

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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## ALGERIA: AQIM LOSES ITS MEDIA CHIEF

*Alexander Sehmer*

Algerian security forces have killed the chief propagandist for al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). This is a victory for Algeria's security services, which have kept AQIM under pressure in recent years, and a temporary setback for a group that has skillfully used its media arm to expand its operations and appeal beyond Algeria's borders.

On January 30, the Algerian military announced it had killed two al-Qaeda fighters in an operation in Mechtat Mohcine, near Jijel, about 400 kilometers (km) east of Algiers. Although the military did not immediately release the names of the militants, officials later identified one of the dead as Adel Seghiri (a.k.a. Abu Rawaha al-Qusantini), the head of AQIM's so-called al-Andalus Media Foundation ([TSA](#), January 31; [Naharnet](#), February 1).

Seghiri's death was confirmed by al-Qaeda, and later the group's Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), another propaganda entity, released a statement "of condolences and congratulations" regarding Seghiri's "martyr-

dom" on its Telegram channel on February 1 ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), February 5; [SITE](#), February 2).

Born in 1971 in Constantine, in Algeria's northeast, Seghiri fought against the Algerian government in the 1990s as part of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), supposedly joining the Islamists after his brother was shot and killed by police ([Menadefense](#), January 31). He was wounded in the leg during renewed fighting in 2003, but remained active and later took up the role as head of al-Andalus, replacing Salah Gasmî (a.k.a. Abu Mohamed Salah) after the latter was arrested in 2012 ([Emouaten.com](#), December 17, 2012; [All Africa](#), December 18, 2012).

Under Seghiri, al-Andalus opened its first Twitter account (on March 16, 2013) and established the Ifriqya el Islamia web forum. Although it is unclear exactly how much influence he had in shaping the organization's strategic development, al-Andalus has become as a key plank in AQIM's media strategy, disseminating audio, video and written content in a range of languages across the internet, aimed at promoting the group's ideology and fostering recruitment. The group's media operations have come a long way since 1999, when the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) first

released grainy, poor quality VHS images of captive Algerian soldiers.

In many ways, the professionalization of AQIM's media operations, of which Seghiri was a part, is the result of the propaganda efforts of AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel, who sought to establish the group as a cross-border jihadist outfit rather than one primarily concerned with Algeria. AQIM has successfully managed that transition, and while the Algerians have dealt a blow to the group by killing Seghiri, it is one from which it will doubtless quickly recover.

## **SYRIA: RIVALRIES RESURFACE AMONG IDLIB REBELS**

*Alexander Sehmer*

As the Turkish offensive against Kurdish forces in Afrin further splinters the Syrian conflict, jihadist rivalries in Syria's Idlib province are once again rising to the surface.

Russian officials confirmed that Syrian fighters shot down one of their military aircraft on a bombing raid over northwestern Idlib province on February 4 ([al-Jazeera](#), February 4). Videos on social media allegedly showed the burning wreckage of the Sukhoi 25. Others purported to show the body of the pilot, who successfully ejected when his plane was hit, but died before fighters could capture him, supposedly detonating a hand grenade rather than fall into their hands ([Tass](#), February 6).

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the rebel jihadist alliance, claimed its fighters were responsible for downing the plane ([New Arab](#), February 4). The group has made much of the incident, as it seeks to combat Russian-backed Syrian forces. Even as government troops push into rebel enclaves, HTS has touted its territorial gains, announcing on February 5 that it had seized the towns of Tal Sultan, Tal Siryatel, Barisa and Ras al-Ayn in the province's east ([Ebaa](#), February 5).

HTS has also called for unity among the militants to better oppose Syrian troops ([New Arab](#), January 17). Usually fractious groups, including Ahrar al-Sham, do appear to be coming together to repel government forces. However, given that HTS has in the past proved to be just as happy to kill and co-opt its rivals, they will likely be unwilling to fall in line behind them ([Middle East Eye](#), January 16).

Meanwhile, Turkey's Operation Olive Branch, mounted against Kurdish forces in Afrin, has diverted the focus of the conflict. Turkey will soon need to decide whether to send its soldiers into the city, precipitating an urban conflict that could lead to high Turkish casualties, or settle in for a prolonged siege. More troubling for Turkey's international allies, it may at some point decide to make good on its threat to pursue the Kurds to Manbij, a move that will further strain relations with the United States ([Arab News](#), February 7).

The various fronts in Syria are also providing space for Islamic State (IS) to regroup. The group was pushed out of Idlib province nearly four years ago, but began to recapture territory there at the end of last year and is now promoting its “humanitarian” efforts in the province ([New Arab](#), December 9, 2017).

On February 4, the group claimed via its Amaq news agency it had destroyed Syrian tanks in fighting east of the town of Sinjar, and has posted videos online supposedly showing its fighters handing out flour in locations in the province’s south. Interestingly, it has begun issuing its propaganda branded with the words “Idlib Province,” suggesting it may still harbor territorial ambitions and signaling its intention to challenge HTS dominance.

## Chinese Projects in Pakistan Prove Tempting Targets for Terrorist Groups

*Sudha Ramachandran*

On December 8, 2017, the Chinese embassy in Islamabad warned its nationals of possible terrorist attacks targeting “Chinese-invested organizations and Chinese citizens” in Pakistan ([Dawn](#), December 8, 2017). It gave no details of how it had come by this intelligence or who the potential attackers might be. However, attacks on Chinese nationals in Pakistan are not uncommon, and a range of possible actors have put China in their crosshairs.

In May 2004, the Baluch Liberation Front (BLF) gunned down three Chinese port workers at Gwadar in Pakistan’s Baluchistan province ([The Nation](#), April 20, 2015). Since then, attacks on Chinese projects and nationals working in Pakistan have become more frequent. Most of these attacks, including one in 2013 that targeted five oil tankers carrying fuel for a Chinese mining company at Saindak, have occurred in Baluchistan ([Balochwana News](#), September 30, 2015).

The recent threat, however, is more likely from the East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM), a Uighur separatist organization. Less than two months before the Chinese embassy in Islamabad alerted its citizens, it had raised concern over a possible threat from ETIM to its ambassador to Pakistan, Yao Jing. In a letter to Pakistan’s Interior Ministry, China claimed that an ETIM assassin, Abdul Wali, had entered Pakistan on an assassination mission ([The Nation](#), October 22, 2017).

### Evolution of the Terror Threat

Over the years, China’s terrorism concerns have been primarily domestic. In the 1990s, the majority of attacks by Uighurs, including the bombing of buses and knife attacks in crowded public spaces, occurred in China’s Xinjiang province. By the end of that decade, however, Uighur militants were carrying out attacks in other parts of China too, including in Kunming and the capital Beijing ([Indian Defense Review](#), July 27, 2016).

Uighur militancy has also had a transnational dimension. As early as the 1990s, Uighur militants were training and carrying out attacks in China from bases in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Central Asian Republics (CARs). A bomb blast on a Beijing bus in 1997 was the work of Kazakhstan-based Uighurs, and in the decades that followed, a rising number of Uighur militants have fought alongside the Taliban, al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS) in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and the CARs.

The close ties between Uighurs and global jihadists have transformed Uighur militants into more radicalized and battle-hardened fighters, capable of striking beyond China's borders. In August 2016, an ETIM suicide bomber rammed a car into the gates of the Chinese embassy in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, and then detonated an explosive device. Uighur terrorist groups in Syria affiliated with the al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front are reported to have masterminded that attack ([China Daily](#), September 8, 2016).

Worryingly for China, the ETIM's reach now extends to countries far from Xinjiang's immediate neighborhood. In August 2015, two suspected ETIM militants set off a bomb in the Erawan shrine in Bangkok, killing 20 people. The attack was in retaliation for Thailand's forced repatriation of more than 100 Uighurs to face prosecution in China ([Bangkok Post](#), August 21, 2015).

Importantly, Uighur ties to al-Qaeda, IS and their affiliates have put China in the cross-hairs of these jihadist groups. In 2014, IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi listed China among countries where he claimed "Muslim rights are forcibly seized" ([SITE Intelligence Group](#), July 1, 2014). The following year, a Chinese national named Fan Jinghui was abducted and killed by IS in Syria ([Global Times](#), November 19, 2015).

In Pakistan, groups like Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), al-Qaeda and IS have all threatened to target Chinese nationals as a warning to China over its treatment of Muslims ([Express Tribune](#), March 2, 2012). In a video released in March 2017, IS vowed to "shed blood like rivers" in attacks on Chinese national in order to avenge Beijing's treatment of Uighurs. It followed up on that threat by killing two Chinese nationals in Baluchistan a few months later. As China steps up its repressive policies in Xinjiang, it can expect more attacks on its nationals and projects in Pakistan ([South Asia Intelligence Review](#), June 19, 2017).

## The Threat in Pakistan

ETIM and its jihadist allies object to Beijing's treatment of Uighurs. In Pakistan, the group's concerns are shared, albeit to a lesser extent, by TTP, al-Qaeda and IS, as well as their affiliates. Although the Pakistani government claims to have eliminated ETIM bases on its soil, hundreds of Uighur fighters operate in the North Waziristan region and remain committed to jihad against China.

For ETIM, targeting Chinese interests in Pakistan may be easier than carrying out operations at home. Unlike China, where security is tight, vast swathes of Pakistan are effectively lawless, enabling scores of terror outfits to operate with impunity ([Friday Times](#), June 8-13, 2012). Additionally, there is no dearth of potential targets for terrorist groups looking to hit Chinese interests in Pakistan. For one, an estimated 30,000 Chinese live in Pakistan today, and their numbers are rising ([Associated Press of Pakistan](#), August 24, 2017).

China has also invested heavily in infrastructure projects in Pakistan, and any of these projects is a potential ETIM target. Particularly attractive are the roads, railways, ports, pipelines and dams that are part of the \$62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) ([China Brief](#), January 12). A flagship venture of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), CPEC's success is an imperative for China ([China-Pakistan Economic Corridor](#), September 4, 2017). However, the large number of terrorist groups active in Pakistan undermine security in the country, which could delay completion of CPEC projects and cost Pakistan and China billions of dollars ([Hindustan Times](#), May 11, 2017).

Specifically targeting CPEC projects and workers would provide ETIM with a major propaganda victory and constitute a major blow to Chinese pride. A major terrorist attack on CPEC would undermine the confidence of other BRI participants in the Chinese initiative and present a possible setback to China's global ambitions.

CPEC itself has been divisive, and Chinese workers face a serious threat from sections in Pakistan who feel exploited by China and excluded from CPEC's benefits. Foremost among these are the Baluch. Gwadar port, which is often described as the "crown jewel" of CPEC, is in Baluchistan ([Express Tribune](#), September 23, 2016). However, few Baluch are beneficiaries of the project ([The News](#), January 29, 2017). Instead, Baluch national-

ists and militants, who have fought against Islamabad's exploitation of their resource-rich land for decades, now find China using CPEC to strip their region of its mineral wealth ([Economic Times](#), October 18, 2017). In addition to targeting the Pakistani military, which has a heavy presence in Baluchistan, militant groups like the Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA), the Baluch Republican Army (BRA), and BLF are now training their guns on CPEC's non-Baluch workers, including Chinese nationals ([Dawn](#), May 13, 2017).

Lesser-known outfits outside Baluchistan province are also targeting Chinese nationals. In May 2016, a Chinese engineer in Karachi was injured by a low-intensity bomb. Claiming responsibility for the attack in a pamphlet recovered from the blast site, the Sindhudesh Revolutionary Party denounced CPEC as an "anti-Sindh project" and accused China of "looting Sindh's resources" ([Daily Times](#), May 31, 2016). While CPEC may be the target, the threat to Chinese nationals is generalized—a 46-year-old Chinese executive was killed this month in Karachi after an unknown gunman opened fire on his car ([Dawn](#), February 5). A company trainee who was in the car with him survived that attack. Both worked for Cosco Shipping Lines Pakistan, a company unconnected with CPEC.

### **Potential for Attacks**

China's treatment of its Uighur population is a key driver for jihadist attacks on Chinese nationals and interests both in Pakistan and further afield. In Pakistan specifically, CPEC has presented an additional driver for attacks and its projects and workers are potential targets.

If Beijing's approach to its Uighur population remains repressive and if CPEC's benefits do not reach local communities in Baluchistan and other provinces, the potential for attacks will only increase.

As China's global footprint expands, so too will its exposure to international terrorists groups. This has already prompted enhanced Chinese engagement abroad, including the deployment of its special forces to protect its projects and rescue Chinese national who have been taken hostage (See [Terrorism Monitor](#), August 15, 2017). The array of terrorist threats that Chinese projects and personnel face in Pakistan is a pointer to what it can expect in other countries participating in the BRI, and from radical Islamist groups sympathetic to the Uighur cause.

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# The Resurgence of al-Shabaab

*Sunguta West*

As al-Shabaab continues to lose leaders to U.S. airstrikes and territory to troops with the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), analysts have contemplated the possible defeat of the Somalia-based militant group. Indeed, Somali President Mohammed Abdullahi Farmajo stressed this possibility at a conference in London last May, saying that with international support and better military equipment, the terrorist group could be defeated in just two years ([Jamhuri News](#), May 11, 2017).

In October, however, a massive bomb blast in the Somali capital of Mogadishu killed more than 300 people ([The Star](#), October 16, 2017). Meanwhile, the group has carried out a series of smaller attacks, terrorizing civilians and assassinating public figures, in an attempt to undermine the UN-backed government, even as the better armed U.S.-backed AMISOM troops' pound its strongholds.

In neighboring Kenya, the al-Qaeda affiliate has also stepped up its operations, forcing Nairobi to redoubled efforts to tackle militants in the Boni Forest, the thick expanse of coastal forest in Lamu, by the border with Somalia. The resurgence pours cold water on predictions of al-Shabaab's possible defeat, prompting security experts to call for new strategies to combat the militant group ([Daily Nation](#), January 23).

## Increase in Attacks

In January, the militants bombed a telecommunications tower in the town of Elwak, in Mandera County, on the Kenyan border. The downing of the tower, owned by Somalia's Hormuud Telecom, disrupted communications within the town and the surrounding area. Local residents said the destruction was intended to cut off communications between local people and the Kenyan and Somalia security forces. The militants reportedly suspected locals were spying for AMISOM troops, who were gathering information and planned to build a medical camp in the area ([Daily Nation](#), January 20).

Ahead of the attack, increased militant activity had been reported in the area. On January 6, the militants destroyed a telecommunications tower belonging to Safaricom, Kenya's leading mobile phone service provider,

in Katulo area in Wajir. The militants used Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs) to down the tower, before engaging security officers at a facility nearby ([The Star](#), January 7; [The Standard](#), January 7).

Days earlier, five security officers were killed in the area while on patrol along the Elwak- Katulo Road. In the attack, a lorry belonging to the paramilitary General Service Unit (GSU) was set on fire ([Mediamax](#), January 3).

In December 2017, the militants destroyed an important water well that had been drilled by the Kenyan army in Lafey town, Mandera County, leaving hundreds of resident without water ([Kulan Post](#), January 25).

## Resurgence in Boni Forest

In another significant development, analysts fear the militants have regained a foothold in Boni Forest in Kenya. The militants have been building their presence on the Kenyan side of the forest since 2012, according to intelligence sources. It is from these bases they are believed to be executing the current attacks on the Kenyan military, the police and local villagers.

In mid-January, heavily armed militants attacked and briefly occupied Ishakani police station, before fleeing to Somalia ([The Standard](#), January 15). Earlier, the militants had rounded up villagers and forced them into a mosque, where they popularized their ideology. Local people said the militants had informed them that their target was the security agencies, and that civilians would not be harmed.

Terrorist activity in Lamu is being orchestrated by Jaysh al-Ayman, a faction within al-Shabaab named after its top leader Maalim Ayman (a.k.a. Abdiaziz Dobow Ali). Its fighters are largely Kenyans from the coastal region and some international jihadists. Ayman, who is thought to be a Kenyan Somali, founded the group in 2009.

The group began by carrying out small grenade and Improved Explosive Devices (IED) attacks in Kenyan towns and villages in Lamu, and staged its first major attack in June 2015, when nearly 50 heavily armed militants targeted Mpeketoni town, killing 60 people. Since then, the faction has continued to carry out attacks in the Kenyan coastal region ([Daily Nation](#), January 23).

The same year as the Mpeketoni attack, the Kenyan government launched Operation Linda Boni, a multi-security agency operation aimed at countering militants' operation in the forest. More than two years since the launch of the operation, however, militants continue to carry out attacks across the coastal region ([The Star](#), July 12, 2017).

While clashes with the military have resulted in casualties on both sides, the security forces have yet to capture any al-Shabaab fighters or their leaders, raising concerns that local residents may be helping hide the militants and offering them support ([Daily Nation](#), January 23).

Joseph Kanyiri, the Operation Linda Boni commander, made that plain in comments on January 22, accusing local residents of helping fighters avoid capture. The security agencies are also reportedly investigating whether local dispensaries and health centers are treating injured al-Shabaab fighters or providing them with medicine ([Intelligence Brief](#), January 22).

### **A 'Faceless' Enemy**

Although al-Shabaab is weakened militarily, financially and politically in Boni, it has been acting to boost its forces through the conscription and recruitment of locals, including children.

The group is allegedly using women as spies, who gather intelligence even from the security forces ([Daily Nation](#), December 18, 2017). Kenyan security forces deployed to the area complain they are dealing with unknown fifth columnists, unlike Somalia where they can be more certain about the identity of their enemies.

A further development, one that began in mid-2017, has been the aggressive recruitment of child soldiers. Reports in January told of forcible child abductions and of reprisals against communities that refuse to hand their children over to militants ([Daily Nation](#), January 27).

In late September, al-Shabaab commanders ordered elders, teachers in Islamic schools and communities in rural areas to hand over hundreds of young children or face attack. The groups have also warned parents against sending their children to secular schools, demanding they attend Islamic ones that the group controls ([Somali Press Online](#), April 21, 2017).

In the past decade, al-Shabaab has recruited thousands of children for indoctrination and as frontline fighters ([KassFM](#), January 15). Since 2015, the group has opened large Islamic schools teaching its own curriculum in areas under its control, strengthening indoctrination and facilitating recruitment.

### **Potential for Larger Attack**

Reports last year that al-Shabaab was on the back foot, while pleasing government officials and Somalia's international backers, appear to have been premature. Forecasts of the group's defeat may need to be tempered by the fact it has proven its resilience time and again.

Kenyan analysts warn that the increased rate of small attacks in Lamu may be an attempt to divert the attention of security forces from Somalia, where the militants have been forced out of their bases and need time to regroup. They warn too that this increase maybe intended as a diversion while the militants plan a potentially much larger attack ([The Standard](#), January 15).

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# The Uncertain Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units

*C. Alexander Ohlers*

At the end of 2017, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced the defeat of Islamic State (IS) in Iraq, an achievement that has paved the way for a new challenge—that of controlling and integrating the powerful, expansive paramilitary groups of the Hashd al-Shaabi (PMU - Popular Mobilization Units), which helped secure the victory.

The PMU is made up of between 60 and 70 militias, with a combined command of approximately 140,000 fighters ([EPIC](#), January 18, 2017). It came about as a result of Iraq's efforts to dislodge IS, which in 2014 had raised its black flag in Fallujah and eventually came to claim territory from Mosul up to the edge of Baghdad.

While diverse, the PMU can roughly be divided into Iranian-backed Shia groups, which receive support and direction from Tehran and constitute the most powerful PMU consortium; Shia nationalists who oppose outside influence from Iran or elsewhere, and often follow Iraqi Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani or Sayyed Muqtada al-Sadr; and non-Shia militia, a small and diverse group that includes Sunni, Christian, Turkmen, Kurdish and Yazidi fighters, who often lean toward independence or greater autonomy from Baghdad.

The role of the PMU in a post-IS Iraq is a tricky question for the Iraqi government. Tackling it will likely determine the future of Iraqi security and politics, and will have a significant impact on the region.

## **Iranian-Backed Militias**

The presence of Iranian-backed groups in Iraq is not a new phenomenon. During the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, Iran began a strategic shift from conventional warfare to more indirect methods or "Islamic Warfare." Accordingly, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force (IRGC-QF) was established to export the ideology of the Islamic Revolution regionally and internationally through the provision of training, funding and weapons, as well as strategic direction, to foreign extremist groups, turning them into Iranian proxies.

In the 1980s, the IRGC-QF supported the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), which had been founded by exiled Iraqi Shia, and the group's armed wing, the Badr Brigades, which engaged in cross-border attacks against Baathist leaders in Iraq. Years later, after the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iran's IRGC extended its support to other Shia groups that opposed the U.S. military presence. These included Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, the Sadr-affiliated Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) and Kataib Hizballah, a violent extremist group that Iran helped establish.

During this period, Iran also cultivated roots in Iraq's political structure and assisted the United States in the formation of the "United Iraqi Alliance," a Shia Islamist political coalition that included the Iranian-backed SCIRI, the Sadrist faction and the Dawa party. This political foothold enabled the appointment of SCIRI's Bayan Jaber as interior minister. He in turn facilitated the placement of Iranian-backed Badr Brigades into Iraqi security forces and police forces ([Congressional Research Service](#), June 4, 2009). Additionally, the Badr Brigades was renamed the Badr Organization and, while it maintained a paramilitary wing, transformed itself into a political party that currently holds 22 of 328 seats on the Iraqi parliament.

In 2011, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq, combined with corruption in the Iraqi security forces and al-Maliki's marginalization of Sunni Awakening (Sahwa) fighters, created a security vacuum that left the country vulnerable to IS. As IS expanded to the edge of Baghdad, al-Maliki established the Popular Mobilization Committee (PMC) as an umbrella organization for militia groups. Following a call to arms by Ayatollah al-Sistani, the number of militia fighters grew to over 100,000, and in November of 2016, the PMU was legally recognized as an independent body within Iraq's security framework ([Asharq al Awsat](#), November 27, 2017).

The Iranian proxies were strengthened by the flow of fighters and the allocation of government funds. They also benefited from Iranian provided weapons, training, equipment and intelligence from the IRGC-QF. The main Iranian proxies include Kataib Hezbollah, the Badr Organization, and AAH. Other militias, such as Harakat al-Nujaba (HN), were established for operations in Syria. Iranian proxies also worked to co-opt other smaller groups.



In addition, the leaders of Iranian-backed PMU militias influence the Popular Mobilization Committee through PMC Deputy Chairman Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a former leader of the Iranian-linked Badr Brigades. Muhandis served as an advisor to IRGC's Quds Force Commander Qassim Suleimani and established the Kataib Hezbollah. His former Chief of Staff, Hadi al-Amiri, later became the leader of the Badr Organization and served as Iraq's transportation minister, allegedly allowing Iranian overflights to supply Syrian President Bashar al-Assad with weapons ([Niqash](#), March 22, 2012).

In 2017, the PMC received more than \$1.63 billion from the Iraqi budget to be administered by Muhandis. [1] One militia fighter explained that Iranian-backed garrisons received preferential treatment from the Iraqi government—in the form of higher salaries and better overall administration—as well as receiving “armored vehicles, special artillery and Katyusha rockets, all things that other militias do not have” from Iran ([Niqash](#), June 19, 2015).

### **Nationalist Shia and Non-Shia Groups**

Paramilitaries loyal to Iran's Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Hosseini Khamenei are of concern to many of Iraq's Sunnis, Kurds, Turkmen, Yazidis and Christians, as well as ideologically nationalist Shias who associate with al-Sistani or al-Sadr.

Al-Sistani, who rejects outside support from Iran, established his militias primarily to protect Shia holy sites and liberate IS held territories. Such groups include Saraya al-Ataba al-Abbasiya, Saraya al-Ataba al-Hussainiya, Saraya al-Ataba al-Alawiya, Liwa Ali al-Akbar and the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (ISCI), which also associates itself with al-Sistani ([SouthFront Analysis & Intelligence](#), August 27, 2017).

The other nationalist movement in Iraq is represented by al-Sadr, who was supported by Iran as the leader of the Mahdi Army from 2003 to 2010. He has since denounced Iranian influence in Iraq and embraced Iraqi nationalism, although his relationships and views have changed substantially over time and may evolve again. Like al-Sistani and other Shia clerics, al-Sadr has been critical of Iraqi militias that fight in Syria for al-Assad ([al-Monitor](#), April 11, 2017). He currently presides over Saraya al-Salam (the Peace Brigades), which is a regeneration of the Mahdi Army.

This issue of Khamenei's primacy versus Iraqi nationalism is a matter that changes with the political environment. For example, after a change in leadership, SCIRI began to ideologically shift away from Iran, as evidenced by its removal of the words “Islamic Revolution” from its name in 2007, after which it became the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (ISCI). ISCI's changing loyalties were rejected by al-Amiri who later severed the Badr Organization from ISCI. Similarly, some Sadrists groups, such as Jaysh al-Muammal, realigned themselves to the Iranian-backed PMU ([Middle East Forum](#)).

Shifting loyalties and ideologies can ignite conflicts between and within sects, and al-Sadr's past clashes with other Shia groups may portend the potential for intra-Shia conflict in the future. In 2008, Prime Minister al-Maliki's Shia-led government unleashed Operation Charge of the Knights (Saulat al-Fursan) against al-Sadr's Mahdi Army in Basra. Sadr's Saraya al-Salam has also clashed with the Iranian-backed AAH in 2015 and 2016 (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), April 29, 2016).

Iranian proxies and dominance also make Sunnis and other groups wary, some of which have found an unlikely advocate in al-Sadr. At the same time, it should be noted that some non-Shia groups are prone to outside alliances and influence that can also weaken the Iraqi state. For instance, the Nineveh Guard (NG), previously known as Hashd al-Watani (HW), is a Sunni militia led by the former governor of Mosul, Atheel al-Nujaifi. NG is an official part of the PMU but also receives funds from Turkey, which has troops stationed in Iraq that are unwelcome by the government, as well as some Gulf States. Similarly, the Sinjar Resistance Units (SRU) is a Yazidi force with strong ties to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey and the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria.

### **Fractionalized Security**

Iranian proxies and other militias that are influenced by outside forces tend to fractionalize Iraqi security. Accordingly, the diverging interests of the Iranian government and their surrogates have complicated the goals of domestic security, international policy and politics.

For instance, in the early phases of the fight against IS, it was intended that PMU units would primarily act as a holding force that would enable the Iraqi security forces to continue liberating areas from IS. However, Iranian

proxies have become increasingly aggressive and expanded their mandate well beyond fighting terrorism. Most notably, three Iranian proxies—Kataib Hezbollah, AAH and the Badr Organization—recently participated with Iraq security forces in an operation to expel Kurdish Peshmerga fighters from Kirkuk following the Kurdish referendum for independence.

Similarly, in the earlier battle against IS in Mosul, the government initially planned what was termed a “horse-shoe strategy” that would allow a route in which IS could withdraw through Tal Afar. Al-Amiri, however, reportedly demanded the PMU move north to rout IS and control territory from Diyala to Tal Afar, which borders Syria, enabling Iranian-backed PMU units to secure the highly strategic airfield and supply routes extending west into Syria ([Iraqi News](#), December 8, 2016). As a result, Iran now effectively controls an Iraq-Syria land bridge through Bou Kamal in Deir Ezzour, facilitating the transportation of supplies and weapons into the Syrian theater ([The Majalla](#), July 21, 2017).

Iranian-backed PMU groups are active in Syria ([Iraqi News](#), Jun 1, 2017). In many cases, Iraqi militias supported the al-Assad regime prior the formation of the PMC in 2014. Badr, for example, deployed 1,500 fighters to Syria in 2013 and some paramilitary groups have been created specifically to take part in the Syrian conflict ([Jihadology](#), October 18, 2013).

PMU support for al-Assad contravenes the Iraqi government interests and authority ([NTR](#), December 21, 2016). Instead, it advanced Iran’s IRCG-QF goals, which seek to dominate Iraq and continue its political and guerrilla activities in Syria, Lebanon and the Gulf States—and even reach as far as Nigeria, Azerbaijan and Pakistan. As the spokesperson for Harakat al-Nujaba, Bashar al-Saidi, noted: “It makes no difference whether we’re in Iraq or Syria ...We are all the followers of Khamenei and will go and fight to defend the holy sites and Shia everywhere” ([MERI: Middle East Research Institute](#), March 2017).

#### Political Influence

Finally, the rise of Iraq’s PMU may also have reverberations in the political arena. The PMU and their leaders have gained popularity since the liberation of Mosul, a trend that some militia leaders hope will translate into votes in Iraq’s 2018 elections.

Iraqi law bans militia groups from the political process, but this separation is difficult to maintain in practice. The Badr Organization, for example, is a political party with a paramilitary arm. Recently, numerous pro-Iranian militia leaders have resigned from their militias to comply with Iraqi law, but it is likely that they will indirectly continue to control their militia units ([Niqash](#), November 23, 2017). If Iranian proxies successfully capture a majority in parliament, Iraq could become an Iranian client state.

It was reported that as many as 62 PMU figures are preparing to stand in Iraq’s upcoming parliamentary and local elections ([The Baghdad Post](#), December 27 2017). Many of these figures are from Iranian-backed militias, including the Badr Organization, AAH, Harakat al-Nujaba, Kataib Hezbollah, Kataib Jund al-Imam and Kataib al-Tiar al-Rasali ([Iraqi News](#), December 26, 2017; [The Middle East Institute](#), December 15, 2017).

#### Three Ways Forward

The increasing involvement of PMU forces in Iraqi security, politics and foreign policy means the position of the groups in a post-IS Iraq will have a significant impact on Iraq’s future and that of the region. There are three possible approaches to managing the PMU that Iraq could explore.

First, PMU militia groups could be allowed to remain as independent units within the Iraqi security framework, an outcome favored by Iranian-backed proxies. It appeals to groups loyal to Khamenei because it offers the most flexibility to influence Iraqi politics and security and continue operations in Syria.

Second, the PMU militias could be disbanded, an option preferred by some Sunnis and Kurds. Al-Sadr too has called for all PMU militias, including his own, to be dissolved. In a televised speech late last year, he said: “We advise our brothers in all factions of the Hashd al-Shaabi to hand over their weapons to the federal government and work to strengthen it by enabling it to impose its control over all of Iraq’s territory” ([The Middle East Eye](#), December 11, 2017).

The third option, one favored by Prime Minister al-Abadi and Ayatollah al-Sistani, is that the PMU be incorporated into the Iraqi security structure, ideally under a single

chain of command that puts ultimate authority in the Iraqi government's hands

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## **NOTES**

[1] See: Al-Mawlawi, A, 'Iraq's 2017 Federal Budget: Key Features and Trends' Al-Bayan Centre for Planning and Studies available at: <http://www.bayancenter.org/en/2016/12/876/>