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Rethinking U.S. Strategy: Disarming Militias and Countering State Capture in Iraq

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COVER: A funeral procession for members of the Popular Mobilization Forces killed in airstrikes targeting the group’s headquarters in Baghdad, Iraq, on Wednesday, July 29, 2026. The U.S. and Saudi Arabia claimed responsibility for the attack. (Muntazer Uday Sahib / NurPhoto via Getty Images)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For years, U.S. policy toward Iraq's Iran-backed armed factions, known in Iraq by the Arabic *fasail*, has largely been framed as a security problem.¹ This approach is disconnected from the greater challenge the United States faces in Iraq.

Particularly since the 2018 parliamentary elections, with Iran's support, the *fasail* have effectively pursued multipronged, long-term state capture, extending their influence across Iraq's political institutions, security sector, bureaucracy, economy, and governance. This advances Iran's strategy of preventing the reemergence of a hostile Iraqi state while leveraging Iraq for wider regional influence.²

The *fasail* constitute a multi-domain influence network operating simultaneously inside and outside the Iraqi state. Militarily, they form the core pillars of the state-funded Popular Mobilization Forces while participating in Iran's regional "Axis of Resistance" (*Mihwar al-Muqawama*; *Mehvar-e Moqavemat*).³ Politically, *fasail*-linked groups won around 80 of parliament's 329 seats in 2025, while their influence extends across ministries, provincial governments, bureaucratic appointments, and economic networks.⁴

Disarmament or integration risks addressing only the armed manifestation of this network while leaving its broader infrastructure intact and granting the *fasail* greater institutional legitimacy. U.S. policy therefore requires a whole-of-the-state approach targeting the political coalitions, institutional enablers, economic networks, and bureaucratic structures that collectively sustain *fasail* and Iranian influence inside Iraq.

Introduction

Recent U.S. pressure on Baghdad to disarm or dismantle Iraq's Iran-backed *fasail* (armed militias) reflects growing recognition in Washington that these groups continue to undermine Iraqi sovereignty, threaten U.S. personnel and regional partners, and serve as critical components of Iran's regional security architecture and power projection network.⁵ The U.S. has designated six groups most commonly viewed as Iraq's principal Iran-backed armed factions – Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Harakat Ansar Allah al-Awfiya, Kata'ib Imam Ali, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq – as both Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) and Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs).⁶ Other closely aligned factions, chief among them the Badr Brigade (Faqlaq Badr), remain undesignated. There are also some more recently emerged facade groups such as Saraya Awliya al-Dam, Ashab al-Kahf, and the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, which various *fasail* have used to claim attacks linked to this broader network.⁷

Successive U.S. administrations have sought to constrain these *fasail* through sanctions, military strikes, and diplomatic engagement with Baghdad.⁸ Only the current administration under President Donald Trump,

1 See, for example: "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Restores Maximum Pressure on Iran," White House, Feb. 4, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/02/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-restores-maximum-pressure-on-iran/>; Or "Posture statement of General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr. Commander, United States Central Command before the Senate Armed Services Committee," U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, March 15, 2022, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/USCENTCOM%20Written%20Posture%20Statement%20-%20SASC.pdf>

2 Crispin Smith, Michael Knights, "Remaking Iraq: How Iranian-Backed Militias Captured the Country," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 20, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/remaking-iraq-how-iranian-backed-militias-captured-country>

3 Smith and Knights, "Remaking Iraq"

4 Ghassan Taqi, 2025, "U.S. Message to Baghdad: No Militias in Government," Alhurra, May 14, 2026, <https://alhurra.com/en/20502>

5 "Secretary Rubio's Call with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shiaa al-Sudani," U.S. Department of State, Oct. 21, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/10/secretary-rubios-call-with-iraqi-prime-minister-mohammed-shiaa-al-sudani-2>

6 Bridget Toomey, "US designates 4 Iran-backed Iraqi militias as Foreign Terrorist Organizations," Long War Journal, Sept. 18, 2025, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2025/09/us-designates-4-iran-backed-iraqi-militias-as-foreign-terrorist-organizations.php>

7 Michael Knights, Alex Almeida, Crispin Smith, "Standing With Iran: The Integrated Combat Performance of Iraqi Militias During Operation Epic Fury," *CTC Sentinel*, June 2026, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/standing-with-iran-the-integrated-combat-performance-of-iraqi-militias-during-operation-epic-fury/>

8 Toomey, US designates.



The 72nd PMF, deployed in the Al-Qa'im district, conducts a military exercise in Anbar, Iraq, on Jan. 26, 2026. (Haidar Mohammed Ali / Anadolu via Getty Images)

however, has seriously pressed Baghdad to resolve the persistent challenge posed by the *fasail*. This was clearly articulated by U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio in a discussion with then-Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani in October 2025, as he explicitly called for the “disarming [of] Iran-backed militias.” It marked the first time a senior U.S. official had made such a demand of Baghdad.⁹

Consequently, since taking power in May with U.S. blessing, the government of Prime Minister Ali al-Zaidi has declared its intention to bring the *fasail* under state's authority and has set Sept. 30 as the deadline for such measures.¹⁰ However, in recent weeks, senior Iraqi officials, including Zaidi's national security advisor, Qassim al-Araji, have said the deadline applies to the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, not the disarmament of militias.¹¹ Consequently, the focus among leaders of the Coordination Framework, Iraq's Shia governing coalition, now appears to be on the “management” of militias' weapons rather than their disarmament.¹² In a recent television interview, former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki openly said that “disarmament” would have an adverse psychological impact on the *fasail* and suggested that the solution might instead involve taking away their heavy offensive weapons while allowing them to retain light and medium weapons.¹³

Notwithstanding this, since the beginning of Zaidi's term, several Shia groups have announced their readiness to relinquish their armed role in one form or another. The first move came from religious and political leader Muqtada al-Sadr, who declared on May 27 the complete “separation” of Saraya al-Salam from its political wing, the Patriotic Shia Current, and its “complete joining of the state.”¹⁴

On June 2, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, led by Qais al-Khazali, one of the largest PMF factions and a core member of the Iran-led Axis of Resistance with a record of fighting alongside Iran in Syria, announced its willingness to “sever its connection” with the PMF, “restrict weapons to the hands of the state,” and place itself under the authority of the Commander-in-Chief of the Iraqi Armed Forces.¹⁵ In a symbolic gesture, the group removed the rifle formerly depicted in its logo to reinforce the claim that it intends to become a purely political organization.¹⁶ On the same day, Kata'ib al-Imam Ali, led by Shibl al-Zaidi, likewise declared its readiness to “sever ties” with the PMF formations, “restrict weapons to the hands of the state,” strengthen Iraq's security institutions, and uphold the rule of law while insisting that “resistance” was “not a profession but a necessity.”¹⁷ Among them, these three factions are estimated to have seven affiliated brigades within the PMF.¹⁸

A notable feature of all these statements was the careful avoidance of the term “disarmament.” Instead, the *fasail* framed the process as a voluntary decision to confine weapons to the hands of the state, thereby projecting

9 U.S. Department of State, Secretary Rubio's Call.

10 “Iraq's September 30 weapons deadline leaves terms of disarmament unresolved,” Shafaq News, July 2, 2026, <https://shafaq.com/en/Report/Iraq-s-September-30-weapons-deadline-leaves-terms-of-disarmament-unresolved>

11 “Security Advisor: September Deadline Applies Only to the Coalition, Not Militias,” 964Media, August 24, 2026, <https://en.964media.com/51531/>

12 “Scoop: Iraqi Shiite leaders propose ‘weapons management’ compromise,” Shafaq News, August 19, 2026, <https://shafaq.com/en/Iraq/Scoop-Iraqi-Shiite-leaders-propose-weapons-management-compromise>

13 “Maliki urges avoiding term ‘disarmament’ over its ‘psychological impact’ on factions,” The New Region, September 3, 2026, <https://thenewregion.com/posts/6411>

14 Muqtada al-Sadr's X account, May 27, 2026, https://x.com/Mu_AlSadr/status/2059582674428170728; Saraya al-Salam evolved from the Mahdi Army (Jaysh al-Mahdi), one of the major Shia militia groups that played a prominent role in the Shia-Sunni sectarian conflict and the anti-US insurgency during the early years following the toppling of the Baath regime.

15 “Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq announces its separation from the Popular Mobilization Forces formations and the confinement of weapons to the state,” *Kurdistan* 24, June 2, 2026, <https://shorturl.at/zExpr>

16 Iraqi journalist Rusul al-Maliki's X account, July 1, 2026, <https://x.com/RusulyA/status/2072363962943807598>

17 “After Saraya al-Salam and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib al-Imam Ali decides to sever ties with the Popular Mobilization Forces and begin the process of confining weapons to the state,” *Al-Sumaria*, June 2, 2026, <https://shorturl.at/lp5ov>

18 “Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces Formations,” *Al-Ssaa*, Dec. 12, 2024, <https://alssaa.com/post/show/8654>

an image of willingly ending their hybrid armed-political existence in favor of a purely political role. In the days that followed, ceremonies were held in which several factions handed over weapons, personnel lists, and equipment inventories to Iraqi army officials in what appeared to be the practical implementation of this process.¹⁹ Reposting a Prime Minister Zaidi announcement on X praising these steps, U.S. Special Envoy to Iraq Tom Barrack touted them as “the nascent foundation for a renewed Iraqi self-governance – grounded in restored sovereignty, enduring stability, and the promise of national renewal.”²⁰

However, the *fasail* camp has not universally embraced the narrative of laying down arms or joining the state. Powerful factions such as Kata’ib Hezbollah and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba have made it clear that they have no intention of abandoning their *muqawama* (resistance) role, demanding security guarantees and U.S. troops withdrawal by the end of September, in accordance with a 2024 agreement between Baghdad and Washington.²¹ In early September, Kata’ib Sayid al-Shuhada conditioned its disarmament to the U.S. and Turkish troops leaving Iraq. Turkish troops have been based in Iraq since the 1990s to fight the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), an organization fighting for Kurdish rights in Turkey.²² Their statements underscore the deep divisions within the Iran-aligned camp and suggest that any claims of comprehensive militia dissolution or disarmament should be treated with considerable caution.

The current approach to disarming the *fasail* rests on an increasingly problematic assumption: that the challenge posed by these organizations lies in their existence as armed nonstate actors. As is, the challenge confronting the U.S. is not simply one of militias operating outside the state. Rather, it is one of organizations that simultaneously operate within and beyond the state while serving the broader Iranian strategy of embedding long-term influence across Iraq’s political system, security institutions, bureaucracy, judiciary, economy, and administrative structures. The militia question, therefore, cannot be separated from the wider process of Iranian-supported state capture that has accelerated over the past decade.

This evolution requires a corresponding shift in how policymakers conceptualize the militia issue. Rather than asking whether the *fasail* have surrendered weapons or severed organizational ties with the PMF, policymakers should look at whether the broader ecosystem through which they exercise influence has been weakened or strengthened. The relevant question is therefore not whether militias have disappeared but whether the structures enabling Iranian influence across the Iraqi state have become entrenched as a result of the ongoing Iraqi government-led campaign vis-à-vis the *fasail*. Iran’s strategic objective is important to take note of here. While maintaining armed proxies capable of vexing and projecting power against adversaries remains an important component of Tehran’s survival strategy, developments over the past couple of decades in Iraq demonstrate an increasing emphasis on institutionalizing influence inside the Iraqi state itself.

Accordingly, the U.S. should adopt a whole-of-the-state analytical framework that understands the *fasail* as multifunctional actors through which Tehran pursues a broader strategy of state capture rather than

19 “Saraya al-Salam Becomes First PMF Faction to Physically Hand Over Weapons to the Iraqi Army,” Kurdistan 24, June 4, 2026, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/917957/saraya-al-salam-becomes-first-pmf-faction-to-physically-hand-over-weapons-to-the-iraqi-army>

20 Ambassador Tom Barrack’s X account, June 2, 2026, <https://x.com/USAMBTurkiye/status/2061888617358971324>

21 “Iraqi armed factions demand guarantees before giving up weapons,” The New Arab, July 12, 2026, <https://www.newarab.com/news/iraqi-armed-factions-demand-guarantees-giving-weapons>

22 Seth J Frantzman, “Iraqi militias raise new conditions for disarmament, Iraq takes ‘wait-and-see’ approach – analysis,” The Jerusalem Post, September 2, 2026, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-907331>

merely as security actors – even though their negative impact on Iraq's political landscape stems primarily, but not exclusively, from their role as armed actors. As the rest of this report shows, the armed component, while highly important, functions alongside political, administrative, and economic dimensions rather than independently of them.

Understanding Iran's Multifunctional Network in Iraq

The Iran-backed Iraqi *fasail* have evolved from primarily armed groups into hybrid political-military organizations that exercise influence both through formal state institutions and informal transnational networks linked to Iran's regional agenda. This shift explains why policies centered exclusively on disarmament risk misunderstanding the nature of the problem, and, consequently, failing to effectively counter these groups and the broader networks through which they exercise influence.

The roots of Iraq's contemporary Shia *fasail* lie in the revolutionary trajectory of Iraq's Shia Islamist movement following Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the Iran-Iraq War over the subsequent decade.²³ Two principal organizational traditions shaped what would later become Iraq's modern militia landscape: the Badr Brigade and the Mahdi Army (*Jaysh al-Mahdi*).

Following the repression of Shia groups in Iraq beginning in the late 1960s, many leaders of the Islamic Dawa Party and other opposition groups eventually found refuge in Iran. Seeking to unify Iraq's fragmented Shia opposition, the post-1979 revolutionary government in Tehran facilitated the establishment of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) in 1982. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) trained and organized its armed wing, the Badr Brigade, which fought alongside Iranian forces during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. Many of the figures who later played leading roles in Iraq's contemporary *fasail*, including Hadi al-Amiri and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, emerged from this environment, developing enduring ties with the IRGC that continue to shape Iraq's political and security landscape.²⁴

Following the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, Badr rapidly transformed itself from an exiled revolutionary force into one of the principal architects of Iraq's post-Baathist security institutions. Rather than remaining outside the state, it became deeply embedded within it, with former commanders assuming influential positions throughout Iraq's Ministry of Interior, thus becoming integral to U.S.-led counterterrorism operations. It has also run the Ministry of Transport under various Cabinets. Although Badr formally separated from SCIRI in 2012, the organization retained its hybrid political-military character while preserving its commitment to Shia Islamist ideology and close ties with Tehran.²⁵

A second major current emerged with the rise of the Mahdi Army, established by Muqtada al-Sadr following the 2003 invasion. Unlike Badr, whose leadership had spent decades in exile, the Mahdi Army emerged from Iraq's Shia communities and the Sadr family's social and religious networks, reflecting a more Iraq-centered set of priorities and perspectives. During Iraq's post-2003 sectarian conflict, it became one of the country's most influential armed actors.²⁶

23 Rodger Shanahan, "Shi'a Political Development in Iraq: The Case of the Islamic Da'wa Party," *Third World Quarterly*, 2004, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3993703>

24 Michael Knights, Crispin Smith, Hamdi Malik, "Profile: Badr Organization," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Sept. 2, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-badr-organization>

25 Knights, Smith, Hamdi, Profile: Badr Organization.

26 "Jaysh al-Mahdi," *Institute for the Study of War*, Dec. 20, 2021, <https://understandingwar.org/research/middle-east/jaysh-al-mahdi/>

“The roots of Iraq’s contemporary Shia fasail lie in the revolutionary trajectory of Iraq’s Shia Islamist movement following Iran’s Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the Iran-Iraq War over the subsequent decade.”



Participants in a funeral procession carry coffins and display Iraqi flags and PMF banners in Baghdad. (Muntazer Uday Sahib / NurPhoto via Getty Images)

Most of today's principal Iran-backed *fasail* can trace their lineage, directly or indirectly, to one of these two traditions. For instance, Kata'ib Hezbollah emerged largely from Badr networks. Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq split from the Mahdi Army, while Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba later emerged from Asa'ib. Although these groups differ in leadership and operational priorities, they collectively represent successive branches of two revolutionary-resistance traditions that gradually expanded Iran's influence inside Iraq.

The rise of the Islamic State in 2014 fundamentally transformed both the scale and legitimacy of these organizations. Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's mobilization fatwa generated unprecedented legitimacy, particularly among the Shia community, for armed formations defending Iraq against the Islamic State. The existing Iran-backed *fasail* proved particularly well-positioned to capitalize on Sistani's fatwa because of their organizational experience, established command structures, and close support from the IRGC.²⁷

The subsequent institutionalization of the PMF in 2016 by the Iraqi Parliament represented one of the most consequential developments in Iraq's post-2003 political order. Rather than being absorbed into the ministries of defense or interior, the PMF evolved into a parallel security structure with its own budget, command hierarchy, intelligence capabilities, and legal status.²⁸ This fundamentally altered the relationship between the *fasail* comprising the PMF and the Iraqi state, as they simultaneously became official state security actors while retaining their organizational identities, leadership structures, ideological commitments, and regional ties with Iran. Notably, the outcome was not the replacement of informal militias by a formal state institution, but rather the uneasy symbiosis of both within the same body.

The economic dimension constitutes another critical pillar of this broader ecosystem. Over the past decade, militia-linked organizations have become deeply intertwined with Iraq's formal and informal economies, establishing what is known in Iraq as *Makatib al-Iqtisadiyyah*, or economic bureaus

27 Priyanka Boghani, "Iraq's Shia Militias: The Double-Edged Sword Against ISIS," PBS, March 21, 2017, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/iraqs-shia-militias-the-double-edged-sword-against-isis/>

28 "Iraq parliament passes law legalising PMF Shia militias," Middle East Monitor, Nov. 26, 2016, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20161126-iraq-parliament-passes-law-legalising-pmf-shia-militias/>

focused on revenue generation.²⁹ Revenue from border crossings, customs, reconstruction contracts, energy, banking and currency exchange entities, telecommunications, commercial enterprises, and public procurement has significantly expanded their financial autonomy while strengthening their political influence.^{30,31} These economic networks finance domestic patronage systems while helping Iran mitigate international sanctions through alternative commercial and financial channels linking the two countries. Iran has exploited these networks to evade sanctions and expand its influence in Iraq, prompting the U.S. Treasury Department to sanction numerous Iraqi businesses, including the Muhandis General Company in October 2025.³² Modeled after the IRGC's Khatam al-Anbia conglomerate, the company has become a key component of the broader economic infrastructure surrounding the *fasail* and further deepens their ties to Iraq's public administration.³³

While Badr's integration into the state marked the first major formal milestone of pro-Iran *fasail* into the Iraqi state, the political dimension of these organizations expanded considerably following the 2018 parliamentary elections. The formation of the Fateh Alliance in that year enabled many PMF factions to translate their wartime legitimacy into parliamentary influence by winning 48 out of 329 seats, marking a new phase in which military power increasingly served a broader political project aimed at reshaping Iraq's governing institutions in addition to fighting Sunni jihadism.³⁴

This evolution accelerated after the 2021 parliamentary elections and the formation of the government by the Coordination Framework, an Iran-backed coalition of Shia groups opposed to al-Sadr. This happened after a cross-sect coalition composed of al-Sadr and his Kurdish and Sunni partners failed to gain the majority to form the government due to a judicial interpretation that gave the Iran-backed Coordination Framework the power to block government formation with one third of the seats in Iraqi parliament. Although the *fasail* won far fewer parliamentary seats in 2021 than in 2018 – just 18 – their actual political influence expanded after Sadr's withdrawal from the political process. The move allowed the Coordination Framework to emerge as Iraq's dominant governing coalition and gain 42 of the parliamentary seats vacated by the Sadrist bloc.³⁵ This gave militia-linked organizations unprecedented access to Cabinet ministries, senior bureaucratic appointments, provincial administrations, and strategic security institutions.³⁶

Taken together, these developments have transformed the *fasail* into hybrid, multidomain actors operating across Iraq's security, political, institutional, and economic spheres while remaining deeply embedded in Iran's broader Resistance Axis. Their expanded influence highlights the limitations of approaches focused narrowly on militia disarmament.

29 Ali Mohammed, "Iraq's Economic Bureaus: Bolstering the Financial Coffers of Political Parties and Militias," *The New Arab*, Feb. 15, 2025, <https://shorturl.at/ps10l>

30 Akeel Abbas, "Border Crossings: The Unholy Alliance Between Iran and Iraqi Militias," Carnegie Endowment, April 28, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/06/border-crossings-the-unholy-alliance-between-iran-and-iraqi-militias>

31 Michael Knights, "Rise of the E-Militias: Designated Terrorist Groups Infest Iraq's Digital Economy," *CTC Sentinel*, November/December 2025, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/rise-of-the-e-militias-designated-terrorist-groups-infest-iraqs-digital-economy/>

32 "Treasury Takes Aim at Iran-Backed Militia Groups Threatening the Safety of Americans," U.S. Department of the Treasury, Oct. 9, 2025, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sb0277>

33 "Iraq's Shiite Militias Modelling IRGC's Engineering Arm," *Iran International*, May 26, 2023, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202305261900>

34 "Iraq: Manual recount shows few changes to May election results," *Al Jazeera*, Aug. 10, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/8/10/iraq-manual-recount-shows-few-changes-to-may-election-results>

35 "ISHM: JUNE 9 – 16, 2022," *Enabling Peace in Iraq*, June 16, 2022, https://enablingpeace.org/ishm357/?utm_source

36 "The Promises and Pitfalls of Iraq's Post-Election Scenarios," *Emirates Policy Center*, Oct. 30, 2021, <https://epc.ae/en/details/featured/the-promises-and-pitfalls-of-iraqs-post-election-scenarios>



Supporters of Iran-aligned armed factions march with portraits of (from left) Iran's slain Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, his son the new Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei, and Lebanese Hezbollah movement's slain leader Hassan Nasrallah, during a rally celebrating the withdrawal of forces of the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State from Iraq in Baghdad in September 2026. (Ahmad al-Rubaye / AFP via Getty Images)

Iran's Strategy: Embedding the *Fasail* in the State

A more complete understanding of the status of the *fasail* in Iraq requires an understanding of Iran's broader strategy toward Iraq itself. Because the *fasail* have functioned as the bedrock upon which Iran projects influence in Iraq, Tehran's objective is not only to preserve their armed capabilities but also to ensure their continued and deepening integration into the Iraqi state.

This does not necessarily require every *fasail* organization to retain its current military capabilities or security-focused role.³⁷ As long as a residual group of armed elements remains capable of harassing Iran's adversaries through kinetic actions, integrating the rest of the ideologically aligned *fasail*, or substantial parts of them, into state security and civilian institutions – such as the PMF or various bodies like the parliament and ministries – through a process that confers political legitimacy on them would constitute a major victory for Tehran. This would advance Iran's interests far more effectively than relying on the *fasail* solely as armed actors seen as troublesome and/or illegitimate by others. It captures the strategic logic behind a dual strategy of preserving effective proxy warfare capabilities through the *fasail* while simultaneously using other elements of them to pursue comprehensive state capture. Hence, fixating on military strength alone is an inadequate measure of Iran's influence in Iraq.

The larger lesson in the conduct of Iran-backed *fasail* is that state capture does not require control over every institution, only sufficient influence over key nodes to shape appointments, resource allocation, and policy outcomes. Iraq's fragmented, coalition-based political system is particularly conducive to this strategy. The role of the *fasail* in shaping the outcome of provincial-level politics and elections were illustrative in this regard. Following the 2023 provincial elections, through coalition-building and alliances with local political actors, Iran-backed factions expanded their leverage in strategically important provinces such as Nineveh, Salahuddin, and Diyala, gaining greater influence over budgets, contracts, patronage, and administrative authority.

The Salahuddin case was particularly interesting, as then-Iraqi President Latif Rashid rejected the selection of prominent local Sunni politician Ahmed al-Jobouri, known as Abu Mazin, on the grounds that he had a criminal record. This was, however, due to Abu Mazin's party sidelining powerful Shia groups such as Asa'ib AHL al-Haq from the local government. The issue was ultimately settled with Abu Mazin nominating Badr Mahmoud al-Fahl, a member of his National Masses Party, as his replacement for the governorship.³⁸ More broadly, although the *fasail* have not consistently dominated elections, they have repeatedly translated relatively modest electoral representation into disproportionate political influence through strategic alliances and institutional penetration.³⁹ In this, their political weight derives less from votes than from their ability to operate simultaneously across multiple centers of power and perceptions of their connections to Iran among other Iraqi political actors.⁴⁰

The push by the *fasail* to expand their reach into all areas of life in Iraq has been spectacularly successful. Under Sudani's government, these

37 See, for example: Renad Mansour, "Networks of Power The Popular Mobilization Forces and the State in Iraq," *Chatham House*, Feb. 25, 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/2021-02-25-networks-of-power-mansour.pdf>; and Knights, Almeida, Smith, *Standing With Iran*.

38 "Abu Mazen: Asa'ib threatened to remove the president if he approved my appointment as governor," *Ultra Iraq*, April 8, 2024, <https://shorturl.at/mx44F>

39 See, for example: Zmkan Ali Saleem, "Prisoner of the Deal: Nineveh's governor and local state capture," *London School of Economics*, March 12, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/crp/2020/03/12/prisoner-of-the-deal-ninevehs-governor-and-local-state-capture/>

40 Suadad al-Salhy, "How Iran-backed Khazali dominated the status quo in Iraq's disputed areas," *The New Region*, Aug. 15, 2024, <https://thenewregion.com/posts/781/how-iran-backed-khazali-dominated-the-status-quo-in-iraq-s-disputed-areas>

groups gained control of key ministries, including Interior and Transport, led by Badr-affiliated figures; Higher Education, held by Asa'ib's Na'im al-Aboudi; Labor and Social Affairs, led by Ahmed al-Assadi of Kata'ib Jund al-Imam; and the Migration and Displacement, led by Evan Faiq Jabro of the Babiliyoun Movement.⁴¹ The Ministry of Communications, which was run by Hiyam al-Yassiri, an associate of PMF chief Fali al-Fayyadh, granted a fiber-optic cable contract to the PMF-linked Muhandis Company in 2025, raising concerns that Iran could gain greater access to monitor telecommunications in Iraq.⁴²

Although the U.S. reportedly objected after the 2025 parliamentary elections to the appointment of *fasail* officials to ministerial and other senior state positions, warning that it would not engage with them, *fasail* or *fasail*-adjacent figures still secured prominent posts.⁴³ These included Asa'ib's Adnan al-Fayhan, who was named deputy speaker of Parliament,⁴⁴ and Mustafa Sanad, a figure linked to Kata'ib Hezbollah, obtaining the Ministry of Communications portfolio.⁴⁵

Against this backdrop, if disarmament is defined as integration and, as such, primarily entails moving organizations, or their leadership, personnel, and political wings, more deeply into Iraqi state institutions without dismantling the broader networks through which they exercise influence, the process risks furthering and deepening rather than reversing state capture.

The Enabling Environment and Political Reinforcers

While the *fasail* remain the most visible component of Tehran's influence network in Iraq, their ability to shape political outcomes, influence public policy, and expand their institutional reach depends on cooperation from a much broader constellation of political actors than the *fasail* network itself. Any strategy directed solely at the *fasail* while overlooking the political forces that enable and amplify their influence is unlikely to produce lasting results.

The principal political vehicle through which the *fasail* have expanded their influence since 2022 has been the Coordination Framework. The political weight of the *fasail* increased substantially after the 2021 elections despite winning just 18 parliamentary seats. Sadr's subsequent withdrawal from Parliament strengthened the Framework by allowing its members and allies to capture many of the vacated seats, while the Framework's decision-making structure has further amplified the influence of the *fasail*: at least five members of the 12-member leadership council of the Framework represent *fasail*, giving them considerable weight at the most powerful decision-making body in the country.

The *fasail* rely on a broad network of groups and individuals transcending sectarian and ethnic divides to sustain their level of influence. Several non-militia Shia actors have played an important role in this process. Among the key ones, the State of Law Coalition, led by former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, has consistently served as a principal political partner of the

41 Al-Estiklal, "The Deep State and Washington's Embassy: Who Is Shaping Power in Baghdad After Elections?," Nov. 11, 2025, <https://www.alestiklal.net/en/article/the-deep-state-and-washington-s-embassy-who-is-shaping-power-in-baghdad-after-the-elections>

42 The New Region, "Iraq Dismisses Iranian Surveillance Fears After Awarding Key Contract to PMF-Affiliated Firm," Oct. 31, 2025, <https://thenewregion.com/posts/3507>

43 Mohammed A. Salih, "Containing Iran's Influence in Iraq: Choices and Consequences for Washington," Gulf International Forum, Feb. 9, 2026, <https://gulif.org/containing-irans-influence-in-iraq-choices-and-consequences-for-washington/>

44 Maha El Dahan, Timour Azhari, and Humeyra Pamuk, "US threatens to starve Iraq of its oil dollars over Iranian influence, sources say," Reuters, Jan. 23, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-control-oil-dollars-heaps-pressure-iraq-over-iranian-influence-2026-01-23/>

45 The Soufan Center, "Iraq's New Government Confronts Challenges on All Fronts," June 4, 2026, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2026-june-4/>



An Iraqi flag flutters at Tahrir Square in Baghdad on Sept. 29, 2026. After more than a decade, the U.S.-led coalition ended its mission in Iraq. (Ahmad al-Rubaye / AFP via Getty Images)

fasail, despite some disagreements over power sharing. Ammar al-Hakim's Wisdom Movement and Mohsen al-Mandalawi's Al-Asas Current, and, most recently, Sudani's Reconstruction and Development Alliance have likewise sustained coalition arrangements that expanded militia-linked influence within the political process and across state institutions. Countering militia influence, consequently, requires addressing the political coalitions that repeatedly reinforce them.

The Kurdish case further illustrates this dynamic. Since former Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) leader Jalal Talabani was incapacitated by health problems, and particularly after his son Bafel Talabani assumed the party's leadership in 2021, the PUK has increased cooperation with several Iran-backed *fasail* as it has sought to preserve and expand its influence within both the Iraqi and Kurdish political spheres. The PUK, one of Iraq's two main Kurdish political parties, has lost nearly half of its electoral support in both the Kurdistan Region and Iraq since the late 2000s amid years of internal fragmentation and leadership disputes. To offset this decline and prevent it from translating into a corresponding loss of political power, while also counterbalancing the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the PUK has embraced close cooperation with the *fasail* in Baghdad and the north.

This partnership between the PUK and the *fasail*, particularly Asa'ib in recent years, has strengthened militia influence over issues including determining Iraqi presidency and its policies (the Salahuddin provincial governor's saga mentioned above being a case in point as Latif was affiliated with the PUK), governance in Kirkuk and Nineveh following 2023 provincial elections,⁴⁶ local elections in Iraqi Kurdistan, and Christian quota politics through the Asa'ib-tied Babiliyoun Movement in broader northern Iraq.⁴⁷ Demonstrating the strength of this relationship, Asa'ib has expressed support for Talabani's purge of his political opponents in Sulaimaniyah.⁴⁸

A similar pattern has emerged within Sunni politics. After a failed attempt to form a broad ethno-sectarian coalition with al-Sadr and the KDP following the 2021 elections, Taqadoun Alliance Leader Mohammed al-Halbousi was

46 Mohanad Faris, "Competition over Kirkuk: Between Internal Conflicts and Regional Rivalries," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Aug. 30, 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/competition-over-kirkuk-between-internal-conflicts-and-regional-rivalries>

47 Peregraf, "PUK and Babylon Movement collaborate for upcoming Kurdistan parliamentary elections," Sept. 25, 2024, <https://peregraf.com/en/news/7516>

48 The Arab Weekly, "Baghdad Shia factions enable Sulaimaniya purge removing PUK's challengers," Aug. 25, 2025, <https://the arabweekly.com/baghdad-shia-factions-enable-sulaimaniya-purge-removing-puks-challengers>

“Without a broader understanding of how the *fasail* exercise influence through political coalitions, efforts to weaken one component of Iran’s network are unlikely to produce meaningful strategic change and may instead facilitate and legitimize its continued consolidation within the Iraqi state.”

appointed as Parliament speaker but was removed one year later by the Federal Supreme Court in what was widely perceived as a punitive measure by the Coordination Framework elites against his emerging maverick orientation.^{49,50} This pushed Halbousi to recalculate and move closer to the Framework, likely out of concern that he could face further political marginalization, as several of his Sunni predecessors had over the years.

Since late 2011, successive Sunni leaders, including former Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, former Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi, the once-powerful Nujaifi family of Mosul, and Siyada Alliance leader Khamis al-Khanjar, were politically marginalized or banished from Iraq’s political process (in Hashimi’s case) after falling out of favor with ruling Shia elites. Hence, cooperation with the dominant Shia groups, and increasingly in recent years with the *fasail*, has become a key political survival strategy for many Sunni politicians. Since 2024, Halbousi’s Taqadum Alliance has notably moved closer to the *fasail*, particularly in provincial coalition-building in Kirkuk and Nineveh and during recent federal government formation negotiations in Baghdad.⁵¹ Regardless of motivation, such alliances expand the institutional influence of militia-linked organizations well beyond Iraq’s traditional Shia political sphere.

Without a broader understanding of how the *fasail* exercise influence through political coalitions, efforts to weaken one component of Iran’s network are unlikely to produce meaningful strategic change and may instead facilitate and legitimize its continued consolidation within the Iraqi state. Peeling away political enablers and reinforcers would be key to isolating the *fasail* and diminishing their role within the Iraqi political system and state institutions.

Toward a Whole-of-the-State Approach

The current emphasis on disarmament risks being counterproductive because, rather than disentangling these factions from the Iraqi state, integration might further entangle them within it, deepening an ongoing process of state capture that strengthens pro-Iran actors at the expense of more moderate forces, including established Shia parties. Without a holistic perspective, any disarmament initiative is likely to play into the hands of Iran and its network in Iraq as they seek to mitigate and weather Washington’s pressure for the remainder of the Trump administration, hoping that a future administration will abandon the policy altogether.

The current policy fundamentally assumes that the militias exist largely outside the Iraqi state and that the principal objective should therefore be to move them inside it under official state authority. Yet many of these organizations are already deeply embedded within the Iraqi state.⁵² This was evident during the recent war between Iran and the U.S. and Israel in early 2026, when these groups targeted U.S. and other actors under the banner of resistance while retaliatory U.S. strikes revealed that those involved in the hostilities were also serving members of the PMF. Their role within the government not only prevented any meaningful action against their belligerence by the Iraqi government but also resulted in the government authorizing the PMF and other armed forces to respond to any attacks by the U.S.-Israeli coalition.⁵³ Statements by senior Iraqi officials

49 Faris, Competition over Kirkuk

50 Mohanad Faris, “How Halbousi’s ouster is reshaping Sunni politics in Iraq,” AmwajMedia, April 25, 2024, <https://amwaj.media/en/article/how-halbousi-s-ouster-is-reshaping-sunni-politics-in-iraq>

51 Al-Aalem Al-Jadeed, “Al-Rasheed Agreement reshuffles Kirkuk’s top posts as Turkmen approach a historic milestone,” April 16, 2026, <https://shorturl.at/0iUFn>

52 Mohammed A. Salih, Militias and Iraq’s Role; Michael Knights, Rise of the E-Militias.

53 Mohammed A. Salih, “Iran-Aligned Armed Groups’ Dangerous Game in Iraq,” The New Region, March 24, 2026, <https://thenewregion.com/posts/4931>

also raise questions about the government's resolve to hold the *fasail* accountable. For instance, National Security Advisor Qassim al-Abboudi recently evaded questions about their responsibility for attacks in Iraq, instead claiming that Ukraine-linked cells carried out some of them, without explaining what motives such cells might have had.⁵⁴

What many *fasail* now seek is greater political legitimacy, particularly at the regional and international levels. Securing broader acceptance, especially from the U.S. given its influence over Iraq's political and economic landscape and its ability to shape other countries' engagement with these groups, would significantly strengthen the position of the *fasail*. In this, they are inspired by the case of Syria under President Ahmed al-Sharaa. Despite Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's jihadist past and terrorist designation, Sharaa's government rapidly gained broad international legitimacy following U.S. recognition of his leadership (at the behest of Türkiye and the Gulf).⁵⁵

To demonstrate progress in the disarmament process, the Iraqi government has publicized weapon handover ceremonies – a message directed at both the Iraqi public and observers in Washington and regional capitals.⁵⁶ However, Iraqi officials have leaked to the media that the *fasail* have turned over only nonoperational or scrap weapons while refusing to surrender strategic weaponry supplied by Iran, including ballistic missiles and operational drones.⁵⁷ This suggests that the *fasail* intend to retain a covert armed capability while simultaneously strengthening their positions throughout Iraq's governing structures.

If this is how the disarmament process unfolds, a likely outcome would be the recognition and legitimization of the existing PMF once the process is officially declared complete, along with the continued participation of *fasail* political wings in Iraq's political system and government. In other words, organizations long viewed by the U.S. and many regional governments as destabilizing may acquire greater domestic and international legitimacy by presenting themselves as responsible political actors that have voluntarily complied with disarmament initiatives.

If the current course holds, a division of labor among the *fasail* is a more plausible outcome than their genuine transformation into purely political groups. Some could emphasize participation in political and government processes while quietly retaining their military capabilities. Others could move in the opposite direction, focusing on maintaining a more visible armed role. But in reality, many of them would likely continue to operate across both domains. During hostilities between Iran and the U.S., for example, some *fasail* proclaiming to be mainly interested in political activities such as Asa'ib and Badr are suspected of having contributed to the armed campaign against U.S. interests and U.S.-allied targets inside and outside Iraq.⁵⁸ This strategic flexibility allows Tehran to reduce international pressure, expand institutional legitimacy for parts of its network, and, importantly, preserve sufficient coercive and kinetic capabilities to deter or pester regional adversaries when necessary.

Additionally, the disarmament process, as it currently stands, presents several problems. First, it risks conflating organizational integration with individual integration. For any demobilization program of this sort to

54 Fadhel al-Nashmi, "Claims of Ukrainian Cell Operating in Iraq Stir Controversy," Al-Sharq al-Awsat, July 28, 2026, <https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/5301043-claims-ukrainian-cell-operating-iraq-stir-controversy>

55 Zeke Miller, Bassem Mroue, and Aamer Madhani, "Trump Says He Will Lift Sanctions on Syria, Moves to Restore Relations With New Leader," PBS, May 13, 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/trump-says-he-will-lift-sanctions-on-syria-moves-to-restore-relations-with-new-leader>

56 Al-Arabiya, "Iraq's Weapons-Confinement Committee Receives Kata'ib Al-Imam Ali's Personnel Files And Weapons," June 10, 2026, <https://shorturl.at/vNR5j>

57 Al-Mada, "Factions Handed The Government 'Scrap' Weapons and Refuse to Disclose The Locations of Eight Ballistic Missiles," July 9, 2026, <https://almadapaper.net/442723/>

58 Knights, Almeida, Smith, Standing With Iran.

succeed it should emphasize the individual vetting and reintegration of PMF combatants rather than the wholesale incorporation of existing organizations into state institutions. Yet, disarmament as conducted so far in Iraq appears closer to organizational normalization than to genuine demobilization.

Amid the ongoing debate over disarmament, there have been proposals in some government quarters to create a new Federal Security Ministry that would bring the PMF and other state security institutions under a single structure to place the PMF under stronger state supervision. However, the *fasail* have voiced their opposition to such ideas.⁵⁹ What is occurring now under the rubric of disarmament is the blanket inclusion of militias into state institutions while preserving their leadership hierarchies, patronage networks, ideological cohesion, and external relationships – an approach that would risk further institutionalizing and legitimization of *fasail* influence within the Iraqi state.

Second, to ensure the success of disarmament, independent verification is essential. This requires credible bodies and mechanisms to determine whether the PMF brigades have genuinely severed their operational ties with the *fasail* and Iran's Resistance Axis, dismantled parallel command structures, and relinquished their independent military capabilities. Considering the existing realities in Iraq, such verification becomes particularly difficult when one recognizes that key actors, such as the PMF or the Coordination Framework themselves, are heavily influenced by many of the same organizations undergoing "integration." Consequently, assuming a binary outcome in which these groups either remain militias or become ordinary political parties is overly simplistic. If the existing broader trends continue, the U.S. might inadvertently facilitate the deeper institutionalization of Iranian influence without having meaningfully eradicated the security threats posed by the militias.

A whole-of-the-state approach, therefore, recognizes that the *fasail* are more than armed factions. They are multifunctional actors central to a broader ecosystem through which Iran projects influence. Unless a mechanism exists to address the totality of their presence and role within the Iraqi state, disarmament through integration is likely to amount to little more than a legitimacy-bestowing rite of passage into the political and diplomatic mainstream for *fasail* groups.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

These steps could allow policymakers in both Washington and Baghdad to meaningfully resolve the challenge posed by the Iranian influence network in Iraq.

1 REPLACE THE MILITIA-CENTRIC FRAMEWORK WITH A WHOLE-OF-THE-STATE STRATEGY

To counter Iranian influence, U.S. policymakers should broaden their analytical and policy framework by treating the militia issue not solely as a security-sector challenge but as a broader problem of state capture. Consequently, success should be measured not only by the proclaimed "success" of the current disarmament process or reductions in militia activity but also by whether Iran's broader influence in Iraq within and outside the state is expanding or contracting.

59 Adel al-Nawab, "Iraq Weighs New Security Ministry to Bring Militias Under State Control," *The New Arab*, May 22, 2026, <https://www.newarab.com/news/iraq-weighs-new-ministry-bring-militias-under-state-control>

2 DISTINGUISH BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL REINTEGRATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL INTEGRATION

Current discussions often conflate reintegrating former fighters with absorbing entire military formations and brigades. The U.S. should support the individual vetting and reintegration of eligible *fasail*/PMF members but oppose arrangements that preserve current factional command structures, hierarchies, and loyalties. The goal should be to dismantle organizational influence, not relocate it.

3 PREVENT FURTHER INSTITUTIONAL CONSOLIDATION BY MILITIA-LINKED ORGANIZATIONS

Future U.S. engagement with Baghdad should prioritize limiting and undoing institutional expansion by militia-linked actors, particularly within government ministries and security institutions. Special attention should be devoted, but not limited, to appointments involving:

- Ministry of the Interior
- Intelligence and national security institutions
- Border management
- Customs administration
- Financial oversight
- Telecommunications
- Transportation infrastructure

Fasail's Influence within Iraq

Iran-backed *fasail* built a multilayered web of influence that penetrates or controls Iraqi institutions, and extends beyond its borders. Four pillars in this network of influence include:

Political Enablers (main influencers)

- **Shia:** State of Law, Wisdom Movement, Al-Asas Alliance
- **Sunni:** Halbousi's Taqadoun Alliance
- **Kurdish:** Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

1. Security



- Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)
- National Security Advisory
- Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS)
- National Security Service (NSS)
- Counter Terrorism Service (CTS)
- Iran-led Resistance Axis (IRGC-QF, Lebanese Hezbollah, Yemeni Ansarallah/Houthis, others*)

2. Political



- Contest elections (federal parliamentary, provincial, KRG, and trade unions)
- Shape post-election coalitions
- Key bloc in Coordination Framework, Iraq's Shia governing coalition
- Influence parliamentary legislation and oversight
- Mobilize public opinion through extensive media/social media network and religious/organizational networks

3. Institutional



- Federal government ministries
- Provincial administrations
- State regulatory bodies
- Independent commissions
- Parliament
- Judicial institutions

4. Economic



- Muhandis General Company (construction, engineering, services)
- Economic bureaus
- Network of financial institutions (banks and currency exchange and transfer companies) and front firms
- Border crossings and customs operations
- Patronage networks and protection rackets

The Outcome is an Entrenched Network of Power



- State Capture
- Shaping State Policy at Various Levels
- Erosion of Sovereignty
- Economic Extraction and Expansion
- Cycle of Violence and Impunity

4 WARN POLITICAL REINFORCERS PARTNERING WITH FASAIL

Policies focused exclusively on the *fasail* overlook the political actors whose alliances repeatedly facilitate the expansion of militia influence. The U.S. should warn non-*fasail* Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish political actors in Iraq, to refrain from entering political alliances with the Iran-backed armed factions. Washington should also be prepared to take punitive measures against political enablers, including through sanctions and designations.

5 INCREASE TRANSPARENCY AND ATTRIBUTION

The continued use of facade organizations for armed activities allows Iran-backed factions to maintain plausible deniability while conducting attacks against the U.S. and its Iraqi and regional allies. In the event of attacks by the *fasail*, Washington should press the Iraqi federal government to clearly attribute responsibility to the militias, rather than functioning as a diplomatic and political buffer for them, and to impose punitive measures, such as cutting off their funding and arming privileges.

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