

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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p.1

*Jacob Zenn*

**BRIEFS**

p.3

*Idris Mohammed*

**No End in Sight for  
Insecurity and  
Banditry in  
Northwestern Nigeria**

p.6

*Sudha Ramachandran*

**Myanmar Militant  
Opposition Divided in  
Fight Against  
Tatmadaw**

p.8

*Rami Jameel*

**Iraqi Prime Minister  
Walks Tightrope  
Between Shia Militias  
and the United States**

## MILITANTS TARGET CHINESE NATIONALS IN THE SAHEL AND NIGERIA

*Jacob Zenn*

China is increasing its influence in West Africa. Most recently, on June 11, China's State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that Beijing plans to extend the Belt and Road Initiative to Burkina Faso in coordination with the latter's government. Further, China would provide support to Burkina Faso's efforts to combat COVID-19 and to counter terrorism ([news.cgtn.com](https://news.cgtn.com), June 11).

Only three days before Wang Yi's announcement, however, two Chinese gold miners were abducted in Niger, not far from the Burkina Faso border ([allafrica.com](https://allafrica.com), June 7). Although there has been no claim of the attack, Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) and al-Qaeda-affiliated Group for Supporters of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) both operate frequently in that border area. Niger's governor in the province of the abduction did not attribute the abduction to ISGS or JNIM, but they remain prime suspects ([Twitter.com/ChinaDailyWorld](https://twitter.com/ChinaDailyWorld), June 8). Since Burkina Faso cut its ties to Taiwan and established diplomatic relations to China in 2018, China has provid

ed agricultural support, such as for rice production, and begun mining operations for gold, uranium, and oil in the border area between Niger and Burkina Faso. As Beijing's presence in these areas grow, instances of jihadists and other armed bandits targeting Chinese nationals can only be expected to increase ([chinaafrica.cn](https://chinaafrica.cn), June 13).

Meanwhile, on April 7, two Chinese gold mine employees were also abducted in Osun State, southwestern Nigeria ([globaltimes.cn](https://globaltimes.cn), April 7). This attack was too far south to be attributable to Boko Haram, but was near oil-producing areas where various militants have long operated. Only one day before the gold mine abduction, on April 6, Nigerian authorities rescued two other Chinese agriculturalists in Ogun State in southern Nigeria ([vanguardngr.com](https://vanguardngr.com), April 6).

The above cases highlight how, as Chinese economic expansion continues in West Africa, security will become a greater concern for its nationals and possibly, as in Burkina Faso, lead to greater security collaboration between Beijing and the regional governments. Nevertheless, China has still not become a major focus of jihadist

attacks or rhetoric. The country, for example, was only briefly featured in an al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) video in 2009 that demanded revenge against China for its response to violence involving Uyghurs and Han Chinese in Xinjiang Province, but that video did not lead to any subsequent attacks on Chinese nationals ([alarabiya.net](http://alarabiya.net), July 14, 2009). Chinese citizens have only incidentally been caught up in AQIM attacks, such as the 2015 Radisson Blu hotel attack in Bamako, Mali that killed 27 people, including three Chinese nationals ([fm-prc.gov](http://fm-prc.gov), November 25, 2015).

Likewise, Boko Haram abducted nine Chinese engineers in northern Cameroon in 2014, but did not target them for their nationality nor did the group make any claims about their capture being related to Chinese foreign policy ([France24.com](http://France24.com), May 17, 2014). The Chinese engineers were, therefore, targets of opportunity and were eventually released for a ransom. It is thus not Boko Haram, but bandits and other criminals generally, who have become the greatest threat to Chinese nationals in West Africa thus far ([scmp.com](http://scmp.com), January 28, 2014). With the diverse threats to its citizens, Beijing will have to reassess whether a security dimension must increasingly accompany the Belt and Road Initiative and other economic projects in West Africa.

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## **MYSTERY SURROUNDS CAR BOMBING ON VENEZUELA-COLOMBIA BORDER MILITARY BASE**

*Jacob Zenn*

On June 16, videos emerged from Cúcuta on Colombia's eastern border with Venezuela of a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) detonation at the Colombian National Army's 30th Brigade military base ([Twitter.com/juscatogui](https://twitter.com/juscatogui), June 16). A reported 36 soldiers were injured in the explosion, which Defense Minister Diego Molano described as a "vile terrorist attack" during an emergency visit to the base ([telesurtv.net](http://telesurtv.net), June 15). Molano also blamed the left-wing rebel group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), for the VBIED attack, although without providing any specific evidence for that allegation.

The ELN is a natural suspect in the attack. In 2019, for example, the ELN carried out a similar VBIED attack on a police academy in Bogota that killed 21 people and injured 68 more ([semana.com](http://semana.com), January 18, 2019). Further, in 2020, the ELN announced that it was abandoning its ceasefire with the Colombian government, which means that the group is now actively conducting attacks against the army ([France24.com](http://France24.com), April 27, 2020). The 2019 attack was the most deadly VBIED attack in Colombian history since 2003, when a similarly styled explosion was set off by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) near a Bogota nightclub, killing 36 people ([eltiempo.com](http://eltiempo.com), February 7). Thus, it is rare, but not unforeseen, for left-wing rebels in Colombia to conduct VBIED attacks.

What was rare about this latest VBIED attack in Cúcuta, however, was that ELN denied any responsibility for the attack and said it had "nothing to do" with it ([elespectador.com](http://elespectador.com), June 18). This stands in contrast to the ELN's 2019 VBIED attack claim, when it stated that "the operation carried out against said installations and troops is lawful within the law of war, as there were no non-combatant victims" ([cbc.ca](http://cbc.ca), January 21, 2019; [laopcion.com.co](http://laopcion.com.co), January 21, 2019). Thus, without any evidence proving ELN's involvement in the Cúcuta VBIED attack or any claim from ELN, Molano's assertion that ELN was responsible is not verifiable.

If not the ELN, then drug traffickers operating along the Colombia-Venezuela border could possibly be responsible for the attack. However, such a VBIED attack would be unprecedented for drug traffickers in that area and makes them an unlikely suspect. Therefore, the attack remains a mystery and a potential source of conspiracy theories, given that Molano instinctively blamed the ELN. Such an allegation, for example, might be intended to provide just cause for a renewed army offensive against the group.

The VBIED attack also attracted additional attention from the United States because its troops were training Colombian soldiers in Cúcuta ([marinecorpstimes.com](http://marinecorpstimes.com), June 17). Although the U.S. embassy in Bogota issued a statement assuring that no U.S. soldiers were “seriously injured,” it noted U.S. military personnel were with a Colombian unit at the time of the explosion. Investigations remain ongoing regarding the attack, and it is likely the U.S. will be involved considering the VBIED attack posed a direct threat to U.S. personnel in the volatile border region between Colombia and Venezuela. It must also be recalled that in 2019 the U.S. had been involved in supporting politicians and activists opposing the Maduro regime in Venezuela, including through operations in Cúcuta ([miamiherald.com](http://miamiherald.com), February 8, 2019).

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## No End in Sight for Insecurity and Banditry in Northwestern Nigeria

*Idris Mohammed*

For half a decade, northwestern Nigeria has been facing serious insecurity, ranging from armed group violence to kidnappings and banditry, which has affected most of the population living in Zamafara, Katsina and Sokoto states. According to the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) Maradi, Niger office, as of June last year, the crisis had forced more than 80,000 civilians to flee their communities and find refuge in the Niger Republic ([HumAngle.ng](http://HumAngle.ng), July 17, 2020). Unfortunately, the Nigerian government’s response to the crises in the region has done little to alleviate the security concerns.

Nigeria’s North West region comprises seven states, including Zamafara, Katsina, and Sokoto, as well as Kano, Jigawa, Kaduna, and Kebbi. Endowed with a sizeable landmass of 216,065 square kilometers and a population estimated at approximately 35.8 million people, the region constitutes 25.75 percent of the total population of Nigeria ([National Population Commission](http://National Population Commission), 2006 census). The majority of the population are farmers, with others engaged in trade and commerce and animal husbandry.

The recent spate of banditry-related violence began in 2014 with cattle rustling activity, but the matter became worse in early 2016 when the bandits started killing local miners in Zamfara communities. However, the attacks now affect the entire North West region, especially the border area with Niger. In what has become a reoccurring tragedy, not only have thousands been killed, but women have been raped, children have become orphans, villages have been sacked and destroyed, farm produce has been destroyed, property has been stolen, and civilians have been kidnapped for ransom ([wanep.org](http://wanep.org), August 19, 2020).

This trend gradually spread to neighboring states, such as Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto, and Kebbi in 2019. As a result, these states established a committee headed by Muhammad Abubakar, a former inspector-general of police ([nationonlineng.net](http://nationonlineng.net), July 10, 2019). He estimated that between 2011 and 2019, 4,983 women were widowed, 25,050 children were orphaned, and more than 190,340 people were displaced in Zamfara due to

armed banditry. The former Governor of Zamfara state, Abdulaziz Yari, similarly reported that nearly 500 villages and 13,000 hectares of land were destroyed and 2,835 people were killed in his state between 2011 and 2018 ([HumAngle.ng](https://www.humangle.ng), August 2, 2020). The Rugu, Kamara, Kunduma, and Sububu forests in the North West region all have since become strategic areas for banditry groups to carry out their attacks.

### **Nigerian Government Responses From Military Operations to Dialogue**

The Nigerian government has launched multiple military operations in the North West region to curtail the banditry menace from 2019 to the present, including Operation Harbin Kunama and Exercise Sahel Sanity. The military operation Exercise Sahel Sanity, headquartered at the Special Army Super Camp IV in Faskari, Katsina state, led to the killing of 220 bandits and the rescue of 642 kidnapped victims from captivity. The troops also destroyed 197 bandits' enclaves, killed the notorious armed leader called "Dangote" of the eponymous "Dangote Triangle" in Katsina, and arrested 335 suspected bandits and 326 illegal miners in Kebbi, Kaduna, Niger, Zamfara and Katsina states ([This Day](https://www.thisday.ng), January 12).

In July 2020, Mustapha Inuwa, the Secretary to the Katsina State Government, announced that his state had spent about \$73,000 (or 30 million Nigerian nairas) on an amnesty program for repentant bandits and cattle rustlers before it collapsed. Inuwa further stated that the reason for the collapse of the peace deal was the bandits kept renegeing on agreements and betraying their promises to the government ([Premiumtimes.ng](https://www.premiumtimes.ng), June 3, 2020; [thecable.ng](https://www.thecable.ng), July 7, 2020).

The Katsina and Zamfara state governments also employed the services of non-state actors, like vigilante groups and Yan Sakai (Security Volunteers), to curtail the conflict. Although they possess knowledgeable insights and understanding of the local conflict, they are not without their negative sides. For example, some of the vigilante members have seized on the opportunity stemming from the conflict to attack personal enemies.

### **The Rise of Kidnapping for Ransom**

Kidnapping for ransom has become a particularly lucrative and attractive business to many in the North West region, especially among the many unemployed youths. Many residents lament how easily the armed banditry

groups storm their communities in broad daylight to either rustle cattle or kidnap people. The kidnapers no longer are interested in kidnapping ordinary villagers, however. Rather, they realize that attacking schools and inter-state transportation routes brings in more money. The region, for example, recorded at least six mass kidnappings of school children and university students in the past six months, including:

- In December 2020, there was an attack on Government Science Secondary School students in Kankara, Katsina State, where over 300 students were abducted by a group of armed men on motorcycles. The state government insisted that nothing was paid for the release of the students, but some residents confirmed that \$73,000 (30 million Nigerian naira) was released to the bandits ([HumAngle.ng](https://www.humangle.ng), December 12, 2020). The late Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau claimed his fighters in the North West region abducted the students, although the abductors had already contacted the state government on the issue of ransom payment before Shekau's faction released an exclusive video from the bandits' camp featuring the boys ([Terrorism Monitor](https://www.terrorism-monitor.com), January 15, 2021).
- In January, there was a kidnapping of more than 317 schoolgirls in Jangebe, Zamfara State. This came just a week after a similar kidnapping incident ([Daily Trust](https://www.dailytrust.com), January 6).
- On December 19, 2020, two days after the release of the Kankara schoolboys, bandits abducted over 80 Islamic school (*Islamiyya*) students in Dandume, Katsina State. The children were rescued after a vigilante group and volunteers intercepted them while they were trying to cross the forest ([HumAngle.ng](https://www.humangle.ng), December 20, 2020).
- Armed bandits stormed the Federal College of Forestry Mechanization in Mando, Kaduna State in March 2021 and abducted 39 students. The bandits demanded a \$1.2 million (500 million Nigerian nairas) ransom from the Kaduna State government, but after the governor, Nasir El-Rufai, failed to comply, they reached out to parents of the abducted students. The governor declared that no more payments of ransom would be made after the abduction and promised not to negotiate with any armed group ([guardian.ng](https://www.guardian.ng), March 15). Three weeks after the abduction the kidnapped students were released in a negotiation facilitated by Shaykh Ahmad Gumi's dialogue committee with support from former President Olusegun Obasanjo.

- In March 2021, an undisclosed number of primary school students in a village in Birnin Gwari, Kaduna State were abducted. A resident and father of one of the victims revealed that the children were rescued by vigilante groups a few days after the abduction ([TVC News](#), March 15).

- On April 23, students of Greenfield University in Kaduna State were abducted by bandits who demanded a ransom of \$1.9 million (800 million Nigerian naira). Five students were killed in captivity while 14 were released after a payment of \$438,000 (180 million Nigerian naira) ([guardian.ng](#), May 30).

- On June 10, an armed group invaded Nuhu Bamalli Polytechnic in Zaria, Kaduna State. One student was killed and eight people, including lecturers and students, were abducted, which caused the school's administrators to shut down academic activities immediately ([Punch](#), June 11).

- One week after the Nuhu Bamalli abduction, on June 17, another 102 students of Federal Government College in Birnin Yawuri, Kebbi State were abducted. The governor chose not to negotiate with the abductors and one male and one female student were killed, while five others were rescued after the Nigerian forces operating under Hadarin Daji intercepted the abductors. More than 80 armed bandits were reported killed by the troops with support from Nigerian air force and more than 800 rustled cattle were recovered. However, approximately 95 students remained in the custody of the armed bandits in the forest while vigilantes and volunteers mobilized for another rescue mission ([The Nation](#), June 19).

### **Paradoxes of Paying Bandits**

Nigerians are paying ransom to the kidnappers and banditry groups because they have seemingly lost interest in security intermediators whom they sometimes see as collaborators and informants to the armed groups. However, the paying of ransoms is motivating more bandits to join the kidnapping business because it involves millions of dollars and the government has failed to stop the insecurity ([Daily Trust](#), May 24). Some have even accused the government of sponsoring insecurity indirectly by paying ransoms. According to this perspective, a government serious about tackling the issue would not pay any money to criminal armed groups in the form of ransom for kidnappings because it is an of-

fence against citizens that require proactive and prompt security operatives to curb.

Regional banditry in North West Nigeria will be difficult to resolve if the government continues with its current strategy without considering the various factors involved in the conflict. First, explosive population growth and climate change in Nigeria are exacerbating economic anxiety and fomenting lawlessness, especially in communities bordering Niger. Moreover, there is unchecked border crossings between herder tribes, as there is virtually no restriction on movements in these border areas. Anyone in Niger can come to Nigeria, commit any crime, and go back to Niger. Furthermore, corruption plays a significant role as some security agencies collect bribes from Nigeriens and grant them access to Nigeria without a proper investigation.

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# Myanmar Militant Opposition Divided in Fight Against Tatmadaw

*Sudha Ramachandran*

On June 22, soldiers backed by armored vehicles clashed with fighters of the recently-formed People's Defense Force (PDF) in Mandalay, Myanmar's second largest city. This was the first time that the PDF has engaged the Tatmadaw, as the Myanmar military is known, in a major city ([Myanmar Now](#), June 22). Following the February 1 military coup, opposition to the junta took the form of non-violent street protests initially, and Mandalay was among the main centers of such demonstrations ([Myanmar Speaks](#), April 28; [The Irrawaddy](#), February 5). With the Tatmadaw employing extreme violence to quell these protests, Myanmar's citizens have increasingly turned to armed struggle and joined civilian militias that have sprung up across the country ([The Irrawaddy](#), April 2).

Until June 22, clashes between the Tatmadaw and these militias occurred only in rural and small towns in Myanmar. That has changed with the Mandalay shootout. While the steadily expanding geographic spread of militia activity will put the Tatmadaw under additional pressure, how effective will PDF fighters be in fighting the military?

## Myanmar's Array of Armed Outfits

Myanmar is not new to protests, armed resistance, or even civil war. The National League for Democracy (NLD) has been at the forefront of non-violent protests against military rule for decades. Besides NLD, activists of various alienated ethnic groups like the Kachin, Shan, and Karen have protested against the military and also civilian governments over various infrastructure projects that have excluded local communities or harmed their environment ([Myanmar Times](#), February 8, 2019). Dozens of ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) have also battled the Tatmadaw for decades in pursuit of greater autonomy or independence. Indeed, Myanmar has been in the grip of severe armed conflict for much of its post-independence era.

An array of armed groups are resisting the junta's rule currently. Dozens of militias have emerged following the coup to fight the junta. While many of these militias are in Bamar (Burmese)-dominated regions of Myanmar, several have arisen in the ethnic minority states too ([Asia Times](#), May 23). Besides this, Myanmar's government-in-exile, the National Unity Government (NUG), announced the formation of the PDF as its military wing on May 5 ([The Irrawaddy](#), May 5). Several of the new anti-junta militias, including those in the ethnic minority states, have joined with the PDF in the months since then. However, Myanmar's long-established ethnic minority organizations have reacted cautiously. Thus far, only the Chin National Front has agreed to join the PDF ([The Irrawaddy](#), May 31).

Whether on their own or as part of the PDF, new militias have met with some success in their clashes with the Tatmadaw. Shortly after its formation, on April 4, the Chinland Defense Force became the Chin local component of the PDF and took control of Mindat, a small town in the western Chin state. The junta's security forces were able to wrest back control over the town in mid-May, however ([The Irrawaddy](#), May 16). Other local units of the PDF have also ambushed several Tatmadaw convoys and targeted military posts and personnel, local government offices, and junta-appointed government functionaries ([The Hindu](#), May 7 and [The Irrawaddy](#), May 31).

## PDF's Many Shortcomings

While local units of the PDF have scored victories against the Tatmadaw, serious doubts about their capacity to engage the Tatmadaw in face-to-face encounters or survive over the long run exist because its fighters are poorly armed. The Chinland Defense Force, for instance, reportedly battled the Tatmadaw with slingshots and flintlock 'Tumee' rifles ([Radio Free Asia](#), May 23). Mindat only remained in its hands so long because its fighters were able to keep out Tatmadaw reinforcements from reaching the town. Once the Tatmadaw began ferrying troops and weapons into Mindat via helicopter, the Chin fighters were forced to flee.

Many PDF fighters are also urban youth, and unused to the hardships of living in jungles or even villages. Their forerunners, the All Burma Students Democratic Front

(ABSDF), which emerged in the wake of the military's 1988 coup, could not cope with the tough life of a guerrilla. Many lacked military skills and were homesick or succumbed to diseases they contracted in the jungles. Will today's generation of fighters survive the rigors of guerrilla life? Importantly, the PDF lacks military leadership to guide them in such an endeavor ([Asia Times](#), June 8).

Pitted against the local units of PDF is the Tatmadaw, Southeast Asia's second largest armed force with around 350,000 soldiers in its ranks. It has enormous experience in fighting its own people ([The Pioneer](#), April 5). It is also well-armed and, importantly, is not averse to using its arsenal against its citizens. When fighters of the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force ambushed and killed scores of soldiers on May 31, the Tatmadaw response was ferocious. It deployed helicopters, heavy artillery, and fighter jets to attack Karen villages ([The Irrawaddy](#), June 1).

### **EAO Support is Essential**

To emerge as a credible force against the Tatmadaw, the PDF will have to become a truly national force and raise more local units across Myanmar, including in the borderland areas. It will further need to secure the support of the better-equipped and battle-hardened EAOs. Some amount of co-operation is happening already. Many of the youth who fled to the borderland areas are receiving refuge, weapons and combat training from the EAOs ([The Irrawaddy](#), March 23). Recent attacks in Myanmar's predominantly Bamar regions reveal operational cooperation between Bamar-dominated anti-junta militias and EAOs. In late April, air force bases at Magway and Meiktila in Bamar-dominated central Myanmar came under rocket attack. While the EAOs like the Kachin Independence Army and the Karen National Liberation Army may have provided the missiles, the attack could not have been carried out without a measure of support from local Bamars. This indicates that some amount of cooperation is occurring between Bamar militias and the PDFs on one hand and the EAOs on the other ([Asia Times](#), May 23).

However, such cooperation is at the ground level and fluid. And while rare solidarity, driven by opposition to the junta, has been visible among Myanmar's ethnic groups since the coup, EAOs remain wary of overtures

by the Bamar-dominated NLD. In power, the NLD displayed little sympathy toward ethnic minority concerns and grievances ([Frontier Myanmar](#), October 10, 2019). Many NLD leaders were openly hostile toward the minority ethnic groups, and the NLD government neither consulted nor was willing to share power with them ([Myanmar Times](#), March 29, 2016). Further, the NLD did little to move forward its professed commitment to federalism, a key demand of the ethnic minorities ([Burma News International](#), May 29, 2020). Consequently, only a few EAOs believe that cooperation with the NLD now will yield a benefit to them should it return to power.

Western powers, meanwhile, have criticized the coup, condemned the generals' actions, and imposed economic and other sanctions on them ([The Irrawaddy](#), May 18). While they have extended support to the ousted NLD government, such support is largely verbal and limited to diplomatic support in the United Nations ([The Wire](#), March 7; [Frontier Myanmar](#), May 15). The United States is reportedly averse to military involvement in Myanmar at this point, given its negative experience in civil wars in Syria and Afghanistan, among others ([The Irrawaddy](#), June 4). Myanmar's neighbors are also not keen to fuel a civil war in Myanmar. India, for instance, is apprehensive of the potential blowback that instability would have for its own restive regions bordering Myanmar ([Hindustan Times](#), March 1). China is apprehensive over the future of projects in Myanmar linked to its Belt and Road Initiative. While the PDFs and the EAOs could purchase weapons from black markets in China and Thailand as they have in the past, these purchases would require the approval of governments in Beijing and Bangkok, which may not be forthcoming now ([Asia Times](#), May 23). The little they can purchase from the black market may not be enough to tilt the balance in their favor.

### **Conclusion**

The recent shootout in Mandalay signals not only an escalation of the ongoing crisis in Myanmar, but also that the armed conflict is entering Myanmar's main cities. The proliferation of armed anti-junta militias across the country and the geographic expansion of fighting will force the Tatmadaw to spread itself thin. However, so long as the EAOs and the PDF do not

unite, their attacks will at most hurt the Tatmadaw but not topple it from power.

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## **Iraqi Prime Minister Walks Tightrope Between Shia Militias and the United States**

*Rami Jameel*

One of the most critical issues in Iraq currently is the relationship between its Shia-led government and Iranian-backed Shia militias. This issue has been important for U.S. military strategy in the Middle East. The only two military actions ordered by President Joe Biden thus far were airstrikes on Iraqi Shia militias in February and more recently on June 27 ([skynewsarabia.com](https://www.skynewsarabia.com), June 28).

Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi has frequently expressed his goal of imposing the government's command over all armed forces, including the Shia militia umbrella organization, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). However, al-Khadimi is careful not to go too far in antagonizing the powerful militias and Iran. For their part, prominent militia leaders have been increasingly vocal in their criticism, and sometimes verbal attacks, on al-Kadhimi, who is a U.S.-backed moderate Shia leader. They accuse him of targeting the PMF to satisfy American pressure. Reports even exist that PMF leaders plan to remove al-Kadhimi from his position by a vote in the parliament coupled with a show of force on the ground ([aawsat.com](https://www.aawsat.com), June 3).

A recent incident shows once more how challenging the issue of reining in the militias is for al-Khadimi. On May 26, a special security unit that reports directly to al-Kadhimi arrested Qaasim Musleh, the commander of the strategically important western Iraq sector in the PMF. The government initially accused Musleh of corruption and involvement in the killing of anti-militia activists. However, other sources suggested that Musleh was arrested for possible involvement in a recent attempt to attack U.S. troops ([alaraby.co.uk](https://www.alaraby.co.uk), May 26).

Al-Kadhimi came under immense pressure from the militias who demanded the immediate release of their comrade. Musleh was only released weeks later with no charges made against him (June 9, [mawazin.net](https://www.mawazin.net)). This incident was the recent episode in a months-long struggle between al-Kadhimi and the militias.



## History of Tensions

Al-Kadhimi's relations with the Iranian-backed militias have been strained for a long time. Before assuming the position of prime minister, he was head of the Iraqi intelligence service (*Mukhabarat*). He was even accused by some PMF leaders of having some sort of involvement in the killing of General Qassim Soleimani, the head of the Quds Force of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC-QF). Soleimani was killed just outside the international airport in Baghdad shortly after he arrived in the Iraqi capital from Damascus on January 3, 2020. The deputy commander of the PMF, Jamal Jaafar al-Ibrahim, who is better known as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, was killed in the same airstrike ([iraninsider.net](https://iraninsider.net), July 31, 2020).

Such an accusation against al-Khadimi was particularly serious considering the degree of anger from PMF leaders and their desire for revenge for the killing of their two most senior leaders. Nevertheless, the tension did not escalate further and no evidence was presented to support the accusation against al-Kadhimi. On the other hand, another crisis was ongoing and causing worry and discomfort for the Iraqi ruling class. In the final months of 2019, a wave of street protests spanned Baghdad and predominantly Shia southern Iraq. The Shia militias were accused of spearheading the deadly crackdown on the protesters, who were themselves mostly Shia and demanded genuine reform and change in the system of government. Hundreds of protesters were killed, which led to the resignation of then-Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi, who was friendly to the militias and did not take serious steps to curtail their power ([skynewsarabia.com](https://skynewsarabia.com), December 1, 2020).

After weeks of deadlock, the Iraqi political factions, including the PMF, agreed to support the selection of al-Kadhimi as prime minister after al-Mahdi's resignation. In his position as head of intelligence, al-Kadhimi nurtured friendly relations with the United States, Western powers, and Sunni Muslim Arab countries in the Middle East. However, he also maintained friendly ties with Iran and was never confrontational in his dealings with the militias ([alarabiya.net](https://alarabiya.net), May 7, 2020).

## Clash of Responsibilities

The arrest of Qassim Musleh came after months of tension between the Iranian-backed militias and the United States. The Ain al-Assad base in western Iraq, which is the largest base in the country hosting U.S. troops, for example, was attacked with rockets on May 4 ([aljazeera.net](https://aljazeera.net), May 4). Moreover, attacks on U.S. bases became more frequent after the killing of Soleimani and al-Muhandis. President Biden, for his part, ordered his first military action against the Shia militias on February 26 after an attack on U.S. forces at another airbase in Erbil, the capital of the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region in northern Iraq. In an apparent attempt not to embarrass the Iraqi government, the U.S. strike targeted the Iraqi militias' position in Syria, where they have been fighting on the side of Bashar al-Assad's government for years ([alquds.co.uk](https://alquds.co.uk), February 26). However, the attacks on American troops did not stop there and, as a result, on June 27, newly launched airstrikes hit Iraqi Shia militias' positions in Syria and Iraq. This time, the ostensibly U.S.-backed al-Kadhimi had to condemn Washington's actions as a breach of Iraqi sovereignty ([dostor.org](https://dostor.org), June 28).

Increasing attacks on the U.S. troops, especially against the Ain al-Assad base, was inevitably going to cause further American responses. The arrest of Musleh could, therefore, have been a message to Musleh and the militias that they needed to stop attacking American bases. The PMF's Shia militias have taken a puzzling position on the issue of the attacks on the United States and Western targets. While they deny responsibility for any attack, at the same time they praise the attackers and state that such attacks are the right thing to do. A whole slew of new groups have emerged over the past two years of groups in statements that claim responsibility for the attacks. Those "new" groups have remained anonymous, but it is widely believed that they are part of the already existing Shia militia organization ([almadapaper.net](https://almadapaper.net), July 20, 2020).

On the political side of the debate, the Shia factions in parliament secured a decision in the wake of the killing of Soleimani that called for the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq. Both Sunni and Kurdish parties opposed a withdrawal, but the Shia factions have a majority in parliament ([albawaba.com](https://albawaba.com), January 5, 2020).

After becoming prime minister, al-Kadhimi has been under pressure from the PMF to negotiate withdrawal terms with the United States, but this is something he never showed much appetite to do.

In the crisis that followed the arrest of Musleh, al-Kadhimi appeared more confident than in his previous major confrontation with the militias. In June of last year, Iraqi security forces arrested a group of militia members from the powerful Kata'eb Hezbollah (KH) for their involvement in plotting attacks on U.S. and Western targets ([alsumaria.tv](http://alsumaria.tv), June 25, 2020). KH and other militias immediately deployed their men to Baghdad, including inside the heavily fortified Green Zone that hosts major government buildings and the prime minister's headquarters. That significant show of force in Baghdad was followed quickly by the release of the detained militia-men. They appeared in photos after their release, stepping on posters of al-Kadhimi ([eremnews.com](http://eremnews.com), June 29, 2020).

### **Corruption Accusations, Sistani, and Sadr**

The al-Kadhimi government's implication that Musleh was involved in corruption was not specific and evidence was not made public, but was still a clever move. The resentment against the major Shia militias in the PMF within the larger Iraqi Shia community is centered around corruption accusations. While the militias hoped for a revered status within their own community after their fight against the Islamic State (IS), they have found themselves in a different situation in recent years. The militias, for example became the center of Shia youth anger and protest against the government in 2019 through wide-scale street protests. The militias' decision to compete in the 2018 parliamentary election and join the government afterwards made them part of the much-resented political class that is accused of corruption.

The unit that arrested Musleh was called the "Anti-Corruption Commission" and is led by General Ahmed Abu Ragheef and reports directly and only to the prime minister. Government critics believe the Commission has not done anything meaningful because it has not made any serious moves against any of the influential leaders of the factions. However, it has been credited by others as being the most effective anti-corruption tool since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, due to fact that the

Commission has at least arrested mid-level government officials and sometimes convicted them ([aljazeera.net](http://aljazeera.net), April 21). Prominent militia leaders, who have long been accused of breaking the law and abusing their power, became fierce critics of the Commission, especially after the arrest of Musleh. They accordingly accused the prime minister of abusing power himself and ordering illegal arrests ([shafaq.com.ku](http://shafaq.com.ku), May 27).

Another factor that made the prime minister's move against Musleh possible was the latter's increasing differences with the circles of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most influential Shia cleric in Iraq. Musleh was for years the commander of the protection force of one of the most holy places for Shia Muslims, the shrine of Imam al-Hussein. The shrine is in Musleh's hometown of Karbala. During those years he was close to the custodian of the shrine and the personal representative of Sistani, Abdul-Mahdi al-Karbala'e. Musleh's protection force became a unit in the PMF and fought against the Sunni IS, which consolidated Musleh's position further but led to a clash with Karbala'e. After the defeat of IS, Sistani associates tried to split their groups from the PMF and become a part of the security forces, but Musleh was against such a move. The settlement of that conflict led to Musleh leaving Sistani's circle and embracing the larger faction of the PMF that is directly supported by Iran, and against integration into Iraqi national security forces ([epc.ae](http://epc.ae), May 30).

An important dimension of al-Kadhimi's relationship with the PMF is the support he enjoys from the anti-U.S. Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr ([aawsat.com](http://aawsat.com), January 14). Sadr controls the largest block in the Iraqi parliament and has significantly larger grassroots support than the PMF. He has maintained his militia, Saraya al-Salam (The Peace Brigades), independent from the PMF. Al-Sadr's claim is that he is free from any domestic or foreign influence, including that of Iran. However, he appears to have made his position as an ally of Iran stronger over the years. During a 2019 visit to Iran, for example, he was given the honor of sitting between the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Soleimani during a high profile religious occasion ([alaraby.co.uk](http://alaraby.co.uk), September 11, 2019).

For al-Sadr, the PMF are rivals within the Shia community. Nevertheless, he joined them in supporting the decision to call for the U.S. withdrawal. When it came to his

position regarding the anti-government street protests that were condemned by PMF militias, he first showed sympathy toward the protesters. However, he later turned against the protests and his loyalists played a key role in ending them.

## Conclusion

Critics of al-Kadhimi and of the entire political system in Iraq cite the Musleh saga as an example of how ineffective the government's actions are. They believe that Musleh was given preferential treatment in detention and point out that he was eventually released without charges. However, al-Kadhimi has made more of an effort than previous prime ministers to rein in the Shia militias. Al-Kadhimi was selected as a compromise interim-prime minister trusted to organize parliamentary elections (now scheduled to be held on October 10, 2021) and any further action could well jeopardize his political position. He also seems to be concerned that more tensions could cause an all-out civil war within the Shia community.

On June 26, the PMF organized a parade for its annual anniversary celebration. The parade was attended by al-Kadhimi and prominent members of his cabinet. The meetings between the prime minister and the PMF leaders in the parade seemed quite cordial, especially between the leader of KH and the PMF chief of staff, Abdul-Azis al-Muhammadawi (better known as Abu Fadak) ([almahjar.net](http://almahjar.net), June 26).

Even for Sistani associates and for al-Kadhimi himself, dissolving the Iranian-backed faction of the PMF is not a strategic goal. The PMF is, after all, a Shia power and when the Iraqi security forces disintegrated in face of IS's sweeping advances in 2014, it was clear that the Shia domination of the government and security forces in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq still might not be enough to protect their community and the whole of Iraq. The attempts to rein in the PMF will probably always be within certain limits, and the Iranian-backed militias will continue to be a matter of concern for the Shia religious leadership and the Shia-led government. The militias, however, are not their enemy.

Despite its condemnation of the U.S. airstrike in June, the Iraqi government is still dependent on U.S. military and strategic support. The relationship between the two

countries has not entered into a crisis, but Washington is determined to strike back against the militias' attacks in the name of self-defense. This complicates Shia politics and will make it difficult for the United States to achieve clarity in setting its military strategy. American strikes will also make it even more difficult to define the basic terms of the country's relationship with Iraq's neighborhood.

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