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Key Takeaway: *Iran provided decisive military support to compel Iraqi Kurds to surrender in Kirkuk, Iraq, on October 16, 2017. Military forces from three major Iranian proxies participated in the operation: Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al Haq, and the Badr Organization. Iran did not attempt to outshine Iraq's Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi in public. Iran instead allowed Abadi to take credit, while quietly positioning its proxies to influence Kirkuk in the future. The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) conducted a rigorous study of social media activity and other reporting of troop movements in Iraq in order to assess the role of Iran's proxies in Kirkuk and across Iraq's disputed internal boundaries.*

Iranian military proxies in Iraq supported Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al Abadi's retaking of Kirkuk by [compelling](#) Iraq's Kurds to withdraw from their positions on October 16. ISW assesses that forces from three major Iranian proxies helped compel the Kurdish surrender in Kirkuk: Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), Asa'ib Ahl al Haq (AAH), and the Badr Organization, as this report will detail. The Kurdish collapse in Kirkuk was a turning point in the conflict between Iraqi Kurdistan and the Iraqi Government. Iran and Abadi are now exploiting their success in Kirkuk and expanding their [operations](#) against Iraqi Kurdistan. Iran's proxies [continue to play](#) a central role.

Methodology

The evidence of Iran's involvement in the initial confrontation in Kirkuk requires careful analysis of openly available sources. Official media channels of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) released little information about which units participated in the initial military operations in Kirkuk on October 16. ISW assesses that the PMF imposed a media blackout, since they went dark for an abnormal duration. One Facebook page affiliated with an Iranian proxy militia took down photos and videos about its involvement in Kirkuk that it posted from October 13-16. Social media outlets that normally report on PMF units were also unusually quiet. This media blackout may have extended to Iraqi press, which also did not report details on PMF units. Iraqi sources also rarely reported on Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) unit numbers in Kirkuk, referring instead to general "Iraqi forces." The media blackout and some retrospective removal of materials posted on unofficial social media links suggest that some authorities within the PMF, Iraq, or Iran wished to conceal evidence that the PMF participated.

Furthermore, some Kurdish press and social media sources [published old, recycled](#) imagery to argue that the Iranian-backed proxies were present, undermining the credibility of the official Iraqi Kurdish case. U.S. uniformed military [spokesmen](#), senior general [officers](#), and [State Department officials](#) have added to the confusion by dodging press questions about the involvement of PMF forces.

ISW conducted a rigorous study of the available evidence in social media and other reporting of troop movements in Kirkuk and across the disputed internal boundaries in order to assess which units comprised the PMF forces whose involvement Iraqi sources generally reported. Forces from three major Iranian proxies were present south of Kirkuk before the operation and advanced along with Iraqi forces: the 43rd and 42nd AAH Brigades and a Badr Organization unit also known as

the PMF 24th Brigade. ISW has provided a list of indicators of the presence of these units below. ISW cannot assess the specific KH unit with confidence at the time of publication. KH, AAH, and the Badr Organization are lethal Iranian proxies that attacked U.S. forces in Iraq, particularly between 2006 and 2008.

Iranian Proxy Leadership in Kirkuk

- Badr Organization leader Hadi al Ameri met with Federal Police (FP) commander Raed Jawat and the deputy head of the PMF and leader of KH Abu Mehdi al Muhandis in Bashir. An official Badr Organization media site provided pictures of this meeting on Facebook on October 15.*



Hadi al Ameri, Abu Mehdi al Muhandis, and Raed Jawat near Bashir on or around October 15, 2017.

- Hadi al Ameri and Abu Mehdi al Muhandis attended the flag raising in Kirkuk City along with Iraq's Counterterrorism Services (CTS) commander General Yarallah. The Iraqi Army's Twitter account posted a [photo](#) of the flag raising, showing all three in attendance. Facebook accounts affiliated with the Badr Organization also posted photos and videos showing the flag raising.* The Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve spokesman said that he [had not seen](#) the photos in response to a reporter's inquiry during a press briefing on October 17.



Hadi al Ameri, Abu Mehdi al Muhandis, and General Yarallah near Kirkuk City on October 16, 2017.

- Hadi al Ameri toured the Bai Hasan oil field on October 16 after Peshmerga forces withdrew. A Facebook account linked to the Badr Organization posted a video of Hadi al Ameri touring the Bai Hasan oil field. Ameri, during an interview from the field, thanked the Peshmegra for not clashing with the ISF. An Emergency Response Division (ERD) officer was standing next to Ameri. When asked if there were oil fields under PMF control, Ameri stuttered, saying that “oil fields... I don’t think so except for Daybaka oil field which is important to control. Besides that, I don’t think we have a problem.” *



Abu Mehdi al Muhandis tours the Bai Hasan oil field on October 16, 2017.

- Additional [photos](#) and [videos](#) that circulated on social media also [show](#) Hadi al Ameri and Abu Mehdi al Muhandis touring sites in Kirkuk Province.

Iranian Proxy Militia Deployments to Kirkuk

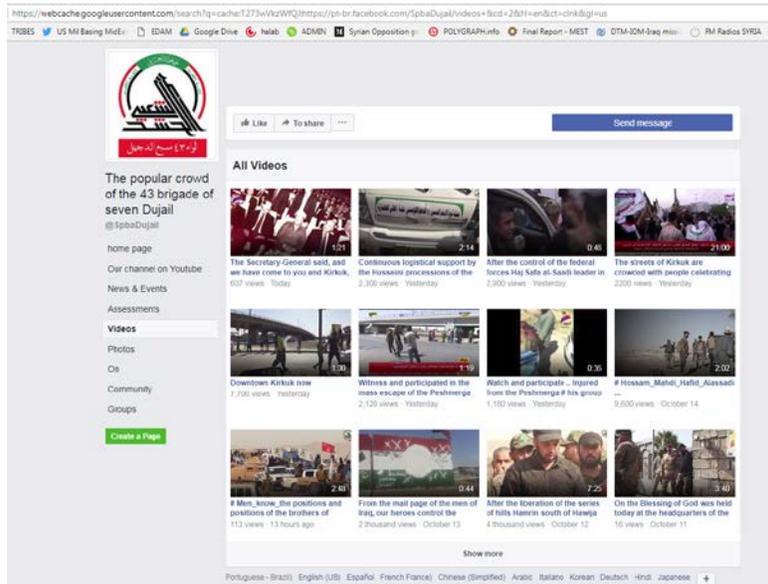
AAH

- [Photos](#) and videos taken in the vicinity of Kirkuk City that circulated on social media included AAH flags. Western reporters also [cited examples](#) of AAH flags raised near Kirkuk.
- A Facebook page affiliated with the AAH 42nd PMF Brigade shared photos with a caption stating that the 42nd Brigade led by Haj Abu Bakr Jubouri was deploying to Daquq for further movement to Kirkuk, and included a photo of a fighter with an AAH flag.*



Photo of AAH fighter either on the way to or near Kirkuk City.

- A Facebook page affiliated with AAH's 42nd PMF Brigade posted photos on October 16 of fighters holding an AAH flag with a caption stating the photo was taken at a Peshmerga position in central Kirkuk.*
- ISW [assessed](#) on October 19 that the AAH 43rd PMF Brigade was also present within proximity of Kirkuk as of at least October 15. The 43rd PMF Brigade was deployed in Salah al Din province before the Kirkuk operation.* A Facebook page affiliated with AAH's 43rd PMF Brigade published information, including photos and videos, that supported ISW's assessment that fighters from the Brigade deployed close to Kirkuk in early October.* Screenshots from the AAH 43rd Brigade's Facebook page are included below.



Badr Organization

- The Badr Organization's Turkmen brigade, also known as the 16th PMF Brigade, was already stationed near Bashir and may have received reinforcement from 16th PMF Brigade units in the vicinity of Hamrin and Qara Tapa.*
- An Iraqi news outlet shared a [video](#) from September 18 that shows a column of fighters from the 24th Badr Brigade arriving near southern Kikuk with Abu Mehdi al Muhandis.



Abu Mehdi al Muhandis arrives close to southern Kirkuk and sits in an apparent Badr Organization office on September 18, 2017.

- A Facebook account affiliated with Ansar Allah al-Awfiya posted a photo from IVO Bashir showing civilians offering food to the PMF and security forces.* The post included photos from al-Ghadeer channel (affiliated with the Badr Organization).
- The communications directorate of the PMF [announced](#) that its force,s along with ISF, control Bai Hasan oil fields in Kirkuk. The PMF in Bai Hasan most likely included a Badr Organization unit, given Hadi al Ameri’s visit.

Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH)

- Al Arabiya published a [video](#) on October 16 from a location near Kirkuk City showing two trucks laden with fighters carrying KH flags, in addition to fighters carrying KH flags stationed at a checkpoint.



Al Arabiya video on October 16, 2017 shows Katai’b Hezbollah fighters near Kirkuk.



These units joined the local Iranian-backed forces stationed south of Kirkuk, which included: [Kita'ib Jund al Imam](#), [Liwa Kirkuk al Thani](#), and Firqat Imam Ali al Qitaliya. [Qiyadat Quwat Abu Fadl al Abbas](#) and a Hawza-affiliated PMF unit named Firqat al Abbas al Qitaliya may also have been present.

Iran's proxies joined an Iraqi force including the [CTS](#) and units from the 9th Iraqi Armored Division. It is unclear from publicly available information which specific CTS and 9th Iraqi Armored Division units participated. The deployment of elite Iraqi units supported by armored artillery indicates Abadi intended both to deter the Peshmerga from fighting and to prepare for that possibility. Abadi also deployed troops from the FP and ERD, which constituted the only government-controlled infantry force. The FP and [ERD](#) likely included units penetrated by Iran. These combined forces staged south of Kirkuk city in order to allow an avenue for retreat for Kurdish forces to the north.

ISW [mapped](#) these forces on October 19 and [updated](#) that assessment on October 29. ISW will continue updating its assessment and map if and when new information becomes available.

Implications

Iran's role in Kirkuk was decisive. The leader of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) Qassem Suleimani traveled [to Iraq](#) on October 14 to convey Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's [support](#) for Abadi's response to the referendum. He also [issued](#) an [ultimatum](#) to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and possibly to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Leader of the Badr Organization, Hadi al Ameri, also [threatened](#) "internal war" if the Peshmerga did not withdraw from Kirkuk. The deployment of Iran's proxies to Kirkuk tipped the scales against Iraqi Kurdistan enough to compel it to withdraw from Kirkuk and large portions of Iraq's disputed internal boundaries.

Iran achieved a second goal through its support in Kirkuk: to further legitimize its proxies in Iraq while sidelining the United States. Iran seeks to subordinate the Iraqi government from within, and was careful to frame the Kirkuk operation as a sovereign Iraqi action. Iran quietly provided critical support that ensured Abadi's success while positioning its proxies to have influence in Kirkuk moving forward. Iran also took action to keep the U.S. on the sidelines by [deploying](#) an Explosively Formed Penetrator (EFP) against U.S. forces in early October. The Kirkuk operation thus bears signs of Iraq's most likely future on [current trajectory](#): Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi notionally in control, Iran's proxies acting on Tehran's orders but as legitimate arms of the Iraqi state, and the U.S. on the sidelines.

Iran's proxies will capitalize politically and militarily on their role in Kirkuk and across Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries (DIBS). The [battlefield circulations of major proxy leaders](#) around Kirkuk bolstered their public image ahead of Iraq's elections scheduled for early 2018. Their subordinates may compete in local Kirkuk politics. Their forces will likely control or contest Iraqi government control of Kirkuk's military infrastructure and oil installations. Prime Minister Abadi placed an Iranian client, Ali Fadhil Imran, at the [head of](#) a new [Kirkuk Operations command](#) on

October 28. Imran is the former head of the Iranian-influenced 5th Iraqi Army Division. Unconfirmed reports indicate Abadi also [appointed](#) an Iranian [client](#), Abdul-Amir al-Zaydi, as the head of “redeployment operations” across Iraq’s DIBS and border crossings on November 5. Zaydi is the former head of the Iranian-influenced Dijla Operations Command. These appointments enable Iran’s proxies to consolidate militarily in Kirkuk and across the DIBS.

The U.S. remains multiple steps behind Iran. President Donald Trump rolled out a new anti-Iran strategy days before the Kirkuk operation, without specifying prescriptions for containing and reversing the strength of Iran’s proxy networks. The Trump Administration’s initial apathy toward Iran’s role in the Kirkuk operation appeared to indicate the U.S. will not meaningfully push back against Iran in Iraq. U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson provided a more forceful, but still sluggish, U.S. response to Iran’s role in Kirkuk in a subsequent trip to the Middle East from October 22-23. Tillerson [said](#) “Iranian militias that are in Iraq...need to go home” during a press conference with Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister Adel al Jubeir on October 22. Secretary Tillerson’s statement recognizes the threat Iran’s proxies in Iraq pose, but rolling back their influence is not achievable through rhetoric alone. Abadi reportedly responded to Secretary Tillerson by stating the PMF [defended](#) their country and made the sacrifices that contributed to the victory over ISIS. Abadi subsequently stated that he will disarm Iran’s proxies if they refuse to submit to his control, in an effort to reaffirm his intent to remain aligned with U.S. policy. He does not have the capability to do so without direct American military support, however. Only a serious change in U.S. policy in Iraq can save Abadi from *de facto* cooptation by Iran.

* Please contact ISW directly to request citations for these data.