Integration of Iran-backed armed groups into the Iraqi and Syrian armed forces: implications for stability in Iraq and Syria

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ABSTRACT
Since 2018, an increasing number of Iran-backed armed groups have started to be integrated into the Syrian and Iraqi official armed forces. The integration of armed groups allows Tehran to enjoy a multi-layered, longer-term, and potentially less expensive influence in Iraq and Syria. Besides, underlying ideological and ideational ties between the armed groups and Iran continue to affect their strategic choices. Meanwhile, and in order to preserve its ability to directly impact the developments, Tehran continues to support an array of smaller militias outside the state structures. This indicates a shifting pattern in Iran’s regional network, from relying predominantly on non-state actors to enjoying a more complex set of non-state and semi-state allies. The consolidation of this model could have considerable implications for Iraq and Syria: 1- Dual loyalties in the Iraqi and Syrian states will make it difficult to form an inclusive government and promote national unity; 2- Anti-American and anti-Israeli ideological elements in the Iraqi and Syrian armed forces’ structure could prevent establishing better ties with the US or Israel; 3- The concern of Iran’s regional rivals over the expansion of Tehran’s influence in Iraq and Syria turns the two countries into a theater for regional confrontations.

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Over the past decade, Syria and Iraq have become the most evident theatres of Iran’s growing regional involvement and influence. The 2003 US invasion of Iraq had significant implications for Iranian foreign policy. Since the then US President George W. Bush had designated Iran, alongside Iraq and North Korea, as part of the so-called ‘axis of evil’, many in Tehran feared that Iran would be the next target of US military invasion. However, as time wore on, the tide turned significantly in favor of Iran. Most specifically, in December 2011, when Washington officially announced the end of its military
campaign in Iraq, the Iranian fear of a US attack began to subside. Gradually, Iran’s influence reached its highest peak as Tehran-backed Shiite groups gained a firm foothold in Iraq. Some even believe that by ousting Iran’s longtime foe Saddam Hussein and helping establish a Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad, the US ‘handed Iraq to Iran on a golden plate’.  

To be sure, the rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS/ISIS) in 2014, accompanied by the occupation of a considerable part of Iraqi – and also Syrian – territories by the armed radicals, ushered in a new phase of US-led military campaign in the region. Nonetheless, once again, Iran was capable of maintaining its position, both through conducting direct military action against the IS and mobilizing the aligned Shiite groups within the so-called Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF/ Hashd al-Shaabi). In this setting, Iran managed to even expand the scope of its influence in Iraq by supporting the central government in Baghdad in its fight against terrorism.

In contrast, the 2011 crisis in Syria, could have spelled the end of the Assad regime, and thus Tehran’s long-held close ties with Damascus and its influence in one of the Middle East’s most strategic regions, i.e. the Levant. As a result, the Islamic Republic was quick to give its full support to Assad. Iran’s 2012 deployment of the elite Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Syria in tandem with its efforts to recruit, train and organize local militias to fight alongside the Syrian army are stellar cases of Iran’s adamant willingness to prop up Assad and redirect the developments in Syria toward a direction favorable to its interests.

Looking at the recent trend of Iran’s relations with Iraq and Syria, Tehran seems to have employed more or less similar measures to secure its interests and expand its influence in both countries. Supporting the existing state and non-state allies while at the same time forming new local militias and importing foreign fighters to act as proxies are among the measures Iran has taken in both Iraq and Syria. Indeed, Iran’s attempts to establish a network of non-state allies throughout the Middle East – or the Muslim World, in general – has been a constant element of its foreign policy since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Since 2018, an increasing number of Iran-backed militias have started to be integrated into the Syrian and Iraqi official armed forces. However, there have been differences between the two countries in terms of the motives and mechanisms for integration, as well as the composition, function, funding, and strategic purposes of the Iran-backed groups. The differences in integration arrangements are expected to affect the internal dynamics within the armed forces, as well as the politics of Iraq and Syria. Both the arrangements and their potential effects have drawn little academic attention so far. This paper seeks to identify these arrangements and explore their potential implications for the structure of armed forces in Syria and Iraq, and consequently, stability in the two countries. As such, the main questions to be addressed
are: what are the similarities and differences between the nature and the role of Iran-backed armed groups in Iraq and Syria? Which factors determine the differences? And what are the implications of their role for security and stability in Iraq and Syria, as well as Iran’s influence in the two countries?

To better understand how the integration of Iran-backed armed groups into the formal state structures impacts Tehran’s influence in Iraq and Syria, this article studies not only the nature of those groups and the modalities of their integration, but also Iran’s influence by conventional means in the two countries beyond the armed groups. In terms of modalities, while Tehran has sought to secure a semi-autonomous status for the PMF – as an official part of the Iraqi state but parallel to the Iraqi army – the focus in Syria has been more on integrating Iran-backed militias into the pre-existing divisions of the Syrian army. However, the article argues that in both cases, the integration of armed groups allows Tehran to enjoy a multi-layered, longer-term, and potentially less expensive influence in Iraq and Syria. Besides, underlying ideological and ideational ties between the armed groups and the Islamic Republic continue to affect their strategic choices, even after becoming a part of the state apparatus. Meanwhile, Tehran continues to support an array of smaller militias outside the state structures. This indicates a shifting pattern in Iran’s regional network, from relying predominantly on non-state actors to enjoying a more complex set of non-state and semi-state allies. The consolidation of this model could have considerable implications for Iraq and Syria, putting them at the center of regional and trans-regional rivalries while exacerbating domestic strife by creating dual loyalties inside the states.

**Iran-backed armed groups: the problem of definition**

A constant feature of Iran’s foreign policy since the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 has been the establishment of close relations with and support for a range of non-state armed groups across the Middle East and beyond. Supporting Palestinian movements, particularly Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, helping to establish and then fully supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Badr Corps (currently known as the Badr Organization) in Iraq, were prime examples of this policy in the first decade of the Islamic Republic. Over the past three decades, Iran’s network of non-state armed allies has expanded significantly. According to the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), in 2019, the total number of Iran-backed forces in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Pakistan was estimated to be 250,000.

In the Islamic Republic’s official discourse, these armed groups, along with a number of states and non-state political actors, are referred to as the ‘axis of resistance’. According to this concept, Iran is considered to be at the center of a network of political and military actors in the Middle East, who share
a common goal in opposing the American military presence in the region and a negative view toward Washington’s regional allies, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia.\textsuperscript{10} From the military point of view, this network serves as an effective means of deterrence against the United States and its regional allies. Iran sees Washington’s military and security engagement in the Middle East as a serious and persistent threat. Meanwhile, due to decades of being under international arms embargo, Tehran has been unable to upgrade its military capabilities\textsuperscript{11} in a way to establish an effective military balance with rivals. However, controlling a network of militias enables Tehran to target American and US-allied interests throughout the region in a relatively swift and low-cost manner.\textsuperscript{12} At the same time, this indirect approach allows Iran to enjoy plausible deniability and avoid accountability for aggressive actions abroad.\textsuperscript{13}

Politically speaking, these groups provide Iran with a powerful lever to influence their host countries’ policies. For example, since the assassination of Iran’s Quds Force Commander Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani by the US in Iraq in January 2020, the Iraqi government has been under constant pressure from Iran-backed groups to reconsider its ties with Washington.\textsuperscript{14} Also, from an ideological point of view, by reproducing the narrative of ‘resistance’ against the United States and their regional allies, these groups work to facilitate the development of Iran’s ideological influence in the region.\textsuperscript{15}

There is no consensus on how to describe Iran-backed armed groups accurately. Mainstream media often label all of these groups, regardless of their differences and the extent and type of their dependence on Tehran, as ‘Iran’s proxies.’\textsuperscript{16} The US state department holds the same interpretation, often calling the Iranian support for these groups ‘Iran’s support for terrorism.’\textsuperscript{17} Similarly, leading US think tanks often assess Iran’s relations with the armed groups it supports as a patron-proxy relationship. In a policy paper published by the Middle East Institute in 2018, Alex Vatanka speaks of a ‘proxy model’ developed by Iran since the 1979 revolution. This model ‘has become increasingly salient since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and more recently in Iraq and Syria, and is now Iran’s primary tool for advancing its regional interests.’\textsuperscript{18} Wilson Center’s Ashley Lane studies all Iran-backed groups in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Palestine, and Bahrain under the title ‘Iran’s Islamist Proxies in the Middle East.’\textsuperscript{19} Hanin Ghaddar of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy emphasizes that Lebanon’s Hezbollah is not an independent partner or ally for Iran but an Iranian proxy.\textsuperscript{20} The same institute has published a paper on Iraq, in which Phillip Smyth warns of Iraq’s reliance on ‘Iranian proxies’.\textsuperscript{21} Some experts, such as C. Anthony Pfaff of the Atlantic Council, acknowledge that Iran-backed militias may, in some cases, act autonomously. Yet he maintains that ‘The fact that proxies might take matters into their own hands does not mitigate the fact of the proxy relationship’.\textsuperscript{22}
Patron-proxy relationships are best defined as ‘informal collaborative arrangements between asymmetrically capable parties, in which one party (the sponsor [or patron]) utilizes another party (the proxy) to reach its strategic goals in exchange for tangible assistance’. In this definition, proxy is the relatively weaker party, often a non-state actor, relying on the support and carrying out the priorities of its patron. It also ‘implies a directive relationship, which allows [the patron] to direct while the proxy obeys.’ However, the complexity of Iran’s relations with its allied armed groups has caused the application of the proxy model to be increasingly brought into question. In a 2019 study, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) argues that ‘the term “proxy” does not accurately describe the variety of relationships Iran has with its partners’. Instead, the study presents the four factors of ideological affinity, strategic convergence, political expediency, and transactional value to assess Tehran’s relationship with various groups it supports. According to these factors, Iran-backed groups fall into five main categories: partner, strategic ally, ideological ally, proxy, and state organ. In the same vein, Afshon Ostovar argues that Iran’s lack of absolute control over its various allied groups makes the title ‘proxy’ not applicable to all of these groups. He believes that the term ‘militant clients’ can provide a more inclusive definition of the nature of Iran’s relationship with those groups. Some case studies also question the applicability of the term ‘proxy’ to all Iran-backed groups. For instance, Douglas A. Ollivant & Erica Gaston argue that in the case of Shiite armed groups in Iraq, ‘we saw much less patron control than is typical in proxy relationships, and much greater evidence of local agency.’ In addition, regarding the relationship between Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah, Amal Saad criticizes the use of the proxy model, arguing that the relationship should be seen as ‘interdependent symbiosis between close allies’. The current article shares the analysis that the mixed nature of Iran-backed armed groups makes it impossible to apply the term proxy to all of them unexceptionally. This is the case with regard to Iran’s network of allied armed groups in general and the Iran-backed groups in Syria and Iraq – the focus of this article – in particular. Lebanon’s Hezbollah, for example, can be safely considered Iran’s close ally. The organization shares the Islamic Republic’s religious and sectarian orientation, strategic vision, and regional objectives, while also receiving considerable political, military, and financial support from Tehran. However, through its political wing, Hezbollah has managed to assume a rather independent role in the Lebanese government, making the title ‘proxy’ increasingly inapplicable to the group. Some could be said about Yemen’s Ansarullah Movement (the Houthis), which enjoys considerable Iranian support, but can arguably survive even in the absence of massive external support. In the same vein, although one can more confidently consider the Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun brigades in Syria and some smaller
pro-Iran militias in Iraq as Iran’s proxies, the more powerful Shiite factions of the PMF are in fact Iran’s close partners. The differences between these groups will be analyzed in detail later in this article. However, regardless of the exact nature of their relationship with Iran, almost all of those groups have a few things in common. First, they share Iran’s strategic goal of opposing the influence of the US and its allies in Iraq and Syria. Second, they all enjoy Iran’s political and material support – financial, military, or both. Thus, the current article categorizes all of these groups as ‘Iran-backed armed groups’, focusing on the implications of their integration into the official military and security structures of Iraq and Syria.

The recently integrated Iran-backed groups in Iraq and Syria

Over the past three years, both Iraq and Syria have witnessed an increasing number of Iran-backed militias being integrated into the state military and security structures. To analyze the implications of the yet ongoing process for Iran’s role in Iraq and Syria, first, we need to identify the main Iran-backed militias subject to integration in the two countries, the nature of their ties with Iran, and the extent to which they have already been integrated into the formal state structures.

Iraq

In Iraq, the then Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi’s decree on 1 July 2019, obliging the PMF to fully integrate into the Iraqi armed forces, was seen by many Iraq observers as a turning point in the Iraqi government’s efforts to establish control over the predominantly pro-Iran organization. The decree called on all groups and factions within the PMF to change their names in compliance with the Iraqi army’s regulations. It also prohibited the PMF factions from having political affiliations while imposing restrictions on their economic and paramilitary activities. At the end of 2021, the July 2019 decree is yet to be fully implemented. The Iraqi government has constant challenges reining in some defiant PMF factions and asserting its full supervision over all PMF-related activities. However, the PMF already enjoys official status as a part of the Iraqi armed forces.

The PMF was initially a group of Iraqi volunteer forces organized in 2014 to fight against the ISIS, which had occupied large swathes of Iraqi territory. The organization was formed in response to a call from the Iraqi government, as well as the influential Iraqi Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, for a popular mobilization to fend off the ISIS threat. More specifically, the establishment of the PMF as a backup/alternative military force went through three phases. In June 2014, following the ISIS’ capture of Iraq’s second-largest city Mosul, then Prime
Minister Nouri al-Maliki called on Iraqi people to volunteer for fighting alongside the army and prevent ISIS’ further advances.\textsuperscript{35} Shortly after Maliki’s call, al-Sistani issued a religious edict (Fatwa) urging all men capable of fighting to join the fight against ISIS.\textsuperscript{36} In April 2015, the organization was given an official status when then Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi ordered all the PMF forces to be brought under the prime minister’s office.\textsuperscript{37} As such, the PMF was officially recognized as a part of the Iraqi Armed Forces supervised by the commander-in-chief, i.e. the prime minister. Besides, the PMF Chairman Faleh Al Fayad was appointed the government’s national security advisor.\textsuperscript{38} He held the position until July 2020, when Prime Minister Mustafa Al Kadhim decided to reshuffle top security posts in his newly-formed government.\textsuperscript{39}

Although the PMF is known as a predominantly Shi’ite organization, a number of Sunni tribes, as well as some Yazidi and Christian forces, also joined it to fight the ISIS.\textsuperscript{40} The PMF was initially comprised of 42 registered armed groups with approximately 118,000 fighters. In late 2020, internal disagreements caused four PMF brigades to split and form a new structure, called Hashd al-Atabat or the Shrine Units.\textsuperscript{41} Among the groups forming the PMF, four powerful ones have closer ties with the Islamic Republic. These include Kata’ib Hezbollah, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, and the Badr Organization.\textsuperscript{42} There are other factions like Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba and Saraya al-Khorasani, which also have close connections with Iran but are either relatively less powerful or act in coordination with the four major groups mentioned above.

Kata’ib Hezbollah was one of the militias that emerged following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. In 2006, four smaller Shi’ite militias joined their ranks and formed Kata’ib Hezbollah (Hezbollah Brigades) with the aim of ‘fighting the American occupation’.\textsuperscript{43} In 2009, Washington designated Kata’ib Hezbollah as a foreign terrorist organization.\textsuperscript{44} The organization is said to have around 5,000 troops in three battalions in Iraq.\textsuperscript{45} Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada was initially part of Kata’ib Hezbollah, but following Sistani’s Fatwa in 2014, it split from its mother organization. Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada has 3,000 to 4,000 forces.\textsuperscript{46} Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq was founded by Qais al-Khazali in 2006. It was initially a branch of Jaysh al-Mahdi (Mahdi Army), a former militia group created in 2003 by Shi’ite Cleric Muqtada al-Sadr to fight against the US forces in Iraq.\textsuperscript{47} The newly-established militia started its activities under the guidance of Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi. Shahroudi, a former head of the Iranian judiciary, was of Iraqi origin. Before the rise of ISIS, the organization had about 3,000 forces. By 2019, its troops were estimated to have reached to more than 50,000.\textsuperscript{48} The Badr organization, known as one of the most influential Iran-backed militias, was formed in Iran in 1982, during the Iran-Iraq war, by the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, then known as the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). The Badr organization’s
Iraqi groups’ affiliation with Iran

Iran supports its allied militias in Iraq not only by supplying them with arms but also through military training and financing. However, since becoming a part of the state military and security structure under the 2015 decree, the PMF has been on the state payroll, which means less dependence on Tehran’s direct funding. Each PMF member receives a salary of 875,000 Iraqi dinars (around $ 600 as of October 2021) per month. Besides, in the case of significant, patriotic actions, PMF members would be rewarded according to the Iraqi defense ministry’s regulations. In case of death or injury, each member would enjoy the same provisions as envisaged for other official military forces. Apart from receiving state funding, some PMF factions have been involved in an array of nontransparent or illegal activities, providing them with considerable financial benefits. Those activities include levying taxes at checkpoints, extending control over engineering and construction companies, and interfering in the functions of seaports.

Material aspects of Tehran’s support aside, PMF’s pro-Iran factions are closely associated with Iran in terms of ideology, social and sectarian composition, and strategic interests. All four major PMU factions consist of Shiites, making them the closest to Iran in religious and sectarian terms. Many other PMF factions formed after 2014 have the same sectarian affinity to Iran. Indeed, the PMF has enjoyed considerable influence among Iraq’s Shiite community as the protector of the Shiite holy sites, at least during the period of the fight against the ISIS. The exception have been some divergent Shiite factions, such as Muqtada al-Sadr’s Saraya Al Salam, which are at odds with the PMF over the latter’s political role and alleged disobedience to Iraq’s central government. By the same token, some PMF leaders don’t even shy away from publicly admitting their allegiance to the notion of vilayat al-faqih (the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), the cornerstone of Iran’s religious-clerical political system. For example, according to Seyed Ali Al-Yasseri, former commander of Saraya al-Khorasani, ‘the PMF is a Vilayi force [believer in vilayat al-faqih].’

In terms of strategic interests, the Iran-backed PMF factions share one of the Islamic Republic’s main strategic objectives, i.e. seeking to limit and eventually end the US presence in the Middle East. Several pre-existing PMF factions, especially the four most powerful ones, actively fought against the American forces during the post-2003 US invasion of Iraq. Following the assassination of Iran’s Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani and of the PMF Deputy Chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis by the US in Iraq in January 2020,
Iran-backed PMF factions have been accused of being responsible for numerous attacks against American interests in Iraq.60 The surge in militia attacks against American interests came hand in hand with Tehran’s own direct response to Soleimani’s assassination, reflected in a large-scale missile attack on US airbase Ain al-Assad in Iraq’s Anbar province.61 Besides, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei declared that ‘the expulsion of American troops from the region’ had become a strategic goal for Iran.62 However, despite expressing support for the efforts by ‘resistance forces’ to end the American presence in Iraq,63 the PMF leaders categorically deny having a role in the militia attacks.64 In turn, they accuse the US forces in Iraq of targeting their bases across the country.65

Such strong bonds between the Iraqi Shiite militias and the Islamic Republic make them Iran’s valuable ally in Iraq. As such, any change in their power and status, including their integration into Iraq’s state security and military structure, could potentially affect Iran’s influence and interests in its neighboring country. In fact, the Iraqi prime minister’s 2015 decree, granting the PMF an official status, was the first step in bringing numerous Iran-backed militias under a unified banner, trying to reorganize them as a part of the Iraqi state. Abdulmahdi’s 2019 decree was the second most crucial step in integrating the PMF. Yet, more than seven years since its inception, the PMF is considered to remain an umbrella organization of various militias rather than becoming a well-integrated state institution. However, as will be discussed later, this challenging and ongoing process has already started to reshape Iran’s role in Iraq.

**Syria**

In Syria, the National Defense Forces (NDF) and Local Defense Forces (LDF) are considered the two largest Iran-backed militias, both of which have been already integrated into the Syrian Army structure, though with different modalities.

The NDF was first established in the city of Homs in 2012, under the supervision of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards commanders. The newly formed militia started recruiting fighters from among Syria’s various sects, i.e. not only Alawites but also Sunnis and Druze, and soon expanded its geographical reach by establishing headquarters in other Syrian provinces. With an estimated 40,000 fighters, the NDF was once considered the largest paramilitary force in Syria.66 In part, the NDF was formed via ‘rebranding, restructuring, and merging of local Popular Committees and other pro-Assad’ militias.67

Some observers believe that by helping form the NDF, Iran pursued creating a Syrian equivalent of the Iraqi PMF or even the Lebanese Hezbollah.68 Indeed, in terms of structure and organization, the IRGC commanders seemed to be trying to use their longstanding experience in
mobilizing volunteers and grassroots militias to form an effective combat force. Maj. Gen. Hussein Hamadani, a senior IRGC commander who was killed in Aleppo in October 2015, played the leading role in creating such a force.⁶⁹

In 2018, Assad decided to dismantle the NDF, reintegrating its forces into the pre-existing army units.⁷⁰ This came against the background of Iran’s desire to legitimize the NDF, providing them with an official status similar to the PMF in Iraq.⁷¹ In addition, with Russia set on reining in various pro-Assad militias to curtail their potentially destabilizing role in Syria’s transition toward the post-war period,⁷² several NDF factions started to be integrated into the Russian-backed 5th Assault Corps.⁷³ Besides, some NDF factions had by then been integrated into the Russian-organized 4th Volunteer Assault Corps in Latakia.⁷⁴

Disappointed by the lack of prospect for preserving the NDF as a distinct military force with official status, Iran shifted its focus to the Local Defense Forces. Since 2013, Iran had started to form the LDF by recruiting troops from Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, and Raqqa provinces. With an estimated 50,000 fighters, the LDF is the largest Iran-backed armed group in Syria and is officially considered part of the Syrian army.⁷⁵ The decision to grant the LDF an official status within the Syrian armed forces framework was made in 2017. As per an agreement between Iran and the Assad regime, the Iranian side, in coordination with the General Command of the Army and the Armed Forces, is in charge of LDF’s leadership in the governorates, ‘until the crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic has ended or a new resolution has been passed’.⁷⁶

Apart from these local Syrian fighters, some foreign-dominated Iran-backed militias have also been integrated into the Syrian armed forces. Most prominent among them is the al-Abbas Brigade (Liwa Abu al-Fadhal al-Abbas), which has been integrated into the Republican Guard.⁷⁷ The al-Abbas Brigade, consisting of fighters from several Iraqi Shiite militias, was formed in February 2013 with the declared aim of protecting the Sayyidah Zaynab Shrine – the tomb of the first Shiite Imam’s daughter – in Syria.⁷⁸

Furthermore, a number of the Iran-backed Afghan and Pakistani fighters in Syria (members of the Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun Brigades, respectively) have reportedly been integrated into the ranks of the Syrian army. According to a knowledgeable source, this was made possible via a presidential decree by Assad granting the fighters Syrian nationality and accepting them into the Syrian armed forces.⁷⁹ The total number of naturalized Afghan and Pakistani fighters is said to be around 15,000. According to another account, a total of 53,000 Iran-backed foreign fighters – not just the Afghans and Pakistanis – have switched uniforms and merged into the Syrian army.⁸⁰

The Fatemiyoun Brigade was initially formed in 2011 as a battalion, then became a brigade, and now depicts itself as an ‘army’.⁸¹ The number of Afghan Fatemiyoun fighters in Syria is estimated to be between 10,000 and 20,000.⁸² Another Iran-backed foreign militia fighting in Syria is the
Zainabiyoun Brigade. The brigade recruits fighters from among the Pakistani Shiites living in Iran, as well as in the Parachinar area in Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Compared with Fatemiyoun, the Zainabiyoun is a relatively small militia whose forces do not exceed a total of 2,500.

Syrian groups’ affiliations with Iran

In terms of their affiliation with Iran, there are differences among the recently-integrated Iran-backed armed groups in Syria, making them different from Iraq’s PMF in general. To begin with, not all of these militias share the Islamic Republic’s ideology, political worldview, or strategic goals. This is essentially due to their disparate sectarian and ethnic backgrounds, as well as primary motives for joining Iran’s Syria campaign. Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun brigades are composed of Shiites who claim allegiance to vilayat al-faqih. Besides, a considerable part of the Fatemiyoun Brigade are Afghan nationals who lived in Iran for a long time before being dispatched to Syria. The same firm allegiance is the case with the al-Abbas Brigade, whose members are basically of the same background as the most pro-Iran PMF groups in Iraq. Yet, both NDF and LDF have a more diverse sectarian composition, making them less adherent to the Islamic Republic’s ideology. In the same vein, their engagement in the Syrian war is less motivated by sectarian and ideological considerations and more by economic incentives, i.e. to benefit from Iran’s financial rewards in return for their loyalty.

How close these militias are to Iran determines how extensively they benefit from financial incentives. Unlike Iraq’s PMF, almost all Iran-backed militias in Syria are still dependent on Tehran’s direct financing. Yet, not all of them receive the same amount of payment. According to Navvar Saban of the Omran Center for Strategic Studies, Iran pays a monthly wage of $450 to $700 to each Fatemiyoun fighter, while other militias receive monthly salaries between $200 and $300. For the members of smaller local militias, the amount drops to $100 per month. All the money comes from the IRGC’s budget. In an April 2020 interview, Parviz Fattah, a former IRGC official who now heads the state-affiliated Bonyad Mostazafan financial foundation, acknowledged that Qassem Soleimani personally oversaw the financing of the Fatemiyoun brigade. Overall and compared with the Iraqi PMF, Iran plays a more direct role in commanding, supporting, and financing its allied militias in Syria.

Iran’s influence in Iraq and Syria beyond the armed groups

Another critical factor in understanding how the integration of Iran-backed armed groups could impact Iran’s role in Iraq and Syria is to take account of other forms of Iranian influence in the two countries, especially in strategic
and security terms. This comprises Tehran’s formal security arrangements with Baghdad and Damascus, as well as informal measures Tehran employs to influence strategic policy-making in Iraq and Syria.

In the case of Iraq, when Washington started to scale down its military presence in the country in 2011, a window of opportunity emerged for Tehran to initiate formal military and security cooperation with Baghdad. Following the rise of ISIS, Iran was the first country to provide military assistance to the Iraqi government. This, in turn, provided the ground for more extensive security ties between the two countries. The first Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on defense cooperation between Iran and Iraq was signed in January 2014. The MoU envisaged, among other issues, continuing cooperation in ‘building a national army to maintain Iraq’s territorial integrity and security.’ As of October 2021, no official information has been released on the implementation of the agreement. But at least symbolically, it heralded a new phase in the Iranian approach toward military and security cooperation with Iraq.

In July 2017, the two countries signed another MoU on defense and military cooperation. According to the new MoU, the two sides agreed to expand cooperation in fighting against terrorism and extremism, border security, and educational, logistical, technical, and military support. Three years later, in November 2020, it was announced that a draft document on military cooperation between Iran and Iraq is ‘almost ready and will be signed soon’. Also, in April 2019, the two sides agreed to draw up a security agreement to cover topics such as human trafficking, counter-terrorism, and border security. It’s also noteworthy that in September 2015, Iran and Iraq, along with Syria and Russia, established a joint intelligence committee to coordinate fighting against ISIS.

At the informal level, Iran tries to advance its interests via loyal politicians and influential figures. As such, pro-Iran politicians occupying high-ranking government positions usually mean greater room for maneuver for Tehran and vice versa. For example, Iran enjoyed a greater deal of influence in Iraq under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki than under his successor Haider al-Abadi. Besides, pro-Iranian factions in the Iraqi parliament have played a key role in advancing Iran-backed agendas. For example, the ‘Fatah Alliance’, which is, in fact, the political branch of the Badr Organization, has significant influence in the Iraqi parliament and is fully supportive of – and supported by – Iran. Nouri al-Maliki’s ‘State of Law Coalition’ has also been known to have positive relations with Iran. By drawing up agendas such as pushing for the complete withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, these factions work in line with Iran’s interests.

As for Syria, Iran’s direct military presence in the country and its critical role in salvaging the Assad regime from the uprising and the subsequent civil war have provided Tehran with significant leverage over Damascus. By 2018, Iran
was reported to have ten military bases in Syria.\textsuperscript{99} Iran maintains that its military presence in Syria is ‘advisory’ and at the request of Syria’s legitimate government, an assertion echoed by the Assad government.\textsuperscript{100} But there is no formal agreement between Tehran and Damascus regulating the Iranian presence in the country. In 2015, some 7,000 IRGC members and Iranian paramilitary volunteers were reportedly operating in Syria. By 2020, the number had shrunk to a few hundred, primarily due to the cessation of major armed conflict in the country and most of the Syrian territory having been retaken by the Assad regime. Besides, the IRGC has outsourced routine military tasks to the proxies and allied militias.\textsuperscript{101}

In discussing Iran’s influence in Syria, one should also consider the long-standing partnership between Tehran and Damascus, which dates back to the Iran-Iraq war and Syria’s support for the Iranian side. For decades, Syria has also been a conduit for Iran’s relations with its Lebanese and Palestinian allies, such as Hezbollah and Hamas.\textsuperscript{102} This partnership has only been strengthened since the start of the Syrian conflict. In August 2018, during the visit of Iran’s Defense Minister Brig. Gen. Amir Hatami to Damascus, an agreement on military cooperation was signed between the two sides. While no details were released on the agreement, Hatami said it ‘provides extensive grounds for bilateral cooperation’.\textsuperscript{103} Also, in July 2020, Tehran and Damascus signed a ‘comprehensive military agreement’, the key part of which was strengthening Syria’s air defense systems by Iran.\textsuperscript{104}

The unofficial aspect of Iran’s influence in Syria has also become more evident over the past several years. Former Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani had close personal relations with many senior Syrian officials, including Bashar al-Assad.\textsuperscript{105} Assad’s brother Maher, the commander of Syria’s Republican Guard and the army’s elite Fourth Armored Division, is also considered a pro-Iran figure.\textsuperscript{106} Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad is another high-ranking Syrian official with close ties to Iran.\textsuperscript{107} Overall, Iran’s active involvement in the Syrian conflict since 2011 has enhanced Tehran’s influence in Syria at both formal and informal levels.

**Armed groups’ integration and Iran’s influence in Iraq and Syria**

Based on the above analysis, it can be argued that the integration of Iran-backed groups into the Iraqi and Syrian armed forces affects Tehran’s influence in the two Arab countries in terms of both structure and content. In terms of structure, the development adds a new layer to Iran’s influence. Prior to the integration, Iran used formal and informal channels to expand its influence and preserve its security and geopolitical interests in Iraq and Syria. The formal aspect has been manifested in efforts to develop bilateral and multilateral military and security cooperation with the Iraqi and Syrian governments. At the informal level, the main tools used by Tehran have been
to develop close ties with parts of the Iraqi and Syrian political elites and to support a range of non-state armed groups – both allies and proxies. The integration of armed groups into the official armies allows Iran to expand its influence into a new layer between the formal and informal levels, i.e. the semi-formal level.

Iran’s main aim of supporting the recognition of PMF as a state body and striving to secure the same status for NDF and then LDF in Syria has been to help form a semi-autonomous military and security structure parallel to the Iraqi and Syrian regular armies. Despite being officially defined as subordinate to the Iraqi and Syrian governments and receiving state funding, such a new structure would be loyal to Tehran. As a matter of fact, Iran has been trying to apply its own experience with the IRGC to Iraq and Syria, i.e. a military organization parallel to the regular army with an independent structure, which receives state funding and, at the same time, has a strong ideological orientation. High-ranking IRGC commanders do not shy away from admitting that they have indeed pursued such an objective.

That could explain why, despite Tehran’s adamant support for the PMF, Abdul Mahdi’s July 2019 decree did not spark any negative Iranian reaction. On the contrary, the decision was generally seen as a positive step in Tehran. The Institute of Strategic Studies, a state-affiliated Iranian think tank, argued at the time that ‘not only Abdul Mahdi’s decree won’t weaken the PMF, but it will actually give the force official legitimacy.’ It also concluded that the PMF integration would create a new ‘web of identity’, i.e. an ideological tendency, in the Iraqi armed forces. In the same vein, IRGC affiliated Tasnim News Agency published an interview with the well-known conservative Iranian political analyst Saadollah Zarei, expressing satisfaction that the PMF has been given an ‘independent identity’ instead of being merged into the Iraqi army.

In contrast, in Syria, several factors restrict Iran’s ability to form a strong parallel military structure like the Iraqi PMF. First of all, as mentioned earlier, the Iran-backed armed groups in Syria feature a more diverse ethnic and religious background than the Iraqi PMF factions. Not all of these groups share the Islamic Republic’s ideological worldview, nor do they have a unified ideological or strategic vision of their own to unite them. Besides, despite more than a decade of war, there is still a strong secular and nationalist faction inside Syria’s Baath Party that opposes Iran’s theocratic and Shiite influence in Arab politics. This is expected to complicate Iran’s role in Syria in general and in the Syrian military and security structures in particular after the war. Finally, but perhaps most importantly, a growing rivalry with Russia over influence in the Syrian armed forces further challenges Iran’s vision of a parallel army. By some accounts, the formation of the 5th Corps by Russia was at least partially aimed at balancing Iran-backed militias’ influence.
These challenges has led Iran to focus more on integrating the most loyal elements of its proxies into the Syrian Army than necessarily establishing a parallel structure. According to Maan Talaa, an expert on Syria’s military and security affairs, ‘Tehran has worked on a qualitative and long-term’ influence, and the Iran-backed militias have been integrated into ‘the qualitative forces of the army, such as the Fourth Division and the Republican Guard’. In other words, by integrating loyal forces, Iran tries to turn pre-existing structures inside the Syrian army into its semi-official avenues of influence. This design is different from the PMF experience, where Iran helped establish a brand new structure and then supported its designation as a state organization. At the same time, Iran has continued to recruit local Syrians and expand its proxy network in Syria, especially in areas with high strategic relevance, like Deir ez-Zor. Iran has also developed other creative ways to spread its security influence in Syria, for example, by establishing private security companies.

In conclusion, it can be argued that despite differences in the nature of armed groups, the quality of integration, and the role of other foreign actors in Iraq and Syria, the integration of Iran-backed armed groups in both countries provides Tehran with a new layer of semi-formal influence. This is especially important for Iran in the long run, as Tehran is well aware of the increasing challenges to its sway at the formal and informal levels: In Iraq, nationalist sentiments and opposition to foreign intervention have been on the rise over the past several years. During the popular protests in Iraq in 2019–2020, one of the Iraqi protesters’ main demands was to end Iran’s meddling in their county. Thus, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who came to power as a result of the protests, has tried to contain the interference of Tehran and its allies in Iraq’s internal affairs and strike a balance between Iran and other neighbors in Iraq’s foreign policy. Behind the scenes, Iran had, indeed, given its consent to Kadhimi’s appointment as prime minister. But the decision was made out of necessity, in order to get reciprocal concessions from Washington in terms of sanctions relief, rather than being a strategic move to accommodate the Iraqi people’s demands. Kadhimi has also shown that his government is willing to maintain strategic relations with the United States against Iran’s wishes. Maintaining strategic relations with the US, in turn, means that the potential for broader military and security cooperation between Tehran and Baghdad would diminish. These developments also affect Iran’s informal influence. For example, Muqtada al-Sadr, once considered one of the most prominent pro-Iran figures in Iraq, has been trying to portray himself as a nationalist in order to gain popular support. This strategy seems to have worked effectively, as the Sadr-affiliated Sairoun Alliance appeared as the biggest winner in the October 2021 parliamentary elections.
In Syria, Iran’s influence at both formal and informal levels depends on Assad and a pro-Iranian circle in his regime. Should this circle be removed from power in a political transition, Tehran’s influence in Syria would be seriously challenged. A possible dominance of the Baath party’s more nationalist faction or the pro-Russian political elite would bring about the same result.

Finally, the integration of Iran-backed groups could also be in line with Iran’s interests from a financial point of view. It makes the Iraqi and Syrian governments officially responsible for financing those groups. This is already the case with regard to the PMF, which, in 2019, received $2.16 billion from Iraq’s defense budget.123 Indeed, the situation is different in Syria, where Iran has continued to financially support its allies as the Assad regime has faced a growing financial crisis due to a decade of civil war and toughening international sanctions.124 However, in a longer-term perspective, the financial aspect of Iran’s influence may also come into play in Syria. As Iran faces increasing economic challenges because of US sanctions,125 this emerging pattern could help Tehran save considerable financial resources that it can use for managing its ailing economy.

Conclusion

The integration of Iran-backed armed groups into national armed forces allows Tehran to enjoy multi-layered, long-term, and potentially inexpensive influence in Iraq and Syria that would be immunized against change of governments or political elites. Even in the short term, this new layer of influence gives Iran more room for maneuver on the formal and informal levels. The Iraqi PMF factions already use their legal status to pressure the government to pursue some policies and abandon others.126 Besides, the integrated PMF factions maintain their ties with a set of smaller militias outside the state structure, supporting them within the framework of the so-called ‘Iraqi Resistance Front’.127 In other words, Iran-backed factions in the PMF work as an intermediary between Tehran and the rest of the ‘resistance groups’ in Iraq, thereby sustaining Iran’s proxy influence in Iraq. In addition, in Syria new local forces are being recruited by the IRGC as proxies at the same time as Iran-backed elements integrate into the army. Again, the possible promotion of Iran-backed elements in the Syrian army is expected to affect the country’s military and security policy-making in the long term.

For about a decade after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran actively pursued the strategy of ‘exporting the revolution’. Based on this strategy, Iran sought to establish like-minded Islamist governments in the Middle East and North Africa through ideological, financial, and military support for non-state actors across the region.128 However, not only did this policy fail to achieve the intended results, it also led to Iran’s political and diplomatic isolation in the
region. Three decades on, it seems that Iran, aware of its actual possibilities and constraints, has adopted a more pragmatic strategy. Instead of exporting the revolution, the new strategy prescribes exporting the Islamic Republic’s unique military-security structure to the target countries. This trend is expected to even further intensify under the new Iranian administration led by hardline President Ebrahim Raisi. The new administration shares the IRGC’s view of seeing the ‘axis of resistance’ as the backbone of Iran’s regional influence, vowing to enhance support for Tehran’s allied militias. Emboldened by the US’ hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iran’s full membership in the Russian and Chinese-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Iranian leaders seem to have concluded that the time has come to realize their dream of ending the US presence in the region, and empowering the ‘axis of resistance’ is necessary to secure Iran’s influence in the post-American Middle East. The IRGC model, i.e. a well-established military and security organization parallel to the regular army, was skillfully implemented in Lebanon in the form of Hezbollah, leading to the emergence of a powerful semi-state ally for Iran. Iran has started to implement a similar model in Iraq and Syria by supporting the integration of allied armed groups into the two countries’ armed forces.

If Lebanon is any example, the consolidation of this model should have considerable implications for Iraq and Syria. First, the emergence and empowerment of dual loyalties in the Iraqi and Syrian states will make it difficult to form an inclusive government and promote national unity. Second, strong anti-American and anti-Israeli ideological elements in the Iraqi and Syrian armed forces’ structure could prevent the development of ties with the United States or a possible normalization – or even a return to de facto peaceful co-existence – with Israel. In the event of any armed conflict between Iran and the United States or Israel, this will also make it difficult for Baghdad and Damascus to stay neutral. Finally, the concern of Iran’s regional rivals, especially Saudi Arabia, over the expansion of Tehran’s influence in Iraq and Syria, turns the two countries into a theater for regional confrontations. This, in turn, obliterates the prospect of stabilization of both countries. So far, the Kadhimi government has tried to fend off the challenge by trying to mediate between Tehran and Riyadh and hosting direct talks among them. But everything still depends on whether the two sides will eventually be able to solve their deep-rooted disputes over a wide range of bilateral and regional issues.

In any case, it should be noted that the actual implications, as they are going to emerge over time, largely depend on the modality of the integration of Iran-backed armed groups. As noted, in its current form the integration process will lead to the emergence of parallel structures and dual loyalties in Iraq and Syria. However, the course could be reversed, at least to a degree, if the central governments in Iraq and Syria were strengthened to the extent
that they could bring Iran-backed forces under a unified central command. In other words, the sooner the situation in Iraq and Syria stabilizes, and the central governments in Baghdad and Damascus establish full control over all state structures, the more likely it is that Iran’s growing influence in the Iraqi and Syrian armed forces can be halted or even rolled back. By contrast, continued instability and weakness of the central governments will be a basis for the continuation and expansion of Iran’s influence at all formal, semi-formal, and informal levels.

Notes

1. Ryan, “Inventing the ‘axis of evil’,” 63-68.
2. Rubin, “Iraq Tries to Prove Autonomy, and Makes Inroads.”
3. Berger, “Invaders, allies, occupiers, guests.”
4. Arango, “Iran Dominates in Iraq After U.S.”
5. Hokayem, “Iran, the Gulf States,” 70-76.
6. Varying degrees of financial and logistical support, as well as training and supply of weapons.
7. Jones, “Containing Tehran,” 11.
8. Currently, the only state that fits into this concept is Bashar al-Assad’s Syria.
9. Particularly Shiite political factions in Iraq, but also the political branches of Hezbollah, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad.
10. Ghassemi, “The Geopolitics of the Axis of Resistance,” 15-20.
11. Except for its home-grown missile program.
12. Azizi et.al., “Trump’s “maximum pressure” and anti-containment in Iran’s,” 157.
13. O’Connor, “Iran Denies Role in US Embassy in Iraq Attack.”
14. Frantzman, “Iran’s maximum pressure on Iraq to remove US forces.”
15. Nazemi Arakani and Khaledian, “The Cultural Components of the Islamic Resistance Discourse,” 84-85.
16. See e.g. Reuters, “Coronavirus and sanctions hit Iran’s support of proxies in Iraq”; and Sly and Haidamous, “Trump’s sanctions on Iran are hitting Hezbollah.”
17. U.S. Department of State, “Iranian Regime’s Transfer of Arms to Proxy Groups.”
18. Vatanka, “The emergence of Iran’s ‘proxy mode’,” 3.
19. Lane, “Iran’s Islamist Proxies in the Middle East.”
20. Ghaddar, “Hezbollah-Iran Dynamics.”
21. Smyth, “Iranian Proxies Step up Their Role in Iraq.”
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23. Moghadam and Wyss, “The Political Power of Proxies,” 124.
24. International Institute for Strategic Studies, “Iran’s Networks of Influence in the Middle East.”
25. Ibid.
26. Ostovar, “The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients,” 166-167.
27. Ollivant and Gaston, “The problem with the narrative of ‘proxy war’ in Iraq.”
28. Saad, “Challenging the sponsor-proxy model,” 627.
29. Humud, “Lebanese Hezbollah.”
30. Juneau, “How War in Yemen Transformed the Iran-Houthi Partnership,” 1-2.
31. Azizi, “Is Iran’s influence in Iraq waning?”
32. Mamouri, “Iraq orders militias to fully integrate.”
33. Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, “States within the state.”
34. Bakhtiar and Gholipour, “15 Groups that fight in Syria.”
35. Amnesty International, “Iraq,” 8.
36. BBC, “Iraq conflict.”
37. Nordland, “After Victory over ISIS in Tikrit.”
38. Al-Kadhimi, “Iraqi National Security Adviser Says Terrorism Linked.”
39. The National, “Iraq PM Mustafa Al Kadhimi reshuffles top security posts.”
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41. Allami, “Iraq.”
42. Ahmadi, “Proponents and opponents of the PMF in Iraq.”
43. Tasnim News Agency, “The structure of Iraq’s PMF.”
44. Mapping Militant Organizations, “Kata’ib Hezbollah.”
45. See note 34 above.
46. Rajam News, “How is the structure of Iraq’s PMF?”
47. Al Jazeera, “The Iraqi Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq.”
48. See note 34 above.
49. Rajab, “The Badr Shiite organization; Iraqi faces and Iranian loyalties.”
50. See note 43 above.
51. Nada and Rowan, “Part 2: Pro-Iran Militias in Iraq.”
52. See note 46 above.
53. Al-Nidawi, “The growing economic and political role of Iraq’s PMF.”
54. Mansour, “The Popularity of the Hashd in Iraq.”
55. Ibid.
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72. Reforming the army in general has been one of the few reform steps that the Russians have insisted on and taken the lead in implementation.
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74. Mardasov, “Russia eyes role in formation of Syria’s National Defense Forces.”
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76. Odeh et.al., “The Syrian Army.”
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78. See note 34 above.
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89. See note 4 above.
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102. See Goodarzi, Syria and Iran.
103. Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), “A new development in Iran-Syria defense cooperation.”
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126. Jiyad, “Iraq still might force the United States out.”
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