, arguing that legitimate states require tolerance and diversity of opinion, civil and human rights, and respect for and support of political institutions. Regarding the need for institutions, Paris (2003, 2004) argues that an institutional framework is essential, as without it, there can be no manageable social change. Under the motto "institutionalization before liberalization", he emphasizes that democratization and normative considerations should be postponed (but not rejected) until a sufficient institutional structure is in place (Andersen 2012: 208).

While the above-mentioned authors serve as examples of the state institutional-normative approach, Ignatieff (2003) and Kaplan (2004, 2005), among others, are also representatives of this perspective. But the UN also takes a normative approach, basing its understanding of legitimate governance on universal values, principles and international norms. Since the 1990s, however, this focus on normativity has been increasingly criticized by scholars and practitioners (McCullough 2015: 7). Concurrently, a second main strand has emerged within the legitimacy debate. This so-called empirical or descriptive approach assumes that both the governed and the governing determine legitimacy in a society. Consequently, it focuses on people's perceptions of an actor, an institution or a political order, but also explores the determinants behind a society's acceptance of power (ibid.: 8).

Among the advocates of this approach is Papagianni (2009: 49-52), who describes legitimacy as a process characterized by negotiation, participatory mechanisms and power-sharing, rather than as a rigid, top-down concept. Drawing on the examples of transitional governments and post-conflict states, Papagianni thus argues that legitimacy depends on the involvement of both ruling elites and the wider society in shaping institutions and policy decisions. Gilley (2006: 48), who uses empirical analysis to measure public perceptions of legitimacy in different political regimes, also emphasizes the interactive nature of legitimacy. This is because legitimacy is not only granted from above (by rulers who follow legal or ideological principles), but also depends on popular support and belief in the government's right to rule. Similarly, Roos/Lidström (2014: 138 f.) describe that legitimacy is derived from the effectiveness,

responsiveness, and accountability of governments as perceived by the public. As a result, legitimacy is an ongoing process that is shaped by both political decisions and citizens' reactions.

As shown by the concepts outlined above, the normative approach emphasizes the inherent characteristics of authority, whereas the empirical approach examines how individuals perceive authority and the dynamics of interaction between the population and those in power. While the normative approach prescribes a "right" way to exercise authority, the empirical approach defines the "rightness" of authority based on the perspectives and relationships between the dominant and subordinate groups (McCullough 2015: 8).

Although both the normative and empirical approaches offer insights into legitimacy, they generally conceptualize it as a static property of political entities. However, recent scholarship has challenged this perspective, arguing that legitimacy should instead be understood as an ongoing, dynamic process shaped by interactions between different actors. This so-called relational perspective will be explored in more detail in Section 2.3.

2.2 Armed Groups, Hybridity and Legitimacy

Before discussing the relational approach, it is necessary to delve deeper into the analysis of armed groups. While the aforementioned approaches have traditionally been applied to the legitimacy of states, similar questions arise when analyzing the legitimacy of non-state actors. How do these actors seek legitimacy, and how do different theoretical frameworks account for their claims to authority?

In general, the legitimacy of armed groups is widely regarded as a contentious issue. While states are deemed inherently legitimate within the international system, armed groups are often perceived as disorderly by their very nature. Consequently, while certain principles of state legitimacy can be applied to armed groups, the understanding of legitimacy and its specific application to these entities remains largely underdeveloped. However, this understanding is crucial, as – similar to states – considerations of legitimacy influence the tactical calculations and self-image of armed groups. Analogous to states, armed groups must submit to or resist pressure from the

national and international community in order to maintain their legitimacy (Podder 2017: 686).

According to Schlichte and Schneckener (2015: 414-421), armed groups face three central challenges regarding legitimacy. First, the use of violence by armed groups has the potential to yield both legitimizing and delegitimizing effects. On the one hand, violence can function as a medium of communication and a demonstration of power, which can contribute to the legitimization of the group. On the other hand, uncontrolled or excessive use of violence can result in delegitimization, particularly if it is directed against the group's own population or international norms. The justification of such violence represents a significant obstacle that must be overcome. Second, armed groups must draw on multiple sources of legitimacy, which must also be compatible with each other. These sources include traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational legitimacy, as outlined by Max Weber (see 2.1). Depending on the context and target group, these sources can be weighted differently to strengthen the legitimacy of the group. Third, armed groups must address local, national, and international audiences simultaneously – a task that requires consistent communication and action to ensure legitimacy at all levels. For example, this can be challenging, as legitimacy at the international level is often strengthened by external recognition and support, but this also carries the risk of the group being perceived as a puppet of foreign powers.

However, the legitimacy of the PMF in Iraq is further complicated by its hybrid nature. Unlike "conventional" armed groups, the PMF operates between the spheres of state and non-state forces. Thus, the PMF, which was founded in 2014 to combat ISIS, was formally incorporated into the Iraqi Armed Forces in November 2016 under the direct leadership of the Prime Minister. Despite this formal inclusion within the national army, the process of integration of the PMF remained challenging. This was due to the presence of various networks and factions within the PMF that possessed different political interests and ideas about the future role and vision of the organization. Some groups also expressed ambivalence about their membership and affiliation with the PMF, and in particular, certain Shiite factions of the PMF saw themselves as subordinate not to the Iraqi state but to Iranian religious leaders (Mansour 2021: 16). This has resulted in the PMF occupying a hybrid position, with one foot within the state and the other outside of it.

In order to comprehend the hybrid nature of the PMF, it is necessary to establish definitive criteria. One of the most prevalent definitions originates from Thanassis Cambanis, Dina Esfandiary, Sima Ghaddar, Michael Wahid Hanna, Aron Lund and Renad Mansour, who propose the following conceptualization:

“[T]he hybrid actor, a type of armed group that sometimes operates in concert with the state and sometimes competes with it. Hybrid actors depend on state sponsorship and benefit from the tools and prerogatives of state power, but at the same time they enjoy the flexibility that comes with not being the state and not being responsible for governance. Hybrid actors seek to harness and control some but not all spheres of the state’s authority. Those that survive over many years tend to penetrate the state and carve out official fiefdoms within its architecture” (Cambanis et al. 2019: 7 f.).

Drawing on this definition, the PMF can accordingly be regarded as a hybrid actor. This is evidenced by the PMF’s provision of security through fighters and checkpoints, particularly in areas where the state has failed, thus increasing their legitimacy. However, the PMF also offers basic services such as waste management, healthcare and infrastructure, integrating into the social fabric and thus strengthening their support among the population. Consequently, the PMF’s role can be understood as a response to the state’s failure to adequately provide security and essential services. By offering services that the state is unable or unwilling to provide, the PMF enhances its legitimacy and recognition. Simultaneously, the PMF maintains a flexible stance towards the state, engaging in the political process while also preserving autonomous domains. This is especially noticeable in the economic sphere: As such, the PMF receives financial support from the state, while also operating in formal and informal economic sectors. This financial independence enables the PMF to exercise a degree of independence from the state’s policies, even when it opts to disavow them (ibid.: 16-19).

This hybridity poses a challenge for legitimacy research: Neither fully rooted in the state nor fully outside of it, the PMF operates in a gray area that challenges traditional analytical frameworks. While one could argue that the formal integration of the PMF into the Iraqi state lends it legitimacy in the sense of Weber’s legal-rational approach, its continued deployment as a parallel independent security force raises questions about the coherence of state authority. From an empirical legitimacy perspective, the PMF simultaneously garners considerable support from the local population,

particularly in Shia communities, due to its role in defeating ISIS and providing security where state institutions are weak. This popular support underscores the relational character of the PMF's legitimacy, which depends not only on legal recognition but is also shaped by its interactions with various societal actors. Consequently, the analysis necessitates a relational approach to legitimacy, which will be explored in more detail in the next section.

2.3 Relational Perspective on Legitimacy

Following this digression on hybrid actors, the relational approach will be examined in greater depth. While the theoretical foundation of this thesis is closely rooted in the paper "Understanding the Legitimacy of Armed Groups: A Relational Perspective," along with the analytical framework outlined within by Podder (2017), the relational approach itself is founded upon a critical evaluation of prevailing theories. According to Andersen (2012: 214), the majority of legitimacy studies – regardless of whether they adopt a state-institutional-normative or empirical approach – perceive legitimacy, state, and society as distinct entities. These approaches define legitimacy a priori (e.g., through democracy or the rule of law) and subsequently assess whether a state aligns with these criteria. This results in a circular argument: A state is considered legitimate because it is already legitimate. Consequently, empirical research frequently treats the state and society as given contexts in which legitimacy functions as an external variable, rather than analyzing its emergence.

However, the relational approach, as its name suggests, analyzes the relationships between different actors. This approach is predicated on sociological foundations, representing a progression from the empirical approach. The relational perspective in sociology fosters an efficient methodological framework for the analysis of legitimacy in armed groups. It advocates for a shift from the study of entities and their characteristics to an emphasis on actions and relational dynamics that contribute to the establishment of legitimacy (Podder 2017: 686). Accordingly, this thesis examines the manner in which the PMF engage with key audiences and the implications of these interactions on their legitimacy.

As previously outlined by Schlichte and Schneckener (2015) in their legitimacy analysis of armed actors, the relational approach employed in this thesis is characterized by an

examination of three distinct levels of relationship. These levels include the relationships between the PMF and the civilian population they intend to serve, the government of the nation within which they operate, and the various external actors comprising the international community (Podder 2017: 687).²

The three levels can be further subdivided into different relationship types (see Figure 2). Consequently, the objective of the subsequent description of the relationship levels and types is to provide a detailed presentation of the framework used, which is then applied to the examination and categorization of the individual factions of the PMF in the analysis section of the paper.

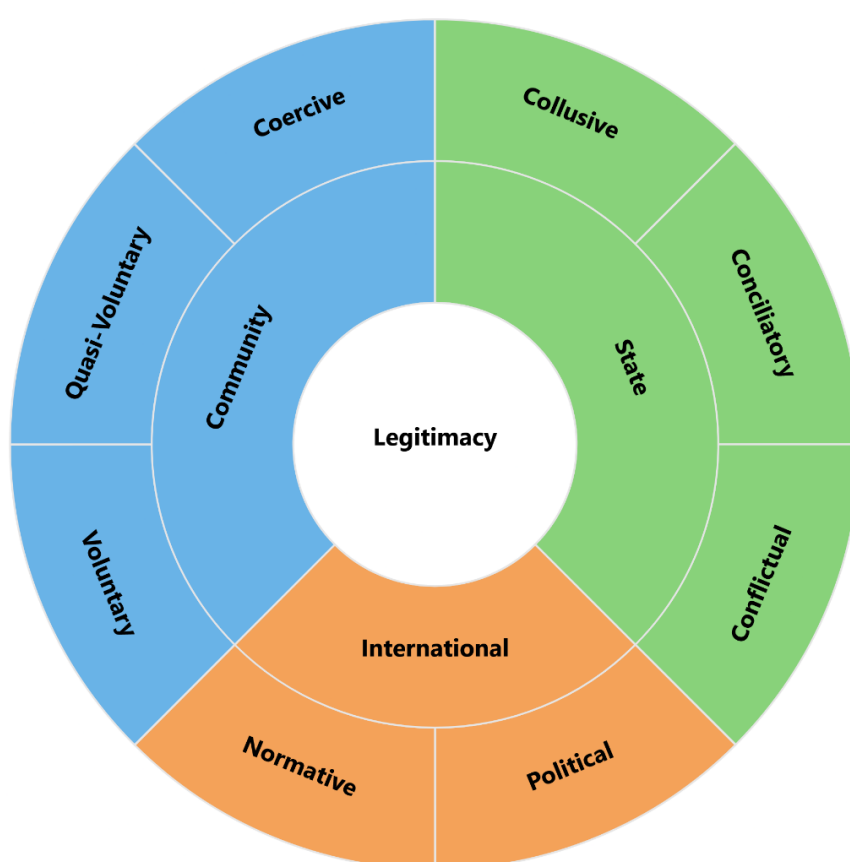


Figure 2: Relational Legitimacy Framework according to Podder (2017)³

² The relationships between the PMF and other armed non-state actors are not subject of this work. While these relationships are important for the overall success of the group, from a legitimization perspective, they play only a subordinate role (Podder 2017: 702).

³ The visualization was created by the author of this thesis, but was inspired by Hubaishi (2020).

2.3.1 Relations with the Community

With regard to the relationship between armed groups and the community, it is important to first consider popular support, which is a critical factor in the survival of armed groups. This support is based on a certain degree of alignment between the community and its leaders, and it is influenced by several factors, including historical decisions, cultural affinities, loyalties, and resentments (Walzer 1980: 212). In contrast to popular support, however, the principle of compliance is characterized by a willingness to adhere to the established rules of a given group, motivated by a sense of its legitimacy. This suggests that compliance entails more than just an individual's personal support for a group; it also involves the perception of the group's governance as justifiable or necessary in a broader social or moral sense. Consequently, compliance refers to collective acceptance of the group's rule as legitimate. As such, analyzing compliance is crucial in assessing the legitimacy of an armed group and can be categorized into three distinct classifications: voluntary compliance, quasi-voluntary compliance, and coercive compliance (Podder 2017: 687 f.).

First, orders are followed voluntarily if they are considered to be beneficial for the community as a whole. In order to ensure this voluntary compliance, existing norms, values, and religious practices are often drawn upon (ibid.: 688). This strategy is based on the fact that armed groups tend to choose modalities that offer a high probability of voluntary compliance or strong enforcement. The adoption of established religious concepts and practices, even when distorted to align with the group's specific needs, is therefore likely to ensure voluntary compliance (Bahiss et al. 2022: 37). Simultaneously, voluntary compliance is not entirely free of control mechanisms, as armed groups often exert a certain degree of coercion to increase compliance and deter defections. Surveillance and symbolic or enforced sanctions serve to maintain order and ensure that civilians do not support opposing forces. Therefore, while voluntary compliance is driven by legitimacy and acceptance, a limited form of coercion remains necessary to stabilize rule and protect the group's influence over the population (Podder 2017: 688).

The second type is quasi-voluntary compliance, defined as "compliance motivated by a willingness to cooperate but backed by coercion" (Levi 2006: 7). In this case, the community exhibits a certain degree of acceptance of the established rules, yet their enforcement is accompanied by a latent or explicit threat of violence or sanctions.

Consequently, the population adheres to the rules because they recognize both the advantages (e.g. the provision of services) but also the consequences of noncompliance. In contrast to voluntary compliance, the focus is thus not on the belief that the armed group is acting in the interest of the community as a whole (Podder 2017: 688). Accordingly, these dynamics also imply that compliance is inherently conditional. In the event that the armed group ceases to maintain its monopoly on the use of force or demonstrates an inability to govern effectively, the likelihood of noncompliance, resistance, and eventual collapse increases significantly (Levi 2006: 7).

The third type of compliance, and the most common among armed actors, is coercive compliance. In this case, the conviction of the civilian population regarding the appropriateness of the rule is irrelevant and not based on a set of shared beliefs or perceptions about the decision-making process (Podder 2017: 689). This form of compliance has been demonstrated to be closely linked to violence. While coercion may yield short-term successes, it has a tendency to discredit the armed groups and reduce their legitimacy over time. As a result, this dynamic often results in a downward spiral, characterized by mass killings, sexual violence, and human rights violations, which are carried out in an effort to maintain compliance. The increase in violence consequently leads to a decrease in legitimacy, which, in turn, can further perpetuate the cycle of violence (Schlichte/Schneckener 2015: 416).

In particular, resource-rich actors with substantial sources of income generation often rely on coercive compliance. Such groups can finance extensive military capacities to enforce their rules and are hardly or not at all dependent on civilian contributions in material terms (Podder 2017: 689). However, given that legitimate actors require fewer resources for enforcement and can instead depend more on the consent of citizens, groups with limited resources are compelled to rely more on voluntary or quasi-voluntary compliance (McCullough 2015: 7).

2.3.2 Relations with the State

In the following section, the relationship between armed groups and the state is examined. Schlichte (2009: 30) asserts that states typically play a central role in the

emergence of armed groups, as essential skills for armed uprisings are transmitted within state institutions. He delineates three primary pathways to group formation:

Firstly, the mechanism of repression is initiated when the government engages in violent repression, compelling the political opposition to resort to armed resistance. These groups are frequently led by politicians who possess formal education and political experience, yet lack military background. Secondly, the ad hoc mechanism emerges in neo-patrimonial environments during crises, wherein individuals marginalized from political networks organize violent action against the state. These groups, being new and unstable due to the challenges of war, primarily seek to overthrow the regime. Lastly, the spin-off mechanism is associated with overt political violence and is initially a state project. Governments utilize informal, irregular forces to achieve goals that regular forces cannot. Over time, these groups can operate independently of state control, sometimes due to international pressure or military ethics. Initially controlled by the state, these informal forces can eventually develop autonomy (ibid.: 31).

The formation of the PMF can be plausibly attributed to the spin-off mechanism, as evidenced by their emergence from numerous informal groups engaged in the fight against ISIS. These groups supplemented, or even replaced, the state forces that had previously collapsed. Contrary to Schlichte's classification, however, the PMF exhibited a degree of autonomy from their inception and were formally integrated into the state only later. Presently, they function in a hybrid role, exhibiting characteristics of both state and non-state entities.

In terms of legitimacy, it has been observed that many armed groups attempt to mimic state structures in order to gain legitimacy. According to Olson (1993: 568), this phenomenon can be explained by the "stationary bandit" thesis. According to this theory, armed groups benefit from imitating state structures or replacing the state by providing important public services in order to control the area and generate long-term income from the population. This approach is often more lucrative than the strategy employed by "roving bandits," whose primary objective is to maximize short-term gains. This assertion is further emphasized by Podder (2017: 692), who underscores the significance of armed groups' effectiveness in adopting state-like symbols, procedures, and governance in determining their success in replacing state authority in public perception.

According to Podder (2017: 694), three distinct types of relationships between armed groups and the state can be delineated: collusive, conciliatory, and conflictual. In a collusive relationship, the state attempts to "buy off" armed groups by offering economic and political incentives. North et al. (2007: 3) highlight the use of "limited access orders" as a means of manipulating the market by restricting access to valuable political and economic resources to a select group of elites. The objective is to co-opt and neutralize armed opposition groups by offering them financial incentives, economic privileges, and political concessions, thereby transforming a purely violent struggle into a negotiated system of cooperation between elites. In this context, insurgents can evolve into agents of state stability rather than adversaries. However, Brenner (2015: 353 f.) contends that this process may potentially result in the destabilization and delegitimization of armed groups. This, in turn, may give rise to internal rivalries and rekindle the conflict between armed groups and the state, thereby negating any progress that may have been previously achieved through negotiations.

The second type of relationship, termed the conciliatory relationship, emerges when the state acknowledges the autonomy of armed groups due to its own limitations. This occurs when the state either lacks the military capacity to retake territory controlled by armed groups or views such areas as strategically insignificant. The resulting relationship is characterized by a political and military standoff in which the armed group retains partial control over its territory and provides basic security, while the state retains authority over core public services (Podder 2017: 695). The establishment of such a conciliatory relationship can enhance the legitimacy of insurgents, thereby facilitating their recognition as legitimate political actors. Consequently, insurgents can increase their credibility among internal supporters, domestic audiences, and international observers (Toros 2008: 412 f.).

Finally, the conflictual relationship is characterized by direct military confrontation between the state and armed groups. The outcome of a conflict is influenced by several factors, including access to external support and resources that can be plundered, the military strength and GDP of the state, and the ideological orientation of the rebel movement (for example, socialist actors are more likely to engage in protracted and violent conflicts). However, the support and information provided by the civilian population is of particular importance, as state-sponsored repression can lead to the

loss of support from the civilian population and increase backing for the insurgents (Podder 2017: 696).

Pro-government militias, defined as irregular armed groups that collaborate with government troops without being part of the formal military, play a distinctive role in this context. These militias offer several advantages, including their ability to deploy with relative flexibility and the potential to enhance the legitimacy of the government by incorporating local troops. However, the employment of such forces is also associated with a decline in state control over violence, which can result in human rights violations and challenge formal military structures. The reliance on pro-government militias also renders the post-conflict period more volatile, particularly if the forces decline to disband after the war (Carey/Mitchell 2015: 8, 10, 27)

2.3.3 Relations with External Actors

The final level of analysis focuses on the relationships between armed groups and external actors. Generally, support can be provided by a variety of actors, including nation states, which offer military, financial, and political resources; diaspora communities, which provide ideological and economic support; and co-ethnic and transnational networks, which facilitate cross-border connectivity among groups. This broad range of supporters is often accepted, which is why most rebel groups since 1945 have had links to foreign countries or have been directly supported by external actors (Podder 2017: 698).

However, given that not all armed groups receive or desire external support, the question of the criteria for such support emerges. Thus, Salehyan, Gleditsch and Cunningham (2011: 734) describe in a study that external support is less likely when armed groups are very strong or very weak. While strong and well-organized groups do not require support and often prefer independence, weak and disorganized or fragmented groups are not worthy of support because they are unlikely to be able to effectively challenge the state. Additionally, transnational connections and interstate rivalries are significant factors in the provision of support to rebel groups, and they are also more likely to obtain support themselves in conflicts in which the government side receives external support.

The international legitimacy of armed groups is influenced by a combination of normative and political factors. In terms of normativity, international legitimacy is contingent upon adherence to global norms, encompassing the protection of human rights, democratic governance, and compliance with international humanitarian law. This principle has guided the international community's approach toward armed groups in the past, particularly in instances where these groups have supported national liberation movements, aspired to transition to a secular, democratic government, and demonstrated adherence to international human rights and governance standards. Armed groups that reject these norms are widely considered illegitimate (Podder 2017: 698, 700).

In addition to normative considerations, political factors also play a role in the recognition or support of armed groups. This is because political calculations often overshadow ethical concerns, especially when powerful actors are involved. Consequently, in some cases, states will support armed groups that they see as valuable allies, even if these groups violate international norms. This support is driven by political interests, such as containing regional threats, destabilizing adversaries, or gaining access to strategic resources, rather than by shared ethical principles. Conversely, a group may encounter challenges in attaining political legitimacy if its actions are perceived as being at odds with the political or strategic interests of influential external actors, even if its conduct aligns with established normative principles. This phenomenon underscores the intricate and often conflicting relationship between normative legitimacy and political legitimacy (ibid.: 700 f.).

In consideration of the impact of international legitimacy, Schlichte and Schneckener (2015: 421) describe that external acknowledgement can generally strengthen legitimacy at the local level, as armed groups are able to portray themselves as internationally recognized entities. However, a dilemma emerges when considering that international expectations frequently diverge from domestic normative frameworks and political demands, resulting in armed groups facing the challenge of satisfying the expectations of both domestic and international audiences. The pursuit of external recognition, therefore, can compel moderation (or the promise of moderation) from the group, which, in turn, may lead to internal delegitimization and fragmentation. Furthermore, there is a risk that armed groups are accused of being controlled by foreign powers as a result of external legitimization. As a result, this dynamic

necessitates a nuanced approach, often characterized by an ambivalent or contradictory stance by armed groups.

In summary, the chapter delineated the three levels of relationships between armed groups and the community, the state, and international actors. Relationships with the community can be defined by voluntary, quasi-voluntary, or coerced compliance, while the relationships with the state are characterized by collusive, conciliatory, or conflictual dynamics. At the international level, however, relationships can be categorized in terms of normative or political considerations. The subsequent analysis and classification of the PMFs' relationships will be conducted in the analytical section of this thesis.

3. The Popular Mobilization Forces

In Iraq's efforts to combat the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS), the nation's developing security forces have become divided into various factions. Some of these groups operate within the framework of the state, while others function independently or in parallel to it. A notable actor that operates outside of direct state control comprises the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)⁴. The PMF emerged in response to the security vacuums that were left behind when the Iraqi forces faltered in 2014. Despite their significance, the PMF are a contentious and internally divided entity, operating under both state sanction and the influence of non-state actors. Consequently, the challenges confronting the PMF will play a pivotal role in shaping the future political and security landscape of Iraq (Mansour/Jabar 2017: 1).

In order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the PMF, this chapter will examine the history of militias in Iraq, the emergence of the PMF, and their composition. The objective of this exploration is to establish a foundation upon which the subsequent analysis and discussion can be constructed.

3.1 History of Militias in Iraq

The roots of militias in Iraq can be traced to the emergence of Shia⁵ political activism in the mid-20th century. In particular, the founding of the Islamic Dawa Party in the 1950s, which sought to integrate Islamic principles into governance, resulted in a significant increase in political mobilization. In 1968, however, the secular Ba'athist regime assumed power, promoting a nationalist agenda while simultaneously repressing religious and sectarian groups. The Shiite community was particularly targeted, leading to a struggle between the Ba'athist government and Shiite resistance groups. Among the key moments of Shiite resistance is the 1977 Safar Intifada, which was a protest against government restrictions on religious practice. In response to

⁴ Although the term "Forces" is plural, this thesis does not adhere strictly to either singular or plural usage when referring to the PMF. Depending on context and readability, the PMF are at times treated as a singular collective actor and at other times in the plural. This variation reflects stylistic and contextual rather than substantive analytical considerations, while the internal heterogeneity of the PMF is addressed separately in the analysis.

⁵ The terms "Shia" and "Shiite" both refer to the same Islamic denomination. While "Shia" is derived from the Arabic phrase "Shi'atu Imam Ali," which translates to "the followers of Imam Ali," "Shiite" is the English adaptation of the same term (Al-Musawi 2024). For the sake of simplicity, both words will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis.

these protests, critics were increasingly assassinated in the years that followed. In 1980, for example, Baqir al-Sadr, the founder of the Islamic Dawa Party, was killed along with his sister, Amina Haydar al-Sadr, for their leading role in the resistance to the regime. But especially the 1991 Shiite uprising, an unsuccessful rebellion following Iraq's defeat in the Gulf War, is regarded as a defining example of religious repression, as the uprising was brutally suppressed by the government, killing tens of thousands of Shiites, and destroying numerous Shiite shrines and villages. Furthermore, the assassination of influential Shiite cleric Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr in 1999 encouraged a younger generation of Shiite activists, including his son Muqtada al-Sadr, to continue the struggle. This event ultimately laid the groundwork for the Sadrist movement, which would become a dominant political force in Iraq after 2003 (Alaaldin 2017b: 144-148).

In response to concerns about potential further uprisings and an increase in desertions from the Iraqi army, Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime intensified the process of arming militias during the 1990s. While earlier examples of government-aligned militias existed – such as the Fursan Salah al-Din in the 1980s, which consisted of Kurdish tribal troops supporting the Iraqi government against Mulla Mustafa Barzani (Gunter 2018: 114) – the large-scale organization and arming of militias became a more prominent strategy in the 1990s. These semi-autonomous fighting forces offered a cost-effective alternative to the conventional military and could be utilized to mobilize society and provide security at the provincial level. The militias thus assisted Saddam Hussein in maintaining control over Iraq and its population – at least until the US-led invasion and the end of his regime in 2003 (Brill 2020).

Following the collapse of Saddam's regime, Iraq's political system was restructured around a new framework of ethno-sectarian power-sharing known as the *Muhasasa Ta'ifiya* system. This arrangement, first introduced in 2003, allocated political offices and state resources based on communal identity, with the initial goal of ensuring proportional representation for Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish communities. However, Muhasasa instead entrenched sectarian divisions and embedded patronage networks deep within the Iraqi state (Haddad 2020a: 74). As a result, this system undermined the capacity of the Iraqi state and facilitated the growth of militias, as political leaders increasingly relied on loyal armed groups to maintain their power. For instance, Nouri al-Maliki, who served as Prime Minister from 2006 to 2014, found the multi-sectarian composition of the military to be ineffective in centralizing his authority. Consequently,

Maliki enlisted the support of Shia militias, which proved to be a more reliable source of control. This dynamic ultimately led to the formal recognition of the PMF in 2014, which resulted in the more integrated presence of militias within the state apparatus (Mansour/Jabar 2017: 6). As Kanan Makiya (2023: 126) notes, these militias, supported by their respective political factions, dominated state institutions through extensive networks of patronage and coercion. The Muhasasa system thus not only shaped Iraq's political landscape but also created the conditions for the entrenchment of militias within the state from 2003 onwards.

These militias, having been radicalized by decades of brutal Ba'athist repression and rooted in resistance networks, were able to fill the power vacuum left by the collapse of Saddam's government. As a result, several militias were able to establish themselves as key players in the emerging political and security order (Alaaldin 2017a: 3). Among these groups, the Mahdi Army (Jaysh al-Mahdi), loyal to Muqtada al-Sadr, quickly became one of the most powerful militias in post-invasion Iraq. As the armed wing of the political Sadrist movement, the militia has gained a reputation for both its resistance to the US occupation and its harsh reprisals against Sunnis. In particular, between 2006 and 2008, the Mahdi Army waged a brutal campaign against Sunnis, using "death squads" that carried out torture, murder, and acts of terrorism. In 2008, a faction of the group eventually split off and reorganized as the Iranian-backed Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) militia (Geneva International Centre for Justice 2016: 5 ff.). Subsequently, the Mahdi Army was disbanded and divided into two distinct entities: The Mumahidoon, which concentrated on providing social assistance and religious education to Shia communities and the Promised Day Brigade, a small, elite combat unit under Sadr's command (Cochrane 2009: 37). However, it was not until 2014 that the new armed wing of the Sadrist movement, the Saraya al-Salam (SaS) militia, was established in the fight against ISIS (Geneva International Centre for Justice 2016: 7).

Simultaneously, the Badr Corps emerged as a prominent force in post-2003 Iraq. As the oldest Shiite militia, it was established in 1983/84 by Iraqi exiles in Iran as the armed wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI, later Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, ISCI), an umbrella organization that included the Islamic Dawa Party among other Shiite opposition groups. From its inception, the Badr Corps was integrated into Iran's military apparatus as a subdivision of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Upon their return from exile in Iran in 2003, they

re-established themselves as a significant military and political force in Iraq under the new name of the Badr Organization (Steinberg 2017: 1 f.). Similar to the Mahdi Army, the Badr Organization, which was protected by the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior, also committed numerous acts of violence against the Sunni population (Foundation for Defense of Democracies n.d.). However, the Badr Organization became increasingly politically active, even joining the State of Law Coalition formed by then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in 2009. But it was not until 2014 that the Badr Organization made its political breakthrough as part of the PMF (Steinberg 2017: 2).

In addition to these entities, the so-called Special Groups warrant mention: This designation, ascribed by the US, refers to a collective of Iran-backed Shia militias. Notable examples include the AAH, which traces its origins to the Mahdi Army and was initially led by Qais al-Khazali, and the Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) militia, which was established in 2007 by former Badr commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Additionally, the small fighting force of Sadr's Promised Day Brigades was also part of the Special Groups. Modeled after the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Special Groups operated primarily as an Iranian proxy with the aim of accelerating the withdrawal of US troops and consolidating Iranian influence in Iraq. In pursuit of this objective, the groups also collaborated closely with the Mahdi Army and the Badr Organization (Knights 2010: 12 f.).

Beyond these Iran-backed militias, other armed groups played a crucial role in Iraq's security landscape. The Kurdish Peshmerga, the long-standing military force of the Kurdistan Region, operated with considerable autonomy and became a key player in both regional defense and national security dynamics. Meanwhile, the Sahwa Movement (Awakening Councils) emerged in the mid-2000s as a US-backed Sunni tribal force aimed at countering al-Qaeda in Iraq. Although initially successful in stabilizing Sunni-majority areas, the movement was gradually sidelined by the Iraqi government, which failed to integrate its fighters into state security structures. This marginalization, combined with sectarian policies, fueled Sunni grievances and ultimately contributed to the resurgence of extremist groups such as ISIS (Gaston 2017).

Despite the prominent role of militias in Iraq in the post-Ba'athist era, their presence has not been without contention. Nouri al-Maliki, who served as the head of the Islamic Dawa Party and held the position of Prime Minister of Iraq from 2006 to 2014, initially

expressed reservations about the growing influence of non-state actors. He characterized militias such as the Mahdi Army and the Badr Organization as problematic and illegitimate entities and took action against them. For instance, with the assistance of the US military, he was able to integrate the Badr Organization, at least to some extent, into the Ministry of the Interior. However, he subsequently reversed his stance on paramilitaries, particularly following the withdrawal of US troops in 2011. This was due to Maliki's increasing reliance on Iran, whose support enabled his return to power in 2010 despite his electoral defeat. Consequently, he advanced the Iranian agenda by providing support to Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian civil war, involving the deployment of Iraqi Shia militias. However, he also utilized militia units to suppress Sunni protests, intimidate political opponents, and maintain control within Iraq's borders (Mansour/Jabar 2017: 5 f., 8 f.).

3.2 Emergence of the PMF

While Shiite militias played a key role in Iraq after the fall of the Ba'athist regime, one development was to significantly strengthen the influence of militias in Iraq – the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The Salafi jihadist group, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or Daesh, was established in 2013 by members of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and other minor Sunni insurgent groups. In addition, fighters from Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, also joined ISIS, contributing to its expansion. Following the successful capture of vast swathes of territory, ISIS proclaimed the establishment of the Islamic State and a global caliphate on June 29, 2014, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi assuming the role of caliph. At its zenith in 2015, ISIS controlled areas in Iraq and Syria with a population of ten million people, and through affiliated groups, also exerted influence over limited areas in Libya, Nigeria and Afghanistan, as well as operating in North Africa and South Asia (Mossallanejad 2015: 3 f.). In Iraq in particular, ISIS had already captured Mosul, the second largest city, in 2014 and controlled more than a third of the country's populated landmass (see Figure 1). As the group continued its advance, there was a rising concern that Baghdad, the nation's capital, might soon also fall into ISIS's possession (Mansour/Jabar 2017: 3).

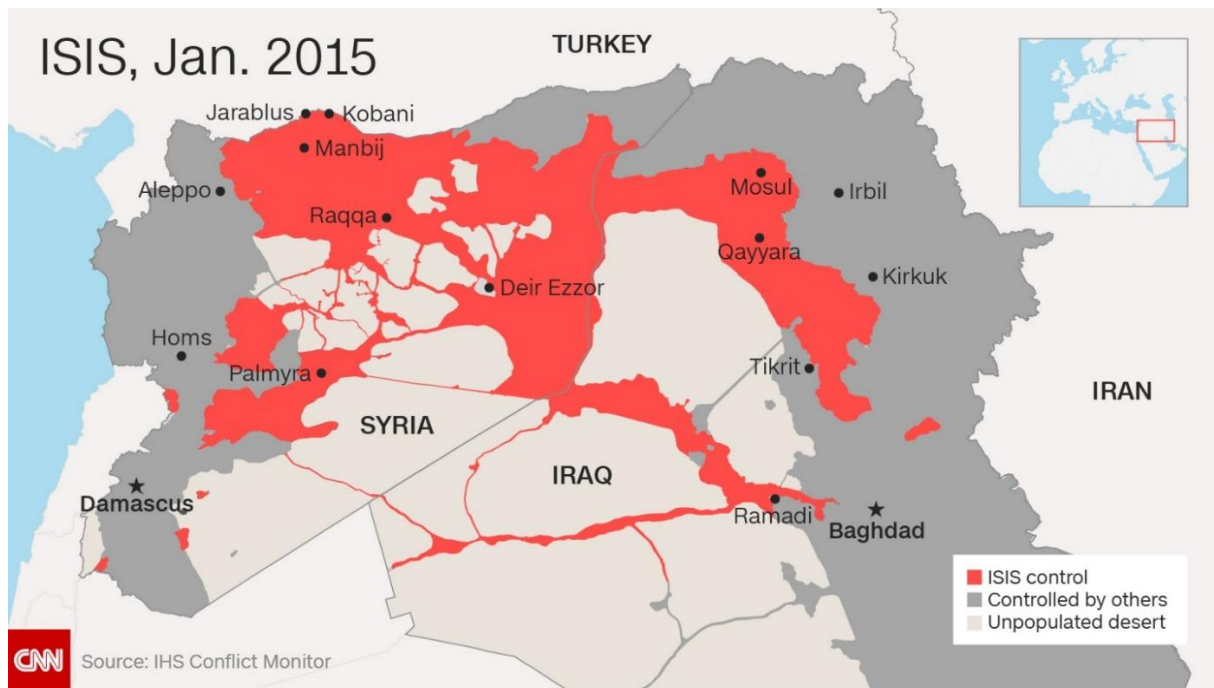


Figure 3: Territorial control of ISIS at its peak in Iraq and Syria in January 2015 (CNN 2021)

By that point, it was evident that the Iraqi military was no longer capable of maintaining the fight against ISIS. This was due in part to the fact that the military was underdeveloped and lacked essential elements such as air power and air defense systems. Additionally, the military's focus had been on internal security, as the country had previously relied on the US to address external threats, until their withdrawal in 2011 (Marcus 2014). Following the collapse of the Iraqi armed forces in June 2014, the Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani attracted considerable attention when he issued a fatwa⁶, calling for resistance against ISIS in a Friday sermon:

"Citizens who are able to bear arms and fight terrorists in defense of their country, people, and sanctities [...] must volunteer to join the security forces" (Sistani 2014, as cited in Jiyad 2023).

Although the call to defend the country was directed against ISIS, it raised controversy among Sunnis, who worried that the fatwa – which was preceded by appeals to the Shia population in particular – could be interpreted as a license to wage war on their community. Nevertheless, Sistani's endeavors were ultimately successful, and he was able to garner a considerable number of volunteers to combat ISIS (Geneva

⁶ In Islam, a fatwa is a formal decision or interpretation of Islamic law by a qualified legal scholar. Fatwas are usually issued in response to religious or legal issues (Britannica 2024).

International Centre for Justice 2016: 10 f.). However, in tandem with Sistani's fatwa, Prime Minister Maliki signed a decree establishing the militia umbrella organization Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), also known as Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) or al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Hashd). This decree represented a clear violation of Article 9, Section B of the Iraqi constitution, which prohibits the formation of paramilitary groups outside the state military. Nevertheless, it provided Maliki with a means of legitimizing the militias he had already relied upon, integrating them into a state body that was separate from the collapsed military (Al-Marashi 2021: 203).

This legalization of militias created ambiguity: Sistani's fatwa was carefully worded to support the official security forces. Yet Maliki and his allies, including Badr chief Hadi al-Amiri and AAH leader Qais al-Khazali, interpreted it as a call to join the paramilitary groups. Subsequently, they launched a widespread campaign to enlist volunteers in hundreds of centers and offices. These recruitment efforts were based on a smear campaign against the very Iraqi army they had built, which the fatwa purportedly called on volunteers to join. Although Sistani subsequently indicated that he did not intend to include the militias in his calls, the high influx of volunteers to the paramilitary groups persisted (Mansour/Jabar 2017: 7).

In regard to the campaign against ISIS, the PMF, in collaboration with a diverse array of actors, including a US-led coalition of Western states, has achieved notable success. Consequently, by December 2017, ISIS had lost 95% of its territory, including the city of Mosul, which it had captured in 2014. On December 9, 2017, then-Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi proclaimed the defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq. Nevertheless, it took until March 2019 for the last occupied area in Syria to be captured and until October of the same year for ISIS caliph Baghdadi to be killed (Glenn et al. 2019). Despite the involvement of numerous actors, the PMF played a leading role in the fight against ISIS in Iraq. Moreover, even after the defeat of ISIS and the subsequent recovery of the Iraqi armed forces, the PMF continues to wield significant influence within the Iraqi military landscape (Cambanis et al. 2019: 23).

3.3 Composition of the PMF

At the height of the conflict with ISIS, the PMF was comprised of approximately 250,000 fighters. As a consequence of demobilizations subsequent to the defeat of ISIS, it was estimated in 2019 that approximately 150,000 PMF fighters remained, distributed across approximately 50 brigades (Peterson 2024: 332). But since then, the number has increased significantly, as according to PMF Chairman Falih Al-Fayyadh, the militia consisted of 204,000 active members as of April 2023. However, given that the number of registered personnel was deliberately concealed for years, and that the actual manpower was always higher than the registered numbers, it can be assumed that there are even more members than the official figures suggest (Al-Kaabi/Knights 2023).⁷

In terms of the group's ideology, the PMF was overwhelmingly Shiite at the time of its founding: The first PMF groups were aligned with Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, while later groups pledged allegiance to Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani or Muqtada al-Sadr. This Shiite mobilization thus also served as a microcosm of the Shiite faith in general, since unlike Catholicism, for example, there is no single religious authority equivalent to the Pope (Al-Marashi 2021: 204). However, the composition of the PMF has since changed. While observers still tend to rely on the simplistic and prejudicial characterization that they are merely "Iran-backed Shia militias," the PMF is actually composed of units with different beliefs, affiliations, and loyalties (Haddad 2018: 3). For this reason, this chapter provides a detailed breakdown of the PMF's composition.

3.3.1 Pro-Khamenei Faction

The most influential groups within the PMF are those that maintain close ties to Tehran and pledge their ideological allegiance to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. As a result, these groups have been facilitated by Iran to serve as dependable political and military allies, thereby receiving more comprehensive funding and resources from Tehran than other groups within the PMF (Mansour/Jabar 2017: 13). Due to the ideological disparities between these groups and the broader PMF, the Iran-aligned

⁷ As with the total number of PMF fighters, the number of members in individual militias is frequently uncertain. In the absence of current figures, only estimates, which are sometimes several years old, can be referenced. However, this does not detract from the argument, as the research question regarding the legitimacy of the PMF does not necessitate exact membership figures.

militias are also referred to as *fasa'il* (factions), as opposed to the other PMF groups, the *alwiya* (brigades) (Marston 2025).

The oldest and largest of the PMF militias is the Badr Organization, which was founded in the 1980s. It is widely regarded as the second most important Iran-backed militia, after the Lebanese Hezbollah. As of 2017, the Badr Organization exercises control over seventeen brigades, comprising almost a third of the total number of PMF brigades (Peterson 2024: 332 f.). Additionally, the number of members is estimated to range from 20,000 to 50,000, with figures varying depending on whether only the fighters or the entire personnel, which also comprises those active in the political wing, are included (Steinberg 2017: 4). The militia is led by Hadi al-Amiri, who is also the leader of the Fatah alliance in parliament, which indicates that the Badr Organization is also deeply rooted in the Iraqi state. Nevertheless, the Badr Organization is a *wal'ai* movement, which means that, when called upon, it acknowledges the Supreme Leader of Iran as a superior authority to the Iraqi Prime Minister (Knights/Smith/Malik 2021).

Another notable militia belonging to the pro-Iranian faction is the AAH. Formed in 2006 as a splinter group of the Mahdi Army, it currently oversees three brigades of the PMF (Peterson 2024: 335), and in 2019 estimates placed the group's strength at around 10,000 fighters (Knights 2019: 2). The group is led by Qais al-Khazali, who is also the founder of the Special Groups, which operated between 2006 and 2011. Since its inception, the group has gained notoriety in Iraq for its attacks against US forces as part of the Special Groups, as well as later in the fight against ISIS. Additionally, the AAH has engaged in international operations, including involvement in the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict and support for the Assad regime in Syria. These operations demonstrate that the AAH, which has been financed and trained by Iran since its inception, serves as a proxy for Iranian interests abroad. Furthermore, it is assumed that AAH has been involved in numerous criminal activities, from assassinations to kidnappings, and with its leader stoking ethnic and religious tensions against Sunnis and Kurds (O'Driscoll/Van Zoonen 2017: 19 f.).

The third significant actor among the pro-Iranian militias is KH, which, as part of the former Special Groups, had split from the Badr Organization in 2007 (Peterson 2024: 336). Having control over three PMF brigades, the KH has around 10,000 fighters (as

of 2019), a quarter of whom are stationed in Syria⁸ (Knights 2019: 2). As with the AAH, the KH was engaged in resistance against the US occupation, fought against ISIS, and was implicated in war crimes (Peterson 2024: 336). However, the former leader of the KH and de-facto leader of the PMF, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, is worthy of particular note: As prior to his death on January 3, 2020, as a result of a US drone attack, he had attempted to further centralize the PMF in order to avoid problems posed by individual factions operating independently. Instead, his death and the subsequent appointment of Abdul Aziz al Muhammadawi (Abu Fadak), a former KH secretary general, as the new KH leader, resulted in internal divisions within the KH and even the entire PMF. This subsequently led to a deterioration of the security situation throughout Iraq (ACCORD 2023).

Furthermore, the Kata'ib al-Imam Ali (KIA), also known as the Imam Ali Brigades is also a relevant actor: unlike the pro-Khamenei militias mentioned above, which were part of the Special Groups, this group was formed only after the 2014 fatwa.⁹ This group was also initially part of Sadr's Mahdi Army before it split off and (as of 2019) consists of a "mega-brigade" with 8,000 fighters (Knights 2019: 2). Furthermore, they are also closely linked to the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iranian Quds Force and are said to have committed significant human rights violations, including the beheading and burning of prisoners (Gaston/Derzsi-Horváth 2018: 21). However, the group has gained particular notoriety through its (now resigned) deputy commander Abu Azrael (or Father of the Angel of Death), who was able to build a large social media following in the fight against ISIS and became the group's figurehead (Hayek et al. 2024).

Ultimately, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HaN) has become a significant actor, particularly in recent years. The militia was established by Akram al-Kaabi, who commenced his career in Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army and subsequently co-founded AAH. However, following a dispute in 2013, al-Kaabi renounced AAH and established HaN. Since then, the group has grown to approximately 10,000 fighters as

⁸ In the context of the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024, the role of Iraqi militias, such as the KH, in the conflict remains uncertain. Although the KH called on the Iraqi government to deploy forces in support of Assad, the KH has remained ambiguous regarding its own involvement. Nevertheless, reports indicated that several hundred PMF fighters had departed for Syria to engage in combat against rebel forces (964 Media 2024). However, in the absence of more detailed coverage, it can be assumed that the PMF did not play a significant role in fighting the Syrian insurgency in 2024.

⁹ In contrast, Mansour/Jabar (2019: 6) describe that the group was already founded several years before the 2014 fatwa (similar to AAH or KH, for example). Since all other sources consulted (cf. Knights 2019, Gaston/Derzsi-Horváth 2018 & Hayek et al. 2024) date the year of foundation as 2014, these sources are given more credibility due to their consistency.

of 2019 and has become a transnational militia, also engaging in conflicts in Syria outside of Iraq (Counter Extremism Project 2024). Since the 2023 war in Gaza, the militia has also been the most radical and aggressive actor of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq (IRI)¹⁰, an umbrella group that directs attacks against both US military bases and Israel (Knights 2024a). Within the PMF, however, HaN is said to have assumed a new central role, particularly following the death of IRGC commander Qasem Soleimani and the deputy head of the PMF, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, in January 2020. (Counter Extremism Project 2024).

3.3.2 Pro-Sistani Faction

The second PMF faction consists of several militias loyal to the Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. They were formed solely by Sistani's fatwa in 2014 to defend Shia holy sites and their homelands against ISIS. After all, there were legitimate fears that ISIS would destroy these holy sites if it succeeded in capturing the corresponding territories. Accordingly, there are four major groups organized from Sistani's hometown of Najaf: Saraya al-Ataba al-Abbasiya, Saraya al-Ataba al-Hussainiya, Saraya al-Ataba al-Alawiya and Liwa' Ali al-Akbar. Each of these groups is associated with one of the four major holy shrines in Kadhimiya, Karbala and Najaf (Mansour/Jabar 2017: 14). Due to their purpose of guarding these religious sites, the groups are also referred to as shrine militias (Peterson 2024: 333).¹¹

In terms of strength, the four militias are made up of four brigades, with a total of around 15,000 fighters, as of 2021 (ibid.: 334). While the majority of the members are Shiites, the faction also has a significant Sunni component, in some brigades even up to 20% (Gaston/Derzsi-Horváth 2018: 22). In addition, they are considered the most professional faction of the PMF, as unlike most other PMF units, the shrine militias are apolitical. Despite their loyalty to Sistani, they closely follow the orders of the state, based on the ideology of *velayet-e insan*, or guardianship of the state by the people and their elected representatives. This is also based on the fatwa which, contrary to

¹⁰ Other pro-Khamenei militias are also linked to the IRI, including KH and AAH. However, while HaN engaged in widespread military offensives against the US and Israel, these other militias were only responsible for sporadic attacks (Knights 2024a).

¹¹ The names of the four militias are directly related to the shrine they are protecting. In addition to these religiously associated names, the three militias, Saraya al-Ataba al-Abbasiya, Saraya al-Ataba al-Hussainiya and Saraya al-Ataba al-Alawiya, also bear the combat names Firqat al-Imam Ali al-Qitaliya, Firqat al-Abbas Ali al-Qitaliya and Liwa al-Tiff (Peterson 2024: 333).

the interpretation of then-Prime Minister Maliki, actually called on people to fight among the state security forces. Alongside this nationalist ideology, their views are also evident in practice: in stark contrast to the pro-Khamenei militias, they have rejected direct arms supplies and training from Iran, insisting that support should be channeled through the official army. They have also coordinated closely with the state army in the fight against ISIS, rather than with the pro-Iranian PMF militias (Peterson 2024: 334).

The polarization between the pro-Sistani faction and those who follow the Iranian state doctrine has increased over the years. In April 2020, the four shrine militias even split from the PMF and placed themselves under the control of the Prime Minister. Furthermore, in October 2021, the faction officially announced that they had changed their name to the Holy Shrine Units (Hashd al-Atabat). While this was effectively the final split from the PMF, the Sistani-affiliated militias continued to operate within the PMF structure in 2022. In the absence of recent media reports on pro-Sistani faction, it is unclear whether and to what extent they continue to operate within the PMF (ACCORD 2023). Nevertheless, reports indicate that Grand Ayatollah Sistani has not supported international calls to disband the PMF, maintaining his position on their role within Iraq's security framework (Mohammed 2024).

3.3.3 Pro-Sadr Faction

The Sadrists encompass the Saraya al-Salam (SaS) (also known as the Peace Brigades), which were established in response to the 2014 fatwa. It is the successor organization of Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, which was founded in 2003 and disbanded in 2008 after a split with the newly formed AAH, among other factors (see 3.1 History of Militias in Iraq). Due to Sadr's preexisting networks, he was able to rapidly mobilize a considerable number of volunteers in the fight against ISIS in 2014, effectively reactivating the former Mahdi Army (Peterson 2024: 334 f.). Hence, divided into three PMF brigades, the estimated strength of the fighting force is between 10,000 to 50,000 (ACCORD 2023). Nevertheless, the militia is alleged to possess the capability to mobilize an army of over 100,000 personnel if necessary (Mansour/Jabbar 2017: 14).

The group's ideological stance is characterized by a Shiite Iraqi nationalism that is significantly influenced by conservative Islamic principles (O'Driscoll/Van Zoonen

2017: 22). Affiliated with the political Sadrist movement, the SaS also advocates an anti-Western position and opposes the presence of foreign military forces in Iraq. In a similar vein, they also express reservations about the extent of Iranian influence within the country. Although the Sadrist militia has frequently collaborated with Iran in the past, Sadr has openly criticized Iran and its affiliated forces within the PMF (Peterson 2024: 335). Consequently, the Sadrists, in contrast to, for instance, the militias of the pro-Khamenei factions, receive minimal to no financial assistance from Iran. Therefore, despite its sizeable membership, SaS lacks substantial financial and military resources (Mansour/Jabbar 2017: 14).

Moreover, SaS's role within the PMF is ambiguous: On the one hand, Sadr rejects the pro-Khamenei groups within the PMF and opposes Iranian influence in Iraq. As a result, the Sadrists sometimes claim they are *not* part of the PMF. On the other hand, they also portray themselves as *part* of the PMF, as the organization enjoys significant popularity among the Iraqi population (ibid.: 15). This contradictory attitude towards PMF membership is also reflected in the status of the militia itself: In fact, Sadr has repeatedly expressed his intention to disband SaS, for example in 2023, when Sadr asserted that some of his followers, who claimed that Muqtada Al-Sadr was Imam Mahdi, the twelfth and final Shiite figure to emerge, had been "corrupted". Nevertheless, the militia has remained active since (ACCORD 2023). For instance, in November 2024, the militia declared a renewed mobilization following an attack on its headquarters in Diyala province by a competing Iran-affiliated militia (Shafaq 2024a). Since then, the SaS has also reportedly established a new brigade in Najaf to protect the holy shrines there (Shafaq 2024b).

3.3.4 Minority Factions

In addition to the predominantly Shia militias previously discussed, the PMF also comprises other religious and cultural forces. This is due to the fact that local groups seeking to combat ISIS had both financial and political incentives to join the PMF. However, the primary groups within the PMF also encouraged non-Shia members to enlist, provided that they adhere to the established hierarchy and do not attempt to challenge the balance of power within the PMF. This approach reflects a fundamental aspect of the Shiite-centric state structure, whereby Sunni and non-Shiite groups are embraced as partners, provided that they accept the predominance of Shiite authority

(Haddad 2018: 10). Consequently, the vast majority of these non-Shia troops were subject to some form of administration or supervision by one of the larger Shiite groups, such as the Badr Organization or AAH (Gaston/Derzsi-Horváth 2018: 24). While the PMF generally could not afford to be selective regarding its allies in the face of the considerable threat posed by ISIS in 2014, the group's heterogeneous composition also had certain advantages: Specifically, the more diverse the PMF is perceived, the better the group is able to sustain the PMF narrative of Iraqi patriotism, which is characterized by a multi-sectarian (but Shiite-led) struggle against ISIS (Haddad 2018: 10).

One of the most sizable minority groups is the Sunni faction, which has expressed a degree of skepticism regarding Sistani's 2014 fatwa, fearing that it could be interpreted as a call for Shias to engage in armed conflict with Sunnis. However, the Sunni faction has observed a significant increase in membership joining the PMF in 2014 (ibid.: 9). This development is partly attributable to the failure of Sunni MPs in Baghdad to pass a law that sought to incorporate Sunni combatants into state military units. Consequently, Sunni individuals who sought to engage in combat against ISIS joined the PMF due to a perceived lack of viable alternatives (Mansour/Jabar 2017: 12). Under the designation of the Tribal Mobilization Forces (TMF), also known as al-Hashd al-Ashairah, approximately 30,000 to 45,000 Sunni combatants were as of 2017 part of the PMF. Notably, the United States has played a pivotal role in this mobilization, significantly contributing to the substantial involvement and training of the Sunni population. This involvement was driven by the strategy to utilize the TMF not only in the fight against ISIS but also to serve as local "holding" troops to maintain control over conquered regions. This approach was deemed more suitable to the local Sunni communities than the deployment of external forces for these tasks (Gaston 2017).

Another notable minority faction is constituted by the Christian or Chaldean-Assyrian militias, which originate from the Nineveh Plains, a region northeast of Mosul that is predominantly Christian. However, a significant proportion of these Christian militias are not affiliated with the PMF but are instead linked to Kurdish military actors, particularly the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and its Peshmerga forces. These include, most notably, the Nineveh Plains Guard Forces, which have received support from the KDP and are officially part of the KDP Zeravani, as well as the Nineveh Plain Forces, formed under an agreement with the Ministry of Peshmerga. The now-defunct

Dwekh Nawsha militia, although loosely linked to the KDP through some material support, was not officially integrated into Kurdish forces (Gaston/Derzsi-Horváth 2018: 27). An exception to this broader pattern of alignment with KDP-affiliated units is the Nineveh Plains Protection Unit (NPU), which, as of 2023, had approximately 500 members (Beth-Addai 2023). Although the NPU formally operates under the PMF umbrella, it maintains a notable degree of autonomy. In addition, it was the sole Christian militia to have received US-led TMF training, a privilege otherwise reserved for Sunni forces (Gaston/Derzsi-Horváth 2018: 27).

Nevertheless, the most prominent group, frequently labelled as Christian, is the Babylon Brigade. While its leadership positions are indeed held by Christians, the group's rank-and-file is predominantly composed of non-Christians, particularly Shia Muslims. By utilizing a Christian façade and receiving support from Iran, this group has succeeded in securing four of the five Christian parliamentary seats. Following the Babylon Brigade's attempt to assert control over the Christian stronghold of Qaraqosh in the Nineveh Plains in 2023, they were subsequently expelled from the town by the NPU (Beth-Addai 2023).

A further minority faction of the PMF comprises the Shiite Turkmen, an ethnic group predominantly located in the southern Kirkuk governorate and the northern Salah ad-Din governorate (Gaston/Derzsi-Horváth 2018: 26). The Shiite Turkmen's decision to join the PMF was motivated by two key factors: Firstly, a desire to enhance their local autonomy relative to the Kurds, and secondly, a need to counter the Sunni Turkmen who had joined ISIS (Mansour/Jabar 2017: 12). Accordingly, the Shia Turkmen, who numbered approximately 3,000 combatants in 2017, are divided into two brigades commanded by pro-Khamenei factions. In conjunction with their parent organizations, such as the Badr Organization and AAH, the Shiite Turkmen were also complicit in numerous war crimes, most notably the persecution of Arab and Sunni inhabitants within their territorial jurisdiction (Gaston/Derzsi-Horváth 2018: 26).

Furthermore, elements of the Shabak ethnic minority are part of the PMF. Located in the northern Ninewa governorate, as of 2017, approximately 1,000 Shia Shabak fighters were distributed across one brigade. Similar to the Turkmen, the majority of these fighters are under the leadership of the Badr Organization (ibid.: 26). As a supporting force, the local unit of the Hashd al-Shabak plays an important role in consolidating Iranian and proxy influence in the strategically important Iraqi region of

the Nineveh plains (Malik/Knights/Beth-Addai 2022). However, some Shabak units are also part of the Babylon Brigade, which, despite its Christian front, consists mostly of Shia Shabak and Arabs. In general, the Shabak have been employed in both front-line operations and the holding of territory, and they have also been observed to subject Sunnis to particularly harsh treatment (Gaston/Derzsi-Horváth 2018: 26).

Finally, among the Yezidi forces, several militias have at times been affiliated with the PMF, though their alignments and loyalties have shifted in response to broader power struggles in Sinjar (ibid.: 28). A prominent example are the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ), closely aligned with the PKK and operating in the Sinjar region west of Mosul. As of 2015, the YBŞ reportedly comprised around 2,000 fighters – a figure which notably also includes women amongst its ranks (Paraszczyk 2015). Separate from the YBŞ, other Yezidi formations such as the Lالش Brigades and the Ezidkhan Brigades have operated within the pro-Khamenei faction of the PMF and have gained notoriety for their alleged involvement in abuses against civilians (Human Rights Watch 2017b).

However, particularly noteworthy is the trajectory of Haydar Shesho's militia, initially known as the Defense Force of Sinjar (HPŞ). Due to a lack of support from the Kurdish Peshmerga, Shesho sought assistance from Baghdad in 2014, which briefly recognized and financed his forces as part of the PMF. In April 2015, however, he was arrested by the KDP after refusing to subordinate his militia to the Peshmerga and sever ties with Baghdad. Following his release, he ended the affiliation with the PMF and in late 2015 renamed his force Defense Force of Êzîdxan (HPÊ), underlining a claim to autonomy from both Baghdad and Erbil. This attempt ultimately failed under increasing KDP pressure, and in March 2017 the HPÊ was officially integrated into the Peshmerga forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government (Schmidinger 2022: 91, 95-97).

The case of the HPÊ therefore illustrates how Yezidi actors have frequently maneuvered between rival powers to secure political leverage and material support. More recently, this also includes the reported defection of around 1,200 Yezidi Peshmerga fighters to the Babylon Brigade, a Christian-led, predominantly Shia militia affiliated with the PMF, in March 2025 (Menmy 2025).

4. Relational Analysis

This chapter examines how the PMF negotiate their legitimacy across three levels: with the civilian population, the Iraqi state, and external actors. Adopting a relational approach, the analysis reveals how the PMF's authority is constantly contested and renegotiated through dynamic interactions at each of these levels.

Structured in three parts, the analysis first explores civilian compliance mechanisms (voluntary, quasi-voluntary, and coercive) across Iraq's diverse communities. It then investigates the PMF's ambivalent relationship with state institutions, characterized by collusion, conciliation and conflict. Finally, it assesses how international norms and geopolitical interests shape the PMF's external engagements. Together, these layers reveal how the PMF navigates Iraq's fragmented political landscape, employing different legitimacy claims depending on their audience and objectives.

4.1 PMF and Iraqi Civilian Population

This section examines the dynamics of civilian compliance between Iraqi society and the four main factions of the PMF, drawing on Podder's (2017) typology of voluntary, quasi-voluntary, and coercive compliance. The analysis primarily focuses on the three dominant factions – pro-Khamenei, pro-Sistani, and pro-Sadr – and their evolving relationships with Iraq's majority Shia and Sunni populations. In contrast, the minority factions are assessed through their localized interactions with specific ethno-religious communities, including Sunni tribes (TMF), Christians, Turkmen, Shabak, and Yezidis, as their reach and legitimacy are typically confined to these respective constituencies.

4.1.1 Pro-Khamenei Faction

During the fight against ISIS, the PMF, including the pro-Khamenei faction, enjoyed significant public support, particularly among Iraq's Shia population. A 2015 study found that 99% of Shia and 50% of Sunni respondents were in favor of the PMF (Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research 2015: 36). Although the study did not differentiate between factions, it is reasonable to assume that the pro-Khamenei Faction, as the largest and most powerful bloc, benefited from this strong support.

The high level of Shia support can be attributed to Ayatollah Sistani's 2014 fatwa, which legitimized the mobilization of militias against ISIS. Although the fatwa aimed to avoid sectarian rhetoric, the inherently sectarian nature of the conflict – featuring a Shia-led state battling a Sunni extremist insurgency – resulted in a Shia identity being ascribed to the PMF (Haddad 2020b: 38). Consequently, compliance among the Shia population during this period can be categorized as voluntary compliance, as the PMF was perceived as a protective force acting in the collective interest of the community (Podder 2017: 688).

However, the Sunni population viewed the PMF with greater skepticism. While some Sunnis initially supported the PMF in the fight against ISIS, many remained wary due to the predominance of Shia militias and the increasing reports of sectarian violence. In fact, since the inception of the PMF in 2014, the pro-Khamenei Faction was implicated in numerous human rights violations against Sunni civilians. For instance, Human Rights Watch (2014) documented at least 142 killings of Sunni civilians in Baghdad, Diyala, and Babylon provinces between March and July 2014, primarily perpetrated by the pro-Khamenei militias AAH, KH, and the Badr Brigades. Furthermore, Amnesty International (2017a: 15-21) reported the abduction of over 3,600 predominantly Sunni men and boys in the provinces of Diyala, Anbar, and Salah al-Din, as well as at the Al-Razzaza checkpoint, which is situated between Anbar and Karbala provinces. Many of these individuals were subjected to torture and subsequently killed – again, primarily by the three militias AAH, KH, and the Badr Organization, which carried out the attacks in revenge and retaliation for ISIS attacks and as part of extortion attempts to demand ransoms from the families.

These violent tactics ensured compliance from the Sunni population but did so through coercion rather than genuine legitimacy. Thus, Sunni interactions with the pro-Khamenei Faction during this period can be classified as coercive compliance, wherein control was maintained primarily through violence and intimidation rather than voluntary acceptance (Podder 2017: 689).

Following the military defeat of ISIS in 2017, the relationship between the pro-Khamenei Faction and the population underwent a significant transformation. The Faction, having solidified its position within the PMF and the Iraqi political landscape, began to evolve increasingly towards becoming a political actor. This shift was marked by the establishment of the Fatah Alliance in 2018, a political coalition led by Hadi Al-

Amiri of the Badr Organization and comprising the pro-Khamenei militias AAH, KH, and Kata'ib al-Imam Ali (KIA). This political integration enabled the pro-Khamenei Faction to expand its influence over state institutions, such as the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, which it used to distribute social benefits and consolidate its support base (Skelton/Ali Saleem 2021: 13).

In parallel with its political expansion, the pro-Khamenei Faction also engaged in service provision as a means of consolidating support. The PMF's engineering unit, controlled by pro-Khamenei groups, played a crucial role in infrastructure rebuilding efforts, particularly in areas neglected by the state (Ezzeddine/Sulz/van Veen 2018: 11). These activities helped reinforce the PMF's image as both an emergency relief organization and a long-term development agency (Cambanis et al. 2019: 35). A specific example of this is AAH, which provided assistance to victims of flash floods in central Iraq in November 2018 (Mapping Militants Project 2021a). But also, KIA, following their triumph over ISIS, shifted their focus toward social services, including mine clearance, free academic tutoring, the reconstruction of educational institutions, and the provision of first aid training programs (Habib 2018).

Despite these efforts, public sentiment towards the pro-Khamenei Faction began to shift. The first major signs of discontent emerged in 2018, when mass protests erupted in Basra due to high unemployment and inadequate energy supply. Protesters targeted state institutions as well as PMF offices, including those of the Badr Organization, reflecting growing frustration with the group's governance role (Cambanis et al. 2019: 32). Both the state and the PMF responded with violent repression, including targeted assassinations of activists. This suppression deepened public resentment, particularly in the Shiite-majority south, where the PMF had previously enjoyed strong support (Skelton/Ali Saleem 2021: 20). The 2019 mass protests further exacerbated this discontent. Once viewed as defenders of Iraq, the PMF – particularly the pro-Khamenei Faction – came to be seen as enforcers of a corrupt political system. The use of deadly force against demonstrators, resulting in hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries, significantly eroded public trust in the group. This decline in public support was reflected in the results of the most recent parliamentary elections in 2021, in which the Fatah alliance suffered significant losses (Al-Aloosy 2022).

This growing dissatisfaction is particularly directed at the pro-Khamenei Faction, which, due to its close ties to the Iranian regime and its role as Iran's extended arm in Iraq, is

suspected not only of undermining Iraq's national sovereignty but also of being involved in economic corruption, intimidation of political opponents, and violent repression of protest movements. While the PMF as a whole was once celebrated as a people's defense force against ISIS, many Iraqis now see the pro-Khamenei faction as representatives of a political elite that puts its own interests before the good of the country. This shift has led to a marked split in the PMF's internal factions, with some groups distancing themselves from the pro-Khamenei bloc to preserve their legitimacy. Concurrently, the pro-Khamenei Faction has endeavored to counteract criticisms of its actions by strategically aligning itself rhetorically with the PMF in general. This is achieved by presenting themselves as part of the "holy mobilization," a strategy employed to evade public and political scrutiny. However, as the pro-Khamenei Faction becomes increasingly integrated into state structures, it is perceived by some as defending the status quo rather than as independent resistance fighters. Consequently, the pro-Khamenei Faction possesses considerably less legitimacy compared to the other constituents of the broader PMF framework within which it operates (Haddad 2020b: 39 f.).

This decline in legitimacy is further reflected in the shifting dynamics of compliance between the pro-Khamenei Faction and the Iraqi population. As a result, the relationship with the Shia community can be categorized as having evolved from voluntary compliance to quasi-voluntary compliance. Initially, the Shia supported the faction due to its alignment with their religious and cultural values, as well as its role in defending against ISIS. However, as the faction became increasingly integrated into state structures and engaged in governance, its actions began to be perceived as self-serving rather than community-oriented. The violent repression of protests and the faction's association with corruption and political elitism have eroded its legitimacy.

This fragmentation is reflected in public perceptions of security. In a 2021 survey, a majority of respondents (60%) identified the Iraqi security forces as the actor with the most positive impact on their personal safety, while support for the PMF was significantly lower, with only close to 15% selecting it – with Shias being more likely than Sunnis to view the PMF positively (Clausen 2021). This underscores the faction's shifting legitimacy: While some Shia still support the faction due to its provision of services and its historical role, this support is now conditional and backed by a latent threat of coercion, characteristic of quasi-voluntary compliance (Levi 2006: 7).

In contrast, the relationship with the Sunni population can largely be categorized as coercive compliance, as the pro-Khamenei Faction continues to rely on violence and intimidation to maintain control. While the intensity of violations decreased after 2017 (Haddad 2020b: 48), systematic abuses against Sunnis persist. For instance, after liberation from ISIS, KH assumed authority over Jurf al-Nasr¹², a town southwest of Baghdad, where it imposed a "no-go zone" preventing displaced Sunni residents from returning and established private prisons holding over 1,000 illegal detainees (Knights 2019: 4). Since then, KH members have indicated their intention of replicating the Jurf al-Nasr model – and consequently the expulsion of Sunni residents – in other cities as well. Although this proposal has drawn criticism from pro-Khamenei actors, such as Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HaN), it highlights the faction's persistent reliance on coercion as a means of maintaining their grip on power (Al-Kaabi/Knights/Malik 2023). However, recurring acts of violence, such as the August 2020 massacre of eight Sunni civilians by AAH in al-Farhatiyah, also demonstrate the use of force and coercion by the pro-Khamenei faction against Sunni communities (Mapping Militants Project 2021a). While isolated instances of quasi-voluntary compliance may occur, such as when services are provided, these are overshadowed by broader patterns of coercion and sectarian-driven control. This reliance on coercive tactics has deepened mistrust among Sunnis, reinforcing the faction's image as an oppressive force.

4.1.2 Pro-Sistani Faction

Similar to the Shia-dominated pro-Khamenei faction, the Shia-majority pro-Sistani faction also enjoyed strong public support in the early years of the PMF. In addition to the aforementioned study (cf. Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research 2015), which attributes predominantly positive sentiment to the PMF as a whole, particularly among Shiites, another study from Karbala can attest to this approval. In a 2016 survey of Iraqi Shiite men in Karbala, researchers from MIT's Department of Political Science found 99% approval when asked if they supported financial assistance to the PMF (Christia/Dekeyser/Knox 2016: 131). The fact that the two shrine militias, Liwa' Ali Akbar and Firqat al-Abbas Ali al-Qitaliya, are the main PMF militias operating in

¹² The city was formerly known as Jurf al-Sakhar, but was renamed Jurf al-Nasr following its liberation from ISIS.

Karbala (EUAA 2022: 199) indicates that the high level of support among Karbala's Shiites can be reasonably transferred to the pro-Sistani faction.

Generally, however, the role of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani can be seen as the most important factor in Shiite approval. Sistani wields significant authority over millions of Shiite Muslims in Iraq, thereby exerting substantial influence on the nation's public sentiment (Riva 2019). Moreover, it was he who initially established the PMF through his fatwa in 2014, thereby also creating the militias loyal to him. In contrast to the pro-Khamenei faction, the pro-Sistani faction does not have any affiliations with Iran and is the group most firmly integrated into formal Iraqi structures. Consequently, they embody the PMF's myth as the protectors of the country the most and, unlike the Iran-aligned *fasa'il*, are positively perceived in public as "the Hashd" (Haddad 2020b: 41).

This contrast with the pro-Khamenei faction has become particularly evident since the formal departure of the pro-Sistani faction from the PMF and their subsequent integration into the state forces. Operating under the name Hashd al-Atabat, they deliberately refrain from engaging in political activities while expressing criticism of the expanding influence of Iranian militias in Iraq. Additionally, they have condemned the killings of protesters and activists by militias affiliated with the pro-Khamenei faction (Al-Omran 2021b). While the *fasa'il* have experienced a decline in favor among Shiites due to their political involvement and the violent repression of protests, the relationship between the pro-Sistani faction and the Shiite population can in contrast be characterized as one of voluntary compliance, driven by communal acceptance, and the absence of coercion (Podder 2017: 688).

This dynamic is similarly applicable to the Sunni population. While the fatwa, in spite of its inherently non-sectarian character, was met with skepticism by Sunnis, a considerable proportion of Sunni combatants were affiliated with the pro-Sistani faction (Gaston/Derzsi-Horváth 2018: 22). Nevertheless, the PMF's popularity among Sunni communities was ambivalent from the outset due to the numerous war crimes committed against Sunnis, mainly by militias by the pro-Khamenei faction. However, Sistani urged the PMF to refrain from such practices after the initial reports of revenge killings of Sunnis by PMF groups emerged. As a result, in February 2015, Sistani issued "Advice and Guidance to the Fighters on the Battlefields," a document in which he strongly advocated for justice and respect among all Muslims, regardless of sectarian differences. In this text, Sistani condemned sectarian violence, extremism,

and hatred, and called on the fighters to act as role models of Islamic ethics (Al-Sistani 2015).

Beyond words, Sistani's guidelines also had practical consequences. His advice is said to have been a mitigating factor in the fighting for the northern province of Ninewa. Although the presence of Shia militia groups (especially the pro-Khamenei faction) in the majority Sunni province could have increased the risk of sectarian violence, documented attacks against the civilian population remained relatively limited and uncoordinated (Wojtowicz 2018). However, Sistani's religious authority was even more pronounced among the fighters of his own faction. Despite the significant involvement of his faction in the fight against ISIS, its conduct during the liberation operations was notably free from substantial human rights violations, in contrast to the actions of some other PMF groups. There are no documented instances of significant violations against Sunnis, which contributes to a more favorable perception of the faction within Iraqi society, particularly in areas affected by the fighting, where thousands of civilians were killed, abducted, or detained (Bayder 2020). Accordingly, Joost Hiltermann, MENA Program Director at the International Crisis Group, asserts that, in contrast to numerous PMF groups, the pro-Sistani militias "have embraced the Sunni population even as they have fought IS" (EASO 2017: 12).

As a result, similar to its relationship with the Shiite population, the pro-Sistani faction's engagement with Sunni communities can also be characterized by voluntary compliance. Despite initial Sunni skepticism toward the PMF due to sectarian tensions, the pro-Sistani militias have maintained a positive reputation by adhering to Sistani's ethical guidelines, avoiding human rights abuses, and fostering a sense of communal acceptance. Their conduct during military operations, particularly in Sunni-majority areas, has distinguished them from the Iran-aligned factions, allowing for a more favorable perception and a level of trust based on mutual respect rather than force.

4.1.3 Pro-Sadr Faction

With regard to Saraya al-Salam (SaS), the only militia within the pro-Sadr faction of the PMF, its initial relationship with the Shia community can be characterized as one of voluntary compliance. Although there are no specific studies on the popularity of the SaS for the first few years after its founding, the previously mentioned surveys among

Shiites (cf. Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research 2015; Christia/Dekeyser/Knox 2016) may suggest a predominantly positive sentiment towards the Shiite SaS. This is primarily attributed to the role of Muqtada al-Sadr. Due to the legacy of his father, Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, who was assassinated in 1999 for his role in the resistance against Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime, Muqtada al-Sadr's name was already positively connoted. However, he himself garnered high approval due to his presence in Iraq before 2003, in contrast to other political parties and military wings that only returned after the US-led invasion of Iraq. Consequently, his Sadrist movement maintained a close connection with the Iraqi populace, as opposed to catering to the elites, and integrated both nationalism and the religious authority associated with the Sadr surname. (Mansour/Jabar 2017:15).

Accordingly, SaS, which was founded in 2014 in response to the fatwa, was able to build on the legitimacy of the Sadr name from its outset. However, it was especially through their role in anti-elite protests that began in 2015 that they were able to gain legitimacy among the Shiite population. The protests, which initially emerged in the Shia-dominated city of Basra, were driven by grievances concerning corruption, the sectarian distribution of power, and the inadequate provision of public services. The overt support of Sadr and SaS for the protesters contributed to the transformation of the protests into a widespread movement that transcended the boundaries of Basra. Even after the protests had subsided, Sadr's involvement and leadership remained particularly present in the collective memory of the Shiite population, which also contributed to Sadr's subsequent electoral successes (Hesselink 2019: 44 f.).

Consequently, Sadr's Saairun Alliance emerged as the winner in the 2018 elections, which helped SaS to gain influence. Thus, in addition to its stronghold in Samarra, SaS established itself as the most influential PMF militia in Baghdad, with a mixture of economic, military and commercial assets. At the same time, it has also managed to build up a strong base of supporters in the capital, partly due to the group's charitable welfare system (Skelton/Saleem 2021: 11, 14; Colombo/van Veen/Ezzedine 2022). While the SaS thus consolidated its position as a reformist, nationalist force, its image suffered a setback with the mass protests that commenced in 2019. Although Sadr had supported previous protest movements, he began to criticize their lack of willingness to compromise and called on his supporters to withdraw from the protests (Robin-D'Cruz/Mansour 2020: 17). This dynamic reached its climax in February 2020, when

the "Blue Helmets," a subdivision of SaS, violently dispersed protest sites, resulting in the deaths of 11 protesters in Najaf. Confronted with widespread public outrage over this violent repression of the protests, Sadr subsequently declared the dissolution of the "Blue Helmets" (Ghafuri 2020).

In the aftermath, the scholars Benedict Robin-D'Cruz and Renad Mansour (2020: 18) of the Foreign Policy Research Institute characterized this betrayal of the protest movements as a transgression that Sadr is unable to revoke, and Sadr himself as a fading force in Iraqi politics. However, this was not the case: In contrast to the pro-Khamenei faction, which suffered significant losses in the 2021 elections following its violent suppression of protestors, Sadr's Saairun coalition experienced a substantial increase in seats. This phenomenon can be partially attributed to the low voter turnout and the changes introduced in the electoral system in 2019 (Mansour/Stewart-Jolley 2022). However, the results also suggest that the rupture with the protest movement may have temporarily eroded the trust of Sadr's base. Nevertheless, this erosion did not prove sufficient to compromise his foundation of voluntary compliance with regard to his Shiite supporters. In a similar vein, Podder (2017: 688) asserts that a limited form of coercion remains necessary even within the framework of voluntary compliance to stabilize the rule and protect the group's influence over the population.

However, the situation is more varied with regard to the Sunni population, where there are differing views on the relationship with SaS: Haddad (2020b: 41), for example, emphasizes that SaS's human rights record is less controversial than that of other PMF groups, and that their continued presence in the Sunni-majority shrine city of Samarra can be seen as one of the more successful examples of PMF relations with the local population. Hiltermann (EASO 2017: 12) also argues that, similar to the pro-Sistani faction, the relationship with the Sunnis is overall positive. However, a 2019 security study conducted in Salah al-Din by the Dutch peace organization PAX (2019: 6) presents the relationship in a more ambivalent light. Among other things, the study concludes that more than three-quarters of the respondents in Samarra agree that sectarianism has a major influence on their communities – and thus significantly more than in all other districts in the governorate. This phenomenon is attributed to the significant presence of SaS, which is characterized as "one of Iraq's most fearsome Shi'a militias" (ibid.).

This apparent discrepancy in the perception of the relationship between Sunnis and SaS can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, with regard to the fight against ISIS, there is no evidence of significant human rights violations by SaS against Sunnis. Consequently, the relationship can certainly be characterized as more positive than, for example, in comparison to the pro-Khamenei faction. However, following the defeat of ISIS and the subsequent takeover of Samarra by SaS, the present administration of the city has been observed to exhibit coercive tendencies. As Cambanis (2019) asserts, despite Samarra's historical significance as the epicenter of the sectarian civil war in 2006, the city has since experienced a period of stability and security under the authority of SaS. While certain segments of the Sunni population, notably the economic elite that has flourished under the militia's governance, exhibit a degree of acceptance, many others feel marginalized and constrained. This is further reflected in the fact that large parts of the Sunni community have not returned to Samarra after the war, with many shops and homes in traditionally Sunni areas remaining closed or inaccessible (Kalin/Raheem 2016). The militia's rigid control, especially over areas like the historic city center, has exacerbated a sense of exclusion and suppression among the broader population. Consequently, SaS have maintained a tight grasp over the city – undeterred by Sadr's repeated announcements regarding the alleged dissolution of his militia (Shafaq 2024b). As a result, Samarra under SaS can be categorized as a textbook case of quasi-voluntary compliance: Sunnis comply not out of genuine loyalty or belief in the militia's rule, but due to the combination of induced benefits and the implicit threat of force.

4.1.4 Minority Factions

With respect to the various minority groups within the PMF, the most significant group – Sunnis operating under the banner of the TMF – will be discussed first. Given that the TMF was primarily deployed in Sunni-majority regions, this discussion will focus exclusively on the relationship with the local Sunni population. In general, fighters from Sunni tribes who were integrated into the PMF and placed under the leadership of Shia militias have played an important role in the fight against ISIS and in controlling the liberated areas. However, this power has also been abused: For instance, Amnesty International (2017a: 19) has documented human rights violations by the TMF in reclaimed areas in late 2016, including torture, public humiliation, looting, and

destruction of homes, as well as retaliatory attacks against suspected ISIS supporters. These transgressions were either tolerated or even encouraged by the PMF leadership, as they enabled them to credibly deny responsibility in the event of atrocities. This strategy also promoted an image of inclusivity and diverted attention from Shia-majority units of the pro-Khamenei faction, notorious for their sectarian violence (Rudolf 2020).

In the aftermath of the war, repression persisted. Accordingly, Human Rights Watch (2017a) documented the forcible displacement and abuse of families associated with suspected ISIS supporters in Salah ad-Din by the TMF, a practice that was rationalized by the tribal custom of “Jalwa,” which involves the involuntary displacement of a clan to mitigate conflict. These Jalwa processes resulted in considerable tensions between the tribes, primarily due to the high level of mistreatment, but also between the sects, as the TMF was accused of acting as a proxy for the Shiite-dominated PMF, merely carrying out their dirty work. In essence, the TMF therefore established a new system of rules that sought to subjugate other social groups and enable the dominant tribal authority to exercise control over the emerging order (Dukhan 2023: 1349). Consequently, the relationship between the TMF and the local community can be regarded as one of coercive compliance, as the actions of the TMF were not directed towards the fostering of voluntary acceptance of their rule but rather aimed at asserting the authority of a dominant clan and enforcing its subjugation through violence and oppression.

Regarding the relationship between the PMF’s minority Christian faction and the local population, the Ninewa Plains Protection Unit (NPU) plays a crucial role, since the NPU was instrumental in liberating ISIS-held territory in the Nineveh Plains and establishing control over these areas. By successfully providing security and helping displaced people to return safely to their homes, the NPU has been able to gain the trust of its citizens. This was particularly due to the fact that the NPU is made up entirely of local Christian men who were already integrated members of the local community (Al-Tamimi 2020). Although the NPU has thus won local support, it only controls two towns, Karamlesh and Qaraqosh (Nakkash 2021).

More widespread, on the other hand, is the formally Christian, but mainly Shia-occupied Babylon Brigade. By bribing and replacing mayors, the brigade was able to take over almost the entire Nineveh Plains, and thus also win four of the five designated

minority parliamentary seats in the last elections (Gavlak 2024). In contrast to the NPU, the Babylon Brigade has been accused of severe human rights violations, including the obstruction of the return of Christian refugees, the illegal seizure of land, as well as intimidation, extortion, and harassment of women (US Department of the Treasury: 2019). Following the attempt by the Babylonian brigades to take control of Qaraqosh in 2023, they were expelled from the city in a joint effort by the NPU and the local population, including the local Archbishop (Beth-Addai 2023).

This attempted takeover can serve as an illustration of the general relationship of the local population with the Christian minority of the PMF. While the relationship with the NPU was consistently dominated by collective cooperation and mutual trust, and can therefore be categorized as voluntary compliance, the opposite can be seen in the relationship with the Babylon Brigade. Despite the absence of overt acts of torture, as seen in the case of the TMF, the brigade's members have repeatedly violated human rights and engaged in acts of severe repression. Consequently, the relationship between the Babylon Brigade and the population can be characterized as one of coercive compliance.

Subsequently, the Turkmen minority, which consists mostly of local Shiite Turkmen but is led by pro-Khamenei militias, will be discussed in more detail. Mainly active in Kirkuk and Salah Al-Din governorate, the Shiite Turkmen have been accused of grave crimes against non-Shiite minorities. For instance, Amnesty International (2017b) has documented cases of Shiite Turkmen militias, in collaboration with Kurdish Peshmerga, perpetrating human rights violations in the northern city of Tuz Khurmatu between 2015 and 2016. These violations include killings, injuries, abductions of civilians, and destruction of hundreds of homes and businesses, leading to the displacement of tens of thousands of individuals. In this manner, Shiite Turkmen have utilized their position of authority as part of the PMF to disadvantage or attack rival groups or actors, with the objective of reshaping local dynamics (Gaston 2018).

The attacks and displacements were predominantly directed at non-Shiites, including Sunni Arabs, Turkmen, and Kurds. While Shiites swiftly returned to the liberated regions, few Arabs or Sunni Turkmen have done so. Consequently, local observers have drawn parallels between the patterns of sectarian appropriation in Tuz Khurmatu and those observed in the KH-controlled city of Jurf al-Nasr (Gaston/Derzsi-Horváth 2018: 53). A similar dynamic was observed in Kirkuk City, where the local branch of

the Badr Organization, led by a Turkmen, provides privileged access to employment, contracts, and services for Shiite Turkmen and Arabs. In contrast, minority groups experience restrictions in accessing the labor market, are subjected to extortion at checkpoints, and face pressure to adopt Shiism (Puttick 2022: 32). Consequently, while the relationship with the Shiites is based on voluntary compliance, the relationship between the Turkmen minority and the local non-Shiite population can be described as one of coercive compliance.

Subsequently, the Shabak minority within the PMF will be discussed, which is also linked to the Badr Organization and the Christian-led, but predominantly Shia Babylon Brigade as part of the 30th Brigade. Together with the Babylon Brigade, the Shia Shabak forces control most of the Christian-dominated Nineveh Plains (Foulkes 2021), which has also enabled them to secure a Shabak minority seat in the Iraqi parliament (Puttick 2022: 9). However, the Shabak brigades have attracted negative attention for human rights violations, including extortion, illegal detentions, violent assaults, robberies, kidnappings and rapes, with the aim of extorting money and controlling the population in the Nineveh Plains (US Department of the Treasury: 2019).

A hotspot of this dynamic is the formerly multi-ethnic, but now mainly Shabak-dominated city of Bartella, which also serves as the headquarters of the Shabak fighters. While the local Shabak population experienced oppression under the ISIS regime, they are currently benefiting from protection and influence. In contrast, the situation is dissimilar for Christians, who, following the liberation of the city, have mostly not returned to their homes: the reasons for this vary depending on perspective. Many Christian sources cite land theft by the Shabak brigade or fear of abuse and discrimination if they do return as key factors. Other accounts emphasize broader structural dynamics, as many Christians emigrated abroad and sold their properties – often at low prices – to neighboring Shabak families, contributing to population shifts in the area (Puttick 2022: 19 f.). In addition, some observers argue that these changes have also been reinforced by higher birth rates among the Shabak and comparatively low levels of emigration, which are believed to have further consolidated their demographic dominance in the region (Shamdin 2024).

As a result, compliance between the Shabak PMF factions and the local Shabak population can be regarded as voluntary, based on shared identity and mutual interests. The relationship with the Christian population, however, is more ambivalent:

while past abuses by Shabak PMF units have fostered fear and distrust, current compliance appears quasi-voluntary – motivated less by overt coercion than by concerns over discrimination, loss of property, and a lack of viable alternatives.

Finally, the intricate relationship between the Yezidi minority within the PMF and the local population will be examined. Accordingly, the Yezidi combatants of the PMF predominantly operate within the Sinjar region, situated in the northern Ninewa province, an area characterized by a complex interplay of Turkish, Kurdish, and Iranian influences.¹³ This dynamic is further exemplified by the Yezidi minority, specifically the Lalish Brigades and the Ezidkhan Brigades, which are affiliated with the pro-Khamenei militias KH and AAH (Malik et al. 2022). According to Human Rights Watch (2017b), in 2017, these militias are said to have abducted and murdered 70 civilians from a hostile tribe on suspicion of being ISIS supporters.

The situation is different for the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ), which initially fought on the Kurdish side but later joined the PMF. The YBŞ played a pivotal role in expelling ISIS from Sinjar, consequently garnering the support of numerous Yezidis in the district who have lost faith in the KDP and the Iraqi security forces to protect them (Saleem/Mansour 2024: 17). However, this support is characterized by a transactional dynamic: While the local PMF groups are criticized for their activities in cross-border smuggling to Syria, they are regarded as a temporary necessity. They are therefore seen as a counterforce to the KDP, as the Yezidi community expresses concern that the KDP will regain control of the region if they return – a scenario they consider to be even more undesirable (International Crisis Group 2022: 8).

In addition to these political dynamics, economic dependence also plays a role in shaping local acceptance. In Sinjar, where employment opportunities are extremely limited, the prospect of regular salaries has motivated many Yezidis to join local PMF units, thereby reinforcing acceptance of their continued presence (Saleem/Mansour 2024: 18). This structural factor reinforces compliance within the population, even where political grievances against PMF units persist.

As a result, the relationship between the Yezidi minority within the PMF and local communities can be categorized as quasi-voluntary compliance. While Yezidis,

¹³ In March 2025, approximately 1,200 Yezidi combatants enlisted with the Babylon Brigade (Menmy 2025). However, at the time of writing, there is little detailed information regarding their involvement with the PMF.

particularly in Sinjar, support PMF-affiliated units like the YBŞ as a pragmatic alternative to the KDP, this cooperation is transactional and contingent on perceived benefits, including protection, political counterbalance, and access to stable salaries. The presence of coercive elements – such as abuses by pro-Khamenei-linked Yazidi militias – further underscores the conditional nature of this compliance

4.2 PMF and Iraqi State

Building on the previous analysis of compliance dynamics between Iraqi civilians and the four PMF factions, this section shifts focus to the relationship between these factions and the Iraqi state. The chapter examines the extent and nature of their institutional integration, political alignment, and operational autonomy. These relationships are then assessed and categorized according to Podder's (2017) typology of collusive, conciliatory, and conflictual interactions, allowing for a detailed understanding of how state and militia actors coexist, cooperate, or compete within Iraq's security landscape.

4.2.1 Pro-Khamenei Faction

Following the collapse of the Iraqi army in Mosul in June 2014 and the rapid advance of ISIS, then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki began to mobilize a range of militia groups, including those aligned with Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Subsequent to the army's defeat, Maliki proceeded to sign a decree establishing the PMF Commission (*Hay'at al-Hashd al-Shaabi*). This action was in direct conflict with Article 9, Paragraph B of the Iraqi constitution¹⁴, but was made possible by Maliki's exercise of control over the judiciary and the weakness of constitutional ties. This decree therefore established the institutional framework necessary to legitimize militias such as the Badr Organization, AAH and KH as formally recognized operating actors in the effort to combat ISIS – despite the fact that these militias maintained a significant degree of autonomy in their actions (Mansour/Jabar 2017: 6).

The PMF actor most integrated within the Iraqi state was the Badr Organization. Prior to 2014, Badr, under the leadership of Hadi al-Amiri, had already consolidated its position of authority through strategic appointments to state institutions, particularly by assuming key roles within the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior (Cambanis et al. 2019: 26). This influence extended over critical branches of the Iraqi state, including the federal police, logistics structures, and parts of the intelligence apparatus. As a result, Badr was able to channel state resources, including funds and weapons, toward its own

¹⁴ Article 9, Paragraph B of the Iraqi constitution states: "The formation of military militias outside the framework of the armed forces is prohibited" (Republic of Iraq 2005).

networks and allied militias, reinforcing its authority within Iraq's security sector (Herentinová 2020: 35 f.).

While Maliki's 2014 decree provided a *de facto* framework for the PMF's activities, the legal status of these militias remained ambiguous and contested after his departure. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who succeeded Maliki in 2014, initially opposed the formalization of the militias and instead sought to integrate them into the regular armed forces. However, Abadi was constrained by structural factors, including the influence of Iran, the weakness of the Iraqi state security apparatus, the existential threat posed by ISIS, and the PMF's sanctified status following Sistani's fatwa. As a result of increasing pressure from the leadership of the PMF, particularly Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, whose close ties to Tehran and the IRGC amplified his political leverage, Abadi was ultimately compelled to issue Executive Order 91 in February 2016, which formally recognized the PMF as an "independent military formation" within the Iraqi armed forces (Mansour/Jabar 2017: 10). This was followed by the November 2016 law, which formally placed the PMF under civilian oversight but did little to restrict their autonomy in practice (Al-Marashi 2021: 208). However, notably, this law was applied retroactively to the period when the PMF had first emerged, thereby legitimizing Maliki's earlier 2014 decree *after the fact*. Therefore, this legal maneuver effectively bypassed constitutional restrictions and secured the PMF's institutional status despite its contested origins (Zarean 2023: 54). As a result, the newly established legal status of the PMF solidified their position as a hybrid actor: part of the state, yet structurally autonomous, with its leadership reporting not to the Prime Minister but to Abu Mahdi (Cambanis et al. 2019: 29).

This early institutional integration of the PMF into the state laid the foundation for a relationship between the pro-Khamenei factions and the Iraqi state that was primarily characterized by a collusive dynamic. As Podder (2017: 22 f.) suggests, collusion occurs when the state co-opts armed groups by offering political and economic incentives, and this dynamic is evident in case of the PMF: the state relied on pro-Khamenei militias to counter ISIS, while these groups secured access to state resources, political recognition, and financial support in return.

In the aftermath of the territorial defeat of ISIS, pro-Khamenei factions within the PMF successfully transformed their wartime legitimacy into political and economic capital. Their electoral debut in 2018 under the Fatah Alliance marked a turning point, at which

point they emerged as the second-largest bloc in parliament, securing key positions in government formation processes and asserting themselves as influential political actors (Alaaldin 2024). While the Badr Organization had already exerted considerable control over the Ministry of the Interior in earlier years, the post-ISIS phase saw an expansion of influence by pro-Khamenei factions across a broader spectrum of state institutions. According to a senior figure from the Fatah Alliance in 2018, PMF members had entered "all the ministries [...] at every level," thereby signaling the normalization of their political presence across government structures (International Crisis Group 2018: 9). This institutional reach was further strengthened by their indirect influence over judicial bodies, including the Supreme Court. Reportedly, this was utilized to protect interests aligned with the PMF as well as to undermine political competitors (Alaaldin 2024).

From an economic perspective, pro-Khamenei factions within the PMF have become firmly embedded in Iraq's economy, operating across what Rached (2022: 12) categorizes as formal, informal, and criminal economic spheres. Formally, the PMF has been the recipient of substantial state budgets and public contracts, and it has established state-registered enterprises such as the Muhandis General Company, a national development and environmental initiative which, among other things, aims to provide additional financial resources to the PMF (Rudolf 2023: 6). Informally, groups such as Badr and AAH maintain economic offices in provincial administrations, particularly in post-ISIS zones, such as Mosul. Within these offices, they exert their influence over the allocation of contracts and the extraction of informal levies from local businesses. Criminally, factions including AAH have been linked to drug trafficking, extortion, and the protection of illicit enterprises such as gambling halls, prostitution networks, and massage parlors (Rached 2022: 14 ff.).

However, control over border crossings proves especially lucrative for pro-Khamenei factions, as it enables both the manipulation of formal customs procedures and the exploitation of smuggling routes. At key checkpoints and ports, including Safra in the Diyala province, Shalamcheh along the Iranian border, and Umm Qasr in southern Basra, groups such as Badr and AAH have strategically embedded themselves within customs enforcement agencies. These groups effectively operate extensive shadow economies, often in collusion with local officials. According to field research commissioned by the Clingendael Institute, fees collected by Badr members at Safra

alone are estimated to have totalled between 12 to 15 million USD. Meanwhile, oil smuggling operations based in Basra and Ninewa have been described as highly lucrative, involving extensive cross-border networks with Iran and Syria (Rudolf 2023: 12). Beyond border areas, these factions also asserted territorial control over specific localities. In Jurf al-Nasr, KH assumed full territorial control and took over local security and administration, thereby establishing a parallel authority structure in the absence of meaningful state oversight (ACCORD 2023).

Consequently, the post-ISIS phase is characterized by a predominantly collusive relationship between pro-Khamenei factions and the Iraqi state. Through formal political integration, access to state budgets, and administrative consolidation, these factions established privileged positions within state structures. At the same time, the state's tolerance of the PMF's parallel authority structures, such as economic offices and local security control, introduced conciliatory elements, whereby the state accommodated these structures rather than dismantling them. This analysis is reflected in Mansour's (2021: 18) assessment, which highlights how PMF networks have become deeply intertwined with Iraq's political, security, and economic spheres. From his standpoint, these networks are regarded as having become largely indistinguishable from other state structures, operating through symbiotic relationships with a broad range of political actors – even those that may appear ideologically opposed.

In terms of more recent history, the mass protests that emerged during Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi's tenure in 2019 marked a turning point in Iraq's domestic political dynamics. However, these protests did not result in a rupture between the state and the pro-Khamenei factions of the PMF. Rather, as outlined in Chapter 4.1.1, both parties were complicit in the violent suppression of protesters, suggesting an ongoing, albeit tense, collusive relationship.

However, with the appointment of Mustafa al-Kadhimi as prime minister in May 2020, this dynamic underwent a notable shift. Notably, Kadhimi adopted a confrontational strategy aimed at curtailing the autonomy of the militias and reestablishing state authority. This dynamic was most clearly exemplified by the arrest of Qasem Muslih, the commander of the PMF in Anbar province and a senior member of Kata'ib Hezbollah, in May 2021 on charges of terrorism. However, his early release revealed the structural limits of the state's authority (Davison 2021). Tensions escalated further

in the same year when an assassination attempt was made on Kadhimī via a drone strike on his residence, for which pro-Iranian militias were widely suspected of orchestrating the attack (Shilani 2021). Concurrently, PMF groups such as KH and AAH further escalated their drone and missile attacks on US military installations operating in Iraq at the invitation of the Iraqi state, thereby challenging Baghdad's monopoly on the use of force (Nevola/Feyli 2023).

Despite these incidents, as well as the tensions caused by the 2021 parliamentary elections, in which the Fatah alliance suffered significant losses, the collusive relationship continued to dominate. Under both Kadhimī and his successor Mohammed Shia al-Sudani (who has been in office since the end of 2022), the PMF continued to receive official state funding and retained its legal status as an "independent military formation." Contrary to mounting concerns regarding the militias' lack of accountability, the al-Sudani government did not only abstain from dissolving the PMF Commission in 2025, but also undertook measures to firmly establish the organization as a state security institution through the PMF Service and Retirement Law. Although the draft law was withdrawn for the time being following political disputes, its introduction alone underscores the PMF's considerable institutional influence and its aspiration to be further integrated into the state apparatus (Al-Anbar 2025).

In regard to the contemporary relationship between the pro-Khamenei PMF factions and the Iraqi state, it is characterized by a dynamic interplay of all three modes: collusive, conciliatory, and conflictual. This multifaceted dynamic is indicative of the hybrid and fragmented nature of governance in Iraq. Although Podder (2017) conceptualizes these categories as ideal types, the Iraqi case demonstrates their capacity to coexist and evolve over time, suggesting that state-armed group relations in weak or contested contexts are frequently non-linear, adaptive, and characterized by overlapping forms of interaction.

4.2.2 Pro-Sistani Faction

In response to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's fatwa in June 2014, a significant number of civilians volunteered to join the fight against ISIS. Among them were the so-called shrine units, which emerged from the custodianships of Iraq's four major holy shrines and aligned themselves with the PMF while adhering to Sistani's vision of reinforcing the state rather than forming parallel forces. Therefore, in contrast to most other PMF formations, these units rejected direct Iranian training or weaponry and publicly pledged to adhere to the Iraqi chain of command (Peterson 2024: 334).

During the 2014-2017 anti-ISIS campaign, this ideological conviction also manifested itself in practice. Of particular note is the Saraya al-Ataba al-Abbasiya, also referred to as the al-Abbas Combat Division, which traces its origins to Karbala and has evolved into one of the most proficient volunteer units. Despite their independent military structure, these forces operated exclusively under the authority of the Ministry of Defense and repeatedly declared that they would only obtain weapons from the state and return them upon request, would not claim police powers and would disband if the state so demanded. Consequently, the division's adherence to the national chain of command and its explicit rejection of extralegal ambitions enabled its operation in scenarios where the deployment of pro-Khamenei militias was restricted due to political considerations. For instance, in the cities of Bayji and Tuz Khormatu, both of which are located in Salah ad Din governorate, they partnered with Sunni tribes and Kurdish forces, contributing to the de-escalation of ethnic tensions. Furthermore, in Mosul in 2017, they were the sole Shia PMF unit to engage in open combat against ISIS within the city itself, collaborating closely with the regular army and coalition support (Knights/Malik 2017).

When examined through the lens of Podder's (2017) theoretical framework, this phase can be distinctly characterized as conciliatory. The pro-Sistani faction functioned as state-supporting militias that neither established a parallel structure nor sought to evade state control. At the same time, the government benefited from their mobilization potential and military capabilities without surrendering its central claims to sovereignty.

However, following the territorial victory over ISIS, the relationship between the Sistani faction and the state underwent a transformation. A central point of contention emerged around administrative control of the PMF Commission, particularly with regard to the distribution of salaries. This tension stemmed from the fact that Abu

Mahdi al-Muhandis, the Iran-linked deputy PMF chairman, maintained control over salary disbursement. As a result, pro-Sistani units increasingly found themselves marginalized within the PMF structure. For example, a Sistani representative complained in 2016 that only 4.800 of the 14.500 salaries expected for shrine-unit fighters were actually paid (Mansour 2021: 28). Furthermore, Saraya al-Ataba al-Abbasiya, which comprised approximately 6% of the total number of fighters (and had also contributed disproportionately to the fighting), received less than 1% of the total budget (Knights/Malik 2017).

This marginalization stood in sharp contrast to the formal principle of equality codified in Executive Order 91 and the PMF Law of 2016, which legally recognized all PMF formations, including the shrine units, as part of Iraq's official security apparatus (Mansour/Jabar 2017: 10). However, while the Sistani-aligned brigades accepted this legal framework in principle, they interpreted its legitimacy as dependent upon its faithful implementation in accordance with constitutional norms and the original intent of the 2014 fatwa. Accordingly, Sistani urged his fighters to integrate into the "official and constitutional" forces and warned militia leaders not to turn their wartime legitimacy into political capital or risk sullyng their "heroic reputation". However, while there was speculation about a possible retraction of the fatwa, Sistani emphasized that the fight against terror was not yet over and that the army continued to rely on the loyal support of volunteers (Rudolf 2017: 13.).

Consequently, the pro-Sistani faction maintained a conciliatory relationship with the state, advocating for reform and equal treatment within the existing institutional framework, rather than seeking to dismantle it. Nevertheless, latent elements of conflict persisted, particularly in relation to the PMF Commission's role in resource allocation and command structures – domains increasingly dominated by pro-Iranian actors.

However, the conflict reached its zenith in 2020: following the assassination of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in a US drone strike in January of that year, Abu Fadak, the leader of the KH, was appointed new military leader of the PMF. As a hardliner of the pro-Khamenei faction and a close associate of Tehran, this was interpreted as an attempt by the Iran-aligned faction to secure complete control over the PMF. Consequently, the shrine militias publicly refused to submit to Abu Fadak's authority, leading to an organizational split with the PMF leadership (Al-Suhail 2020). These escalating differences led Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi (shortly before his departure from

office) to issue a decree in April 2020 ordering that the four shrine units be removed from the PMF Commission and placed under the direct command of the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. As a result, the four brigades formally announced their renaming as "Hashd al-Atabat" and declared their complete distance from the PMF Commission. However, it is worth noting that the pro-Sistani faction remains a formal constituent of the PMF, despite the fact that their salaries and budgets have since been directly managed by the Ministry of Defense (Salem 2022).

Following the organizational separation, the relationship between the Atabat units and the Iraqi state has seen notable stabilization. As part of its active involvement in security operations, the pro-Sistani faction is currently engaged in the protection of Shiite pilgrimage sites. Additionally, efforts are underway to facilitate the country's development through the civil service sector. With regard to their role within the PMF, government-affiliated observers have increasingly pointed to the shrine units as a blueprint for the broader institutionalization of the PMF, due to their loyalty to the state and their rejection of political partisanship (Al-Omran 2021a). Nevertheless, reports indicate that Grand Ayatollah Sistani has not supported international calls to disband the PMF, maintaining his position on their role within Iraq's security framework (Mohammed 2024).

Against this backdrop, the relationship between the pro-Sistani faction and the Iraqi state can be best described as conciliatory, marked by cooperation without full assimilation, in which the state tolerates limited autonomy in return for loyalty and compliance. Despite the emergence of elements of conflict, particularly concerning resource distribution and the appointment of Abu Fadak, the shrine units ultimately responded through legal and institutional channels, not rebellion. Since their administrative separation from the PMF Commission, these tensions have largely subsided, and the relationship has further stabilized. Furthermore, in contrast to the pro-Khamenei faction, whose collusive engagement with the state was driven by political capture and clientelist access to resources, Sistani-aligned units deliberately avoided party politics and institutional infiltration. This reinforced their position as state-loyal but morally autonomous actors.

4.2.3 Pro-Sadr Faction

Subsequent to Grand Ayatollah Sistani's call for voluntary mobilization in June 2014, Muqtada al-Sadr reactivated his former Mahdi Army under the new name Saraya al-Salam (SaS). In the span of several weeks, a substantial military force was established, which was particularly active in the recapture of strategically important areas. A prime example of this is its participation in the liberation of Jurf al-Sakhar, located on the main supply route between Baghdad and the Shiite pilgrimage sites in Karbala, in October 2014, where SaS played a crucial role in the eventual expulsion of IS (Majeed 2014). Furthermore, following the military operation, the militia strategically withdrew and relinquished control to state security forces, thereby signifying their allegiance to the Iraqi central government (Asharq Al-Awsat 2014).

However, the Sadrists focused even more strongly on defending Samarra, which, as the site of the al-Askari Mosque, was of not only religious but also political significance. Back in 2014, SaS established its own "Samarra Operations Command" there and, in coordination with the military, took control of central districts. The militia effectively acted as an independent security force there and attempted to convey an image of national responsibility. Its presence in Samarra was of particular strategic and symbolic importance – Sadr repeatedly stated that this was the only place where his militia intended to remain in the long term (Hameed 2014).¹⁵ In 2017, this presence intensified further: In a high-profile parade, SaS presented its "rapid intervention brigade" in Samarra. The aim of this self-presentation as a professional, loyal formation was to distance itself from the image of a "militia" and position itself as a morally upright defense force serving the country (Weiss 2017).

Despite this pro-government self-image, relations with the central government remained tense. In the spring of 2015, there was a break in relations between SaS and Baghdad: after reports of human rights violations by other PMF groups came to light as well as the government's authorization of the US-led coalition's support for the Tikrit offensive, Sadr announced that his units would withdraw from the operation. Shortly thereafter, he froze all SaS activities nationwide – a clear sign of political distancing and independent decision-making power (Anadolu Ajansı 2015). Nevertheless,

¹⁵ While the focus here is on SaS's strategic and political role in Samarra in relation to the Iraqi state, it should be noted that sectarian dynamics have also shaped developments in the city. For a detailed discussion, see Chapter 4.1.3.

normalization followed: in 2016, SaS formally handed over several previously controlled areas near Tikrit to the Iraqi military (Jawad 2016).

With reference to Podder (2017), it can be noted that during the fight against ISIS, SaS acted in a conciliatory manner toward the Iraqi state. They cooperated operationally with state security forces, formally respected the sovereignty of state institutions, and – unlike pro-Iranian militias – avoided establishing permanent parallel structures. At the same time, they demonstrated their autonomy through selective refusals to participate in operations and by establishing their own regional command in Samarra. The relationship was thus characterized by pragmatic cooperation based on national loyalty, without implying institutional fusion.

In the aftermath of the military's triumph over ISIS, the Sadrists formally maintained their affiliation with the PMF within the broader framework of the Iraqi security apparatus. Consequently, SaS gained access to state resources and salary payments while also maintaining their operational independence. However, similar to the pro-Sistani forces, Sadrist fighters complained that they had been disadvantaged by the then PMF leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in the distribution of salaries (Mansour 2021: 28). This internal marginalization was also reflected in their ambivalent relationship with the government under Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. In the spring of 2016, Sadr put pressure on the government through mass protests and even had his supporters storm parliament on April 30 to force political reforms (Kalin/Rasheed 2016). After key demands were met, however, Sadrist MPs supported the government and helped prevent its collapse (Hameed/Kalin 2016). The relationship was thus characterized by tactical, short-term cooperation – conciliatory because cooperation was selective, and collusive because Sadr gained influence over the government's direction through political pressure without being formally part of the executive branch.

With the 2018 election, however, Sadr's role shifted from that of an extra-parliamentary actor to a central power factor within the political system. His Saairun list won 54 seats and became the strongest force in parliament (Al-Shadeedi/Van Veen 2020: 19). Sadr subsequently reached an agreement with the pro-Iranian Fatah alliance on Adel Abdul-Mahdi as a compromise candidate for prime minister. Although Abdul-Mahdi was considered an experienced, non-partisan figure with a reputation for neutrality (ibid. 21), he had previously held senior roles in the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) (Sowell 2018). However, Sadr publicly withdrew his support for the head of government

in the fall of 2019. Against the backdrop of nationwide protests, he called for new elections, condemned the political class, and called on his supporters to mobilize – a course change that contributed decisively to Abdul-Mahdi's resignation in November of the same year (Al-Shadeedi/Van Veen 2020: 28; Kadhim/Mohammed 2019). Thus, just as before, the cooperation between Sadr and the executive was characterized by tactical calculation: initially collusive in the sense of helping to shape the government, later conflictual when the political situation made it necessary to once again present himself as an extra-institutional tribune of the people.

The appointment of Mustafa al-Kadhimi as prime minister in May 2020 led to a renewed rapprochement. The Sadrists supported Kadhimis cabinet in parliament and in return gained increasing access to the state apparatus. Within a few months, they are alleged to have gained control of around 200 key positions in the Iraqi administration, including directors in the interior ministry, the electricity and health sectors, banks, and regulatory authorities (Davison/Rasheed 2021). This informal penetration of state institutions by Sadrists secures access to budgets and patronage, acting as a clear factor of collusion.

Apart from this deepening bureaucratic anchoring, conciliatory elements are also continuing: this became particularly clear in October 2021, when Sadr ordered the closure of all SaS headquarters outside Baghdad, Najaf, Karbala, and Samarra. This measure deliberately reduced the militia's territorial presence in conflict-prone regions and was described by Sadr himself as a “lesson in political behavior” (Shafaq 2021). This step symbolically relieved the state, as SaS relinquished its nationwide security role and limited itself to protecting religious sites, which function was coordinated with the Ministry of Defense. The protection of shrines, such as in Samarra or by the newly formed Najaf Brigade (Shafaq 2024b), signals a willingness to cooperate functionally within clearly defined limits and thus fulfills central criteria of the conciliatory mode as defined by Podder (2017: 695), since the state is not undermined but complemented as the situation requires.

At the same time, recurring tensions remain. The political escalation reached a peak in June 2022 when Sadr called on his entire 73-member parliamentary bloc to resign, thereby blocking the formation of a government (Rasheed 2022). This was followed by protests and the occupation of parliament by supporters, which on August 29, 2022, led to armed clashes between SaS fighters, rival PMF militias, and state security forces in the Green Zone, leaving at least 20 people dead (Davison/Kadhim 2022). Military

tensions remained heightened even after that: following an attack on the SaS headquarters in Diyala in November 2024, the militia put its units on high alert (Shafaq 2024b). These incidents show that Sadr is prepared to use force against the state when strategic interests or rivalries are at stake. All three types of relationship – collusion, conciliation, and conflict – thus exist simultaneously, underscoring the hybrid, volatile nature of the relationship between the Iraqi state and the Sadrist movement.

4.2.4 Minority Factions

With regard to the minority faction of the PMF, the Sunni TMF will be discussed first: The legal basis for registering Sunni tribal fighters within the TMF under the umbrella of the PMF Commission was established by a decree issued by the Council of Ministers in April 2014 and a government ordinance in February 2016. This arrangement enabled the state to act in the short term without having to enforce its authority across the board (Rudolf 2020). However, shortly after the TMF was formally established, there were persistent complaints about missing or reduced salary payments. In November 2016, parliament established a commission of inquiry into "monthly deductions" from TMF salaries in Anbar, Salah ad Din, Kirkuk, and Ninewa (Sky News Arabia 2016). In 2017, TMF commanders in Mosul once again publicly accused the government of discriminating against them in terms of remuneration and equipment provision (Al-Jubouri 2017). These disputes mark the transition from an initially conciliatory tolerance to latent conflictual tensions.

Concurrently, a patronage network emerged. Field studies from Anbar demonstrate that only a proportion of the registered combatants received consistent wages, while prominent tribal sheikhs leveraged their privileged access to financial resources to distribute construction contracts and positions within their networks (Rudolf 2020). This collusive logic ensured loyalty but did not lead to institutional integration. However, despite this apparent mutual dependence, the TMF remained unintegrated into the regular armed forces. On the one hand, government measures, including the armament program for TMF brigades in Anbar, as announced in May 2022, demonstrate the government's ongoing reliance on its security function, particularly in the stabilization of former IS areas (Al-Dabbagh 2022). In contrast, the rise in internal tensions exposed the limitations of centralized governance. In 2025, an audio recording was made public in which a commander threatened his own fighters. The

PMF Commission rejected the allegations and pointed to the "complete administrative registration" of the TMF (Baghdad Today 2025), indicating ongoing tensions under the guise of formal integration.

In reference to Podder (2017), it can be concluded that the TMF functions within a hybrid structure. Initially, they adopted a conciliatory stance when working with local partners against IS. However, from 2016 onwards, this relationship became characterized by conflictual mistrust. Since 2017, the TMF's actions have also been marked by collusion, as certain elite groups have strategically aligned themselves with the state, receiving selective rewards in the process. Consequently, although these actors are functionally integrated, they remain organizationally fragmented, reflecting the division of state control within the security apparatus.

Subsequently, the subject of Christian minorities is addressed, beginning with the Ninewa Plains Protection Unit (NPU): In 2014, when Baghdad initiated its anti-ISIS offensive, it formally recognized the NPU as an autonomous PMF brigade. However, the NPU was operationally integrated directly with the National Security Service, and only a fraction of the 2,000 fighters enlisted received financial support. Despite this limited support, the NPU fought alongside regular troops in the liberation of Bartella and Qaraqosh in October 2016 and subsequently took over the provision of security in both locations (Hanna/Kruczek 2020: 34 f.). In subsequent years, the organization's leadership made repeated requests for full integration as a standard brigade, a request that was consistently denied by the PMF Commission. Instead, the unit was effectively placed under command of the Babylon Brigade in 2023. Despite the NPU's continued emphasis on its loyalty to the state, in practice, it remains a marginal player without a clear mandate (Beth-Addai 2025). The relationship can thus be described as conciliatory cooperation, which is, however, increasingly being undermined by the growing influence of the Babylon Brigade.

In contrast, however, the Christian-led, but predominantly Shia Babylon Brigade can be classified in a different manner. Under the PMF law of November 2016, it immediately received full state funding and, unlike the NPU, quickly set its sights on political power. In the 2021 parliamentary elections, the brigade secured four of the five Christian minority seats, leveraging support from a predominantly Shiite electorate. In the 2023 provincial council elections, the brigade further consolidated its dominance, winning all available seats (ibid.). One example of the close personal ties between the

militia and politics is Evan Faeq Yakoub Jabro, who became Minister of Migration in the Kadhimi cabinet in 2020 as an independent Christian. However, at the end of her term, she ran on the Babylon Movement list in 2021 and won the Baghdad minority seat (Agenzia Fides 2021). This sequence illustrates the collusive nature of the relationship: the brigade utilizes political networks to provide loyal figures with visibility and access to state resources, and in return, benefits from their political ties.

In regard to the Turkmen minority within the PMF, the following observations can be made: In 2014, Shiite Turkmen, led by the Badr Organization, mobilized two organizations and registered them as regular PMF units. These brigades received immediate salary payments from the PMF budget and operated under the tactical command of the Iraqi Joint Operations Command, for example in the liberation campaign around Tuz Khurmatu (Derzsi-Horváth/Gaston/Saleh 2017). Thus, Baghdad demonstrated a degree of tolerance towards their local autonomy, a strategic decision that was employed to maintain control over critical front sections without having to deploy substantial military forces. This approach can be interpreted as a conciliatory gesture.

However, even beyond the context of the ongoing conflict with ISIS, the Shiite-Turkmen brigades provided support to the PMF in October 2017 during a federal offensive against Kurdish forces in Tuz Khurmatu. The operation followed the Kurdish independence referendum and, subsequent to armed conflict, resulted in the withdrawal of the Peshmerga and Kurdish forces from the city. Consequently, Turkmen commanders of the PMF assumed pivotal political and security roles, including the mayor's office and police leadership (IOM 2024: 8). By leveraging the loyalty of the Turkmen brigades, the state thus secured its dominance over the contested territory and established a strategic buffer against the KRG, thereby engaging in a clear collusive mechanism.

This dynamic has been further exemplified by recent events: when Shiite-Turkmen PMF members organized protests against the appointment of a Kurdish administrative head in the small town of Altun Kupri, Kirkuk Governorate, in July 2025, Baghdad employed a strategy of appeasement through symbolic political actions. Consequently, Prime Minister al-Sudani has dispatched a mediation committee to engage in dialogue with local actors and has committed to a review of the Turkmen demands. This occurrence is particularly noteworthy given that Turkmen already occupy 12 of the 17

administrative positions in Altun Kupri, including law enforcement, healthcare, and notary services (Rudaw 2025). As a result, the central government's cautious response can be interpreted as a strategic maneuver to maintain the collaboration with the Turkmen PMF, ensuring the continued stability of contested regions, such as Kirkuk – a collusive arrangement in the sense of mutual benefit maximization. The relationship between the Turkmen PMF and the Iraqi state can therefore be classified as initially conciliatory, serving to secure contested areas in the short term. However, from 2017 onward, it has transformed into a structurally collusive relationship.

The relationship between the Shabak minority of the PMF and the state can be described in similar terms: at the end of 2014, following the advance of ISIS, the unit was officially incorporated into the Hashd Commission and paid from the PMF budget. It was assigned a specific mandate to secure the Mosul-Erbil transport axis and hold Bartella (Malik/Knights/Beth-Addai 2022). By taking this approach, Baghdad acknowledged the need for local autonomy to address a shortage of military resources along the front lines, which can be regarded as a typical conciliatory agreement. However, this dynamic underwent a significant shift in 2017, when Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi ordered the withdrawal of all PMF units from the Nineveh Plains. In the summer of 2019, fighters from the Shabak Brigade obstructed the Mosul-Erbil highway, engaged in armed conflict with security forces, and explicitly demanded their continued presence in the region. The protests had a notable impact, resulting in a relaxation of the ultimatum and the unit's effective retaining of its status quo (Spyer 2019). This capitulation exemplifies the collusive nature of the relationship: Baghdad's tolerance of the Shabak militia, which is economically and security-politically influential, is driven by the need to maintain a loyal force in the strategic Nineveh Plains. In return, the militia asserts its control over checkpoints, revenues, and political leverage.

These collusive patterns subsequently solidified. Despite Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi's directive in 2020 for a "joint checkpoint model," in which regular troops were to collaborate with the Shabak Brigade, economic and personnel control remained predominantly within the Shabak's domain (Malik/Knights/Beth-Addai 2022). Concurrently, field studies by Puttick (2022: 21) demonstrate that the brigade continues to generate revenue from road tolls and scrap metal trading, allocates local posts, and positions itself as a dependable security partner against the Kurds and ISIS. Consequently, Baghdad refrains from intervention, recognizing that the unit not only

ensures cost-effective territorial security but also functions as a mediating entity within the Shiite coordination framework.

Finally, the Yezidi minority of the PMF is discussed: The first attempt at integrating Yezidi forces occurred in late 2014, when Haydar Shesho's Defense Force of Sinjar (HPŞ) was briefly recognized and financed by Baghdad, establishing a short-lived direct link between the Yezidi community and the Iraqi state. Under pressure from the KDP, however, this arrangement collapsed in spring 2015, and the force was subordinated to the Peshmerga Ministry (Schmidinger 2022: 92, 95–97).

After this short-lived case, the PMF Commission moved to establish more durable Yezidi formations by placing the Lalish regiments and the Ezidkhan Brigade under the protection of the Badr Brigade following the territorial capture of Sinjar by ISIS. The arrangement not only authorized them to defend their respective home districts but also provided regular state salaries, which in a marginalized region like Sinjar often constituted one of the few reliable sources of income. In this way, Baghdad's integration strategy combined security guarantees with economic patronage – a typical conciliatory arrangement observed in the region during that period (Saleem/Mansour 2024: 18; Malik et al. 2022). As such, these units were officially integrated into the PMF as "Kata'ib Ezidkhan" in early 2017 and have since held posts in several sectors of Sinjar (Human Rights Watch 2017).

Beginning in 2017, the nature of the relationship underwent a shift towards a collusive hybrid. This transformation was marked by Baghdad's unsuccessful attempts to disarm the PKK-affiliated Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ), which culminated in 2021 in the establishment of the 80th PMF brigade. The brigade is led by former YBŞ special forces chief Bir Shakho Shingali and continues to operate de facto on the ground (Malik et al. 2022). These developments also occurred within the context of a broader power struggle between the KDP and the PKK in Sinjar, both of which sought to control local security structures. The defection of Peshmerga-affiliated Yezidis to PMF formations can thus be interpreted not only as a response to institutional incentives, but also as a rejection of KDP influence following the controversial Peshmerga withdrawal in 2014 (Saleem/Mansour 2024: 9).

The ongoing shifts in alignment were further exemplified in March 2025, when approximately 1,200 Yezidi fighters, who had previously been subordinate to the Peshmerga, switched their allegiance to the PMF-affiliated Babylon Brigade. Despite

not being part of established Yezidi units such as Lalish or Brigade 80, they were officially registered by the PMF Commission and included in the payroll (Menmy 2025). Although the details of their internal roles remain limited, this process offers insight into the state's strategic engagement with Yezidi minorities within the PMF to ensure local law enforcement – a collusive mechanism in which political co-optation is prioritized over clear institutional integration. At the same time, the event is a reflection of the ongoing legitimacy vacuum in Sinjar, where Yezidi actors have sought security guarantees from various sources as a result of competing claims to authority by the Iraqi state, the KRG, and transnational actors such as the PKK (Saleem/Mansour 2024: 10).

4.3 PMF and External Actors

This chapter examines the relationship between the PMF and international actors, focusing on the two central powers of influence: Iran and the US. Both have had a significant impact on the development, role, and assessment of individual PMF factions since 2014. In addition, other international actors are considered where relevant, including Saudi Arabia, the European Union, and, in particular, Turkey, whose role is primarily manifested in local power conflicts, such as in northern Iraq.

Analytically, the chapter draws on Podder's (2017) model, which highlights the tension between strategically motivated international legitimacy and normative, rights-based recognition in contexts of contested governance.

4.3.1 Pro-Khamenei Faction

In the aftermath of the collapse of Iraqi security forces in the face of the ISIS offensive in June 2014, Shiite militias rapidly mobilized to counter the advance of the jihadists. In response, Iran took swift action, playing a pivotal role in the organization and militarization of these forces. Within a few days of the fall of Mosul, the IRGC deployed military advisers and commanders to the front via its special unit, the Quds Force. Concurrent with these individual missions, the Iranian side assumed a coordinating role in establishing the emerging paramilitary structure that would later evolve into the PMF (Parker/Dehghanpisheh/Coles 2015).

Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a long-time Badr commander with close personal and operational ties to Qassem Soleimani, then commander of the Quds Force, was central to this early consolidation. Muhandis assumed a leadership position in the recently established Popular Mobilization Committee, an official body operating under the Iraqi government that functioned as a liaison between Tehran, Baghdad, and the militias. In this capacity, he was responsible for the coordination of logistical operations, frontline deployments, and strategic communications. However, Iran's involvement extended beyond mere advisory roles: since mid-2014, Tehran had been systematically supplying weapons, ammunition, and reconnaissance technology to militias, and had even established a covert drone base in Baghdad. Furthermore, it is estimated that several hundred Quds Force members coordinated operations directly on the battlefield. In addition, Soleimani's direct involvement in operational planning, as

evidenced by his participation in the recapture of Fallujah, and his meetings with Iraqi militia leaders to coordinate tactics, further underscored his active role in the military strategy of the region. While the United States relied primarily on airstrikes, Iran assumed operational leadership of the ground forces associated with it (Bazzi 2016).

Concurrently, the Iraqi government formally requested military assistance from the United States to counter the advance of ISIS, particularly in the form of airstrikes and reconnaissance operations. While the US government initially exhibited reluctance in its response and made its support contingent on political conditions, particularly the demand for a more inclusive government in Baghdad, this stance was ultimately modified. However, shortly thereafter, the United States initiated targeted airstrikes on ISIS positions, particularly in support of Iraqi and Kurdish units in the north. The deployment of reconnaissance drones and the increase in military presence in Iraq, involving the dispatch of advisors and special forces to support Iraqi troops outside of direct combat operations, were also reported (Ghazwan/Hassan/Stewart 2014).

Meanwhile, Human Rights Watch (2015) documented systematic attacks, destruction, and expulsions by PMF factions, including the Badr Brigades, KH, and AAH, as early as 2014/2015. These findings stand in clear opposition to the requirements of international humanitarian law and compromise the normative legitimacy of these actors. Nevertheless, during this period, they garnered both political and functional recognition. Iran actively sponsored them, and the United States tolerated the pro-Khamenei militias role de facto as long as they effectively countered IS on the ground. This tension between processes of delegitimization of human rights and strategically motivated support illustrates precisely what Podder (2017: 700 f.) describes as a conflict between normative and political legitimacy: in this case, military potency in the context of an overarching security policy goal proved more decisive than legally compliant behavior.

On November 26, 2016, the Iraqi parliament passed the PMF Act, thereby establishing the PMF as an independent component of the Iraqi armed forces under the prime minister. This development served to strengthen the political legitimacy of the militias; however, it did not resolve the issue of their preexisting external ties to Iran (Smith/Singer-Emery 2019: 184). In parallel, political tensions escalated on the global stage. In October 2017, the United States Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson (2017, as cited in Kalin/Landay 2017), asserted that “Iranian militias that are in Iraq, now that the

fight against Daesh and ISIS is coming to a close [...] need to go home". This statement indicated a decline in the political legitimacy of these groups in the eyes of the US, despite their legalization by the state. Furthermore, the United States pursued a policy of sanctions and designations. In March 2019, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HaN) was designated as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT), a development that served to further reinforce its international normative and political delegitimization.

As a result, the legal integration of the PMF in 2016 led to an increase in its local and state legitimacy, but simultaneously led to an erosion of its international legitimacy, as evidenced by terrorist listings and sanctions imposed on pro-Khamenei groups. This dynamic substantiates Podder's (2017: 700) hypothesis that political interests frequently override normative standards: while these groups were tolerated from 2014 to 2017 despite documented human rights violations, restrictive measures such as sanctions were imposed only after the military defeat of IS – not out of normative concern, but based on shifting strategic calculations.

The relationship between the pro-Khamenei faction and the US continued to deteriorate in the subsequent years. The US drone strike on January 3, 2020, resulted in the deaths of IRGC-Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani and PMF deputy leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, both of whom occupied pivotal roles within the Iranian chain of command within the pro-Khamenei factions. Subsequently, the United States escalated its designation policy. AAH was classified as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, and its leaders, Qais and Laith al-Khazali, were designated as SDGTs (US Department of State 2020). Similarly, the US Department of the Treasury (2021) sanctioned Falih al-Fayyadh, the civilian head of the PMF Commission, for his role in the violent repression of the 2019 protests, in which hundreds of civilians were killed. This move emphasized the normative delegitimization of the PMF leadership as a whole, even though not all factions acted in the same way.

In response, pro-Khamenei groups intensified their missile and drone attacks on US targets, as illustrated by an attack on the US-led coalition base near Erbil International Airport in February 2021 (Knights 2024b). Additionally, there were sporadic confrontations with Turkey: Turkish military installations in northern Iraq were subjected to repeated rocket attacks, indicating that elements within the pro-Khamenei sphere increasingly regarded Ankara as a legitimate target in the context of regional rivalries (Salim 2023).

In reference to Podder (2017: 698), it can thus be determined that following 2020, the relationship with Western actors underwent a definitive shift. The implementation of terror lists, sanctions, and military counterattacks resulted in a substantial decline in political legitimacy within the US and the EU. Conversely, within the Iranian camp, the political standing of the militias as constituents of the "axis of resistance"¹⁶ experienced a notable rise. Normatively, the situation continued to deteriorate due to ongoing allegations of serious human rights violations and attacks on demonstrators and foreign forces.

Since October 2023, the primary pro-Khamenei PMF factions operating outside Iran have increasingly adopted the label IRI, an umbrella term that coordinates attacks "in solidarity with Gaza" and deliberately obscures the individual identities of the groups (Malik/Knights 2023). In addition to the escalation of aerial assaults involving drones, ballistic missiles, and cruise missiles targeting US and coalition forces in Iraq and Syria, Iran-backed groups have also asserted responsibility for drone attacks on Israel (Sharawi 2024). By May 2024, the IRI accounted for a higher number of attacks on Israel than the Houthis, indicating its regional projection capabilities and political utility for Tehran (Alaaldin 2025).

In response, the United States and Israel initiated a series of retaliatory strikes against proxies in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, further intensifying the escalation in security policy and the political delegitimization of the militias in the West. However, under pressure from the Trump administration, several Iranian-backed militias in Iraq have been considering the possibility of partial disarmament or reintegration into state structures in order to avoid US strikes (Rasheed 2025). According to reports, since the open exchange of blows between Iran and Israel in June 2025, Iraqi militias have adopted a verbal rather than physical approach to conflict, indicating a tactical de-escalation in response to external pressures (Sharawi/Toomey 2025). Unlike Hezbollah or the Houthis, the pro-Khamenei factions in Iraq have therefore remained "conspicuously quiet," deliberately refraining from escalation so as not to jeopardize their entrenched political and economic interests in Iraq (Loveluck/Salim 2025).

¹⁶ The term "Axis of Resistance" refers to a loose, Iran-backed network of state and non-state actors in the Middle East – including Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, various Iraqi militias, and the Houthi movement in Yemen – opposing the US, Israel, and their regional allies (Britannica 2025).

In consequence, the pro-Khamenei factions within the "axis of resistance" are garnering additional reputation through transnational actions, yet concurrently experiencing a substantial erosion of their Western political legitimacy. Normatively, the situation remains precarious: cross-border attacks, endangering civilians, and disregarding state sovereignty are contrary to international norms. However, the 2025 disarmament discussions and the recent tactical de-escalation of Iraqi militias in response to the Iran-Israel confrontation exemplify how external pressures, such as those exerted by the US, can potentially lead to recalibrations in military strategy. Thus, Podder (2017: 700) demonstrates that political legitimacy is not determined by normative considerations, but rather by strategic utility – the dissolution of this utility inevitably leads to a corresponding decline in support.

4.3.2 Pro-Sistani Faction

Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's June 13, 2014 fatwa called upon all Iraqi men to protect the state against ISIS. In response to this call to action, volunteer units were established, including the four shrine brigades. In terms of financial resources, the organization primarily relied on revenues from Shia shrines in Najaf and Karbala. This allowed them to establish a distinct organizational structure, distancing themselves from the leadership of the pro Khamenei-dominated PMF. Despite their formal affiliation with the newly established PMF, the shrine brigades were thus able to decline operational directives from the PMF commission due to their (at least partial) financial independence (Knights/Malik 2021). Moreover, in contrast to the majority of PMF formations, these units declined to receive direct Iranian training or armament and publicly pledged to adhere to the Iraqi chain of command (Peterson 2024: 334).

With regard to their relationship with the US, the shrine militias assimilated themselves into the Iraqi command structure, operating in direct coordination with the Joint Operations Command and benefiting from US air support. For instance, pro-Sistani forces remained in Tikrit in 2015 as Iran-aligned units withdrew following the initial coalition strikes. However, even in subsequent offensives, the Iraqi command strategically utilized the shrine brigades in areas where coalition airpower was required, given their reputed reliability and absence from any US terrorist lists. Although the brigades declined to engage directly with US trainers, based on their

principles, the Iraqi Ministry of Defense proceeded to provide them with US-sourced equipment (Knights/Malik 2017).

In terms of legitimacy, the pro-Sistani forces thus combined high normative legitimacy – among other things through state mandate and fewer allegations of abuse – with political benefits for Baghdad and the anti-ISIS coalition. In doing so, they demonstrate Podder's (2017: 700 f.) model that strategic usefulness plus norm conformity maximize international acceptance.

Following the territorial victory over ISIS, the relationship between the pro-Sistani faction and Iran underwent a deterioration. Despite the 2016 PMF law's official integration of the Atabat into the state apparatus, the 2020 assassination of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis gave rise to a power struggle within the PMF, with Iran-aligned factions seeking to install KH commander Abu Fadak as the new leader. This ultimately led to the (at least operational) split of the shrine militias from the PMF and their subsequent subordination to the regular Iraqi armed forces (Al-Suhail 2020). According to US researcher Hamdi Malik (2020), the pro-Sistani faction's withdrawal from the PMF was a deliberate attempt to challenge the influence of pro-Iranian militias in Iraq and proved, consequently, to be a significant setback to Iran's strategic influence in Iraq. In response to this challenge, Iranian-backed commanders not only issued political threats but also implemented a targeted internal division strategy: The new PMF military chief, Abu Fadak, sought to isolate factions within the Shrine Units and persuade them to turn away from Sistani's authority. This was achieved through the provision of superior equipment, operational support, as well as political endorsement for "breakaway factions" (Malik 2022). Such attempts at recruitment and internal infiltration were thus a clear attempt to break the unity of the pro-Sistani groups and maintain Iranian influence.

Amidst these developments, the relationship with the US also experienced notable tensions: in March 2020, a US retaliatory strike targeted a KH weapons depot situated within Karbala airport. At the time of the attack, however, the facility was under the protection of Atabat brigades, several of whom were killed. Despite the fact that Atabat commanders announced legal action against the US, they refrained from anti-American rhetoric despite their outrage. Instead, they merely renewed their demand not to be drawn into conflicts between Tehran and Washington (Knights/Malik 2021). This incident demonstrates the extent to which normative considerations, such as

unintended casualties, can exert strain on relations without leading to a complete overturning of the prevailing political dynamics. The US maintained its provision of indirect support, recognizing the continued strategic utility of the shrine brigades as a counterbalance to pro-Iranian groups.

Despite such incidents, Atabat commanders maintained their stance of operational separation from the PMF Commission in subsequent years. They emphasized their refusal to tolerate attacks on diplomatic facilities or coalition forces, and restricted their activities to shrine and state duties (Al-Kaabi/Knights 2024). Abu Fadak's earlier attempts to reintegrate pro-Sistani forces into the PMF Commission can thus be considered a failure. Furthermore, in April 2025, Baghdad transferred shrine militias to the Iraqi-Syrian border, replacing Iranian-aligned formations in the region, which can be interpreted as a deliberate effort to counter Tehran's influence in the border area (Campa et al. 2025). In addition, the Atabat maintains ongoing collaborative relationships with the US. One notable aspect of this cooperation involves logistical and security-related coordination with US agencies, with the aim of safeguarding holy sites and pilgrimage routes. However, this cooperation remains confined to operational specifics and does not encompass a strategic partnership or a joint command structure (Azhari 2024).

Accordingly, these recent developments indicate that international legitimacy is contingent upon the cost-benefit calculations of external actors. In the aftermath of the military victory over ISIS, the US prioritized containing Iranian influence, while Iran sought to foster a closer relationship with the PMF structures. As a result, the pro-Sistani forces experienced a decline in their political legitimacy in relation to Iran, primarily due to their overt opposition to Abu Fadak. Conversely, these brigades garnered strategic significance for the US, serving as an autonomous and dependable counterbalance. Their normative recognition remained constant because they were integrated into the state, not listed as a terrorist organization, and acted in a comparatively rule-compliant manner. This finding aligns with Podders' (2017: 700 f.) model of a legitimacy triangle consisting of normative acceptance, strategic utility, and geopolitical rivalry.

4.3.3 Pro-Sadr Faction

Following Sistani's fatwa in June 2014, Muqtada al-Sadr also issued a call to his followers, urging them to defend the people, the nation, the faith, and the sacred sites. In response, Saraya al-Salam (SaS) was established as a revival of the former Mahdi Army and proceeded to mobilize in Baghdad, Basra, Kirkuk, and Najaf (Bayoumi/Harding 2014). Three days later, thousands of armed combatants appeared in Sadr City, Baghdad, in combat gear, which can be interpreted as a signal to both Iraq and Iran that the Sadrist had the capacity to act independently (Al Jazeera 2014). Therefore, the divide with Iran was evident from the onset. During the mass protests led by Sadrist in April 2016, the slogan "Iran, get out, get out!" was chanted, directed at the PMF factions of Amiri and Khazali, who were widely regarded as being in close collaboration with Tehran (Cammack et al. 2017: 39). However, even in the broader context, the SaS maintained a distinct organizational and ideological separation from pro-Khamenei militias, which is why the faction was largely cut off from Iranian funding early on (Mansour/Jabar 2017: 15).

The relationship between the United States and Iraq also remained tense. In May 2015, Sadr threatened to reactivate his military wing against US interests if Washington took measures that contributed to the division of Iraq—for example, by directly supporting Kurdish and Sunni militias (Roggio 2015). In 2016, following the US deployment of additional ground troops to combat ISIS in Iraq, Sadr once again characterized US troops as a legitimate target for his forces (Kalin 2016). At the same time, the relationship exhibited a more ambivalent stance with regard to military activities against ISIS: At the end of March 2015, the US initiated airstrikes in Tikrit, leading to a significant withdrawal of PMF militias from active combat, in protest against US intervention. However, the SaS, in conjunction with the pro-Sistani faction, remained on the battlefield despite the US involvement (Al Jazeera 2015).

With regard to Podder (2017: 700 f.), it can be stated that between 2014 and 2017, the international legitimacy of the SaS exhibited ambivalence: Iran lacked the strategic access necessary for political recognition, while the US was confronted with overt hostility. Although the SaS effectively tolerated the US intervention in Tikrit and continued to fight alongside state forces, this temporary convergence of interests did not lead to lasting international recognition, since normative restraint alone, without strategic benefit, is rarely sufficient for stable legitimacy.

In the 2018 parliamentary elections, the Saairun alliance, headed by Sadr, emerged as the dominant force, surpassing the Iran-affiliated Fatah bloc, which secured the second position. This outcome can be interpreted as a substantial setback for Tehran (Al-Shadeedi/Van Veen 2020: 19). However, Sadr had already garnered attention in the period leading up to the elections when he met with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the most significant US ally in the MENA region, during the summer of 2017. According to analysts at Reuters, the primary objective of this meeting was to symbolize to influential Sunni states that not all Shiite groups submit to Iranian authority. Conversely, Sadr's strategic intent was to pit the Saudis against the Iranians, leveraging both sides to secure financial support and diplomatic backing (Rasheed/Westall 2017). However, this initiative was only partially successful, as evidenced by the subsequent strained relationship between Sadr and the Iranian leadership, as well as between the SaS and pro-Khamenei militias such as Badr and AAH. This tension was partly attributed to Sadr's refusal to accept Iranian chains of command and his promotion of nationalism (Davison/Rasheed 2022).

The relationship between the United States and Iraq remained tense: following the killing of IRGC commander Qasem Soleimani and the deputy head of the PMF, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, in a US airstrike in January 2020, Sadr demanded the immediate termination of the US security agreement, the closure of the US embassy, and a "humiliating withdrawal" of all US troops (Rasheed/Aboulenein 2020). Nonetheless, the attacks were confined to verbal exchanges, as SaS refrained from directly aligning with the Iranian-led attacks on US bases. Consequently, in the post-ISIS era, the international legitimacy of SaS remained constrained, as asserted by Podder (2017: 700ff.). Despite their normative restraint, the political efficacy of SaS for key external actors was restricted due to their ideological distance from Iran, their antagonism toward the US, and their sporadic and limited interactions with Saudi Arabia.

However, in the aftermath of the 2021 election victory and subsequent months of political deadlock, an open power struggle escalated: pro-Iranian forces carried out attacks against Sadr's potential allies, including rocket attacks on Kurdish territory and drone strikes on the United Arab Emirates, which had supported Sadr's coalition plans with Kurdish and Sunni forces (Davison/Rasheed 2022). At the end of August 2022, SaS engaged in armed conflict with pro-Iranian militias in Baghdad's Green Zone until Sadr called on his supporters to retreat (Davison/Kadhim 2022). In response, Iran

employed religious pressure: Grand Ayatollah Haeri, a close associate of Sadr, resigned in September 2022 and advised his followers to follow Ayatollah Khamenei in the future. Sadr interpreted this as an attempt by Tehran to marginalize him spiritually (Davison/Hafezi/Bassam 2022). The conflict escalated again in 2025, when Sadr publicly demanded the dissolution of the militias and the disarmament of the "resistance factions" (muqawama). In response, prominent representatives of pro-Iranian groups strongly criticized the cleric, nearly leading to renewed violent clashes (Al-Kaabi 2025).

The relationship between the United States and Iraq also remained strained: in October 2023, Sadr called for the closure of the US embassy in Baghdad in response to Washington's policy on Israel (Ramadan/Ismail 2023). However, the conflict remained largely verbal, as evidenced by Sadr's public instruction to the SaS in March 2025 to abstain from any armed response and his emphasis on the exclusivity of religious and national authorities in determining security matters. This initiative was a strategic response to the escalating confrontation between the US and Iran and to the mounting pressure from the US to prevent pro-Iranian militias from attacking US targets in the context of the Gaza conflict (Mustafa 2025).

Beginning with the 2021 election, the relationship between the SaS and international actors underwent a substantial deterioration, particularly with regard to Iran and the US. Notably, Iran adopted an increasingly antagonistic stance towards Sadr's bid for political independence, employing a combination of political intrigue and religious coercion. Conversely, the US persisted as a consistent target of confrontational rhetoric, particularly following Soleimani's assassination in 2020 and subsequently in the Gaza context from 2023 onward. However, this hostility remained largely rhetorical, given that, in contrast to pro-Khamenei groups, the SaS never engaged in active attacks against US targets. This strategy can be interpreted, in the sense of Podder (2017: 700f.), as a deliberate balancing act: on the one hand, it secures the movement's domestic political legitimacy through anti-imperialist positioning, while at the same time maintaining some room for international maneuver by avoiding military provocation. As a result, the international legitimacy of SaS fluctuates between normative restraint and political irrelevance – offering insufficient strategic value for sustainable partnerships, yet not enough aggression to trigger outright isolation.

4.3.4 Minority Factions

In the context of the PMF minority factions, the Sunni minority serves as the initial starting point. Subsequent to the capture of additional territories by ISIS, the Ministry of Defense issued a call to Sunni tribes, encouraging them to register as TMF. In December 2015, the US Department of Defense (2015) issued a directive emphasizing the central role of Sunni tribal fighters in the stabilization of recaptured regions, such as Ramadi, while explicitly excluding Shiite militias from these operations. The US also provided support to these forces in the form of training and equipment, particularly through the Iraq Train-and-Equip Fund. The objective was to deploy them as locally based security forces in liberated areas – so-called "hold forces" – under the leadership and control of the Iraqi government (US Department of Defense 2016). With regard to relations with Iran, representatives of the Badr Organization have acted as mediators between the TMF and the Shiite militias (Mapping Militants Project 2021b). In addition, individual TMF units have also joined Shiite PMF forces in exchange for superior funding, weaponry, and equipment, which surpassed the resources available through the US-backed program (Gaston 2017).

Following Iraq's victory over ISIS, US funding for the TMF decreased. From 2018 onwards, the number of TMF fighters receiving direct support decreased to a few thousand, and logistical assistance was progressively reduced in accordance with the declining threat posed by ISIS (Gaston/Ollivant 2020: 22). Consequently, Iran was able to consolidate its regional influence: Badr's growing role as a link between the TMF and Tehran (Knights 2019: 7) and reports of TMF fighters serving as proxies for Shiite-dominated PMF groups, resulting in alleged war crimes (see chapter 4.1.4), further underscored the sway of pro-Iranian groups within the TMF (Dukhan 2023: 1349).

With reference to Podder (2017: 700 f.), the history of the TMF indicates that the external legitimacy of the TMF is contingent upon its political utility. During the period of 2014 to 2017, Sunni tribal fighters were regarded as essential "hold forces" by the United States. Consequently, Washington persisted in its training and armament of these individuals. Following the defeat of IS, the utility of the coalition diminished, normative concerns gained weight, and US support gradually dried up. In the aftermath of these events, Iran moved to fill the power vacuum, incorporating several TMF brigades into the Badr Organization based solely on tactical criteria – a classic example

of how political interests drive external recognition, while normative standards only take effect when strategic added value disappears.

In addressing the Christian minority within the PMF, attention is first directed towards the Ninewa Plains Protection Unit (NPU). Although formally operating under the PMF's banner, the NPU functions independently of the PMU leadership. Beginning in 2014, the NPU received training and non-lethal equipment from a US-based non-profit organization known as the Nineveh Plain Defense Fund (NPDF). In the context of the global coalition efforts to combat the ISIS, the NPU participated in operations alongside the US-led coalition and Iraqi forces in the Nineveh Plains campaign, assuming responsibility for the security of checkpoints in predominantly Christian regions of the country, including Qaraqosh (Knights/Kalian 2017). Despite these certain financial connections with the US, the NPU relies on the Iraqi state for the majority of its funding (Kefford 2023). With regard to Iran, no such mutually beneficial relationship is evident. Conversely, there have been reports of persistent tensions between NPU checkpoints and pro-Iranian brigades, which escalated in 2023, resulting in the abduction of NPU members by the Babylon Brigade, a group that claims allegiance to Christianity but is predominantly comprised of Shiite Muslims (Syriac Press 2023).

By contrast, the Babylon Brigade does maintain close ties with Iran: despite its Christian façade, the group is in fact controlled by Kata'ib al-Imam Ali (KIA), which is affiliated with the IRGC (Smyth 2018). Already in 2017, the group's leader Ryan al-Kildani emphasized that victory over ISIS would not have been possible without Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani. In a later interview in 2021, he further stated that the group was "by default connected by blood with the Islamic Republic and this is a virtue that cannot be denied" (2021, as cited in Amwaj Media). This ideological notion is also evident in practice, since Iran has been accused of utilizing the brigade as a means of exerting political influence in the Nineveh Plains, for instance, by influencing the 2021 elections and also in the lead-up to the 2025 elections (Beth-Addai 2025).

The relationship with the United States is less considerably amicable: In July 2019, the United States government imposed sanctions on Rayan al-Kildani, the leader of the Babylon Brigade, in response to his alleged involvement in significant human rights violations. According to the US Department of the Treasury (2019), the Babylon Brigade is considered a significant impediment to the return of displaced persons to

the Nineveh Plains and has been accused of looting, stealing land, and intimidating the local population.

In reference to Podder (2017: 700 f.), it can be therefore asserted that the NPU provided tactical added value to the US coalition in the war against ISIS, exhibited a normatively unremarkable manner, and consequently gained limited legitimacy – while remaining largely inconsequential to Iran. In contrast, the Babylon Brigade functions as a proxy for Tehran, leading Iran to disregard their human rights abuses, while the US has imposed sanctions on the group since 2019. International recognition thus strictly follows the respective strategic gain, not normative standards.

With regard to the Turkmen brigades, a deeper connection to Iran can be observed. The Shiite-dominated 16th PMF brigade has been operating around Kirkuk and Tuz Khurmatu since 2014 and is closely linked to the Badr Organization, which, among other things, supplies the group with weapons. The Turkmen minority also exhibited a close association with the former KH and PMF leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (Knights 2019: 5). However, in recent years, the close ties to Iran have become increasingly apparent. For instance, in May 2023, a high-ranking IRGC Quds officer served as a mediator between the 16th Brigade and competing units within an internal PMF conflict in Kirkuk, indicating a discernible Iranian influence over Turkmen militia structures (Knights/Al-Kaabi/Malik 2023).

In this manner, Iran is also responding to the increasing efforts of Turkey to exert influence along the so-called Turkmen belt, which it is countering with targeted support and the expansion of its own militia structures (ibid). Since 2015, Turkey has focused on establishing its own pro-Turkish security structure in northern Iraq. This endeavor involves the training of Sunni Turkmen in camps, such as Bashika, in an area deliberately situated outside the Shiite-dominated and Iranian-controlled PMF. This competition for influence among the Turkmen serves as a prime example of the geopolitical power struggle between Iran and Turkey, wherein both parties are engaged in a bid to gain control of local proxies (Strachota 2015). This dynamic has already manifested itself in the fight against ISIS, wherein Ankara, in collaboration with the US, has attempted to influence and pressure the Iraqi government to exclude Shiite PMF units, including Turkmen fighters, from the offensive to recapture Tal Afar (Majidyar 2017). Washington has also repeatedly acted as an adversary of the Turkmen PMF, as evidenced by the US airstrikes in June 2021 on the Iraqi-Syrian

border, which were specifically directed against the Turkmen Brigade 16 (Ahmad 2021).

According to Podder (2017: 700 f.), actors gain legitimacy when they are strategically useful. As such, the 16th Brigade of the Turkmen forces has been a source of added military value to Iran in Kirkuk, thereby garnering a degree of political support. For Turkey, which supports its own Sunni Turkmen, and for the US, which seeks to contain Iranian proxies, this situation creates a hindrance, leading to minimal or negative recognition by these actors. Consequently, this context demonstrates that normative issues are largely outweighed by their respective political benefits.

Subsequently, the Shabak minority is examined. The Shia-dominated Shabak Brigade 30 was registered as part of the PMF in November 2014 and is organizationally subordinate to the Badr Organization. However, it is also closely linked to KH and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HaN) in terms of personnel. Notably, Hassan Sultan al-Shabaki, the brigade's commander, concurrently functions as the local representative of Iran's Supreme Leader, Khamenei. Furthermore, the brigade functions as an operational outpost for Iranian interests in northern Iraq: The areas under its control function as a staging ground for rocket and drone attacks, while its cultural institutions overtly serve to disseminate Iranian ideology, mobilize politically, and bind local communities to Tehran (Malik/Knights/Beth-Addai 2022).

Due to this close connection to Iran, relations with the United States are critical: The US Department of the Treasury (2019) sanctioned Waad Qado, the founder of the 30th Brigade, for kidnappings, extortion, and systematic displacement in Bartella and Qaraqosh. Moreover, the brigade has been implicated in numerous attacks on US targets, including an effort to blockade US troops near Mosul in February 2019, the destruction of a US reconnaissance drone in November of the same year, and repeated rocket attacks on US bases in Erbil originating from this region. The relationship with Turkey has also been marked by tension: In April 2021, a Turkish soldier was killed in an attack on a military base in Bashiqa, with Turkish authorities locating the launch site in an area controlled by the 30th Brigade (Foulkes 2021).

According to Podder (2017: 700 f.), the unit functions as a reliable outpost for Iran, providing strategic added value, which is why it continues to receive support. Conversely, for the United States and Turkey, the presence of this brigade has been a persistent source of challenges, as it poses a threat to their own personnel and

contributes to regional instability. Therefore, in response, Washington imposed sanctions while Ankara has taken military action against their positions. Normative accusations therefore only guide action once the strategic benefit – as in this case from a Western perspective – turns negative, while Tehran ignores them as long as the brigade serves its interests.

Finally, the PMF's Yezidi minority is discussed: With respect to Iranian influence, the Lalish Brigades and the Ezidkhan Brigades have been shown to have close ties to the Badr Organization and KH (Malik et al. 2022). In the Sinjar region, the Yezidi militias play a pivotal role in facilitating Iran's attainment of both territorial control and local legitimacy. According to Zmkan Ali Saleem, program director at the Institute of Regional and International Studies, they facilitate Iran's achievement of a specific objective: the maintenance of a land corridor through northern Iraq for the supply of allied forces in Syria and Lebanon. However, the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ) also play a role in this goal: In spite of the ideological linkage between the YBŞ and the PKK – and, consequently, a Kurdish nationalist, secular Marxist project – Iran cooperates with them because their strategic interests overlap (Lynch 2021).

This cooperation is rooted, in part, in a common adversary: Turkey and the US. Turkey perceives the YBŞ as a potential "PKK corridor" extending from Qandil, Sinjar, and Syria, as well as a direct threat to its interests in neighboring Turkmen regions, such as Tal Afar (Saleem/Mansour 2024: 10). This assessment is evidenced by recurring Turkish airstrikes, which have repeatedly targeted senior YBŞ commanders – among them Marwan Badal, killed in December 2021 (Dawood 2022). The relationship with the US is also characterized by strategic ambivalence, particularly due to the resulting tensions with US allies, including the Iraqi central government and Turkey. However, there is a notable exception to this pattern: the YBŞ was not directly targeted during the anti-ISIS campaign, but rather tolerated, which reflects the complex regional interests of the US in the region (Saleem/Mansour 2024: 11 ff.).

In reference to Podder (2017: 700 f.), it can be concluded that the Lalish, Ezidkhan, and YBŞ brigades play a significant role in Iran's national interests. They have been instrumental in securing the northern Iraq-Syria corridor, thereby constraining Turkish influence in the region. This strategic importance has garnered them both political and military support from Iran. In the eyes of Turkey, these militias represent a direct threat and are regularly subjected to aerial bombardment. In contrast, the United States has

exhibited, at least during the fight against ISIS, a more tolerant stance towards these militias. This suggests that high utility is associated with political recognition, while low or negative utility is linked to rejection, with normative criteria playing a secondary role.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how the PMF has built and maintained legitimacy since its founding in 2014 through its relationships with various actors, particularly the Iraqi civilian population, the state, and external actors. The emphasis was placed on a relational approach that comprehends legitimacy not as an inherently fixed characteristic, but rather as the consequence of dynamic and context-dependent interactions.

The analysis has demonstrated that the PMF function as hybrid actors within a multifaceted field of tension: they are simultaneously integrated into the state and independent as well as ideologically fragmented and functionally united. Different patterns emerge at the three levels of relations, which both strengthen and undermine their legitimacy.

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

The first research question of this paper addressed the mechanisms of civilian compliance, specifically, the ways that the PMF had gained approval, tolerance, or obedience from the Iraqi civilian population. Consequently, the analysis indicated significant variations in the forms of the relationship with the population, depending on the faction. The pro-Khamenei faction had gained considerable support among the Shiite population because of its involvement in opposing ISIS. However, following the military's success in defeating ISIS, the faction evidently lost legitimacy. This is evidenced by the change between voluntary compliance to quasi-voluntary compliance among Shiites, whereas the relationship with the Sunni population was marked by coercive compliance from the beginning, characterized by systematic violence and suppression. In contrast, the pro-Sistani faction has established consistently positive relations with Shiites and Sunnis, characterized by voluntary compliance. Their withdrawal from the PMF structure, with no visible connection to violence or political power struggles, has resulted in a significant increase in their perceived legitimacy.

The pro-Sadr faction has also achieved mostly voluntary compliance among Shiites, particularly due to their anti-elitist stance and charitable work. However, in Samarra, many Sunnis have not returned after the war and remain marginalized, while the city is firmly held by SaS. Although segments of the Sunni elite have benefitted from the

relative stability and economic opportunities under SaS, the broader community experiences exclusion and coercive pressures. This combination of selective benefits for some and implicit threats for others reflects a form of quasi-voluntary compliance among Sunnis. The situation is more nuanced among the minority factions: while the Christian led NPU and the Shabak militias have achieved voluntary compliance within their respective ethnic-religious community, the relationships of other groups are often characterized by repression, control, and systematic human rights violations. This is particularly evident in the case of the Babylon Brigade and the Turkmen. But also the Sunni tribes in the TMF and the Yezidi brigades primarily exhibit forms of coercive or quasi-voluntary compliance, which are shaped not only by security and political considerations but also by economic dependence on PMF-provided salaries. Therefore, the results of the thesis indicate, that forms of civil compliance are largely dependent on factional association, political disposition, religious identity, historical power relations, and economic incentives.

The second research question focused on the character of the PMF's relationship with the Iraqi state, specifically whether that relationship was indicative of cooperation, coexistence, or confrontation. The analysis indicated a substantial degree of fragmentation, classified according to Podder's typology of relationships: Accordingly, the pro-Khamenei faction is firmly positioned within state structures, with a primarily collusive relationship with the state. The pro-Iranian groups benefit from a combination of political leverage, state resources, and legal recognition, which enables the establishment of parallel power structures across various sectors, including administration, economy, and security apparatus. Nevertheless, there are also components of conflict, including threats of violence against representatives of government and the unauthorized compromise of state sovereignty through use of military force. At the same time, the state has shown a tolerance of these parallel structures which indicates conciliatory tendencies. In contrast, the pro-Sistani faction provides a model of conciliatory relations that exhibits a sense of institutional loyalty and a tactical disengagement from political power struggles. Although the pro-Sistani faction has encountered moments of friction with the PMF Commission, the organization has consistently sought to integrate into the conventional armed forces, thereby preserving state authority without fully submitting to it.

Similarly, the pro-Sadr faction engages within a field of tension between all three modes: While the faction has at times cooperated loyally with state institutions, it has also gained collusive advantages through political pressure and has not shied away from open confrontation in times of conflict. For instance, it has engaged in actions such as paralyzing parliament and resorting to armed conflict. Similarly, among the minority factions, the picture is also mixed: the TMF, Christian, Turkmen, Shabak, and Yezidi units typically operate within the framework of conciliatory agreements that grant local autonomy in exchange for security and stability. However, oftentimes the evolution of these relationships has transitioned towards arrangements of collusion, where state tolerance of particular interests has taken hold and formal integration has given way to clientelist networks. In addition, conflictual tensions with other factions remain, that manifest in the form of protests, unequal distribution of resources, or simply disobeying directives issued from the central government. As a result, the study concludes that the relationship between the PMF and the state is not characterized by clear responsibilities, but rather by fluid transitions between cooperation, co-optation, and confrontation. This also reflects the hybridized fragmentation of the Iraqi state.

The third research question addressed the role of external actors and the question of how international norms and political interests influence the legitimacy of the PMF. In this case, as well, patterns of relationship emerge that fluctuate between normative legitimacy and political legitimacy. Following 2014, the pro-Khamenei faction significantly benefited from Iranian support, operating as Tehran's operational arm in Iraq. Despite substantial human rights violations and documented war crimes, the group was initially tolerated by the international anti-ISIS coalition, particularly the US, as long as its military value in combating the common enemy, ISIS, outweighed its drawbacks. It was only subsequent to the defeat of ISIS and the loss of its immediate strategic relevance that a process of political and normative delegitimization commenced, manifesting in terror lists, sanctions, and military retaliation, and more recently in tactical de-escalation during the 2025 Iran-Israel confrontation. In contrast, the pro-Sistani faction garnered both political and normative recognition due to their integration into the state apparatus, their deference toward Iran, and their adherence to established norms. Its distancing from Tehran as well as its role as a reliable partner in the security sector have earned it a high degree of legitimacy, particularly in the eyes of Western actors.

The pro-Sadr faction has also demonstrated a consistent opposition to Iranian influence, but simultaneously rejects Western intervention. Despite their antagonistic rhetoric toward the US, they refrained from direct military attacks, a tactic commonly employed by pro-Khamenei groups. This results in a balancing act between normative restraint and political irrelevance – strategically too independent for partnerships, yet too cautious for international isolation. Furthermore, the minority factions offer a particularly clear reflection of the strategic selectivity of international legitimacy: The historical record indicates that Sunni, Christian, Turkmen, Shabak, and Yezidi entities were only supported or tolerated by external actors when they fulfilled specific geopolitical functions. For instance, they were utilized as "hold forces", local forces of authority, or instruments in the Iranian-Turkish proxy conflict. However, as soon as these entities demonstrated a decline in utility or exhibited questionable loyalties, they experienced a loss of international support, faced sanctions, or even became the target of military intervention. Consequently, it can be concluded that, in practice, normative considerations norms are subordinate to geopolitical interests. The political legitimacy of the PMF is not determined by its adherence to international law, but rather by its strategic usefulness to external actors.

5.2 Theoretical and Analytical Implications

The present study has shown that the PMF's legitimacy cannot be adequately understood through standardized or binary models. Rather than thinking about legitimacy as a fixed institutional attribute, legitimacy is recognized as a relational concept resulting from a combination of recognition and negotiation through instances of embedded practice. These instances are shaped by interactions with local communities, state institutions, and international actors.

Although the PMF were formally designated as part of the Iraqi military establishment, the vast majority of factions continued to operate independently, drawing their authority not only from legal status, but also from the provision of protection, social services, and symbolic capital – especially in locations where the state was absent or diminished in trust. In marginalized regions such as Sinjar or the Nineveh Plains, regular PMF salaries furthermore provided one of the few stable sources of income, which turned the militias into an important economic actor for entire communities. These dynamics

do not imply a breakdown of governance, instead, they emphasize a fragmented form of rule, whereby legitimacy is relational, situational and contested.

Additionally, such dynamics have also demonstrated some of the limits of contemporary post-conflict paradigms that assume linear transitions, and centralized monopolies on governance and violence. The PMF, however, represent the process by which armed groups become institutionalized without relinquishing their parallel forms of authority. The display of authority in Iraq thus demonstrates a concept of hybridity, anchored in local embeddedness, and shaped by a form of strategic pragmatism.

The analysis reveals three overarching patterns: First, legitimacy in hybrid contexts is inherently performative and unstable. As such, PMF factions continuously adjust their strategies – alternating between coercion, service provision, political engagement, and religious framing – to secure recognition from multiple and shifting audiences. Second, fragmentation should not be viewed solely as a symptom of weak statehood. Instead, it functions as a form of governance, producing resilient yet frequently contradictory authority structures. Third, international legitimacy is demonstrated to be selective and instrumental in nature: groups are frequently tolerated or supported not based on their normative behavior, but rather due to their strategic utility. This challenges assumptions about the role of international norms in post-conflict state-building.

Taken together, these findings necessitate a rethinking of how legitimacy is understood and assessed in post-conflict environments. The case of the PMF indicates that authority is not imposed from above or institutionalized in fixed categories, but rather is constantly renegotiated through embedded, hybrid, and relational practices.

5.3 Outlook and Further Research

Looking ahead, the evolving role of the PMF raises urgent questions about the future of political order and legitimacy in Iraq. As this study has shown, the PMF are not a temporary anomaly, but a central actor in the country's fragmented governance structure. Their ongoing institutionalization, combined with persistent autonomy as well as factionalism, suggests that Iraq's political future will continue to be shaped by hybrid arrangements rather than centralized authority.

A particularly significant test case lies in the parliamentary elections scheduled for November 2025. As the previous elections in 2021 have demonstrated, intra-Shiite rivalries and extra-institutional contestation continue to define the political landscape. Accordingly, the upcoming vote may either further entrench the PMF's political role – particularly through affiliated parties – or reignite disputes over the limits of legitimate authority. In both scenarios, the questions of who holds power, how it is exercised, and on whose behalf will gain increasing importance.

While some PMF factions may continue to pursue formal integration, others may exploit legal ambiguity and local power vacuums to expand their autonomous influence. This could further complicate efforts to rebuild trust in state institutions and foster inclusive governance. At the same time, the PMF's evolving role illustrates how non-state actors can become institutionalized centers of power, thereby complicating the boundaries between rebellion, governance, and political participation.

From a research perspective, several avenues for further investigation emerge directly from this study. While this thesis has adopted a macro-analytical and typological approach, further empirical research is needed to explore how legitimacy is perceived, negotiated, and contested at the local level. A promising example is the study of PMF governance in Ninewa governorate, which has already shown how armed actors strategically deploy martyrdom narratives, symbolic grievances, and personal loyalties to generate compliance (cf. Hesselink 2019). Building on such micro-level insights, future studies could investigate how relational legitimacy is experienced differently across regions, communities, and factions – particularly in contested areas such as Sinjar, Kirkuk, or the Nineveh Plains.

Comparative research with other hybrid actors in the region (e.g. Hezbollah or the Houthis) could also help determine whether similar patterns of strategic legitimation occur elsewhere, or whether the PMF represent a uniquely Iraqi phenomenon. This comparison could usefully be expanded to non-Iranian-aligned formations, such as Haftar's Libyan National Army, to test whether the relational dynamics of legitimacy also apply in different ideological and geopolitical contexts. Moreover, examining how factions deploy religious narratives, provide services, or apply coercion selectively may offer deeper insight into the construction of legitimacy in fragmented political contexts. Such studies would also allow for a more grounded assessment of the relational model's analytical strength in practice.

These dynamics raise not only empirical questions, but also deeper theoretical ones about the foundations of legitimate rule in fragmented political systems. In such contexts, legitimacy cannot be taken for granted – it must be continually performed, negotiated, and believed. As Max Weber (1922: 122) argues, “No system of domination has ever been content, based on experience, to rely solely on material, affectual, or value-rational motives for its continuance. Every such system seeks instead to awaken and sustain belief in its legitimacy.”¹⁷

It is precisely this belief, shaped and sustained through ongoing interaction between the rulers and the ruled, that ultimately upholds authority in fragmented political systems – especially where formal authority remains uncertain or contested.

¹⁷ Author's translation from the German original: “Keine Herrschaft begnügt sich, nach aller Erfahrung, freiwillig mit den nur materiellen oder nur affektuellen oder nur wertrationalen Motiven als Chancen ihres Fortbestandes. Jede sucht vielmehr den Glauben an ihre Legitimität zu erwecken und zu pflegen.”

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