

Testimony of

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on

**“Countering Iranian Proxies in Iraq”**

**U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism,  
Nonproliferation, and Trade**

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Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, on behalf of the Hudson Institute, I am honored to testify before you today about Countering Iranian Proxies in Iraq.

We've are being asked today to define the threat of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds (Jerusalem) Force (IRGC-QF) Iraqi militias, their role, and how the U.S. can counter Iran's malign influence.

**How bad is it?** Well, Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds Force, now has an armed political party that came in second in Iraq's elections. It is named the Fatih Coalition, and it is poised to have a major role in Iraq's next government.<sup>1</sup> They are threatening Americans, they've launched rockets and mortars at our embassy in Baghdad, at our consulate in Basra; they are in Syria, and they want to go to Jerusalem.<sup>2 3</sup>

**Iran's Proxies are positioned to be dominant players in Iraq's new government.**

**Soleimani's directed and funded Iraqi militias have a political party called Fatih and they came in second in Iraq's parliamentary elections.** They came in second to Moqtada al-Sadr, a man who directed militia attacks against the U.S. on behalf of Qassem Soleimani, and ahead of Prime Minister Hader al-Abadi, a man that stood aside along with U.S. officials and allowed IRGC-QF Iraqi militias to grow influence over Iraq's political and security situation.<sup>4</sup>

Fatih coalition members, to include the new Sunni speaker of the Council of Representatives, are taking pro-Iran positions to include threatening the U.S., condemning the U.S., and announcing that Iraq would not adhere to U.S. sanctions on Iran.<sup>5</sup>

**What is Fatih?** Fatih is comprised of key IRGC-QF militias and enablers.

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<sup>1</sup> Falih Hassan and Rod Nordland, "Iraqi Political Alliance Unites a U.S. Friend and Foe" *NYT*, June 23, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/23/world/middleeast/iraq-elections-prime-minister.html>

<sup>2</sup> John Irish and Ahmed Rasheed, "Exclusive: Iran moves missiles to Iraq in warning to enemies" *Reuters*, August 31, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-iraq-missiles-exclusive/exclusive-iran-moves-missiles-to-iraq-in-warning-to-enemies-idUSKCN1LG0WB>

<sup>3</sup> Michael R. Gordon, "White House Blames Iranian-Backed Militias for Attacking U.S. Facilities in Iraq" *WSJ*, September 11, 2018. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/white-house-blames-iranian-backed-militias-for-attacking-u-s-facilities-in-iraq-1536707458>

<sup>4</sup> Ahmed Aboulenein, Maher Chmaytelli, "Populist cleric Sadr all but wins Iraq election" *Reuters*, May 13, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-election/populist-cleric-sadr-all-but-wins-iraq-election-idUSKCN1IE091>

<sup>5</sup> Amir Toumaj, "Analysis: Tehran's push to force US exit from Iraq" *Long War Journal*, September 21, 2018. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/09/analysis-tehrans-push-to-force-us-exit-from-iraq.php>

**Abu Mehdi al-Mohandes has killed Americans.** Mohandes is the leader of the IRGC-QF created, funded, trained, and directed Kataib Hezbollah or Hezbollah Brigades, and is also the deputy commander of the Hashd al-Shaabi or the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU).<sup>6</sup>

Mohandes is also a designated terrorist and his group is a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization. Surprisingly, Mohandes receives a paycheck from the Iraqi government, has access to U.S. intelligence, equipment, and funding through a Badr militia network in the Iraqi Security Forces. The PMU have been absorbed into the Iraqi Security Forces and now fall under the Prime Minister's office.<sup>7</sup>

**Qays Khazali has killed Americans.** Khazali is the commander of the IRGC-QF created, funded, trained, and directed Asaib ahl al-Haqq, or League of the Righteous, a group that has killed Americans, continues to threaten Americans in Iraq and Syria, and is responsible for launching mortar and rocket attacks against the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and the consulate in Basra<sup>8</sup>. Khazali is also a member of the Fatih coalition, and his group AAH went from 1 seat in parliament to 15 seats.<sup>9</sup>

**Akram al-Kaabi has killed Americans.** Al-Kaabi, formally of Asaib ahl al-Haqq, leads the IRGC-QF created, funded, trained, and directed militia Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba. Akram al-Kaabi is designated for killing Americans and his group was attacked by U.S. airstrikes in Syria for threatening U.S. forces in al-Tanf, Syria.<sup>10 11</sup>

Akram al-Kaabi is no friend of the Iraqi Government and has said if the Supreme Leader gave the word he would overthrow the Baghdad Government.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> David Daoud, "PMF deputy commander Muhandis details Hezbollah ops in Iraq" *Long War Journal*, January 9, 2017, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/01/pmf-deputy-commander-muhandis-details-hezbollah-ops-in-iraq.php>

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Treasury, "Treasury Designates Individual, Entity Posing Threat to Stability in Iraq" *DOT*, July 2, 2009. <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg195.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> Michael R. Gordon, "White House Blames Iranian-Backed Militias for Attacking U.S. Facilities in Iraq" *WSJ*, September 11, 2018. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/white-house-blames-iranian-backed-militias-for-attacking-u-s-facilities-in-iraq-1536707458>

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Pollack, "The unfortunate rise of the Khazali Network" *AEI* August 30, 2018. <https://www.aei.org/publication/the-unfortunate-rise-of-the-khazali-network/>

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Treasury, "Treasury Designates Individuals and Entities Fueling Violence in Iraq" *DOT*, September 16, 2008. <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp1141.aspx>

<sup>11</sup> Babak Dehghanpisheh, "The Iraqi militia helping Iran carve a road to Damascus" Reuters, September 22, 2017. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/tags/harakat-al-nujaba>

<sup>12</sup> Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, "Iraqi Shiite militia leader says he would overthrow government if ordered by Iran's supreme leader" *Long War Journal*, November 12, 2015.

**To counter Iran’s Proxies in Iraq we must first acknowledge that Badr Corps is Iran’s premiere proxy in Iraq.** Badr facilitates everything Iran’s IRGC-QF Commander Qassem Soleimani, Abu Mehdi al-Mohandes, Qays Khazali, and Akram al-Kaabi want to do in Iraq and Syria. Badr is Iran’s premiere proxy in Iraq and Qassem’s go-to is Hadi al-Ameri.

Soleimani’s greatest asset is Hadi al-Ameri, the leader of the IRGC-QF created, funded, trained, and directed Badr Corps. Ameri is also the head of the Fatih coalition and the commander of the Hashd al-Shaabi where Badr, Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib ahl al-Haq, Harakat Nujaba, and Kataib Imam Ali are the command and control structure for the hundred-thousand-man force.

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Hadi al-Ameri facilitates everything Qassem Soleimani wants to do in Iraq through his network of highly placed Badr officers throughout Iraq’s intelligence and security apparatus. Ameri’s lieutenants facilitate IRGC-QF militia activities, procure U.S. M1 Abrahams tanks, have access to U.S. intelligence through Qassem al-Araji’s MOI<sup>15</sup>, and have access to funds through the Prime Minister’s security budget.<sup>16</sup>

Soleimani’s premiere proxy is Badr Corps. In Khazali’s Tactical Interrogation Reports (TIR), he states Badr Corps trained in Iraq on the same tactics AAH did to target Americans.<sup>17</sup> Badr Corps is the face Soleimani wants to show to the U.S. We often hear the argument from senior U.S. officials that, “Badr isn’t as bad as the others”. In fact, Badr is worse. Badr facilitates and masks everything Soleimani, Mohandes, and Khazali, and Akram al-Kaabi are doing in Iraq.

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<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/11/us-designated-terrorist-of-iraqi-militia-reportedly-in-aleppo.php>

<sup>13</sup> Guido Steinberg, “The Badr Organization: Iran’s Most Important Instrument in Iraq” *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, July 2017. [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2017C26\\_sbg.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2017C26_sbg.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Phillip Smyth, “Iranian Militias in Iraq’s Parliament: Political Outcomes and U.S. Response” *WINEP*, June 11, 2018. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iranian-militias-in-iraqs-parliament-political-outcomes-and-u.s.-response>

<sup>15</sup> Associated Press, “Iraq Interior Minister Qassem al-Araji Was Twice Detained by U.S.” May 8, 2017. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/iraq-interior-minister-qasim-al-araji-was-twice-detained-u-n756166>

<sup>16</sup> Inspector General, Department of Defense, “Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve and Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | October 1, 2017 – December 31, 2017” *DOD*, February 2, 2018. <http://www.dodig.mil/reports.html/Article/1430685/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-inherent-resolve-and-operation-pacific-eag/>

<sup>17</sup> Josh Rogin, “Iraqi terrorist turned politician told U.S. interrogators he worked with Iran to kill Americans” *Washington Post*, August 30, 2018 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/josh-rogin/wp/2018/08/30/iraqi-terrorist-turned-politician-told-u-s-interrogators-he-worked-with-iran-to-kill-americans/?utm\\_term=.eec64b8493bb](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/josh-rogin/wp/2018/08/30/iraqi-terrorist-turned-politician-told-u-s-interrogators-he-worked-with-iran-to-kill-americans/?utm_term=.eec64b8493bb)

Badr's saturation of Iraq's Security Forces is none more evident than having top Badr officer Qassem al-Araji, detained twice by U.S. forces for providing lethal aid to kill Americans, as the Minister of Interior.<sup>18</sup> His ministry facilitates IRGC-QF militia access to U.S. intelligence, funds, and equipment.

### **Arguments for Designation and Targeting.**

**Designated terrorists and terrorist organizations are seeking to destabilize Iraq**, they are threatening Americans in Iraq and Syria, and they have access to U.S. intelligence, funds, and equipment. Designated terrorists are being rejected by Iraqis, and their terrorist organization affiliates are having their offices set ablaze by Iraqis who have had enough of Iran and its proxies. It's time for the U.S. to do what Sunnis, Kurds, and now Shia Iraqis are asking us to do – stand behind them and give them strength to push back against Qassem Soleimani.<sup>19</sup>

**Asaib ahl al-Haqq and Harakat al-Nujaba were created, funded, and trained by the IRGC Quds Force** – these IRGC-QF militias answer directly to Qassem Soleimani and grew their influence under the U.S. ISIS campaign.<sup>20</sup>

### **Policy Recommendations.**

#### **Maximum Pressure Campaign is needed for Kataib Hezbollah.**

We need a maximum pressure campaign on Abu Mehdi al-Mohandes and his Kataib Hezbollah militia. Mohandes and Kataib Hezbollah are designated, and I'm not sure they feel it. Kataib Hezbollah has penetrated Iraq's economic sectors to benefit the IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah. Everything and everyone Kataib Hezbollah touches should be subject to U.S. secondary sanctions.

**Designate Badr.** Badr is not the Baath party – De-Baathification affected teachers, technocrats, relatives, anyone who was employed by the Saddam regime had to join the party. Badr is simply an IRGC-QF proxy, it is not a party, and being a member of Badr is not required to be in government. De-Badrification is needed in Iraq, de-Badrification will end Soleimani's ability to use legitimate institutions such as the Ministry of Defense (MOD), Ministry of Interior (MOI), Ministry of Transportation (MOT), and Ministry of Energy (MOE) to further Iran's strategic hold on Iraq's security apparatus and sever Soleimani's penetration of Iraq's economic sectors.

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<sup>18</sup> Associated Press, "Iraq Interior Minister Qassem al-Araji Was Twice Detained by U.S." May 8, 2017. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/iraq-interior-minister-qasim-al-araji-was-twice-detained-u-n756166>

<sup>19</sup> Isabel Coles and Ali Nabhan, "Iraqi Protesters Torch Iranian Consulate" *WSJ*, September 7, 2018 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iraqi-protesters-torch-iranian-consulate-1536356602>

<sup>20</sup> Ahmed Majidyar and Husayn Hosoda, "Iran-Backed Iraqi Groups Threaten Violence Following U.S. Terrorism Bill" December, 6, 2017. <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/io/iran-backed-iraqi-groups-threaten-violence-following-us-terrorism-bill>

**Sanction Qays Khazali and Asaib ahl al-Haqq (AAH).** We must sanction Qays Khazali to discredit Qays Khazali, sanction Qays Khazali because Iran doesn't want us to and the Iraqis protesting do. Sanction Qays Khazali to disrupt his position ahead of government formation – sanction him so that politicians that want to work with the US ahead of Iran see a message that the US will not overlook the IRGC-QF's influence in the Iraqi government.

**Sanction Akram al-Kaabi and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN).** Akram al-Kaabi directed Americans be killed during the Iraq War and is threatening to do so again. Akram al-Kaabi's group has moved on American forces in Syria and as a result, his forces were attacked and decimated by American air power. He is threatening to target and kill Americans again in Iraq and Syria.

By not sanctioning AAH and addressing the IRGC-QF's influence in Iraq has created a Force Protection issue. The argument that designating AAH and HHN will put US soldiers at risk is a straw man argument – allowing AAH and HHN to grow their influence by ignoring their role puts our soldiers at risk.

**Listen to Iraqis.** All Iraqis are saying no to Iran's malign influence in Iraq except for the religious parties and militias tied to Iran – the ones we are unfortunately backing as well. Now is the time to use U.S. leverage and Treasury tools to help Iraqis limit Iran's influence and bring Iraq back into its traditional role as a bulwark against Iranian aggression and expansion.

We can do this by increasing our pressure campaign on the designated FTO Kataib Hezbollah, by not granting waivers for Iraq to do business with Iran, and to designate Asaib ahl al-Haqq and Harakat al-Nujaba. Let's make it hard for Hadi al-Ameri to be in the same room with Soleimani and his designated lieutenants – Ameri and Badr Corps need to feel that they are next.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee.

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Mike Pregent is a Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute. He is a senior Middle East analyst, a former adjunct lecturer for the College of International Security Affairs, and a visiting fellow at the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University.

Pregent is a former intelligence officer with over 28 years' experience working security, terrorism, counter-insurgency, and policy issues in the Middle East, North Africa, and Southwest Asia. He is an expert in Middle East and North Africa political and security issues, counter-terrorism analysis, stakeholder communications, and strategic planning.

He spent considerable time working malign Iranian influence in Iraq as an advisor to Iraq's Security and Intelligence apparatus, including an embedded advisory role with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's extra-constitutional Office of the Commander-in-Chief. An office set up to ensure Iranian-backed Shia militia party control of Iraq's security and political process.

Pregent served in Desert Shield and Desert Storm, served as a liaison officer in Egypt during the 2000 Intifada, as a counter-insurgency intelligence officer at CENTCOM in 2001, and as a company commander in Afghanistan in 2002.

Pregent served as an embedded advisor with the Peshmerga in Mosul 2005-06. Also, as a civilian SME working for DIA, he served as a political and military advisor to USF-I focusing on reconciliation, the insurgency, and Iranian influence in Iraq from 2007-2011. He was a violent extremism and foreign fighter analyst at CENTCOM from 2011-2013.

He holds a Masters in Strategic Public Relations from The George Washington University and is a graduate of the U.S. Army's Defense Language Institute in Modern Standard Arabic and Egyptian Dialect.

Mike is a free-lance writer for the *The Wall Street Journal* and a contributing writer to the *Daily Beast*.

Mike Pregent has numerous publications on ISIS, Iran's Qods Force, and on Syria and Iraq. His writings have been published in *Foreign Affairs*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *Foreign Policy Magazine*, *The Tower Magazine*, *Long War Journal*, *New America Foundation*, *CNN*, *Al-Jazeera*, *Business Insider*, and the *Daily Beast*.

Mike frequently appears as an expert analyst on Shia militias, Iran, Iraq, and ISIS with appearances on BBC World News, MSNBC, Al-Jazeera International, CNN, CNN International, VOA Persia, and Fox News.