*Dispossession and Disappearance*

*The "Rules of Engagement" inside the Popular Mobilization Forces' Iraq*

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*And the Tishreen Movement's Struggle for Rule of Law and a Sovereign State*

*The road to Iraq's parliamentary elections held on Sunday, 10 October has been paved by means of disenfranchisement in one of its most fundamental forms: enforced disappearance. Originally slated for 2022, these early elections once constituted a key demand of the Tishreen protests that began in October 2019. At that time, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators assembled in Baghdad and cities across central and southern Iraq to call for the resignation of the government under then-Prime Minister Adel Abd al-Mahdi, as well as early elections (in accordance with a revised electoral law) and constitutional reforms. Their aim was ultimately to dismantle Iraq's political system, which is predicated on an unwritten ethno-sectarian apportionment scheme that is widely perceived to have done little more than fuel sectarianism, endemic corruption, and incessant foreign intervention since its installation following the 2003 US-led invasion and the toppling of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime. Of course, this 'rebirth of Iraq' would not come to pass. Thawrat Tishreen (the October Revolution) instead resulted in the death of more than 600 protesters killed by Iraqi security forces and legally recognized paramilitary networks charged with preserving the status quo.*

*Although protests have since subsided, a campaign of targeted killings, abductions, and forced disappearances remains in effect against anyone deemed critical of the government or the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, Arabic: al-Hashd al-Sha'abi) on its payroll. While it is elements of the latter that are widely understood to be behind these attacks, authorities have proven utterly unable or unwilling to hold them accountable. This*

*dynamic points to the 'symbiotic relationship' that has long existed between Iraq's political leadership and paramilitary organizations. Yet the ubiquity of the violence and the blanket impunity that culpable armed groups now enjoy also signal a shifting balance of power within this partnership, and a blurring of the line that previously distinguished state and non-state actors.*

*Throughout the last two years, paramilitary networks have leveraged their role in quashing the Tishreen movement to embed themselves more deeply within Iraqi politics. In so doing, network leaders have expertly 'infiltrated, dominated, co-opted, or otherwise compromised' both public and private institutions, thereby amassing tremendous wealth through both formal and illicit revenue streams while attaining greater access to government ministries. The outcome is a political system in which armed groups comprise an inextricable pillar and protector, participant and beneficiary.*

*Thus, the political order that protesters sought to reform has instead been reinforced through a policy of violence. Time will tell whether Sunday's elections and the forthcoming government formation process can begin to extricate the architects and sponsors of this policy from power, and usher in meaningful measures to search for, locate, and release those whom have been forcibly disappeared and hold perpetrators criminally responsible.*



*Photograph: Ahmad Al-Rubaye/AFP via Getty Images*

*Paramilitary Violence and State Cover*

*In the first six months of the Tishreen protests, 123 demonstrators were confirmed missing. Of these individuals, at least 32 had been abducted and subsequently beaten and/or tortured by 'unidentified armed elements,' while 33 others were arrested and held incommunicado in the custody of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) for days and, in some cases, weeks.[1] According to the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), at least 20 individuals abducted by 'unidentified armed elements' remained forcibly disappeared as of May 2021.*

*Patterns identified across accounts of disappearance and torture ruled out the involvement of criminal gangs, as none of the documented incidents were motivated by theft or requests for ransom. It quickly became evident that the intended objective was rather 'to dissuad[e] participation in protests by sowing fear' through 'a deliberate silencing of peaceful voices.' Citing the consistent modus operandi of abduction and 'interrogation,' UNAMI/OHCHR concluded that the 'unidentified armed elements' executing the project were, in fact, 'actors with substantial levels of organization and access to resources.'*

*On 23 October 2019, Iraq's Supreme Judicial Council issued a directive establishing judicial investigative committees to investigate protest-related crimes including the abduction of demonstrators within each affected governorate. Yet by the time former intelligence chief Mustafa al-Kadhimi had been confirmed as Iraq's next prime minister in May 2020, not a single incident of abduction or disappearance had led to a trial or prosecution.*

*Shortly after assuming office, al-Kadhimi made multiple commitments pledging to release protesters whom had been arbitrarily arrested and detained, and to investigate enforced disappearances and ensure accountability. In October 2020, his office announced the formation of a new fact-finding committee, mandated to 'find out about all the violent events that accompanied the demonstrations from 1 October [2019] onwards, highlighting who was responsible.' Executive Order 293 also vested this committee with the authority to 'transfer any case and anyone to the court of law.' During a meeting with the United Nations Committee on Enforced Disappearances (CED) that same month, Iraq's delegation noted that 'the fight against enforced disappearance was an important part of the national human rights plan for the period 2020-2024.' Addressing protest-related disappearances in particular, the delegation stated that Prime Minister al-Kadhimi 'was concerning himself directly*

*with that matter,' adding that he 'had placed the restoration of the rule of law at the top of the list of government priorities.'*

*But one year later, these claims and committees have amounted to nothing. Relatives of eight individuals disappeared between December 2019 and October 2020 told Human Rights Watch that they had not been informed of al-Kadhimi's fact-finding committee, nor had any member of the committee contacted them. Likewise, despite their efforts, none of the families had received any information from authorities regarding the fate or whereabouts of their missing loved one. According to HRW, case details indicate that elements of the PMF were 'most likely' implicated in all eight disappearances.*

*The government's latest fact-finding committee is also proving to be as opaque as it is ineffective. Members of the committee whose identities and qualifications remain unknown consulted neither victims and survivors nor relevant civil society organizations on the mechanism's design and development. Details regarding the committee's methodology, criteria for case selection, funding source, and reporting lines remain undisclosed, and it has yet to release a report or publish any findings.*

*Until now, the only official information publicly available on the investigation and prosecution of protest-related crimes is that published by UNAMI, which it in turn received via letter from the Supreme Judicial Council in response to a formal request. According to this documentation, 8,163 cases were filed between 1 October 2019 and 31 March 2021.[2] As of 17 April 2021, 3,897 of these cases were still under investigation, while another 1,122 cases had been closed. Although the reason for closure was not provided for each of these cases, the Supreme Judicial Council did report that at least 451 cases were closed after being attributed to 'unknown perpetrators.'[3] UNAMI believes that the actual number of cases closed under this pretext is much higher. In March 2021, other judicial sources reportedly shared information indicating that as many as 1,831 cases had been attributed to 'unknown perpetrators' in Baghdad alone. With these cases now closed, systematic and institutionalized impunity is assured.*

*It must be stressed that the Supreme Judicial Council, in its letter to UNAMI, did not disaggregate these 8,163 filed cases by the nature of the alleged crime, making it impossible to garner any information on investigations into abductions and forced disappearances. It is, however, deeply disturbing that Baghdad governorate is the only location in which the Supreme Judicial Council recorded (an unspecified number of) cases involving 'allegations of kidnapping' despite widely reported incidents in Maysan, Karbala, Basra, Dhi Qar, and Najaf.*

*Nearly one year prior to this correspondence in June 2020 UNAMI's Human Rights Office submitted to the Prime Minister's Office a list of demonstrators and activists whom had been abducted (and released) and others still missing.[4] Seeking information on the progress made in these cases, UNAMI sent numerous follow-up communications. Eleven months after the original submission, al-Kadhimi's government had still not responded.*

*Authorities have similarly failed to specify the military and security units that are legally licensed to arrest and detain people, and the location of all official detention sites. The central government has likewise declined requests to clarify the command structure of the Iraqi security apparatus and delineate the respective mandate and official uniform of each composite agency and entity, including the constellation of paramilitary groups that make up the PMF.*

*This is all to say that what has emerged in the wake of the Tishreen protest movement is a concerted, coordinated, and officially sanctioned campaign to conceal the identity of those responsible for planning and perpetrating acts of violence against unarmed civilians.*

*The question is  why?*




*Installation view of Hanaa Malallah, She/He Has No Picture (2019) on view in the exhibition Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991 2011 at MoMA PS1, New York from November 3, 2019 to March 1, 2020. Photo by Matthew Septimus.*

## *Tracing PMF Networks: Hybridity, Heterogeneity, and Hurdles to Perpetrator Identification*

*Incidents of abduction and enforced disappearance are commonly attributed to 'the PMF,'[5] 'PMF militias,' or simply 'militias' in official complaints, formal UN statements, human rights reports, and media accounts. These classifications which are often employed interchangeably require further attention and precision.*

*The Popular Mobilization Forces derive from a 2014 fatwa, in which Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani Iraq's most influential Shia cleric called upon volunteers to enter into the national armed forces to defend the country's territory against Islamic State (ISIS) fighters. Yet rather than enlist in the collapsing military, thousands of men joined pre-existing armed groups or formed their own. In a bid to institutionalize these disparate paramilitary forces and thus grant them a sense of legal legitimacy[6], the then prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, banded them together under an umbrella organization dubbed al-Hashd al-Sha'abi (the Popular Mobilization Forces, PMF) and administered by a body referred to as Hayat*

*al-Hashd al-Sha'abi the PMF Commission.*

*In view of the PMF's critical role in the liberation of ISIS-controlled territory, parliament passed the Law of the PMF Commission in November 2016, which designated the umbrella organization 'an independent military formation as part of the Iraqi armed forces and linked to the Commander-in-Chief.' The PMF thus became institutionalized within the state as a legally recognized armed entity while simultaneously remaining independent from and outside of Iraq's traditional security apparatus. Because its chain of command is 'linked to'[7] the Prime Minister's Office via the National Security Council (NSC) the PMF is separate from, and exercises parity with, the Ministries of Defense and Interior, and thus exists beyond the scope of ministerial oversight. The 'civilian' status of the NSC has also functioned to present the PMF with a greater degree of maneuverability. Exploiting their autonomy from Iraq's constitutionally mandated armed forces, many PMF elements have expanded their activities and influence far beyond the security sector. This nuanced posture has therefore enabled paramilitary groups operating under the PMF banner to 'move back and forth' between state and non-state spaces, 'as [their] interests dictate.'*

*Such interests, however, shift from one PMF group to another, and are themselves largely determined by divergent ideological underpinnings and political alignments. Thus, as analyst and scholar Dr. Renad Mansour explains, the PMF does not represent one unified, cohesive, and monolithic entity, but instead acts as 'a series of fluid and adaptive networks' that vary in their respective structure, strategy, capability, and connectivity to the state.*

*Nonetheless, the reason these myriad networks and their composite brigades and factions are so rarely distinguished in media and human rights reports is two-fold: first and foremost is the absence of independent, impartial investigations, as alluded to above. Second is the fact that the individuals carrying out attacks against protesters and civil society activists do so anonymously. Victims and survivors consistently describe how masked men wearing civilian clothes forced them into unmarked vehicles, often with no license plate as CCTV footage has repeatedly shown. This latter point of anonymity becomes more significant when one considers that, in those few instances in which the specific PMF element has been identified, it was almost always the survivor, his or her lawyer, or a witness who made the identification not law enforcement.*

*Such cases are, however, the exception to what has otherwise become a rule of officially sanctioned obscurity. Indeed, throughout the course of a broad albeit non-exhaustive review, the author noted that out of*

*the roughly 50 paramilitary groups and entities that form the PMF, only five have been publicly identified by name as perpetrators of abduction and enforced disappearance. They are: the PMF Security Directorate, the Badr Organization, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asai'b Ahl al-Haq, and Ansar Allah al-Awfiyah. It is likely no coincidence that these organizations also constitute the PMF's oldest, largest, best financed, and most militarily capable. Their respective leaders and powerbrokers are likewise among the most extensively entwined and well represented within the institutions of the Iraqi state and its political system.*

## *Security Sector Co-optation and Implications for Accountability and Rule of Law*

*The cause of the ongoing impunity is thus acutely structural. Upon reading individual accounts of abduction and disappearance, one is struck by the depth and breadth of police negligence and inaction. Relatives of the missing invariably report that the police 'showed little interest,' 'did not offer any assistance,' 'said they did not have enough information to follow up,' and '[did not] file a missing persons claim or [offer] any other help.' In fact this May, UNAMI/OHCHR stated that '[i]n no case did official authorities formally assist in locating those abducted.'*

*Abdicating their duty to protect victims and survivors, law enforcement officials have instead served to protect the perpetrators. Ali Naseer Alawy, a prominent figure within the protest movement, was abducted and tortured for several hours, then left on the side of a highway in Najaf this past February. He told HRW that he believes those responsible 'must wield power since nearby police had done nothing to intervene.' After speaking to police following his release, Alawy said he concluded that 'because he did not know who the kidnappers were, there was no point in filing a complaint.' Those who do file complaints involving incidents of abduction or disappearance by an 'unknown party' generally do not receive any response aside from those in which authorities 'advise' them not to pursue the case further. Some judicial sources have also highlighted the challenges that they confront in determining the identity of perpetrators, citing an unwillingness on the part of certain security forces to share information and evidence. According to UNAMI/OHCHR, this lack of cooperation is particularly pronounced in 'sensitive cases,' which inevitably include those attributed to 'armed actors operating outside state control.' In these cases, arrest warrants issued by the judiciary have reportedly not been implemented.*

*Yet such obstruction is made far less shocking in light of the role that the Badr Organization plays within Iraq's Ministry of Interior and the Federal Police under its authority. The organization was originally known*

*as 'the Badr Brigades' established in Iran in 1982 with the purpose of serving as the military wing of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and thus fighting against Saddam Hussein's regime in the Iran-Iraq War. In the vacuum that followed the 2003 US-led invasion, Badr rebranded and developed its influence, emerging as a dominant armed actor. To address this growing strength, Nouri al-Maliki with the support of the US military advanced measures to integrate Badr and other paramilitary groups into the Interior Ministry. Through this integration process, which spanned 2006-2008, 'Badr fighters switched uniforms to become federal police.' Emboldened by the absence of any regulatory mechanism, however, these former insurgents did not 'integrate'; rather, they 'captured' the ministry and 'controlled' its 37,000 personnel, thus conferring upon the Badr Organization the power to 'install its own minister, deputies, and directors general.' All the while, of course, Badr maintained its presence as an armed group outside the state apparatus as well. And by 2014, the Badr Organization had solidified its position among the primary paramilitary groups that would comprise the 'core nucleus' of the PMF.*

*In spite of the clear perils of unchecked 'integration,' Prime Minister al-Kadhimi appears to have also adopted this approach, ostensibly as a means of curtailing the PMF's autonomy. It was confirmed last November that the Defense Ministry was in the process of training Hussein Falih Aziz to become a major general in the Iraqi military. Aziz perhaps better known as Abu Zainab al-Lami is a former member of Kata'ib Hezbollah and the current head of the PMF's Security Directorate, which is implicated in the abduction of several prominent activists, including Dr. Maytham al-Hilo. In December 2019, Aziz was placed under US sanctions for his alleged role in 'ordering the assassination of protesters in Baghdad.' According to at least one security officer, he had ordered snipers to use lethal force against peaceful demonstrators in order to suppress the Tishreen movement. Even so, a government official told Reuters that Aziz 'will be given a senior position [within the military] when training is completed.' Though this 'inducement' is purportedly intended to 'restructure the PMF' and thus dilute its power, there is no indication that Aziz will (or must) forego his position as PMF security chief.*

*As these examples demonstrate, efforts exerted by consecutive governments to rein in the PMF whether authentic or not have and continue to be manipulated and maximized by the organization's most abusive elements. Rather than being weakened, these groups have secured their survival by penetrating and permeating the state, thus becoming quasi-governmental.*

*Nowhere has this expansionary evolution proven more glaring than in Iraq's parliament.*



*Installation view of Hanaa Malallah, She/He Has No Picture (2019) on view in the exhibition Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991 2011 at MoMA PS1, New York from November 3 to March 1, 2020. Photo by Matthew Septimus.*

*Paramilitary Politicians: Compromising Legislative Powers and Ministerial Posts*

*Hadi al-Ameri the longstanding leader of the Badr Organization is regarded as the 'political godfather' of the PMF. In 2018, he catapulted to new (i.e., national) heights, becoming the head of the Fatah Alliance the PMF's electoral bloc.[8] Capitalizing on their part in the defeat of ISIS, PMF groups enjoyed remarkable success at the ballot box, handing Fatah 47 parliamentary seats (out of 329) in the bloc's electoral debut. The majority of these seats went to MPs from the Badr Organization (21) and the Sadiqoun Movement (15) the political wing of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq.[9] An additional two seats went to the political party representing Ansar Allah al-Awfiyah the most powerful PMF element in Maysan governorate and the group publicly incriminated in the disappearance of human rights lawyer Ali Jasib Hattab al-Heliji and the subsequent assassination of his father, Jasib Hattab Abboud al-Heliji.*

*Fatah's strong showing empowered coalition leaders to play kingmaker alongside Muqtada al-Sadr's Sa'iroun bloc. This meant that PMF commanders acted as a driving force within government formation*

*negotiations, with some powerbrokers 'engaged in closed-door meetings and backroom deals' that culminated in the appointment of Prime Minister Adel Abd al-Mahdi a relatively weak, consensus candidate lacking political party support and thus beholden to Fatah's PMF parties to remain in power. Converting their electoral victories into political capital, PMF heads have continued to extend their reach further into state institutions, inserting themselves as well as their loyalists and proxies more deeply into government ministries. This blueprint has been followed with particular intensity in the ministries and divisions that address matters of reform and accountability issues posing a potential threat to the political and paramilitary interests of PMF networks. By installing their allies as 'special grades' (al-darajat al-khasa) those in senior civil servant positions PMF figures have ensured legal cover for their respective armed elements. The strategy has proven exceptionally effective. Responding to a comment on the impunity enjoyed by those responsible for the high-profile assassination of security analyst and government advisor Hisham al-Hashimi, a senior government official said: 'We can't move against them easily. [Y]ou have to understand that their people are everywhere.'*

*A Struggle for Sovereignty Against the Backdrop of Paramilitary and Proxy Violence*

*It is little wonder then that journalist, human rights activist, and pro-democracy campaigner Ali al-Mikdam has called the PMF's removal 'impossible.' A key figure in the Tishreen protests of 2019, Mikdam was abducted and physically assaulted in a targeted attack this past July. Although authorities have not publicly identified the perpetrators, Mikdam has long been openly critical of pro-Iran armed groups. However, his abduction was perhaps precipitated by a piece published two weeks earlier, in which he articulates in great detail why and how Tehran-backed militias are 'hunting down' Iraqi activists.*

*Thus far, this article has not explicitly addressed the PMF's foreign alliances and allegiances, nor has it examined the PMF's activities within the context of broader global and regional power dynamics. This omission is not the consequence of some flagrant oversight; rather, it was a conscious decision, aimed at highlighting the abduction and enforced disappearance of Iraqi people as a crisis that warrants unqualified attention and action, as opposed to framing such abuses within the shadow of geopolitics and the lens of the US-Iran proxy war. As Mikdam has eloquently suggested, it is this narrow preoccupation with bilateral tensions that has fomented the violence being inflicted upon Iraqi activists. Unable to avenge the US military's assassination of Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani and PMF Commission leader Abu Mahdi*

*al-Muhandis 'in equal force,' Mikdam says that pro-Iran armed groups instead retaliated against those expressing peaceful opposition to Tehran's 'vision' and influence inside Iraq. 'The rules of engagement changed,' he explained, and the number of civil society figures killed, abducted, or threatened rose sharply.*

*Following the killing of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, PMF elements and particularly those ideologically aligned with Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei moved swiftly to discredit the Tishreen movement as 'a tool of 'American subversion'' and, by extension, to 'legitimize' the use of violence against protesters. In a statement, Kata'ib Hezbollah called for the 'expulsion of the American enemy and its followers from Iraqi lands,' in effect, smearing demonstrators as foreign agents and, in turn, 'orchestrat[ing] a backlash' against the movement and a campaign of intimidation against its participants.*

*In the face of this discursive aggression, the slogan, rallying cry, and raison d'être of the Tishreen movement "We want a homeland" grew in its poignancy. Iraq has long been treated as a theater of proxy competition, thereby dispossessing Iraqi people of a sovereign country. This was at the essence of a manifesto printed on the front page of the movement's Tuk Tuk newspaper on 6 November 2019. Titled No to America No to Iran, the passage condemns these two powers for 'engineering the oppression of new generations [by] ensuring that Iraq continues to be a failed and weak state, incapable of defending itself ' Indeed, as long as the Iraqi state is rendered captive, made subordinate to, or otherwise controlled by figures that are not elected by, nor represent the Iraqi population, it will remain categorically ill-equipped to strengthen, preserve, or assert its sovereignty. And of course, a state that is incapable of promoting the realization of its own sovereignty is exponentially less willing and equipped to respect and protect the right of its citizens to exercise personal self-determination.*

*The Iraqi state has, for decades, made clear the extent of its unwillingness, doing so as the Tuk Tuk passage notes through a policy of oppression. If self-determination is the right to freely decide on one's political status and freely pursue one's economic, social, and cultural development, then enforced disappearance is its antithesis. Perceived in these terms, it follows quite 'logically' that Iraq has one of the highest numbers of missing and forcibly disappeared people in the world. The Iraqi state also has the highest number of urgent requests pending before the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances, accounting for nearly half of the 1,000 cases brought before the Committee since 2010.*

## *Charting the Course Forward*

*Just as Iraq's crisis of enforced disappearance did not begin with the protest movement of October 2019, it will not end with Sunday's parliamentary election, regardless of the number of seats Tishreen candidates secure. The eradication of enforced disappearance requires the commitment and technical capacity of every facet of the state and each branch of government. Yet such institutions from law enforcement, intelligence, and security forces; to the judiciary and council of ministers; to parliament have long been appropriated and configured to cater to actors and interests that are diametrically opposed to the sovereignty, agency, and self-determination that Iraq's protesters exercised and for which they made profound sacrifices two years ago.*

*That being said, it is imperative that as the process of government formation gets underway, analysts, observers, and foreign diplomats refrain from focusing exclusively or even disproportionately on the establishment politicians and traditional blocs at the expense of independents and newcomers such as the protest party Imtidad or the Kurdistan Region's New Generation opposition group. Doing so implicitly contributes to the latter's disempowerment, as it fails to acknowledge the agency that political 'outsiders' do possess and have skillfully harnessed to facilitate change and foster reform. We would thus all do well to remember the unprecedented political concessions that the Tishreen movement did in fact achieve between October and December 2019, and avoid underestimating its ability to do so in the future.*

*Arguably the greatest success of Sunday's election provided that violence is not employed to overturn the result is the unequivocal rejection of the PMF's Fatah Alliance, which reportedly lost 27 parliamentary seats, reducing its total to 20. This overwhelming defeat might translate into a comparable decline in the bloc's bargaining power vis-à-vis government formation negotiations. As such, PMF networks could potentially wield far less influence in deciding key appointments. More important, however, is the message that this 'sharp rebuke' sends to the remaining segments of Iraq's political class: namely, that violence is not a viable mode of governance, and that as state officials and government representatives, their actions and choices have electoral consequences. Iraqi society has demonstrated through this election cycle that while targeted assassinations, abductions, and forced disappearances might once have proven politically expedient, such abuses now promise to exact high political costs. In delivering this message, Iraqi people have begun to recalibrate the calculus on which the current political order is premised.*

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*[1] It is important to note, however, that on account of threats,*

*intimidation, and thus the fear of reprisal that often deters reporting the actual number of cases of arbitrary arrest, abduction, unlawful detention, and enforced disappearance is expected to be significantly higher.*

*[2] These cases involve alleged crimes perpetrated against protesters, as well as those perpetrated by protesters, as the Supreme Judicial Council did not make any differentiation in its correspondence. The latter allegations typically include blocking roads, burning tires, and setting fire to government buildings and political parties' headquarters.*

*[3] Article 130 of Iraq's 1971 Criminal Procedure Code (CPC) stipulates that if an investigative judge finds 'that the perpetrator is unknown,' he may issue a decision 'to close the case temporarily.'*

*[4] The names of abducted and/or disappeared individuals were submitted with the consent of the victims or their families.*

*[5] Also frequently referred to as the 'PMU,' or Popular Mobilization Units.*

*[6] Article 9 of Iraq's 2005 Constitution states that 'the formation of military militias outside the framework of the armed forces is prohibited.'*

*[7] The authors of Hybrid Actors: Armed Groups and State Fragmentation in the Middle East emphasize that, in reality, the PMF does not answer to the prime minister or the chairman of the NSC, but rather, that its de facto leader had been Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis prior to his assassination on 3 January 2020.*

*[8] Iraq's 2015 Law on Political Parties prohibits political parties from participating in and working with armed or paramilitary organizations. Nonetheless, at least 17 PMF elements have their own political party that is represented in parliament by the Fatah Alliance.*

*[9] According to analyst Phillip Smyth, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's political and military 'wings' are, in reality, not separate and autonomous entities, but rather 'overlapping internal divisions within a cohesive organization.' Demonstrating this 'overlap' is the fact that Qais al-Khazali serves as both the political and military leader of the respective 'wings.' In December 2019, he was placed under US sanctions for his involvement in 'a committee of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) proxies that approved the use of lethal violence against protesters for the purpose of public intimidation.'*