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LAYING DOWN OF ARMS BY MILITIA GROUPS IN IRAQ: DRIVERS, FRAGMENTATION AND HYBRIDIZATION

FEYZULLAH TUNA AYGÜN I SERCAN ÇALIŞKAN

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CONTENTS

3 INTRODUCTION

5 MEANING OF THE DISARMAMENT DECISION

9 U.S. PRESSURE ON MILITIA GROUPS AND THE GOVERNMENT PROGRAM

13 RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY, DOMESTIC LEGITIMACY AND SHIITE POLITICAL DYNAMICS

17 CONTINUATION OF INTEGRATION AND HYBRIDIZATION

21 CONCLUSION

INTRODUCTION

The announcement by Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Saraya al-Salam and Kataib Imam Ali that they are prepared to withdraw from the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, also known as the Hashd al-Shaabi) and hand over their weapons to the Iraqi state marks one of the most significant developments in Iraq's post-DAESH security landscape. Established after the DAESH seized Mosul in 2014, the PMF gradually evolved into a force of roughly 200,000 armed personnel with a massive budget. Beyond serving as a security force, it has become one of the main pillars of Iraq's Shiite political order. As such, the decision represents more than an institutional choice by the three groups; it signals a redefinition of the relationship between the state and armed actors in Iraq.

The way the decision was announced is as significant as its substance. By framing the move in terms of "the country's interests" and "the guidance of the religious authority," the groups sought to present disarmament not as a response to external pressure but as a step shaped by Iraq's own political and religious legitimacy mechanisms. Given the influence of the Najaf-based religious authority in Iraqi politics, this emphasis also serves a critical role in preserving the groups' social support.

At the same time, assessing the political context of the decision and its implications for Iraq's security landscape requires an understanding of the country's security architecture. Since 2003, the boundaries between state institutions and armed groups in Iraq have become increasingly blurred. Although the PMF were formally incorporated into the state's security apparatus under legislation passed in 2016, many of the factions within the organization have continued to maintain their own command structures, political ties and economic resources. As a result, the current debate over the handover of weapons extends beyond a military or administrative measure; it forms part of a broader discussion about the scope of state authority.

The key question, therefore, is whether Iraq is genuinely moving toward dismantling armed groups or simply repositioning them within the state. If the process results in the elimination of independent armed capabilities, the centralization of the chain of command and the transfer of all security decision-making to state institutions, it would mark a significant strengthening of Iraq's state capacity. If, however, the weapons are formally transferred to the state while these groups retain their own command structures, political influence and organizational networks, the outcome would amount to little more than militias operating under a different guise. The significance of the decision, therefore, lies less in the announcement itself than in how it is implemented. While the move represents an important milestone in Iraq's long-standing effort to establish the state's monopoly on the use of force, the ultimate outcome will depend on the nature of the new relationship between the state and these armed groups.

This study examines the disarmament and integration process of militia groups in the context of Iraq's domestic political dynamics, U.S. influence over Baghdad and the evolving landscape of Shiite legitimacy. It first explores the conditions that gave rise to the disarmament decision and its implications within the PMF. It then examines U.S. pressure on militia groups alongside the security vision of the Zaidi government. The study also analyzes the role of the Najaf-based religious authority and the competition among Shiite political actors. Finally, it assesses the hybridization of militia groups in light of their disarmament and emerging institutional role.

Iraqi Prime Minister Zaidi, as Commander-in-Chief, chairs the National Security Meeting.

MEANING OF THE DISARMAMENT DECISION

Iraq has entered a new phase in the process of disarming militia groups within the PMF and integrating them into various state institutions. Although the future of the PMF has been the subject of extensive debate over the past decade, initiatives launched under the governments of Mustafa al-Kadhimi and Mohammed Shia al-Sudani failed to produce tangible results. The current phase, however, may mark a turning point, with militia groups expected to surrender their weapons and their personnel redistributed across different state security institutions, effectively diminishing the PMF's role. Driven by regional transformations stemming from wars and crises, as well as shifting political dynamics within Iraq, the government formed by Ali al-Zaidi on May 14, 2026, began taking concrete steps on the issue during its first month in office.

The first major endorsement of the Zaidi government's policy of bringing militia weapons under state control came from Muqtada al-Sadr. On May 28, 2026, Sadr announced that Saraya al-Salam, the militia group affiliated with his movement, had joined military units under state control.[1] A similar statement came on June 2, 2026, from Qais al-Khazali,

1 Mâzâ ya'nî i'lânu's-Sadr demce "Serâyâ es-Selâm" fi'd-Devleti'l-Irâkiyye?", *Al Jazeera, May 28, 2026.*

the leader of Asaib Ahl al-Haq. Khazali announced that Asaib Ahl al-Haq had severed its ties with the PMF organizational structure, handed over its weapons to the state and accepted that arms should be held exclusively under the state's monopoly.[2]

Although Sadr has long argued that state sovereignty should extend to militia groups as well, Khazali's statement carries particular significance because of his shift in position. Khazali is one of Iraq's most symbolic figures, known for his close ties to Iran and his hardline anti-U.S. rhetoric. Therefore, this move by Asaib Ahl al-Haq, under Khazali's leadership, represents a turning point in demonstrating that one of the most influential groups within the PMF in terms of its military, political and bureaucratic weight has accepted state authority. However, this shift is less a result of the Baghdad government's deterrent power than of the pragmatic policies pursued by Khazali, who has accurately assessed changing regional and domestic dynamics. The U.S. pressure on the Baghdad government to "dismantle militia structures and integrate them into the state,"[3] combined with Iran's regional loss of influence, has pushed Shiite groups within the PMF to seek new positions in Iraq. The most concrete outcome of this shift has been Asaib Ahl al-Haq's announcement that it had severed ties with the umbrella organization and would fully hand over its weapons to the state.[4]

The regional shifts resulting from wars and crises, as well as efforts to reposition themselves within Iraq's domestic political landscape, are also relevant to other armed militia groups close to Iran.

The factors that pushed Asaib Ahl al-Haq to disarm may also apply to other militia groups. The regional shifts resulting from wars and crises, as well as efforts to reposition themselves within Iraq's domestic political landscape, are also relevant to other armed militia groups close to Iran. Following the establishment of the Zaidi government, the process was placed on a more institutional footing through the "Central Committee for Separation and Integration,"[5] established under the coordination of the Prime Minister's Office and the PMF Commission. In this context, Kataib Imam Ali, one of the other major Iran-aligned militia groups within the PMF, joined the committee after issuing a supportive statement confirming that it recognized state authority and would comply

2 "Iraq's Asaib Ahl al-Haq to Disengage from Popular Mobilization Forces, Place Weapons under State Control," *Anadolu Agency, June 2, 2026.*

3 Feyzullah Tuna Aygün, "ABD/İsrail-İran Savaşı ve Irak'ta Milis Ekosisteminin Dönüşümü," *ORSAM, April 7, 2026.*

4 "Asa'ib Begins Procedures to Sever Ties with the Popular Mobilization Forces and Join the Commander-in-Chief," *Al Sharqiya, June 2, 2026.*

5 "Asâib Ehl el-Hak" fi'l-Irâk a'lenet teşkîle lecnetin merkeziyyetin li-fekki'l-irtibât bi'l-Haşdi'ş-Şa'bî ve hasri's-silâh bi-yedi'd-devle," *Al-Nashra, June 2, 2026.*

with the decision to place weapons under the state's monopoly.[6]

There are also armed militia groups that have not joined the committee and have shown resistance to the handover of weapons. Akram al-Kaabi, the leader of the Nujaba movement (Harakat al-Nujaba), one of the major Shiite militia groups within the PMF, has openly opposed the government's policies, stating, "Our weapons are a red line and will not be handed over as long as we have breath."[7] Considering the existence of numerous proxy militia groups under the control of Harakat al-Nujaba, it can be expected that a center of resistance will emerge against the Zaidi government's steps. However, at a time when mainstream groups such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Imam Ali are adopting a cautious approach, the impact of the resistance that may be mounted by Harakat al-Nujaba and its allies could remain limited.

6 "Iraq Begins Merging Kataib Imam Ali into State Forces," *Shafaq News, June 10, 2026.*

7 "eş-Şeyh el-Ka'bî: Silâhu'l-Mukāveme hattun ahmer ve len yuselleme mâ dâme fînâ nefes," *Al-Ahad News, June 5, 2026.*

U.S. PRESSURE ON MILITIA GROUPS AND THE GOVERNMENT PROGRAM

Iraqi lawmakers attend a parliamentary session in which Prime Minister-designate Ali al-Zaidi and most members of his cabinet received a vote of confidence in Baghdad, Iraq, May 14, 2026.

With U.S. President Donald Trump assuming office, one of Washington's main policies toward Iraq has been to neutralize Iran-aligned militia groups and integrate them into the state, thereby distancing them from Iran's mechanisms of control.[8] In this context, particularly after Iraq's parliamentary elections on Nov. 11, 2025, Tom Barrack, the U.S. ambassador to Ankara and special envoy for Syria, became the leading representative of U.S. policy in the formation of the Zaidi government by playing an active role in the government-building process in Baghdad. Indeed, Barrack's engagements in Baghdad were shaped both by the goal of producing an Iraqi government as distant from Iran as possible and by efforts to neutralize militia groups.

Immediately after the formation of the government, a new phase began in efforts to put this policy into practice, and the Trump administration decided that Barrack would remain the figure overseeing the process. Indeed, shortly after the establishment of the Zaidi government, Iraq was added to Barrack's official portfolio, and he was appointed as the "U.S. Representative for Syria and Iraq."[9]

Iran's loss of influence in the regional balance of power has directly reinforced the pressure the U.S. is seeking to exert on Iraq. Seeking to capitalize on the opportunities created by this decline in Iran's influence, the Trump administration has used Barrack to establish a pressure mechanism aimed first at neutralizing militia groups. However, the issue of dismantling militia structures should also be understood as one of the key building blocks for establishing a strong central authority in Iraq. Barrack's statements indicate that his core policy objective for both Iraq and Syria is the creation of strong central governments free from uncontrolled armed groups. Although it remains an open question whether the Zaidi

8 Sercan Çalışkan, "Trump'ın İkinci Dönemi Irak'ta Neleri Değiştirebilir?", *Policy Brief no. 256, November 2024.*

9 "Trump, Tom Barrack'ı Türkiye ve Suriye görevlerinin yanı sıra Irak Özel Temsilcisi olarak atadı," *Anadolu Agency, May 31, 2026.*

government will be the actor capable of achieving this in Iraq, it is clear that concrete steps in this direction are expected from the Zaidi administration.

At this point, the Zaidi government's program presents an approach that partially aligns with U.S. expectations while also taking Iraq's existing balance of power into account. The program's core vision is built around "a stable state, a productive economy and balanced partnerships," with the strengthening of state sovereignty and national security identified as its primary focus.[10] Issues such as placing weapons under state control, centralizing security decision-making mechanisms, strengthening border security and combating organized crime are consistent with the U.S. objective of strengthening state capacity in Iraq, an outcome Washington has long sought.

At the same time, the government program presents a framework that envisions redefining militia groups within the state system rather than completely dismantling them. In particular, the provisions concerning the PMF aim to improve the capabilities of its personnel, define their duties and responsibilities on a legal basis, and institutionalize their position within the security system. While this approach partially aligns with U.S. expectations, it does not envision the complete exclusion of Iran-aligned armed actors. Therefore, the Zaidi government has adopted an approach that seeks to strengthen state authority and centralize security decision-making while also maintaining existing political and security balances.

The dimension of the government program concerning militia groups could become an important tool for managing U.S. pressure. The Zaidi government identifies strengthening the state's authority over the security sector and ensuring that armed groups are subject to oversight within an institutional framework as among its primary objectives. In this context, goals such as professionalizing security institutions, strengthening command-and-control mechanisms and ensuring that armed actors operate under state authority have come to the forefront. However, the program also maintains an approach that envisions reorganizing existing structures within the state system rather than completely dismantling Iran-aligned Shiite armed groups. This indicates that Zaidi is seeking to avoid a hardline policy of eliminating militia groups and instead pursue a strategy centered on integration and oversight.

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10 Feyzullah Tuna Aygün and Marwa Jamal, "Irak Başbakanı Ali Ez-Zeydi'nin Hükûmet Programı ve Sınırlılıklar," *Analysis no. 338, June 2026.*

On the other hand, the government program also addresses limiting the influence of militia groups through financial and institutional measures.[11] Objectives such as restructuring the budgets and personnel frameworks of security institutions, overseeing the economic and administrative activities of non-state armed actors, increasing financial transparency and strengthening the institutional capacity of public institutions are important in this regard. Given the influence of armed groups over economic networks and financial resources, these reform areas also carry significance for reestablishing state authority alongside administrative transformation.

However, the feasibility of the program depends largely on political consensus and existing power dynamics. The Zaidi government program sets out certain objectives aimed at restructuring militia groups under state authority and strengthening centralized control in the security sector. At the same time, the program adopts a pragmatic approach that envisions reorganizing the PMF and other armed actors while preserving their position within the state system. Therefore, the Zaidi government's main challenge in the coming period will be to establish a sustainable balance between its goal of strengthening state authority and the existing influence of Shiite political and armed actors.

11 Feyzullah Tuna Aygün and Marwa Jamal, "Irak Başbakanı Ali Ez-Zeydi'nin Hükûmet Programı ve Sınırlılıklar," *Analysis no. 338, June 2026.*

RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY, DOMESTIC LEGITIMACY AND SHIITE POLITICAL DYNAMICS

Members of the Shiite Coordination Framework convene to establish a common position.

Shiite politics in Iraq is undergoing a clear process of fragmentation. This divide first became evident with the withdrawal of the Sadrist Movement from politics. However, it became more visible during the government formation negotiations within the Shiite Coordination Framework. The power struggle among Shiite political actors has led to competition between differing understandings of the state, security and legitimacy. More concretely, the alignments that emerged around Nouri al-Maliki's candidacy for prime minister demonstrated which actors had adopted a state-centered approach and which continued to view the axis of armed resistance as a fundamental element of political influence.

In this process, one side has consisted of political actors seeking to balance relations between the U.S. and Iran, respond to international pressure and strengthen Iraq's state capacity; while the other has been made up of circles that prioritize opposition to the U.S., advocate preserving the current position of armed groups and insist on a prime minister position under Maliki or a similar figure. As a result, the divide in Shiite politics has not been limited to personal or organizational rivalries but has evolved into a struggle between competing visions over what kind of state structure Iraq should have in the future.

During the government formation negotiations within the Shiite Coordination Framework, Sudani and Ammar al-Hakim opposed Maliki's candidacy. Later, with Khazali moving closer to this position,[12] a more pragmatic and balancing bloc emerged within Shiite politics. This bloc adopted a more flexible approach toward Iraq's regional and international relations while identifying the strengthening of state institutions and bringing armed groups under control as among its primary objectives. The support provided to this approach

12 "Under US Pressure, Iraq's Ruling Shiite Alliance Edges toward Break with Maliki," *Amwaj Media, February 24, 2026.*

by prominent Sunni political figures, including Iraqi Parliament Speaker Haibat al-Halbousi and his cousin Mohammed al-Halbousi, leader of the Taqaddum Party, also contributed to the formation of an effective political alliance during the government formation process.

The role played by Faiq Zaidan, the head of Iraq's Supreme Judicial Council, in this process is also particularly noteworthy. Zaidan's influence over judicial institutions provided significant institutional support to the Sudani, Hakim, Khazali and Halbousi axis during the government formation negotiations. Ultimately, Zaidan became one of the decisive factors in shaping the government. Today, efforts to disarm militias and integrate them into state institutions are also advancing largely with the support of the same political and institutional circles. An examination of the activities of the Central Committee for Separation and Integration, expectations toward militia groups and the management of the process clearly demonstrates the support Zaidan and Halbousi have provided for the government's policies. In contrast, the institutional weight of the Shiite Coordination Framework appears to have become more limited compared with previous periods, while decision-making authority has increasingly shifted toward a government-centered structure.

The role played by Faiq Zaidan, the head of Iraq's Supreme Judicial Council, in this process is also particularly noteworthy. Zaidan's influence over judicial institutions provided significant institutional support to the Sudani, Hakim, Khazali and Halbousi axis during the government formation negotiations. Ultimately, Zaidan became one of the decisive factors in shaping the government.

However, interpreting the divisions within Iraq's Shiite structures solely through the lens of power struggles among political actors would be incomplete. An important dimension of this divide is also shaped by different sources of legitimacy and religious-political references. At this point, the influence of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the line represented by the Najaf seminary should not be overlooked. The Najaf seminary has taken a cautious approach toward armed groups becoming alternatives to state institutions and argues that weapons should ultimately remain under the control of state authority.[13] Although Najaf has not explicitly called for the complete dismantling of militia groups, its support for the principle of the state's monopoly over the use of force provides an indirect basis of legitimacy for policies of integration and institutionalization.

Therefore, Shiite political actors supporting the disarmament and integration process are aligning their policies not only with the government program or international pressure but also with Najaf's state-centered approach. In contrast, Iran-aligned armed groups and their political

13 Suadad al-Salhy, "Iraqi Shia Leader Sistani Moves to Break Iran's Grip over Militia Movement," *Middle East Eye, May 1, 2020.*

affiliates derive their legitimacy primarily through narratives centered on "resistance," the "axis of resistance," opposition to the U.S. and the struggle against Israel. As a result, an increasingly distinct competition has emerged within Iraqi Shiism between two different political narratives: one centered on the state and the other on resistance.

This indicates that the division within Shiite domestic politics is also a struggle over legitimacy. The state-centered approach represented by figures such as Sudani, Hakim and, to some extent, Khazali seeks to build support around concepts such as strengthening state institutions, ensuring economic stability, international normalization, sovereignty and the rule of law. In contrast, the resistance-oriented approach represented by groups such as Kataib Hezbollah, Harakat al-Nujaba and similar organizations emphasizes "the fight against the DAESH," "the sacrifices of the PMF," "opposition to the U.S." and "the preservation of the regional resistance axis." Therefore, the debate over militia groups laying down their arms extends beyond the issue of disarmament or integration and can also be viewed as a broader struggle over which political narrative will be recognized as more legitimate.

The emergence of disarmament debates has also been influenced by the transformation of the historical sources of legitimacy of the PMF. After 2014, the PMF's most important source of legitimacy was the threat posed by the DAESH and Sistani's *fatwa* calling for jihad. However, with the DAESH largely neutralized, the conditions created by the wartime period have weakened, and the continued existence of armed structures on the same grounds has increasingly come under scrutiny. Pro-government Shiite actors have used these changing circumstances to argue that Iraq has moved from a period of war to a period of state-building and that armed groups must therefore adapt to this new reality.

The other faction within Shiite politics, consisting of Maliki, Humam al-Hamoudi, Abu Alaa al-Walai and Hadi al-Amiri, has taken a more cautious approach toward the disarmament process. Although Maliki has occasionally made statements regarding placing weapons under state control, he remains outside the current process due to his exclusion from the government and limited influence over decision-making mechanisms. Hadi al-Amiri, the leader of the Badr Organization with a background dating back to the Iran-Iraq War period, has also adopted a cautious stance in the disarmament debate. This situation indicates that, as during the government formation process, Maliki and Amiri continue to align along similar lines within the Shiite Coordination Framework.

The debate over militia groups laying down their arms extends beyond the issue of disarmament or integration and can also be viewed as a broader struggle over which political narrative will be recognized as more legitimate.

On the other hand, Kataib Hezbollah and Harakat al-Nujaba, two influential armed groups within the PMF, are taking this position further on the ground. These groups are openly opposed to disarmament and integration efforts. Therefore, the success of the government's policies will depend not only on political consensus but also on the level of resistance these groups demonstrate.

At this point, the Najaf seminary's mechanism of "silent approval" — avoiding direct intervention while still exerting influence — has also become important. In Iraqi politics, many actors seek not necessarily to secure the explicit support of the religious establishment during critical periods, but rather to avoid facing its open opposition. The government's policies aimed at strengthening state authority and integrating armed groups appear to be largely aligned with Najaf's state-centered approach, which it has advocated for many years. Therefore, from the perspective of government circles, the religious establishment's silent support serves as an important source of legitimacy.

In the context of Shiite politics, the divide in Iraq is more than an ideological competition among political actors or a disagreement between the government and militia groups. It represents a current reflection of the struggle for influence between the Najaf-centered state-oriented Shiism and the security-centered Shiite political approach represented by armed resistance movements. Iraq is entering a critical phase of disarmament and integration amid this multilayered fragmentation within Shiite politics. Although the parties are currently avoiding direct confrontation and maintaining controlled rhetoric, the possibility that some militia groups could escalate their resistance to a military level and that the government could respond with strict security measures should not be overlooked, as this could transform the existing political competition into a more serious crisis and potential conflict.

Dozens of people, gathered protest that Iraq has frozen the movable and immovable assets of Lebanon's Hezbollah and Yemen's Houthis on the grounds that they "participated in terrorist acts," Basra, Iraq, Dec. 4, 2025

CONTINUATION OF INTEGRATION AND HYBRIDIZATION

The disarmament of militia groups and their integration into state institutions in Iraq initially appears to indicate the strengthening of state authority and the centralization of the security sector. However, considering Iraq's post-2003 experience, integration processes have not always resulted in the dismantling of armed actors. On the contrary, in many cases, the boundaries between the state and armed groups have been redefined, with these groups losing their position outside the state while maintaining their influence within it. The most striking example of this has been the Badr Organization. The integration of Badr Brigade members into the federal police force in 2005 led to the "Badrization" of the federal police force.14 Therefore, the process that has begun today should be viewed not only from the perspective of disarmament but also as a new phase of hybridization.

To understand the current position of Shiite militia groups in Iraq, it is also necessary to emphasize that viewing these structures merely as proxy actors directed by Iran is insufficient. Particularly after the DAESH period, the institutionalization process of the PMF has transformed militias into actors that are both part of the security architecture and possess their own political, economic and social networks.15 Therefore, debates over disarmament and integration go beyond the issue of reducing military capabilities and represent a redefinition of the relationship between the state and these hybrid structures. Indeed, many militia groups today continue to operate as influential actors not only through their armed forces but also through their parliamentary representation, connections within the bureaucracy, access to economic resources and capacity for social mobilization.

In Iraq, hybridization refers to the ability of non-state armed actors to become integrated into state institutions rather than being

14 "Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State," *Crisis Group, July 30, 2018.*

15 Feyzullah Tuna Aygün, "Irak'taki Şii Milislerin Hibritleşmesi: İran'ın Vekilleri mi, Özerk Aktörler mi?", *ORSAM, March 3, 2026.*

completely eliminated, allowing them to simultaneously use both formal and informal sources of power. The PMF gaining legal status in 2016 represents one of the clearest examples of this model. During this process, many groups began receiving salaries from the state budget, operating as part of the official security structure and gaining legal legitimacy. At the same time, militia groups maintained their own leadership networks, political organizations and social bases. As a result, a new intermediate form emerged between the state and the non-state sphere.

After the DAESH period, the institutionalization process of the PMF has transformed militias into actors that are both part of the security architecture and possess their own political, economic and social networks.

This transformation has enabled militia groups to establish a more permanent position within Iraq's political and economic structures beyond the security sector. Through their relationships with state institutions, militia-affiliated actors have gained access to decision-making processes through parliamentary seats, ministerial positions, local governments and bureaucratic posts. At the same time, access to public resources, procurement processes, logistical networks and areas of local influence has increased these groups' capacity for influence. Therefore, the integration process being discussed today does not primarily represent the incorporation of armed groups that previously operated outside the state into state structures; rather, it largely involves the restructuring of the positions of actors that have already become embedded within the state.

The steps taken by Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Saraya al-Salam and Kataib Imam Ali also raise the possibility of a similar transformation. If the integration process remains limited to transferring weapons to the state and redistributing personnel across different security institutions, the political and social influence of these groups will not disappear. On the contrary, they may continue to access decision-making mechanisms through cadres serving within state institutions. In such a scenario, while their armed capacity may appear to diminish, their institutional influence would continue through different channels.

In this scenario, the transformation of militia groups will occur through repositioning rather than dismantlement. Particularly for groups with broad political representation, such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq, the decline of armed power could be accompanied by an expansion of bureaucratic and political influence. It could even be argued that some militia groups have initiated the disarmament process as part of an effort to strengthen their position in the political sphere. Similar to Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Saraya al-Salam is expected to maintain its influence through the Sadrist movement's capacity for social

mobilization, while Kataib Imam Ali may continue to exert influence through its connections within the security bureaucracy. Therefore, placing weapons under the state's monopoly does not necessarily mean that these actors' influence in Iraqi politics will automatically diminish.

In addition, the assumption that the integration process will bring all militia activities under state control should be assessed with caution. Iraq's experience shows that armed structures institutionalized within the state have, at times, been able to preserve their room for maneuver through different names, networks or informal mechanisms. Particularly during periods of heightened regional tensions, some groups may be likely to operate through more flexible and deniable "shadow militia groups" rather than acting under their own names. This could result not in the complete elimination of armed capabilities, but rather in a reduction of their visibility and a change in their methods of operation. Therefore, the success of integration will be measured not only by the handover of weapons but also by the extent to which independent command structures and parallel decision-making mechanisms are eliminated.

In a model where hybridization continues, the state is not an entirely independent actor in this process either. Due to the nature of Iraq's political system, there is significant fluidity between security institutions, political parties and centers of social power. Therefore, the integration process should be understood not only as a mechanism through which the state transforms militias, but also as a process of mutual transformation in which militia-affiliated actors influence state institutions. In other words, while the state attempts to transform armed groups by incorporating them into its structure, the institutional culture and political influence of these groups also penetrate the state apparatus.

This situation is also important in terms of the factor of Iranian influence in Iraq. The recent decline in Iran's regional influence and the increasing autonomy of Shiite actors in Iraq have been changing the nature of hybrid structures. Some groups that were previously viewed as Iran's proxy forces have begun to act more according to Iraq-centered calculations as Iran's regional influence has declined. However, this does not mean that they have completely transformed into independent actors. On the contrary, the process of hybridization allows these structures to integrate into state institutions while maintaining their external connections to a certain extent. For many groups, the historical, ideological and organizational ties established with Iran have

The steps taken by Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Saraya al-Salam and Kataib Imam Ali also raise the possibility of a similar transformation. If the integration process remains limited to transferring weapons to the state and redistributing personnel across different security institutions, the political and social influence of these groups will not disappear.

not completely disappeared. Nevertheless, it appears that interests within Iraqi domestic politics, institutional gains and established spheres of influence have become more decisive in decision-making processes. Therefore, the advancement of integration may pave the way not for the complete end of Iranian influence, but for its continuation in more indirect, institutionalized and less visible forms.

The ultimate outcome of the disarmament and integration process that has begun in Iraq will depend less on the handover of weapons itself and more on the nature of the new relationship established between the state and these groups. If the process evolves into a model in which independent command structures are eliminated and political and military decision-making mechanisms come entirely under state control, this would represent a significant step toward state-building. However, if a situation emerges in which groups preserve their organizational identities, political influence and institutional networks while gaining new positions within the state, it would be more accurate to conclude that hybridization in Iraq's security system is continuing in a different form. Therefore, current developments should be understood less as the complete disappearance of militias and more as a sign of a reshaping distribution of power within the Iraqi state. The fundamental issue facing Iraq is not simply whether armed groups exist, but rather the extent to which the autonomy of these hybrid structures vis-à-vis state authority can be limited and how much the gray areas between the state and non-state actors can be narrowed.

Iraqi Shiite militia groups organize a military parade as part of the 'World Quds Day' events in Baghdad, Iraq, March 28, 2025.

CONCLUSION

The announcements by Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Saraya al-Salam and Kataib Imam Ali that they are ready to hand over their weapons to the state represent an important turning point for the future of Iraq's security sector. This decision demonstrates that the PMF structure, which gained influence in the post-DAESH period, can no longer be sustained within the same institutional and political framework. However, interpreting this development directly as the dismantling of militia groups would mean overlooking the complex nature of state-armed group relations in Iraq. The real significance of the process lies in the redefinition of the relationship between armed actors and the state.

Within this framework, three main dynamics appear to have played a role in the emergence of the disarmament decision. First, the decline in Iran's regional influence and the increase in U.S. pressure on Iraq pushed Iran-aligned Shiite armed actors to seek a new position. Second, the Zaidi government's program, with its emphasis on state sovereignty, national security and placing weapons under state control, provided the process with an institutional foundation. Third, the indirect support given by the Najaf-centered religious establishment for state authority strengthened the domestic legitimacy of the decision to lay down arms. Therefore, this development emerged at the intersection of external pressure, government policy and the search for legitimacy within Shiite politics.

Despite this, whether the process will succeed depends less on the nature of the announcements and more on how implementation is carried out. The handover of weapons to the state will have limited significance unless it is accompanied by the termination of independent command structures. Likewise, the redistribution of militias into security institutions does not necessarily mean that these individuals have completely severed ties with their

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former organizational affiliations and networks of political loyalty. Iraq's experience shows that integration processes have sometimes enabled armed groups not to disappear but instead to establish new spheres of influence within state institutions.

Therefore, the main challenge facing Iraq is not simply the change in the names or institutional status of militia groups. The central issue is the extent to which the political, economic, military and social influence of these structures can be limited. If the integration process is supported by a transparent weapons inventory, effective oversight mechanisms, a centralized chain of command, financial controls and principles of political accountability, the Iraqi state could achieve a stronger capacity for sovereignty in the security sector. Otherwise, while the visibility of weapons may decrease, the influence of militia-affiliated actors within the state will continue through different channels.

From the perspective of Shiite politics, this process is also making the divide between state-centered and resistance-oriented lines in Iraq more visible. The pragmatic and state-centered approach represented by Sudani, Hakim, Khazali and circles close to the Zaidi government views bringing militia groups under control as necessary for Iraq's stability. In contrast, groups such as Kataib Hezbollah, Harakat al-Nujaba and similar organizations see the disarmament initiative as a weakening of the resistance axis. Although this divide is currently being managed in a controlled manner, the response of groups that resist the handover of weapons in the later stages of the process could create new areas of crisis in Iraqi domestic politics.

The decision by the three militia groups to leave the PMF and hand over their weapons to the state creates an important opportunity for Iraq's state-building process. However, this opportunity also carries the risk that hybridization may continue in a new form. If the Iraqi state can genuinely transform armed groups while bringing them under control, it will represent a significant step toward the centralization of the security sector. However, if these groups preserve their organizational identities, political influence, economic networks and institutional connections while gaining new positions within the state, the process will mean not the dismantling of militias but rather a redistribution of power within the Iraqi state. Therefore, the decisive factor in the coming period will not be whether weapons are handed over, but rather the extent to which the gray areas between the state and hybrid actors can be narrowed.

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