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PROTECTORS OF THE STATE?

THE POPULAR MOBILISATION FORCES DURING THE 2022 POST-ELECTION CRISIS

Simona Foltyn

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Protectors of the State? The Popular Mobilisation Forces During the 2022 Post-Election Crisis

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About the Author

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Abstract

The Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) is a grouping of Shiʿa-led paramilitaries in Iraq, formed in 2014 with Iranian support to fight the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The PMF officially reports to Iraq's prime minister and has undergone a gradual process of institutionalisation which has been subject to much debate and criticism. Although officially a state force, the PMF is frequently criticised for acting outside the chain of command to protect its ideological and political interests.

This paper examines the PMF's role during the 2022 post-election crisis, with an aim to shed light on its level of institutionalisation six years after its foundation. The paper focuses on armed clashes that took place inside Baghdad's fortified Green Zone on 29–30 August 2022 between the PMF and rival forces led by Shiʿa cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

Executive Summary

Iraq's 2021 national vote for the House of Representatives ushered in a turbulent post-election crisis, unprecedented in length and violence. After almost a year's impasse over government formation, rival Shiʿa camps fought one another in the heart of the capital Baghdad. The deadly standoff was provoked when followers of powerful Shiʿa cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who backed then-prime minister and Western ally Mustafa al-Kadhimi, breached the Green Zone, a highly secured government quarter also home to the headquarters and residences of Sadr's rivals. The Sadrists besieged government institutions and clashed with the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), an umbrella term for mostly Shiʿa paramilitaries whose political affiliates competed with Sadr for power. The battle lasted less than 24 hours, but it offered a glimpse into the relative strength and operational coherence of two sides who some feared would one day be pitted against one another in an intra-Shiʿa war. On one side, the Sadrists still resembled the ragtag insurgents who had faced off with American forces in messy street battles. In stark contrast, the PMF, seen in combat for the first time since the war against ISIS, displayed a notable level of organisation and discipline indicative of an advanced stage of institutionalisation.

This report evaluates the PMF's progress along four dimensions: the extent of its decoupling from politics; its separation from the so-called Resistance Factions, its command and control and, finally, its military capabilities. The overall conclusion is that the PMF has evolved from a hodgepodge of militias formed to fight ISIS into a somewhat professional fighting force that showed restraint and discipline in the face of what it saw as an attack on its headquarters and attempt to overthrow the state. Its conduct leading up to and during the Green Zone clashes hints at a certain level of organisational maturity, though the crisis also highlights flaws in its command and control. Specifically, the paper presents seven findings:

1. The PMF saw itself as the protector of the system rather than specific party interests. Though it remains entangled with its political affiliates, known as the Coordination Framework (Frame), the PMF didn't take direct orders, but rather served as a safety valve in case the Sadrists attempted to take power by force.
2. The PMF's role was markedly different from the Resistance Factions, who deployed violence throughout the government formation process to help the Frame achieve desired political outcomes. This includes attacks on Sadr's Sunni and Kurdish allies and their foreign backers.
3. The PMF prepared for potential escalation months in advance, deploying around 12,000 troops inside the Green Zone. This points to a high degree of organisation, while also signalling the erosion of trust towards the prime minister and his government.
4. During the clashes, there was a complete breakdown of command and control between the PMF and the prime minister. In engaging the Sadrists, PMF leaders acted against the orders of the prime minister, who in their eyes had lost legitimacy as the commander in chief.
5. Throughout the crisis, the PMF showed restraint, signalling a reluctance to be dragged into an armed conflict with its rivals. Once clashes began, its leaders took steps to minimise bloodshed and avoid further escalation.
6. PMF leadership mostly relied on a small but highly trained special force recruited after the war with ISIS to ensure a disciplined and measured response to a volatile situation that could have easily spiralled into broader conflict.
7. There was palpable discord between the PMF and the Resistance. During the clashes, PMF leaders struggled to assert control over Resistance-affiliated brigades, who looked to Resistance commanders for guidance.

Introduction

Methodology

The paper's findings are distilled from more than a dozen semi-structured elite interviews with current and former PMF officials, Sadrists, government and security officials and Resistance commanders with direct knowledge of the events in question. The interviews were carried out between November 2022 and February 2023 by the researcher in person and mostly in Arabic. Most interviewees requested anonymity to speak candidly. The paper's findings are further informed by five years of journalistic reporting in Iraq, including countless discussions with government and security officials, diplomats, civil society actors, ordinary Iraqis and rare visits to Resistance and PMF bases across the country.

Background

The PMF was founded in 2014, but to fully understand the internal dynamics and the rivalries that played out during the latest political crisis, it's necessary to look further back in history. The name Popular Mobilisation Forces was coined in June 2014, days after Iraq's highest Shiʿa authority Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a fatwa (a religious edict) calling on Shiʿa civilians to take up weapons to stop ISIS' sweeping advance across the country's north and west. The extremists had taken roughly a third of Iraq's territory, reaching the outskirts of the capital Baghdad. The Iraqi army had collapsed, and there was a need for a new ground force to fill the security vacuum. Answering Sistani's call, tens of thousands of Shiʿa men joined the newly created PMF, whose strength would soon exceed 100,000.

The backbone of the PMF were the so-called Resistance Factions, who had years of fighting experience under their belt. Their senior cadres first honed their skills as part of the underground resistance against Saddam Hussein's regime, part of which was harboured by neighbouring Iran. When the US invaded Iraq in 2003 and overthrew Saddam, the resistance shifted to fighting the American occupation and Sunni extremist groups like al-Qaeda. They received support and training from Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah. The main resistance groups that emerged over the post-invasion years are Kataʾib Hezbollah, Kataʾib Sayyid al-Shuhada (a Kataʾib Hezbollah offshoot), Asaʾib Ahl al-Haq and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba. The last two are splinters from Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi army (later renamed Saraya Salam) which also mounted an insurgency against the Americans. These historic links between the Sadrists and the Resistance Factions are important to understand as they help explain these groups' conduct during the post-election crisis. While there is rivalry between them, they remain historically and socially entwined, with sons of a single household often fighting for different Shiʿa Islamist militias.

The 2011 US withdrawal from Iraq seemed like an opportunity to demobilise the Resistance, but another war was brewing in Syria. The Resistance Factions flocked across the border and fought al-Qaeda and other Sunni insurgents alongside Syrian government forces. The factions claim they did so to protect Shiʿa shrines and prevent the conflict from spilling

into Iraq, but their critics accuse them of using the war to spread their and Iran's influence throughout the region. The factions returned to Iraq when ISIS started gaining ground on their home turf. With the blessing of then-prime minister Nouri Al-Maliki, they deployed around the Baghdad belt in February 2014, four months before Sistani's fatwa, to protect the capital from ISIS as entire divisions of the Iraqi army disintegrated in the face of its blitzkrieg. Once the PMF was officially established in June that year, the Resistance factions became its founding brigades. They trained thousands of recruits, absorbing some into their own ranks and organising others into newly formed brigades. 'The basis of the PMF are the Resistance Factions,' said a senior Resistance commander. 'The Resistance Factions are like the skeleton and the PMF is the muscle. Without the skeleton the flesh cannot walk and the other way around as well.' Muqtada Al Sadr's Saraya Salam was also incorporated into the PMF. But the Resistance Factions retained control over leadership positions and funding, much to the dismay of other brigades.

A 2016 law legalised the PMF as an official state force reporting to the prime minister, a move that drew opposition from Sunni politicians because of the PMF's human rights abuses in Sunni areas (though other Iraqi security forces also committed abuses (HRW, 2016)). It also raised concern among Western and some Iraqi officials who feared that the PMF's institutionalisation would deepen Tehran's influence over the Iraqi state. After ISIS' territorial defeat in Iraq in 2017, the PMF accelerated its integration into the Iraqi security apparatus and launched a controversial venture into politics. The political wings of the PMF and Resistance took part in the 2018 election, converting their battlefield spoils into political capital. The Fatah alliance, consisting of parties linked to PMF groups Badr, Asaʾib Ahl al-Haq, Kataʾib Jund al-Imam and led by former Badr commander Hadi al-Ameri, won 29 out of 329 parliamentary seats and emerged as an important political player who competed for the Shiʿa vote with Muqtada al-Sadr's Sadrist Movement, Ammar al-Hakim's Hikma and offshoots of the Daʿwa party, including Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law Alliance.

In 2018, building on a March decree by his predecessor that formalised the PMF's inclusion into the security apparatus, prime minister Adel Abdul Mahdi issued another decree that abolished faction names like Kataʾib Hezbollah in favour of more neutral brigade numbers. For the Resistance, this milestone presented an opportunity and a dilemma. It meant formal institutional support, but to be put on the government payroll, fighters needed to provide their names and IDs, an insurmountable obstacle for secretive groups accustomed to operate in the shadows. 'Some of them agreed, some of them didn't. If you give your ID you join the PMF. It was a condition to get paid,' said one senior PMF commander who used to belong to a Resistance faction and opted for the transition. Other Resistance commanders refused, but took advantage of the decree to retire their older soldiers whose cover had been compromised during the war against ISIS into the PMF and recruit a young generation of unknown fighters to replace them.

But the separation was messy. Fighters struggled to adjust to their new identity as government employees and continued to evoke Resistance slogans. Their allegiance to their old commanders and the cause remained intact. Resistance commanders who opted out still

wanted to benefit from the PMF's logistical support, supplies and not least the legitimacy bestowed by Sistani's fatwa. To completely sever the ties between the PMF and Resistance would take time, gradual reforms and most importantly, a strong leader.

The mastermind behind the PMF's institutionalisation was its late deputy commander Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis. A charismatic, father-like figure who had cultivated connections between Shiʿa Islamist groups across the region (Hasan, 2020), he spearheaded the PMF's transformation into an official but autonomous (Mansour, 2018) and ideological state force that some feared would create a parallel state structure and help Iran-aligned actors consolidate their grip on power. He wanted to strengthen fighters' loyalty to the institution as opposed to individual 'war lords,' said a former PMF official who worked with Mohandis on these reforms. Those 'war lords' were the old Resistance commanders, who despite their official separation from the PMF retained significant sway over their former troops. To nurture fighters' sense of institutional belonging, Mohandis introduced electronic payments and drafted a service and retirement law which sketched out the PMF's internal structure. It would introduce ranks, offer a career path and allow the older generation of fighters who held particularly strong sympathies for the Resistance to retire with dignity. But the law never saw the light of day.

On 3 January 2020, Mohandis was killed alongside Iranian General Qassem Suleimani in a US strike near Baghdad airport. With his death, the reforms ground to a halt. The PMF lost an influential leader whose personality was instrumental in keeping together a heterogenous body of armed groups. Internal divisions over ideology and resource allocations boiled to the surface (Foltyn, 2021). The so-called Shrine factions, which were loyal to Sistani and accused the PMF's founding brigades of alignment with Iran's Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, requested to be placed under the ministry of defence. The twin assassinations plunged Iraq into a fresh crisis that once again blurred the lines between the Resistance and the PMF. 'The complete separation of the Resistance Factions takes time,' said a top PMF official. 'The Trump era was a setback; we were in a state of war which slowed the process.' In response to Mohandis' and Suleimani's killing, the four Resistance Factions formed a Resistance Coordination Committee and stepped up their attacks on US forces.

Abu Fadak al-Mohammedawi succeeded Mohandis as the deputy commander of the PMF. Like Mohandis, Abu Fadak was a co-founder of Kataʾib Hezbollah and a former Badr operative and although he shared his predecessor's vision for the PMF's institutionalisation, he lacked the charisma and leadership qualities to implement controversial reforms like the complete separation of the Resistance Factions. This created tensions between Abu Fadak and the Resistance. 'Both Abu Mahdi and Abu Fadak wanted the Resistance to separate from the PMF. However, Abu Fadak is more focused on it and there are problems because of that. The Resistance Factions don't want to separate because they are benefiting financially, logistically, for example through the colocation of bases,' said the senior Resistance commander.

The co-location of bases in particular is a liability for the PMF when the US retaliates against the Resistance (Foltyn, 2021). PMF leaders had tasted the benefits of institutionalisation and didn't want to be caught up in geopolitical score-settling. They pushed ahead with separation, keen to distance the PMF from the reputational hazard stemming from association with the Resistance. 'The PMF is a respected force, it has popularity, it has started to provide services, it has started to protect the democracy in Iraq. If we allowed the Resistance to get involved, the PMF would lose its credibility,' said a senior PMF commander. Critics might be quick to dismiss such comments as attempt at ensuring plausible deniability for the attacks carried out by the Resistance. But there are signs that they might be security sector reform at work, evidenced by a growing discord between the PMF and the Resistance. 'Some of the [Resistance Factions] are angry because they have benefited from the relationship with the PMF. They have enough weapons and money, but they were benefiting from the name and we will not allow anyone to use the name of the PMF,' said a second senior PMF commander. These mounting tensions had a significant bearing on decision making during the post-election crisis.

The Build-up to the Clashes

Iraq held parliamentary elections in October 2021, two years after mass demonstrations – dubbed the Tishreen (October) revolution – attempted to shake the foundations of the post-2003 political order. Protesters forced then-prime minister Adel Abdul Mahdi to resign. His successor, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, rose to power with Sadr's backing and was tasked with holding early elections. Ostensibly, the goal was to placate protesters' demands for systemic change. In truth, the Sadrists used the vote to consolidate their power.

The Sadrists, who successfully rode the protests and subsequently took advantage of a new election law, came first with 73 of out 329 seats. Other winners included parliament speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi's Taqqadum party with 38 seats and Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) with 33 seats. Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law emerged as the second strongest Shiʿa party after Sadr, securing 35 seats. The biggest loser was the Fateh alliance, which included the political wings of Resistance Factions Badr and Asaʾib Ahl al-Haq. It lost more than a third of its seats. Kataʾib Hezbollah's political wing ran for the first time, but only won one seat. Haider al-Abadi's Nasr and Ammar al-Hakim's Hikma also fared poorly. Unwilling to accept defeat, the losing parties alleged fraud and filed complaints with the federal court.

Sadr wanted to use his victory at the polls to position himself as the sole leader of the Shiʿa in Iraq. He tried to sideline his Shiʿa rivals and form a majority government with Sunni and Kurdish parties, a break with the previous practice of dividing government posts among all elected parties. The political wings of the PMF and the Resistance, who still received hundreds of thousands of votes, felt that by having shed blood fighting first the Americans and then ISIS, they had earned an inalienable right to be part of the system.

The Resistance Factions flexed their muscle and set up a sit-in at the gates of the Green Zone, demanding a recount. Their message was clear: Muqtada al-Sadr didn't represent all Shiʿa. Two people were killed in clashes with security forces on 5 November. Two days later, an armed drone dropped explosives on Kadhimi's residence inside the Green Zone, though the prime minister was not inside at the time of the attack. The Resistance Factions have denied responsibility and a government investigation remains inconclusive. Tensions further flared when Sadr called for the disarmament of the Resistance. But on 27 December 2021, the federal court ratified the election results, and the Resistance dismantled its protest site and shifted its strategy.

To form a government, the parliament needed to first vote for a speaker and then a president, who would task the largest block in parliament with nominating a prime minister. Sadr believed he could get the necessary votes by forming a tripartite alliance with Halbousi's Taqaddum and Barzani's KDP. This was unacceptable to the other Shiʿa parties, who became known as the Coordination Framework, or Frame in short. Shiʿa constitute the majority of Iraq's 40 million population, and custom dictated that they had to reach an agreement between themselves first. 'The Frame wasn't against the majority government. They were against the idea that the majority would turn into a minority. The Shiʿa would have lost their dominance. How can you form a government that doesn't represent the majority of the population?' said a one of the nine leaders represented in the Frame. 'There was a fear about a silent coup, that when a tripartite alliance would come to power the biggest actors in it will be the Sunnis and Kurds,' said another senior Frame official.

The Frame was mistakenly described as Iran-aligned, but it included a wide array of Shiʿa actors: Nouri al-Maliki (Daʿwa Party), Hadi al-Ameri (Fateh Alliance), Qais al-Khazali (Asaʾib Ahl al-Haq and its political wing Sadiqoon), Haider al-Abadi (Nasr Alliance), Ammar al-Hakim (Hikma Movement), Faleh Fayyadh (the chairman of PMF), Humam Hamoudi (Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq) and representatives of two lesser-known Shiʿa factions. Despite different interests these actors were united in their opposition to Sadr, though to varying degrees. On one side of the spectrum was Ameri, who tried to negotiate a rapprochement with Sadr. On the other was Maliki, who has been Sadr's archenemy ever since he launched a battle against Sadr's militia in 2008. Khazali, who had split from the Mahdi Army in 2006 to set up Asaʾib Ahl al-Haq, was Sadr's other main rival. Sadr tried to divide and conquer the Frame by wooing some of its less antagonistic players. But the Frame stuck together and went on to mount a multifaceted strategy to thwart Sadr's tripartite alliance. Their carrot-and-stick approach relied on political negotiations, court rulings and violence, though they disagreed to what extent weapons should be used to achieve their political goals.

On 9 January 2022, Sadr's Sunni ally Halbousi was re-elected speaker of parliament. Hours after the federal court confirmed his appointment, rockets hit near his residence in Iraq's western Anbar province. The incident was part of a series of rocket attacks carried out by the Resistance Factions against Sadr's allies and their backers in the United Arab Emirates. Sadr's tripartite alliance began to shake. His goal of forming a majority government

without the Frame was dealt a final blow when the federal court issued a ruling on 7 February 2022, in which it clarified that two thirds of parliament members needed to be present to vote on the president. Without striking a compromise with his Shiʿa rivals, Sadr didn't have the numbers to get his presidential nominee through parliament. After several more months of impasse, Sadr ordered his 73 members of parliament to resign, squandering his electoral victory in what many described as a strategic mistake. Sadr's seats were redistributed to the runner ups in each district, with Fateh making the biggest gains by almost doubling its representation and allowing the Frame to become the majority in parliament (Adbul Zahra, 2022). For many observers, it was just a matter of time until Sadr would rouse his dedicated following to take to the streets. The stage had been set for an armed confrontation.

Findings

This section analyses the PMF's conduct during the Green Zone clashes and the period leading up to it, describing events chronologically while simultaneously extracting findings that shed light on the extent of its decoupling from politics, its separation from the so-called Resistance Factions, its command and control and its military capabilities. A total of seven findings are presented.

1. The PMF remains entangled with its political affiliates, but didn't take their orders.

As a state security force that reports to the prime minister, the PMF should theoretically stay out of politics. The reality in Iraq is that political actors maintain their armed wings as an insurance policy should their interests not be secured through peaceful means. The two main Kurdish parties (KDP and PUK) each have military wings in the form of Peshmerga, Sadr has Saraya Salam (which is technically part of the PMF but follows Sadr's orders), while Nouri al-Maliki commands an entire battalion (hundreds of soldiers) of the prime minister's special division even though they are on the government's payroll. Similarly, there is an undeniable link between the Frame as a political body and its military affiliates, the PMF and the Resistance Factions. This was most obvious in the attendance of both political and military actors at the Frame's regular meetings.

Throughout the crisis, the Frame, the PMF and the Resistance factions played distinct though intertwined roles. Their relationship can be best be described as an alignment of shared interests to preserve Shiʿa dominance and the status quo. They all saw Sadr's tripartite alliance as a threat, but each adopted a different approach to contain it. While the Frame sought political solutions through dialogue, the Resistance Factions used force to impose them. The PMF's purpose, in turn, was to protect the system should Sadr attempt to take power by force. 'The PMF was a safety valve for the political system. Its presence alone gave reassurance to Shiʿa actors that there is a force to defend the system,' said the senior Frame official. PMF leaders fulfilled this role reluctantly, wary of a backlash and negative impact on the PMF's reputation.

The Frame did not, however, issue direct orders to the PMF, in part due to incongruity over how and if at all the PMF as an armed actor should get involved. 'Because there was disagreement in the Frame on this point, the Frame only gave the PMF general lines not direct instructions,' said the senior Frame official. Abadi and Hakim, considered the most moderate among the Frame's membership, categorically opposed the PMF's involvement. So did Ameri, but not because he believed in the demilitarisation of politics. Ameri had close ties with Sadr and Kadhimi's government, an arrangement that had proven politically and financially beneficial (Foltyn, 2022) and that he hoped to preserve. Throughout government formation talks, Ameri was the one who tried, in vain, to bring Sadr into the fold. Even after the Sadrists invaded the Green Zone, Ameri remained steadfast in his opposition to confronting them militarily.

2. The Resistance, not the PMF, served as the stick during negotiations.

During the post-election crisis, there was a clear difference in the conduct of the PMF and Resistance Factions. While the PMF's purpose was to protect the system from collapse or violent takeover, the Resistance Factions resorted to sporadic acts of political violence to force Sadr's hand whenever political negotiations yielded no results. 'The Resistance had the role of the threat, while the Frame had the role of negotiation,' said one Resistance commander. These threats were delivered through repeated attacks on Sadr's Sunni and Kurdish allies as well as their backers. One faction carried out several attacks against targets inside Iraqi Kurdistan. 'The message to Massoud [Barzani] was "If you form a government without the Frame, it will rain rockets on Erbil for four years,"' said the Resistance commander. After Halbousi was re-elected speaker of parliament in January, the Resistance sent a stern warning through a rocket that struck near his residence in Anbar province, while Kataʾib Hezbollah publicly deployed its forces to intimidate the speaker and to prop up his local rivals. 'It was a message that he was going with the wrong people,' said a Frame official. Using a façade group to deflect responsibility, the Resistance also attacked the UAE for backing Halbousi and Sadr. These strikes were successful in prompting Sadr's allies as well as the Emiratis to back down, eventually leading to the tripartite alliance's downfall.

Once again, not everyone in the Frame agreed to the use of force. The disagreement became palpable when Kataʾib Hezbollah's Secretary General Abu Hussein began attending Frame meetings shortly after the elections. 'Some said it was useful, some said it was harmful. People were not comfortable with Abu Hussein being present in the meetings,' said the senior Frame official. Some Frame members opposed his presence because they were against the use of violence, while others wanted him to stay away for the sake of plausible deniability, as the former PMF official with close knowledge of the Frame's meetings explained: 'They thought, "If you attend, you become one of us and then you can't do the dirty things that you must do. We will not have anyone to threaten with. We are politicians, but when we want someone to escalate things, when you are with us, you can't play that part, so you should always be away from us, so that you can escalate when there's a need for an escalation."'

Although the Resistance didn't shy away from violence against Sadr's allies and their backers, it is important to note that they largely refrained from targeting the Sadrists directly. There were small-scale armed confrontations between the Sadrists and Mahdi Army offshoot Asaʾib Ahl al-Haq in southern Iraq, where the age-old rivalries between the two groups are amplified by competing tribal networks and economic interests. In early 2022, Maysan province was rocked by a spate of assassinations attempts targeting local leaders, but tensions were quickly resolved to avert tribal conflict (Badawi, 2022). The August clashes also spilled southward. Saraya Salam launched attacks on headquarters of Asaʾib Ahl al-Haq and other rival groups, but Resistance commanders say they ordered their troops to withdraw to other locations to avoid violence spiralling out of control. The port city of Basra, where the two sides were already in fierce competition over the city's lucrative economy, briefly plunged into heavy fighting (al-Salhy, 2022).

But in general, there was broad consensus among the Resistance that intra-Shiʿa bloodshed was a red line they were not willing to cross. This was in part to avoid an internecine conflict that risked descending into intercommunal violence, in part because of Iran's guidance to keep the Shiʿa united and in part because of their shared history of fighting the Americans in the wake of the 2003 invasion. 'We have a strategic relationship with the Sadrists. They were our colleagues during the arrests by the Americans. The Sadrists are the resistance,' said the senior Resistance commander. The senior Frame official described the relationship as follows: 'The Resistance Factions have a continuous relationship with the Sadrists. Sometimes it's closer, sometimes it's distanced. For sure they were against the tripartite alliance, but they tried everything so there would not be a clash between the Shiʿa. They wanted to dismantle the tripartite alliance by neutralising Sadr as much as possible so that it doesn't come to the stage of clashes and the spilling Shiʿa blood.'

As explained in the background section, the line between the PMF and the Resistance is often blurry. In their defence, PMF leaders and Iraqi government officials attribute this ambiguity to the naturally slow pace of institutionalisation, while detractors accuse the PMF of deliberate obfuscation to benefit from a dual status as a state and non-state actor. The post-election crisis suggests that there may be some progress in the decoupling of the PMF and the Resistance, demonstrated by the PMF's preoccupation with its legitimacy, its refusal to engage in political violence as well as growing tensions between the PMF and the Resistance over the former's insistence to distance itself from the latter. Even as tensions mounted in the capital, the PMF tried to keep the public eye on its role to fight ISIS, with its media arms publishing stories about operations against ISIS sleeper cells.

3. The PMF prepared for the crisis months in advance.

The PMF displayed a high degree of organisation in the months leading up to the crisis, exemplified by the gradual and systematic build-up of forces inside the Green Zone. Their presence inside the fortified government quarters dates back to former prime minister Adel Abdul Mahdi, who relied on the PMF to secure government institutions and help suppress the October protests alongside other security forces. During his term, Resistance

Factions also took up residence inside the Green Zone. Their arrival caused alarm among Western governments, whose diplomatic staff found themselves living next door to the very adversaries they sought to escape by taking up residence in the highly secured government enclave. 'The Americans became very concerned about that. This was used big time against Abdul Mahdi, so he limited their presence slightly to prevent the backlash,' said a top government official. Ironically, the build-up accelerated after Western ally Kadhimi came to power, unable to assert control over an increasingly adversarial and autonomous PMF. 'Under Kadhimi, their influx into the Green Zone quadrupled,' said the official.

PMF troops drastically increased in 2021, after Kadhimi ordered the arrest of PMF commander Qasem Musleh for his alleged involvement in the murder of activist Ehab al-Wazni. The PMF besieged the Green Zone, while its leadership pressured Kadhimi to hand over Musleh to its own security directorate (Amn al-Hashed in Arabic), which is in charge of disciplinary matters and, as they argued, should have been tasked with carrying out the arrest warrant. Days later, Musleh was released after the judiciary stated there was no evidence linking him to the murder. The PMF saw Musleh's detention as politically motivated, yet another sign that Kadhimi was acting in bad faith. They needed to prepare for another potential confrontation with a prime minister who they saw as hostile against them. 'When Qasem Musleh happened, we saw that we had few forces [inside the Green Zone]. We began to reinforce, we brought in additional units and left them there,' said a senior PMF commander. During this time, PMF troop levels rose to around 5,000.

A second surge took place in the summer of 2022 amid rising tensions with the Sadrists, bringing the total number of PMF personnel inside the Green Zone to around 12,000. 'The PMF was smart. They prepared for the crisis,' said a senior security official. To assemble a force of this size, troops had to be moved from different parts of the country, including Sinjar and Kirkuk. The PMF's leadership didn't want to draw attention to the redeployments, so it moved units gradually, often using regular vacation rotations during which soldiers would travel home, from where they'd be redeployed to the Green Zone. This suggests the PMF's participation in the clashes were not a spontaneous reaction to a provocation, but the result of months of advance planning and strategic decision making.

While the PMF's mobilisation was mostly driven by growing animosity with Kadhimi, whom they saw as beholden to Sadr and the West, it was also underpinned by a general distrust towards state security forces. PMF leaders regard Iraq's National Intelligence Service as politicised due to its close ties with Kadhimi and Western intelligence organisations. They believe the Iraqi army remains afflicted by the same ills that led to its collapse in 2014, with corruption and lack of morale thwarting its ability to effectively carry out its mandate. In their minds, the void left by the perceived weakness of these state institutions could only be filled by an ideologically driven force. 'The PMF differs from the other security forces. The security forces are bound by laws and instructions, but they're not bound by doctrine. The PMF is bound by laws, instructions and doctrine,' said the PMF commander. 'Nobody can stop the PMF. With one phone call I can mobilise 200,000 fighters, you won't get that with the other security forces.'

4. There was a complete breakdown in command and control between the prime minister and the PMF.

The PMF's build-up inside the Green Zone ensued without the approval of prime minister Kadhimi or the Joint Operations Command, highlighting the deepening rift and level of mistrust between the PMF and the commander in chief. The PMF was acting autonomously, outside the regular chain of command. 'Of course, Kadhimi knew, but he couldn't do anything. Everything we did during Kadhimi's time was without his approval. No request, no signature, no approval, no nothing,' said the senior PMF commander. The government inevitably noticed the reinforcements arriving in the Green Zone, a tiny district that is peppered with security cameras. In the absence of official communication, officials could only guess the extent of mobilisation. 'I don't think that anybody knew the number of forces. We had estimates. We could guess, for example, from how many pieces of bread or the quantity of water they'd bring in,' said a senior government official.

The rift between the PMF and Kadhimi reached breaking point by the end of July, when thousands of Sadrists stormed the Green Zone and laid siege to parliament. Kadhimi's hope to remain in power hinged on Sadr and he was widely seen as complicit in the insurrection. These suspicions only hardened when he took no steps to end the siege and instead ordered security forces responsible for securing the Green Zone to protect the demonstrators. 'He didn't exercise his role as the head of government and commander in chief of the armed forces. Any internal struggle or chaos would prolong his government's life. He wanted to stay in power by all means,' said a Kataʾib Hezbollah official. These views were not limited to the PMF and Resistance, but were shared by government and security officials who served under Kadhimi. 'He tried to use this crisis to extend his stay. He was counting on the Sadrists. The Sadrists' first option was that Kadhimi stays,' said the senior government official.

Not only did Kadhimi allow the rioters to invade and occupy the seat of parliament; he also turned a blind eye when they began amassing weapons inside the Green Zone. 'The weapons which the Sadrists used to confront PMF were already in the parliament, on the roof of the parliament building and behind the secretariat of the council of ministers. The prime minister was aware of it,' said the senior government official. The Sadrists remained inside the Green Zone for weeks, their sit-in coinciding with the mourning month of Muharram. Things began to escalate in August, when they extended their siege to the nearby Higher Judicial Council and threatened to occupy oil fields. The Frame feared that Sadr planned to gradually paralyse and eventually take over the state. The PMF significantly ramped up its troops inside the Green Zone, preparing itself for the inevitable show down.

The breakdown of the chain of command between the prime minister and the PMF was complete once clashes began on 29 August. Kadhimi repeatedly attempted to reach Abu Fadak, the PMF's second in command. According to three people with close knowledge of the communication that night, Abu Fadak refused to take Kadhimi's calls. The senior government official interviewed for this paper attempted to mediate and convene a meeting,

but Abu Fadak declined to attend and sent a delegation of lower-level commanders. 'It was not a friendly meeting,' said the government official. Another top government official with knowledge of that meeting called it 'humiliating' for the prime minister. The mid-level PMF officials showed no respect and refused to heed his orders to stop fighting. Kadhimi had lost control of the PMF, who saw him as responsible for the clashes. In ordering government security forces and specifically the special division in charge of protecting the Green Zone to refrain from action, he had placed the onus on the PMF, leaving it no other choice but to fight back.

5. Throughout the crisis, the PMF showed restraint.

The fighting that broke out on 29 August was the heaviest urban battle Baghdad had seen since the 2003 invasion and the subsequent insurgency. Residents had a sleepless night, listening to the sound of heavy machine gun fire, mortars and rocket-propelled grenades that echoed from the heart of the Green Zone. The fighting was concentrated in an area of just three square kilometres between the Republican Palace, the ministry of defence, the parliament and the hanging bridge. Given the small size of the battlefield, the thousands of people mobilised on both sides and the use of heavy weapons, one would have expected much heavier casualties. At least 63 people died, including 55 Sadrists, 6 PMF and 2 members of the government's special division tasked with protecting the Green Zone. Two conclusions can be drawn from these figures. First, the PMF clearly came out on the winning side, suggesting superior organisation and military capability. Second, the relatively low fatalities support claims of several top PMF leaders and government officials that the PMF's strategy that night was to minimise bloodshed. 'There was no intention to kill, otherwise thousands would have died,' said a top PMF official.

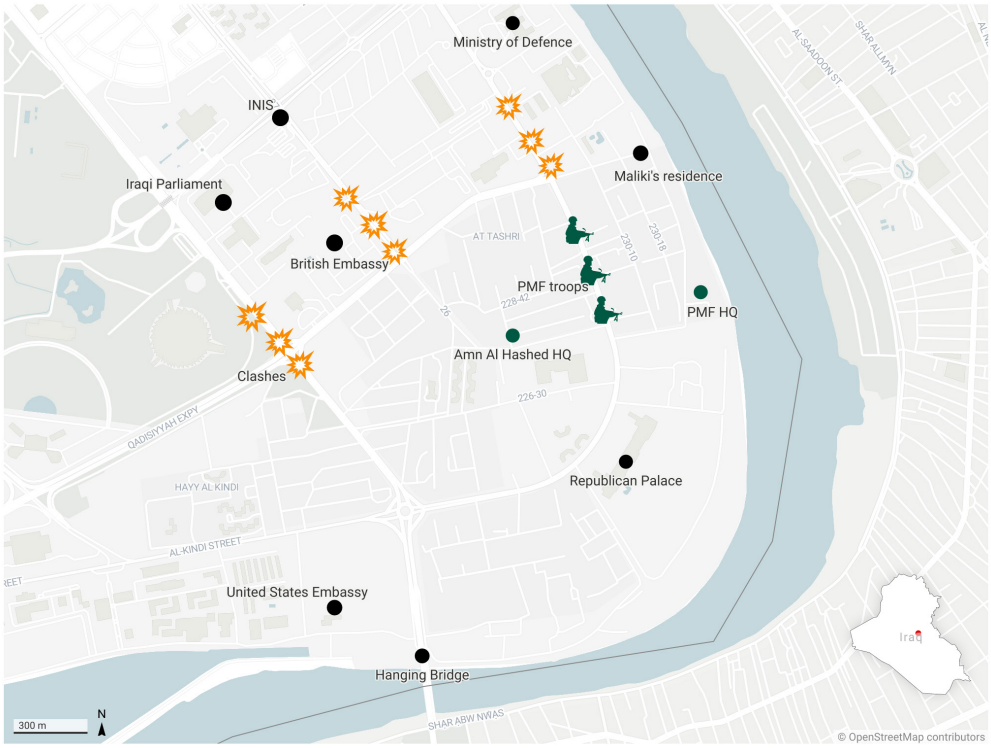
To evaluate the PMF's response, it is necessary to reconstruct the sequence of events. Around midday on 29 August, throngs of Sadrists – at this moment unarmed – began moving in the direction of the Republican Palace, which is the seat of government located on the banks of the Tigris in the southwest corner of the Green Zone (see Figure 1). The palace is on the same road that extends from the ministry of defence, past Nouri al-Maliki's house, past Faleh al-Fayyadh's house and past the headquarters of the PMF. Around 2,000 of the 12,000 PMF troops stationed in the Green Zone were concentrated along this corridor to protect these facilities. When the Sadrists charged towards the palace, both PMF leadership and senior security officials urged them to avoid that particular street. 'I told the Sadrists not to move in the direction of the PMF. I told them they will shoot,' said the senior security official who was on the ground at that time.

Kadhimi had issued strict orders to the special division charged with protecting the Green Zone to desist from using force. That division has at its disposal dozens of Abrams tanks, Humvees and thousands of soldiers and could have swiftly put an end to the unfolding crisis. Except for the battalion that reports to Maliki and potentially some troops who were guarding the special division's headquarters, its soldiers had been asked to put their lethal weapons in storage, effectively disarming the entity responsible for protecting the government. Kadhimi's justified his orders with a desire to avert bloodshed, but many considered the move a humiliating capitulation of the state. 'It's not good for the country and the state to be insulted like this, for people to think that the army is weak,' said the security official.

With the special division disarmed, the Sadrists entered the palace without much opposition. They occupied the halls of government and took a dip in the palace swimming pool. After a couple of hours, Kadhimi reportedly gave the special division orders to remove the rioters from the palace (but not the Green Zone) using batons and other non-lethal weapons. Several journalists who were covering the events were caught up in the chaos and suffered light injuries. This is when things spiralled into violence, though it's difficult to pin down where exactly the first bullet was fired.

As the Sadrists exited the palace, part of the crowd moved in direction of the PMF headquarters located only around 500 metres away, where PMF forces were on high alert. In a last-ditch effort to avert escalation, a PMF commander took a small force of around 140 and went to meet the Sadrists. 'I told them, please change your path. I told them we have 2,000 deployed in this line. If you enter, they will shoot,' he said. The Sadrists didn't back down, at which point an order was given to shoot in the air to disperse the crowd. Separately, gunfire also rang out from the direction of Maliki's residence, where his battalion of the prime minister's special division had deployed alongside the PMF.

Figure 1: Baghdad Green Zone Clashes, 29–30 August 2022



With the sound of gunfire, word spread that the PMF was killing Sadrists, prompting the latter to mount its response. The Sadrists retreated towards parliament, where they grabbed the readily available stockpile of weapons and took up position behind concrete blocks right outside parliament. Saraya Salam reinforcements were called in from Sadr City and the northern shrine city of Samarra, with two more positions set up near the headquarters of the Iraq National Intelligence Service (INIS) and the ministry of defence.

In total, there were three frontlines along the three main avenues cutting from north to south, with diplomatic missions caught in the line of fire. Within hours, medium and heavy weapons were deployed in the clashes. At midday on 30 August, a deflated Sadr gave a televised speech calling on his supporters to withdraw. They complied immediately, putting an end to the escalation.

This sequence of events has been corroborated by several high level PMF and government officials who were either part of the chain of command that day or had first-hand knowledge of the events. There is consensus that the PMF acted largely in self-defence, after other means of de-escalation had been exhausted. 'The PMF had shown restraint during a whole month. They only got involved when they felt that their headquarters and the Green Zone were at risk of falling,' said the senior security official who was on the ground that day. Throughout the clashes, the government's special division, except for the battalion protecting Maliki's residence, didn't engage either side, though they did attempt to create a buffer zone by positioning a column of Humvees in the middle of the battlefield in a bid to keep the warring factions apart. As for the Sadrists, they officially deny any involvement by Saraya Salam, insisting that those who took up weapons were tribes and individuals acting in self-defence after the PMF opened fire. The PMF denies this narrative. Before the incursion turned violent, the PMF's security directorate arrested several dozen Sadrists, their IDs reportedly confirmed that they belonged to Saraya Salam.

6. The PMF relied on a small but highly trained force.

Countless videos and photos of the fighting circulated on social media, depicting motley groups of men in civilian clothing firing machine guns and RPGs. Remarkably, these videos only show the Sadrists, as if they are fighting an invisible enemy. The absence of visual evidence of the other side inevitably raised questions over who was engaged in the firefight, an ambiguity that was intentionally kept in place by both the government and the PMF so as to eschew accountability and potential retaliation. A government investigation led by national security adviser Qasem al-Araji has yielded no results 'because of the sensitivity of the issue,' according to the senior government official. PMF commanders, too, were wary that confirmation of the PMF's involvement could have negative repercussions. After all, they had acted against the prime minister's orders. They didn't want the brigades who were involved to be subject to retaliation or censure.

But the lack of publicly available footage of PMF fighters hints at something else: strong command and control over its rank and file. PMF commanders had issued strict orders forbidding the use of cell phones and its fighters evidently complied. But one can get a glimpse of the PMF's performance looking at surveillance footage captured by the hundreds of security cameras planted throughout the Green Zone. In one such surveillance video shown to the researcher, a highly professional, well-equipped force is moving in neat formations, reminiscent of the elite counterterrorism forces who fought against ISIS.

These men belong to the PMF's special forces, a recently assembled force that is part of Brigades 3 and 5 and reports directly to the PMF's chief of staff Abu Fadak. They were recruited and trained after the war with ISIS and seem to have acquired a more advanced

skill set compared to the PMF's other brigades mobilised in 2014. The soldiers weren't drawn from pre-existing brigades, but recruited directly into the special force to ensure allegiance to the PMF's central leadership. 'They are young and in good shape. We trained this force for a year,' said the senior PMF commander. These young men were seen in action for the first time during the Green Zone clashes. 'That was their first mission. They would have killed the Sadrists had they entered that street,' he said.

Despite the large number of PMF troops (12,000) mobilised inside the Green Zone, much of the fighting involved a few hundred soldiers from the PMF's special forces. They were chosen because they were the best equipped to protect the PMF's leaders and institutions and because of their loyalty. The leadership wanted to contain the crisis and for their orders to be heeded – not to have to worry about fighters' old allegiances towards the Resistance.

The security directorate of the PMF (Amn al-Hashed), another well-trained force under the leadership of Abu Zeinab al-Lami and mostly responsible for disciplinary matters, played a limited role. Its headquarters are also located inside the Green Zone, on a small side street near the Republican Palace. The Amn al-Hashed was not part of the 2,000 mobilised personnel, but participated in repelling the Sadrists when they approached their base. In addition, Brigades 14 (formerly Kataʾib Sayyid al-Shuhada), Brigade 8 (formerly Saraya Ashura) and Brigade 40 (formerly Kataʾib Imam Ali) engaged in a limited capacity and were mostly on standby in case clashes escalated.

7. The clashes highlighted rifts between the PMF and the Resistance.

The rifts between the PMF and the Resistance Factions deepened during the Green Zone clashes. As a state institution, the PMF was reluctant to be dragged into a political conflict. Its leaders wanted the Resistance Factions to take the lead in repelling the Sadrists. After all, it was their political wings who were haggling over government positions. Abu Fadak reportedly asked Resistance commanders to step in, but pre-existing tensions over his push to fully separate the factions from the PMF had eroded any goodwill. 'They knew that Muqtada Al-Sadr would take control of the Green Zone, the state, politics, and yet they were silent,' complained the senior PMF commander. 'They were supposed to help the PMF but they didn't provide any support.' The Resistance, in turn, put the blame on Kadhimi. 'Kadhimi was supposed to deploy the army, he wasn't supposed to let the PMF be the first line. We knew that he wanted to ignite strife and that's why we didn't go towards collision,' said the senior Resistance commander.

The Resistance put some forces on standby should the fighting spill beyond the Green Zone, but otherwise left the PMF to deal with the fallout. Kataʾib Hezbollah, for example, believed their presence would further provoke the Sadrists. Other Resistance Factions, too, took a strategic decision to not engage, both during the Green Zone clashes and when Sadrists began attacking PMF and Resistance headquarters in Baghdad and other southern cities. 'There was wisdom by our leaders to eliminate this problem through not reacting,' said an Asaʾib Ahl al-Haq official. 'It would have escalated. This escalation would lead us to armed confrontation. We always say that the enemies of Iraq want an intra-Shiʿa war.'

The clashes also showed that, in times of crisis, Abu Fadak struggled to assert command and control over Resistance Factions that were nominally integrated into the PMF back in 2018. He had anticipated there would be some insubordination and chose to primarily rely on the PMF's special forces. Brigades that formerly belonged to Kataʾib Hezbollah and Asaʾib Ahl al-Haq reportedly ignored Abu Fadak's orders and looked to their Resistance leaders for guidance. At least part of a brigade that formerly belonged to Badr snubbed Abu Fadak's instructions to deploy, instead adopting Hadi al-Ameri's non-confrontation policy vis-à-vis Sadr. According to two accounts, Abu Fadak was furious with Ameri, not least because the latter neglected to visit injured PMF fighters in the hospital after the clashes were over. Ameri reportedly rebuffed Abu Fadak's criticism by asking 'Who ordered them to fight?'

The discord between the PMF, Resistance and Frame officials shows that they cannot be treated as a monolithic group, but rather as an amalgam of loosely affiliated political and military actors whose alignment ebbs and flows depending on their political and economic interests. It is thus simplistic to think, as some Western observers have suggested, that their actions are guided by Iran, even though their broader interests (such as keeping the Shiʿa united) may align at a strategic level. In fact, Iran's involvement in this latest government formation process was the lowest since 2003. Suleimani's successor Esmail Ghani lacks the charisma, experience and linguistic capabilities to engage at an operational level with his Iraqi allies. 'From 2005 until 2018, Haji Qasem [Suleimani] formed the governments in Iraq. He had a special attention for the Iraq file. That's why we had a long crisis this time and that's why we had intra-Shiʿa fighting,' said the senior Resistance commander.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

The 2022 post-election crisis offered an instructive window into the PMF's level of institutionalisation six years after its creation. This research paper dissected the August 2022 clashes inside the Green Zone to shed light on the PMF's command and control, its entanglement with political affiliates, its relationship with Resistance Factions as well as its military capabilities. The findings suggest that the PMF displayed a certain level of organisational maturity. It showed restraint and refrained from unnecessary political violence. Its use of a highly trained special force hints at the leadership's desire to assert greater discipline over rank and file. But the clashes also revealed weaknesses in its command and control, specifically PMF leaders' inability to assert authority over former Resistance Factions.

The PMF leaders' own insubordination to the prime minister sets a worrying precedent whereby they may simply opt out of the command structure whenever a government does not align with their vision of a state.

The fallout between the Sadrists and the PMF highlights the pitfalls of a system where most political players have armed wings. It has prompted Western officials and analysts to once again beat the drum for the need to centralise weapons in the hands of the state. Such calls are rooted in the belief that one institution should have a monopoly over state violence, and that multiple armed actors are recipe for trouble. But militarisation of politics is the norm in Iraq. If anything, last year's post-election violence has further entrenched the primacy of the gun. Moreover, Western calls for disarmament lack credibility because they tend to be ideologically motivated, disproportionally targeting the PMF and the Resistance because of their affiliation with Iran, while giving a pass to the Sadrists or Kurdish parties. Adding insult to injury, many Western officials and analysts still approach the PMF as if it was a non-state actor. Some say it shouldn't have bases inside the Green Zone (Knights, 2022), while others advocate for its dissolution altogether. Such perspectives are divorced from ground-truths and do little except to stoke tensions.

The objective of this paper is not to offer recommendations, but to present findings that can enable policy-makers to accurately frame the issue going forward. As a start, they should let go of the quixotic idea of demobilising the PMF. This only fuels mistrust, especially if applied unequally to the various armed actors in Iraq. There may, however, be an opportunity to support security sector reform. The new government led by prime minister Mohammed Shiaʿ al-Sudani, who unlike Kadhimi is not seen as an adversary by the PMF, is well positioned to push for its continued institutionalisation, for example by proposing laws that strengthen command and control. The long overdue service and retirement law would increase fighters' institutional loyalty and help sever ties with the Resistance.

Finally, Western governments should avoid interpreting Iraq through an Iranian-dominated lens. Throughout the crisis, the Frame and the Sadrists were described as pro- and anti-Iran, respectively. Such designations are simplistic and irrelevant. Brandishing an anti-Iran label, as Sadr and Kadhimi did to shore up support, does not guarantee good governance, while describing the PMF and the Resistance as Iran's proxies disregards their complex history and wide-ranging interests. Policy-makers should recognise that Iraq's political and armed groups are part of a patchwork of multifaceted affiliations and ever shifting alliances which often result in nonlinear fault lines. Understanding what drives their behaviour is vital to sound policy-making and constructive engagement.

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Cover Image
Members of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces hold flags during a symbolic funeral for members killed by US air strikes on the Syria-Iraq border. Baghdad, 29 June 2021.
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