



# From the Militias Serving the State to the State Serving the Militias: What Has Happened to Iraq?

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An umbrella organization of dozens of primarily pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) has been operating in Iraq since 2014. This article focuses on the relations that have emerged between the PMF and the government. It analyzes why the state has anchored the organization's status in law and strengthened it, even though the PMF's leading militias are undermining Iraq's sovereignty. It reviews the background causes, manifestations, and consequences of this phenomenon, and then assesses two possible hypotheses. The first hypothesis attributes the state's attitude to its need for a military response to the emergency created by the rise of ISIS and the failure of the Iraqi army to halt it in 2014. The second hypothesis involves the network of connections that have developed between Iran, the Shi'ite militias, and the Iraqi government over the years, which has followed a patron-client arrangement. These connections have enabled Iran to intervene and exert its influence in order to strengthen the status of the Iranian-supported PMF. This analysis also addresses the significance of these relations for Israel, which became a target of attacks by these militias in Iraq during the Swords of Iron War.

*Key words:* Iraq, Shi'ite militias, Popular Mobilization, PMF, Iran, state-society relations, patron-client relations, the Shi'ite axis, Israel.

## Introduction

What makes a country attach to its security forces militias that do not respect its sovereignty, and even provide them with government subsidies when they violate its laws and policy? The theoretical and empirical research literature on relations between states and violent non-state players devotes a great deal of attention to hybrid situations in which the government security forces and militias of various types

operate simultaneously and in tandem, even though there is no clear hierarchy between them (Husken, 2018; Staniland, 2021). One fairly common situation in civil wars occurs when the army splits up into militias acting with no connection to the central government. When the government stabilizes, it reintegrates the militias into the army or dismantles them (Nelson & Petrova, 2023).

This study concerns a different situation in which a state possessing a functioning army allows militias—operating as independent players not subject to its authority—to exist at its expense, even though their activity detracts from the country’s sovereignty and even destabilizes it, as has been the case in Iraq in recent years. This seems paradoxical and is certainly atypical. At the same time, there is little discussion of such a phenomenon in the research literature. The purpose of this study is therefore to explain the conditions leading to this situation in which the state serves the militias, rather than the militias serving state.

This study analyzes the background and consequences of this phenomenon in Iraq, while looking at the government’s relations with the mostly pro-Iranian Shi’ite militias that have banded together into the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) umbrella organization since 2014. It will examine changes in Iraq and the challenges it faced following the collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime, which resulted in a gap between what was planned and the actual facts on the ground in the democratic federal regime constituted under US sponsorship. From the very beginning, the central government experienced difficulty in enforcing its sovereignty equally in all parts of the country and among all sections of the population, while terrorist attacks mounted and dozens of militias identified with various population groups were formed.

Considering this background, two hypotheses are presented for the state’s policy towards the PMF and what led to the current state of relations between them. The first focuses on the solution to the state’s current needs provided by the PMF, as a link between the state and the armed communities in Iraqi society, when ISIS began its campaign of conquest. The military solution furnished by the militias following the Iraqi army’s failure to contain ISIS added to their extensive deployment (even beyond Iraq’s borders), and led the Iraqi government to accept assistance from the PMF and accord these militias a special legal status, even though

they refused to respect the government’s sovereignty. The second explanation concerns Iran’s involvement and influence on the Shi’ite militias and the government in Baghdad. It explores the possibility that a patron-client relationship developed between Iran and the relevant players in Iraq as a result of the establishment of the PMF and decisions reached in Baghdad, and that the status of the PMF is attributable to Iran’s involvement and influence. These relations are based on a network of connections formed by the Iranian regime over the years with political parties, organizations, and Shi’ite militias in Iraq. The process of political consolidation and military force-building by these players is accordingly related to their close affiliation with the Iranian regime, particularly the Revolutionary Guards Quds force, which has been financing and arming the main Shi’ite militias even before their PMF umbrella organization was created. Finally, the explanatory power of each hypothesis is evaluated in the context of the Swords of Iron War and the situation and status of the Shi’ite militias in Iraq is compared with the state of Hezbollah in Lebanon. The summary and conclusions highlight the significance of the events being examined for Israel, which became a target for attacks by the Iraqi militias during the Swords of Iron War.

### **The new Iraq—The accelerated democratization process fostered by the US and the gap between what was planned and the actual results**

The abrupt collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003, shortly after Operation Iraqi Freedom began under American military leadership, inaugurated a change of regime in Baghdad. The American administration cooperated in this task with allied Iraqi political groups that had previously opposed the regime. The main governmental institutions were rearranged—government ministries, the Iraqi army, and internal security agencies—according to a democratic constitution formulated by

a provisional ruling council with the help of advisors from the American government. The US military forces remained in Iraq and advised the new government and its security forces in the initial years, before withdrawing in 2009-2011.

With the collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime, Iraq received sizeable aid from the U.S. from the beginning of this process. American advisors and military forces took part in planning the establishment of a new administration and the training of the Iraqi army. Free parliamentary elections were held for the first time in January 2005, with politicians from a variety of ethnic groups and religious sects combining in lists to compete in these elections. Great hopes were placed on the project of replacing the Iraqi dictatorship with the world's first Arab democracy, based on power sharing—facilitating representation for the various ethnic and other groups comprising Iraqi society through the allocation of seats in parliament and positions according to an ethnic blueprint across the parliament, government and its ministries, and the security forces (Younis, 2013).

The plan of the architects of the new political order was to create fair, multi-ethnic representation, ease inter-ethnic tensions, and reinforce consensus and stability. From the very beginning, however, the minorities, especially the Sunni minority, complained about the tyranny of the Shi'ite majority. The new security problems that soon arose complicated the plans, particularly attacks by terrorist organizations seeking to upset the new order. New militias identified with ethnic groups or tribes were established in response to these security problems. These developments highlighted the difficulty of satisfying all parts of Iraqi society in the framework of the new governmental arrangements. Terrorist groups formed, especially among Sunni supporters of the old regime, and some of them joined jihad terrorist organizations. Groups arose, including among the Shi'ite political parties, and organized their own militias in response to

these threats, giving rise to concern that a civil war would ensue (Zeidel, 2008, p. 46; Dodge, 2013, p. 249).

What enabled the flourishing of terrorist organizations and the proliferation of militias in Iraq was the security vacuum—the absence of effective control by the ad hoc interim government established in Iraq after the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime. In the security realm in particular, the early days following the collapse exemplified the lack of plans to maintain order and prevent looting, as well as the absence of alternative means of control to those of the former regime. Members of the Ba'ath regime, including officers from the security forces and the army, went underground and became the nucleus for the development of terrorism against the coalition and its efforts to stabilize Iraq and establish a regime that would lead it toward democracy (Hughes, 2010, p. 159).

This poor starting point in the rebuilding process primarily reflected the difficulty in achieving a broad internal consensus in Iraq on the appropriate replacement for the former regime. The efforts to undermine the new order consisted of an accelerating pace of terrorist attacks during the first decade of the new government. The most deadly and traumatic of these attacks, which were conducted by the Sunni terrorist organizations that joined forces with extremist Islamic Sunni organizations headed by Al Qaeda, were aimed mostly at the government and the Shi'ite population. At the same time, Shi'ite organizations also conducted terrorist attacks. Among these were militias such as Kata'ib Hezbollah (Hezbollah Brigades)—a pro-Iranian Shi'ite militia formed a few years after the change of regime in Baghdad. The Iranian regime, which sought to use these militias against the American presence in Iraq and in responding to Sunni terrorism, was deeply involved in them. Such terrorist attacks detracted from the legitimacy of the government, which faced the challenge of unifying the different parts of the heterogeneous Iraqi society and was also forced to cope with

constant waves of terrorism in the early years of its existence (Hashim, 2006, p. 19; Azzam, 2013, p. 23).

Iraq's security problems worsened as terrorist attacks became more frequent, especially on the part of the Sunni minority, including members of the defunct Baath Party who had been driven out of power. They joined the new terrorist frameworks: the Islamic Army, Al Qaeda, and a decade after the new regime's formation, the Islamic State of Iraq (later ISIS).

After the withdrawal of American forces in 2011, it was apparent to all parties that the Iraqi army was finding it difficult to counter the scale of mounting terrorism. The most prominent example was the army's failure against ISIS when the latter took control of Mosul, followed by further conquests and terrorist attacks, which gave ISIS control of large areas of Iraq starting in the summer of 2014. This collapse highlighted the trend towards internal conflict and violence and the difficulty of integrating the security elements in the country belonging to groups on different sides of the political and ideological spectrum in the inter-ethnic conflicts: Sunni, Shi'ite, Kurds, and others. These problems arose from the first year of the new political order, but the American administration did not reassess the situation. In summing up the period, diplomat Robert Ford, political counsellor to the US embassy in Baghdad in 2004-2006, commented, "American security forces could deal with security problems, but that didn't

give us unlimited political power. Bremer and his team... developed political plans and a temporary constitution that were excellent intellectual achievements inappropriate for Iraq's circumstances" (Ford, 2023).

The most prominent symptom of the security weakness of the new Iraq's central government, army, and security agencies was the ongoing terrorism: suicide terrorist attacks, rocket fire, and explosive devices against the American forces in Iraq—a series of security shocks at a time when the government was trying to achieve stability. The new militias that had been formed in Iraq after Saddam Hussein's regime collapsed were not an entirely new phenomenon in the country; ethnically, tribal, or religiously-based militias had operated there for decades, especially Shi'ite militias that had been formed during Saddam Hussein's rule in opposition to the regime (the leading such militia was the Badr Brigade, founded as a Shi'ite opposition organization under Iranian sponsorship in the 1980s). Even after these organizations became political parties in the new Iraq starting in 2003, some of them continued to maintain independent militias free of state supervision, enforcement, or involvement. About ten of these joined the PMF. At that stage, these militias had thousands or even tens of thousands of armed members (Cole, 2007, p. 111). In place of Saddam Hussein's regular army, which numbered approximately 400,000 soldiers in the last decade of his regime (Malovany, 2009; Post & Baram, 2002, p. 24), a smaller army of about 200,000 soldiers was formed, supported primarily by training and arms supplied by the US and other countries (Dodge, 2013, p. 256).

Nevertheless, the Iraqi state security forces had difficulty winning legitimacy among the range of ethnic groups in Iraqi society or to be seen as protectors of all members of the public, even in their new democratic format set forth in the constitution approved by referendum in 2005. Among the Sunni minority, there was opposition to cooperation with the security

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forces of a regime founded by the U.S., which had deprived the Sunnis of the leading role they had played in Saddam Hussein's regime. Among the Kurdish minority, the change in regime was regarded as an opportunity to attain broader autonomy while maintaining its local security force—the Peshmerga. The Shi'ite majority was split among various political parties holding different ideologies and political incentives, which moved the Shi'ites towards dividing security responsibility, instead of unifying it, through the founding of new militias for new political movements (Salehyan, 2020, p. 103).

The removal of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship and the creation of a democratic order were not the sole factors creating internal political incentives for the founding of militias that gave each group an answer to potential threats inside Iraq and the ability to withstand their enemies. The Iraqi army's disappointing performance in countering the security chaos prevailing in large parts of the country and the increase in terrorist activity by organizations espousing an extreme Sunni Islamic ideology, among them Al Qaeda, contributed to this trend and aggravated it. The government's repressive measures (especially Shi'ite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki) against the Sunni minority in the framework of anti-terrorism legislation also played a role. In terms of military capability, despite large-scale aid and training from the US army, the Iraqi army proved unable to prevent terrorism by the Sunni extreme Islamic organizations at the beginning of the second decade following the change of regime in Baghdad. Sunni Islamic terrorism further gained momentum in 2009-2011, especially after the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq (Strachan, 2017, pp. 4-5).

Concurrent to this process among Sunni organizations, new Shi'ite militias also arose in Iraq in 2003-2014 with the encouragement and aid of the Iranian regime. The largest and most prominent of these is Kata'ib Hezbollah (Hezbollah Brigades). From the very beginning of its activity in 2007, Iranian Revolutionary Guards

Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani was directly involved in this organization, which received training and financing from the Iranian regime (Gulmohamad, 2020, p. 276). The defection of the Al Qaeda branch in Iraq from that organization's central leadership and the founding of Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014 marked a new stage in the internal conflict in Iraq. This conflict escalated in line with the stepped-up militarization of ethnic and tribal groups in Iraqi society, combined with the inability of the Iraqi army and state institutions in general to cope with the mounting ISIS offensive.

Despite the arms and training provided by the US, the Iraqi army had not trained properly for years. It was obvious that political corruption had penetrated its ranks and made it a tool for the promotion of cronies and the harassment of opponents, instead of the fulfillment of its professional duty—preparing for war, including the war against terrorism (Strachan, 2017, p. 6). This provided a golden opportunity for a multitude of Iraqi militias, particularly the Shi'ite militias, to take the lead in a campaign in which the Iraqi army was failing—the campaign against ISIS.

### **A landmark for the Shi'ite militias— An umbrella organization**

The founding of an umbrella organization for the Shi'ite militias operating in Iraq when ISIS took control of Mosul was the result of a combination of circumstances requiring an immediate response to the mounting security crisis threatening both Iraq and Syria, whose border ISIS broke through soon afterwards, as well as neighboring Iran. The rapid advance of ISIS in its bloody campaign of conquest demanded an immediate response, including a division of the war effort into several areas in which ISIS had consolidated itself. In this sense, the organization of militias that had previously acted separately under Iranian sponsorship against their common enemy was a matter of necessity for the purpose of stopping and later defeating ISIS.

The establishment of the PMF was therefore a combination of a decision by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki following the defeat suffered by Iraq's army, backed by a fatwa issued by Iraqi Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, regarded as the leading Shi'ite religious authority there. He called on anyone in Iraq capable of bearing arms to fight against the terrorists or even to join the security forces in order to achieve the holy goal. The first groups to fulfill al-Sistani's fatwa were the pro-Iranian militias (Moore & Ganzeveld, 2024).

The main Iranian force involved in organizing the PMF was the Quds Force under the command of Qasem Soleimani. The PMF's core consisted of the Iraqi militias trained and armed by Soleimani, which were joined by other Shi'ite militias with less pronounced links to Iran. All of them answered Ayatollah al-Sistani's call and took part in the joint effort to defeat ISIS. The dozens of militias in the PMF can be divided by loyalty into three groups:

- A large group of militias loyal to the Iranian regime, including Kata'ib Hezbollah, the Badr Brigade, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous), Harakat al-Nujaba (The Noble Ones).
- A group loyal to al-Sistani.
- A group loyal to Shi'ite leader Muqtada al-Sadr, who took issue with the pro-Iranian camp among Shi'ites in Iraq.

In addition to these groups, tribal Sunni militias and other minorities took part in the war effort against ISIS (Mansour & Jabar, 2017).

For the PMF, the military operation against Islamic State, which began in 2014, was an opportunity for these militias to rebrand themselves as a force acting in defense of Iraq and other countries in the region, against the threat of ISIS, which was expanding territorially, and to participate in a joint international effort by the Iranian-Russian axis and an ad hoc coalition led by the US. At the same time, while Iran and its Axis of Resistance partners regarded the pro-Iranian militias as legitimate partners of great military value, the terrorist attacks conducted

by them against American soldiers made the U.S. classify them as terrorist organizations and impose sanctions against them and their leaders (Moore & Ganzeveld, 2024).

In Iraq, some militia leaders pushed for their inclusion in the Iraqi state frameworks in order to harness them for the "resistance" (*muqawama*) vision (referring to resistance to the Western countries or enemies in general)—in other words, to make Iraq part of the Axis of Resistance led by Iran. In this context, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq militia Secretary General Qais al-Khazali clearly declared this goal at a conference he attended in February 2015:

When some people hear the term resistance, they hesitate to use it because they think that resistance is directed against the state. This is not what is meant. Instead, we can say that the resistance has now shifted from resistance by factions to resistance by the state. In other words, we have reached the stage of state resistance, meaning that the authorities, the people, and the laws and regulations are part of the resistance (al-Khazali, 2015).

The PMF, however, did not cease to exist after the collapse of the Islamic State's strongholds in Iraq and Syria and the organization's defeat. The militias did not give up the status and advantages that they had obtained from their incorporation in the umbrella organization. As al-Khazali said, it appears that the PMF militias meant to enter the Iraqi state's politics and organizational framework, while at the same time retaining their identity as a military entity acting in the substate sphere, or even beyond Iraq's borders, in most cases with a clearly defined ideology. In order to turn the militia into an active political organization in the parliamentary or even governmental sphere, they needed to coopt the state into legitimizing the militias, thereby legalizing the PMF's activity.

The process that turned the Shi'ite militias into an organized body equivalent to the "Iraqi army" and in time outnumbered it, is analyzed below. Of no less importance was the change in their status in Iraqi law—from a multitude of militias with no state support to a well-organized organization that for all intents and purposes is part of the state security apparatus. This includes an allocation of bases and equipment, the establishment of a government company to finance their activity, and a process of passing legislation to upgrade benefits for their members.

### **The Process of changing PMF's status in Iraq: From its founding to political, economic, and legal influence**

The first stage in the creation of the PMF was recruitment of the militia members themselves in accordance with national requirements and the fatwa by al-Sistani. This gave religious validity to the permanent presence of the Shi'ite militias in the state security forces. As a result of these circumstances, an organization initially emerged that lacked uniformity among its various elements: pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias, a militia identified with Shi'ite leader Muqtada al-Sadr, a militia of al-Sistani supporters, and Sunni tribes (Knights, 2025a, pp. 115-116).

The involvement of the Shi'ite axis led by Iran in the PMF's activity was reflected above all in the leading role played by Revolutionary Guards Quds Force commander General Qasem Soleimani, who took part in planning the PMF's combat against ISIS together with PMF chief of staff Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was responsible for order and internal organization. The organization's preservation and numerical growth (over 200,000 militia members in recent years) represent a significant achievement, given that the militias that joined the PMF came from various Shi'ite movements and ethnic groups—including Sunni, Christian, and Yazidi militias—all of which became subject to Iranian influence when the organization was founded (Bengio, 2025).

The substantial change in the PMF's status occurred in 2016, about a year and a half after it was launched. For the first time, legislation was passed, officially making the organization an integral part of the state security forces, albeit one defined as an independent entity, reporting its activity directly to the prime minister, not the Ministry of Defense or the Iraqi army Chief of Staff. The definition of its role enabled it to act against security threats. At the same time, the legal status of its internal command and hierarchy and its relations and ties with the other state security forces, headed by the army, were left ambiguous. Even at this stage, tension therefore emerged between the army and the militias and escalated as they operated without coordination and contrary to orders from the government and the army (Al-Mawlawi, 2025).

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The significance of this legal authorization from the state was not merely symbolic or theoretical. It was reflected above all in the material aspect—the procurement of military equipment from the state, including arms, and its distribution to formal military frameworks (similar to army units), with a corresponding allocation of resources. When the fighting against ISIS waned in 2018-2020, the PMF became more actively involved in internal security affairs on the seamline between security and internal Iraqi politics. This trend reached a peak with the beginning of the Tishreen protest—a wave of demonstrations against the deteriorating economic situation

and high unemployment, which also reflected popular opposition to Iran's intervention in the country. These protests were led by politically unaffiliated young people, a large proportion of whom were Shi'ites. The PMF, which at this stage was already integrated in the activity of Iraq's security forces, participated in the violent suppression of these protests, which included the killing of demonstrators (Berman et al., 2020). During his short term in office, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who attempted to use force to restrain militia terrorism against American targets in Iraq, was targeted by militia members who used violence and even tried to assassinate him using drones (Schneider, 2020).

The next stage in institutionalizing the connection between the Shi'ite militias and the state's governmental institutions was during the 2021 elections and the formation of the new government in 2022, following a period of internal Shi'ite conflict between leaders of various PMF member movements. Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shi'ite leader who received the largest number of votes in the elections, insisted on differentiating his movement from the pro-Iranian militias and refused to sit with them in the same government. For their part, the leaders of the political parties and representatives of the pro-Iranian militias united in a coalition entitled the "Coordination Framework." This crisis, accompanied by violent clashes, ended when al-Sadr and his representatives withdrew from parliament, after which the Coordination Framework formed the new government. At this point, the pro-Iranian militias were able to institute governmental measures to their benefit, including legislation. After forming a government headed by Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani, leader of one of the Shi'ite political parties, a public company was founded (named al-Muhandis after the PMF's first chief of staff, who was assassinated together with Qasem Soleimani), with an annual budget of tens of millions of dollars and an allocation of government land and other assets to the militias (Alwaqai Aliraqiya, 2023).

This action is the clearest manifestation of the trends that characterize the situation. Even if some of the militias are ideologically close to Iran and receive aid from it, their goal—exploiting their status as Iraqi political players—takes precedence over external aid. They seek to participate in government institutions, the government and parliament in order to mold state frameworks and policies to their purposes, while feeding at the public trough. They wish to attain the status of a state executive arm by means of the law passed in 2016 that accords the PMF militias recognition as a legal entity that is part of the state security forces. After becoming part of the government, their aim is to take advantage of the democratic institutions and the state economy to establish a financial institution to finance their actions and enrich themselves. The PMF's penetration of governmental institutions also has legal ramifications—the appointment of judges loyal to the pro-Iranian militias to key positions to ensure their legal protection, prevent political appointments harmful to the militias' rule and to suppress the opposition (Smith & Knights, 2025).

The next stage in legislation to fortify the militias' status in government was a legislative initiative by the PMF leadership led by Falih Al-Fayyadh (as of the end of 2025 it had not been completed). This initiative included two laws: a PMF service and retirement law and a PMF authority law, expanding the law enacted in 2016 governing the PMF's status and authority. The new PMF authority law states that the PMF will no longer be an emergency force established by order of the prime minister and under government supervision; it will be an institution with full authority and virtually immune to subsequent reforms, let alone elimination. The new proposal also states that the PMF will be responsible for the preservation of the political order, which is liable to encourage the militias to again employ repressive measures against demonstrators, as it did in 2019. In other words, if the new authority bill passes, it will further

undermine the democratic base and human rights in Iraq (Knights, 2025a).

The PMF service and retirement law was designed to anchor PMF members' rights in the same way as the service and retirement laws for the government security agencies and the army. Some regarded the inclusion of the retirement age in this legislation as an effort to compel the leadership to accept changes, because it means that 400 senior officers will be forced to retire. Because of these internal tensions, the law did not pass; a new form of the law is now being considered (Toomey, 2025). In addition, and corresponding to the events that have taken place since the outbreak of massive protests (the 2019 Tishreen protests) against the takeover by the Shi'ite militias and the Iranian foothold in the country, occasional waves of protest have occurred, mainly by young people calling for "an end to rule by the Iranian militias," as in a demonstration in Al-Nasiriyah in southern Iraq – one of the Shi'ite population centers in the country (Milafat Arabia, 2024).

### **The research hypotheses: What explains the appearance of a state serving the militias in Iraq?**

The process described above makes it clear that while state institutions in Iraq have been stagnating since the ISIS crisis began in the summer of 2014, the PMF militias have acquired influence, including on the shaping of the strategy against ISIS. Indeed the militias have been so successful that they have outstripped the official Iraqi institutions and have challenged the ability to enforce order in the country and enforce the orders of those institutions on the militias. One possible explanation for this is the internal features of the country, with an emphasis on the relations between the central government and non-state players—in this case violent non-state players benefiting from advantages over the state institutions. These non-state players derive their power and influence directly from the communities or groups in society whom they represent.

The fundamental assumption in this context is that the state's inability to ensure security when needed, as reflected in the Iraqi army's failure in confronting ISIS, damaged the legitimacy of the state, which is supposed to defend its citizens. The result was internal tensions and splits in society. This situation in turn encouraged the further appearance and strengthening of militias identified with specific groups in society. These militias acquired greater legitimacy than the central government for taking action against threats to these groups. The militias are taking advantage of their opportunities to expand the range of their activity and challenge the state's sovereignty. In the case of Iraq, it is obvious that the substantial advantages of the PMF militias over Iraqi army units in organization and internal unity among the fighters and the high degree of legitimacy they enjoyed for action in the combat zones—in some cases they comprised local residents—have reinforced their status in combating ISIS. The umbrella organization was able to sustain itself, while the state appeared weak or insubstantial in comparison with the militias' record of achievement (Salehyan, 2020, p. 106).

These developments occurred at a time when relations between the state and society in Iraq were on precarious footing. The advance of the pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias, which are gaining control over the state's resources, is attributable to the combination of a democratic political order with a polarized multi-ethnic society in which conflicting interests between ethnic groups, political movements, and leaders result in tension and violence, such as clashes and terrorism.

During the period of democratic change following the downfall of Saddam Hussein's regime and also following the election of a new government in democratic elections, state institutions experienced difficulty in enforcing order and providing security throughout the country. Activity by militias affiliated with tribes or political movements mounted, as did extreme Islamic terrorist

organizations (among them Al Qaeda in Iraq, which later became ISIS). This reflected the trend towards conflict between ethnic groups or political movements of conflicting orientation. When ISIS began its campaign of conquest in northern Iraq, followed by its penetration of additional regions, the central government's army failed to stop it and was forced to rely on ad hoc assistance, provided by the pro-Iranian militias. The militias exploited this opportunity to organize themselves, expand the range of their activity, and improve the legitimacy of their actions under state sponsorship. They had the advantage of deriving their power from society and enjoyed the support of a broad base of the Shi'ite population (the majority in Iraq), which was seeking an effective defense against ISIS. This situation enabled the pro-Iranian PMF militias to progress in Iraqi politics and divert public funds into their pockets by anchoring their status in law on the same format as the Iraqi army and the rest of the formal security forces.

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### **From centralization to decentralization in security, and the undermining of state sovereignty**

The relations between the government, the army, and pro-Iranian militias in Iraq reflect a shift from the centralization of power and authority in the sovereign state (in the classic Max Weber model) to the decentralization of sovereign authority among a large number of players. The research literature on sovereignty models describes the state of hybridity in the security sphere as the splitting or delegation by the state of authority to substate players in the framework of cooperation or coordination between them for the purpose of achieving shared security objectives (Srivastava, 2022). In the case of Iraq,

however, no shared security objective is involved. The sovereign state's objectives (renewal of control or enforcement of sovereignty) absolutely contradict the objectives of the militias operating as players not subordinate to the sovereign. The militias make no commitment to obey the commands of the sovereign (the government and the army), even if PMF regards itself as an arm of the state (Knights, 2024, p. 1111).

The case in question therefore reflects the undermining or weakness of the sovereign order resulting from the way in which the state is attempting to exercise its authority over the militias. It grants them legal status, but in effect authorizes their illegal activity at the cost of its actual sovereignty. In order to explain this phenomenon, it is necessary to take into account all of the players operating in the country, their influence, and the interaction between them—not just the official institutions, but also other players comprising society.

### **The state in society approach**

Joel S. Migdal's *State in Society* theory challenges the traditional conception of a uniform autonomous state. Migdal argues instead that the state is a non-uniform political entity composed of various competing institutions in which traditional forces such as tribes, religious groups, and local leaders are frequently involved. Instead of ruling society, a dynamic relationship is created in which the state and society shape each other. This concept emphasizes the informal character of the interaction between players, based on negotiation or a dispute over control, especially in developing countries. The state is merely one of a range of players operating in society and competing with each other for hegemony. As such, it needs their help in order to establish its legitimacy as a player with authority who must be obeyed. If the state is unable to generate norms of obedience to state institutions (civil society) and constitutes merely a framework for competition between the players operating in it, the latter can be expected to challenge

the state's legitimacy and its ability to impose its law on them. In such an eventuality, state assistance to these players will only help them to reinforce their own legitimacy and popularity at the state's expense (Migdal, 2001).

In the case of Iraq, a divided society in which the norms of obedience to the law or the central government are weak, the practical effect of including the militias in the state security forces for the purpose of unifying the war effort is to strengthen the militias and weaken the state.

At the societal level, such relations between the state and militias operating separately from the army are liable to have extremely grave consequences, fatal for the state's sovereignty, when these militias engage in illegal activity, mainly smuggling. The combination of their armed and violent character and this smuggling activity, which enables them to arm themselves and act beyond the range of state supervision, makes it difficult for the state to exercise control or restrain them. Peter Andreas refers to these types of players as "clandestine transnational actors" operating both inside a country and beyond its borders. Their illegal (and sometimes violent) activity violates the state's laws, leading them to act secretly in order to evade law enforcement efforts. Andreas asserts that their interests are varied. Some of the smugglers are motivated by economic incentives (high profits), while terrorists, guerilla fighters, and rebels act from political ambitions or religious inspiration. There are also differences between them in organization and the location of their activity: some are highly organized; others are not. Some operate only locally, others regionally or globally. At the same time, the most challenging aspect for the state in these players' activity is their expertise in avoiding detection by the state security institutions (Andreas, 2003).

### **The regional-axis explanation: Patron-client relations between Iran and the Shi'ite militias**

An alternative explanation for the augmented status of the Shi'ite militias at the expenses of

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**Iran's profound influence in Iraq is manifested in its ability to operate proxies there, smuggle arms to them, and exert political pressure on the government in Baghdad. Among other things, this is a result of Iraqi dependence on Iran, particularly in the energy sector—the supply of electricity and gas**

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Iraqi state sovereignty, accomplished by means of the government's relationship with the PMF umbrella organization, is outside intervention. Iran has obtained influence in Iraq through its ties with the government and to an even greater extent through its ties with the pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias. Iran's profound influence in Iraq is manifested in its ability to operate proxies there, smuggle arms to them, and exert political pressure on the government in Baghdad. Among other things, this is a result of Iraqi dependence on Iran, particularly in the energy sector—the supply of electricity and gas. This kind of relationship can be described, as in the research literature, as patron-client relations: protection and aid from the patron country for players it regards as loyal and cooperative, who are sometimes also dependent on it for financing or goods supplied by the patron (in the case of the militias, financing of activity and a supply of Iranian arms). This type of relationship with Iraq enables Iran to easily intervene and exert pressure on the government in Baghdad for the purpose of advancing the status of the militias in the PMF framework (Ostovar, 2018).

In analyzing the relations between Iran and the Shi'ite militias in Iraq, it is possible to detect a variety of patterns of relations distinguishable from each other in a number of ways: the degree of a militia's dependence on aid from Iran, the degree of ideological or political similarity to the Iranian regime, and in general the extent of Iranian influence and control over the militia's operations. Assuming that the Iranian regime does not possess the same degree of influence over every militia and that not every militia is loyal and obedient to the Iranian regime to the

same extent, Iran's relations with the Shi'ite militias in Iraq is more like a decentralized network with no clear hierarchy among all of the elements, although Iran plays a key role in it (Tabatabai et al., 2021; Zimmt, 2025).

In practice, the network of connections with the militias in Iraq is decentralized and probably less hierarchical than the Iranian regime sought to achieve by expanding its influence in the neighboring country as part of its regional strategy of proxies. At the same time, in the interactions between the Iranian regime and a large proportion of these militias that are loyal to Tehran, the logic of patron-client relations is easy to detect. Local players develop a connection with a regional player (usually a country possessing resources) with an interest in fostering this connection for the purpose of exploiting it or using it in the long term. In other words, aid in money and arms to the relevant militias is aimed at improving their fighting capabilities and instilling in them the motivation for victory in a way consistent with the regional player's interests. This external intervention in turn increases the militias' power vis-à-vis the government institutions and gives them the means to exert pressure on the central government, which has been forced to recognize their status and even support them in order to avoid an internal conflict with them and their patron (Ostovar, 2018, pp. 19-20).

The PMF's founding was accompanied by direct Iranian intervention and guidance on Iraqi soil, with an emphasis on the Quds Force under the command of Qasem Soleimani. In this sense, however, the PMF is an organization designed to create order and facilitate and streamline ties with dozens of Shi'ite militias, given the differences between them and the varied extent of their identification with and loyalty to the Iranian regime. The principal challenge for the Iranian regime in this matter is coordinating the militias' actions and preventing tension and internal conflict between the member militias that may be generated by political or ideological rivalry. The establishment of the new

framework (similar to the founding of Hezbollah in Lebanon) was therefore designed to facilitate Iran's intervention in Iraq and directly further its goals by means of the Shi'ite militias, rather than attempting to accomplish this through the central government (Alaaldin, 2024).

Furthermore, Iran is aware of its limited ability to promote Iranian interests in Baghdad through the central government there, which maintains ties with the US and wishes to preserve balance in its relations with Iran and the US. Operating through proxies who are not dependent on the government and whose actions are not always known to it, is advantageous for Iran. Strengthening the Shi'ite militias and turning them into a military and political power on which the government and the security forces are dependent, is designed to ensure that the government will not restrain the militias and will finance their activity. Even if the government in Baghdad objects to this policy, the Iranian regime will be able to continue promoting military and economic goals in Iraq, such as the deployment of Iranian armaments in Iraqi territory by the militias and smuggling through Iraqi territory, in order to evade the US sanctions against Iran, e.g. its oil industry. In recent years, pro-Iranian militias have been using boats in these smuggling efforts (Knights, 2025b).

According to this approach, as an external player responsible for arming and financing Shi'ite militias in recent years, Iran is also responsible for the significant change in the militias' status by setting up the PMF umbrella organization, which is enabling the militias to coordinate and streamline their activity. The Iranian regime regards the operation of proxies as important, especially in a neighboring country, for a number of reasons. First of all, it ensures that Iraq will never again constitute a threat to the Iranian regime, as it did when Saddam Hussein ruled Iraq. Secondly, the use of proxies enables Iran to achieve regional goals involving Iranian axis in countries in the region: terrorist actions against American forces who

renewed their operations in Iraq as part of the war against ISIS, the consolidation of militias capable of fighting at Iran's side when necessary, and the use of the Iraqi theater to smuggle arms and goods (such as oil). The pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias in Iraq have engaged in all of these activities in recent years. The process of strengthening and organizing the Shi'ite militias in Iraq into the PMF framework therefore reflects not only the local motivation of these militias, but also their Iranian patron's objective of empowering its clients in Iraq in competition with the central Iraqi government. Iran wishes to increase their power in comparison with the Iraqi army and the other state institutions, thereby expanding the Iranian foothold in Baghdad (Smith & Knights, 2025).

On the other hand, some Shi'ite militias are challenging Iran's plans in Iraq. One of the Shi'ite movements that initially joined the PMF is that of Shi'ite leader Muqtada al-Sadr. In recent years, he has taken issue with the militias allied to Iran and criticized Iranian involvement in Iraq; resulting in an open and violent conflict within this camp that constitutes a threat to Iranian interest there. In other words, the Shi'ite militias are not Iranian puppets; they have their own motives, which are forcing the Iranian regime—especially Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani—to spend great effort on coordination and easing tensions and rivalries between the various militias (Schneider and Zimmt, 2022).

An empirical test of the above hypotheses and theoretical explanations, which is presented below, consists of the PMF's response to the Swords of Iron War between its inception on October 7, 2023 and the end of 2024. Implications and consequences for the relations between the Iraqi state, the PMF, and the Iranian-led Shi'ite axis are provided.

The Iraqi government and official state institutions have refrained from any military response whatsoever to the war in Gaza, nor to the provision of "assistance fronts," such as those comprised of other member of the

Shi'ite axis—first Hezbollah in Lebanon and later the Houthis in Yemen—, which began firing missiles at Israel. Starting in early November 2023, pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias in Iraq began proclaiming their own barrages of missiles and drones against Israel. The Shi'ite militias in Iraq had never before taken such a step (they had previously been involved in a few sporadic launchings, especially during previous rounds of fighting between Israel and the Palestinians in Gaza) and the militias conditioned a halt in their missile attacks on the end of the war in Gaza. Both before and after their fairly frequent attacks against Israel, the Iraqi militias fired barrages against American bases in Iraq and Syria. The announcements by the Shi'ite militias in Iraq that took responsibility for these actions, were signed the "Islamic Resistance in Iraq"—a generic name similar to the "Islamic Resistance in Lebanon"—a term for Hezbollah in Lebanon (The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2023).

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Between November 2023 and November 2024, the Iraqi militias took responsibility for 300 barrages against Israeli targets. Less than a third of these came close to Israel and damage was inflicted in only a few cases (Polak, 2024). In one case, in October 2024, the "Islamic Resistance in Iraq" and Iraqi security sources announced that an "advanced drone" launched against a base in the Golan Heights had caused the death of two soldiers (Zimmt, 2024). The attacks against American targets tailed off drastically after an incident in late January 2024 in which a drone launched by one of the militias killed three American soldiers staying at a base in Jordan. When the US threatened to respond militarily

following this deadly incident, including against “Iranian interests,” Revolutionary Guards Quds force commander Esmail Qaani intervened directly. The international media reported that he arrived urgently in Baghdad and demanded from representatives of the Shi’ite militias that they refrain from attacking the US. Shortly afterwards, a spokesman of Kata’ib Hezbollah (which the US had blamed for the attack) announced the cessation of attacks against American targets (Schneider, 2024).

In the absence of any initiative or direct threat from Israel to respond militarily to the attacks by the militias in Iraq (probably due to concern that Americans would be harmed directly or as a result of the militias’ response to Israeli attacks), the militias continued their barrages against Israel until November 2024, soon after the ceasefire in Lebanon. During this period, warnings from the US and later also from Israel began reaching Baghdad, placing responsibility for the pro-Iranian militias on the Iraqi government (Sa’ar, 2024).

During this period, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia’ al-Sudani, fearing materialization of the Israeli threat to attack Iraq, called for Iraqi non-involvement in any regional conflict and warned the militias against the consequences of their action (Baghdad Today News, 2024). The Shi’ite militias’ attacks against Israel eventually petered out and were not renewed in 2025, following American threats, which also included a demand to disarm the militias—a demand expressed by representatives of both the Biden and Trump administrations as part of a reassessment of relations between the US and Iraq resulting from the escalating crisis with Iran that preceded open warfare in June 2025, with no direct connection to the state of war in Gaza. As for possible Iranian involvement in the decision to halt firing, a source in the Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba militia stated after the events, “The reports of Iranian pressure to restrain our activity are incorrect. We made our decision independently and Iran does not intervene

in our affairs. At the same time, we are open to dialogue with the government, provided that it realizes the importance of the existence of resistance factions in the national security equation” (Fadel, 2025).

Reflecting on the period of active combat by the militias in Iraq makes clear the importance of domestic considerations in inducing them to halt the “assistance front.” For the PMF member militias, which are worried about American or Israeli attacks in response to the launching of missiles and drones and the growing tension between them and the government on this issue, the preservation of their military and political power in Iraq is clearly a higher priority than considerations of solidarity with other members of the Shi’ite axis (Rudolf, 2025, p. 435).

This conclusion is consistent with the internal-institutional explanation of the process that Iraq has undergone—the increase in status of the Shi’ite militias as political players seeking to maximize their achievements against their rivals in the Iraqi political arena. They use their ideology and intervention in regional conflicts to improve their internal and regional status. Furthermore, the events that took place during the period during which the militias in Iraq were involved in attacks against American and Israeli targets also highlighted the deviations between the decisions taken by the militias and the interests of Iran, which restrained them. The tools that Iran has created for exerting its influence in Iraq (as explained above in the regional-axis explanation) do not adequately explain the militias’ behavior from the beginning of their physical involvement in the war until the end of that involvement—the constraints imposed or pressure exerted by Iran on these militias during part of the period must be taken into account. The core explanation of the players’ behavior during the entire period is their ideological or political considerations and the dynamic between domestic players inside Iraq (including the government, according to the internal-institutional explanation).

The Iraqi case shows that the internal circumstances in a country—especially the characteristics of the players within the Shi’ite axis, the relations between them, and their connection with the central government—have a substantial influence on the extent of Iran’s influence and success in getting the Shi’ite militias to cooperate and obey its dictates. It is useful to examine the similarities and differences between the case of Iraq here and the case of Hezbollah in Lebanon. There is considerable similarity between the basic conditions of Iraq and Lebanon: The societies of both countries are split among several ethnic groups which have engaged in conflict between each other and even in civil war throughout their history. At the same time, in both countries (since 2003 in Iraq) there is a formally democratic regime based on power sharing, while a national identity has emerged and is moving the country in the direction of preserving its territorial integrity and preventing internal rifts from leading to disintegration (Byman, 1997, p. 4).

Despite this similarity, a comparison reveals substantial differences. The Shi’ites constitute a firm majority of the population in Iraq; the rules of the political game there accord them more influence over the government than the Shi’ites in Lebanon enjoy, who are not a majority, although their influence has grown in recent years. As far as the Iran-sponsored militias are concerned, a “state within a state” exists in both countries in the sense of an organization competing with and undermining the central government’s sovereignty. In Lebanon, this consists of a single organization (Hezbollah), while Iraq has a large number of organizations that are associated under a single umbrella (the PMF), but which differ ideologically and in orientation, including the degree of their affiliation with Iran. This fact affects the structure and character of the connection between Iran and the axis players in both countries. In Lebanon, Iran is Hezbollah’s sole patron and Hezbollah is Iran’s primary client in the absence of a reliable support in the government (parts of

which are now decidedly hostile to Iran), while in Iraq, the Shi’ite-dominated government is relatively comfortable with the Iranian regime. The large number of organizations there, the internal rivalry among them, and the difficulty of achieving unity between them make the patron-client relationship between Iran and the PMF less stable and looser than Iran’s strong ties with Hezbollah. The internal considerations of the Iraqi militias are likely to prove more decisive than Iran’s influence (depending on how close they are to Iran).

## Discussion and conclusions

The formation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the first umbrella organization of militias in Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime, institutionalized the connection between the militias, despite the substantial differences that prevailed between its constituent political movements and entities from the very beginning. This method of organization greatly expanded the resources and means at the disposal of a number of the most dangerous terrorist organizations currently active in Iraq and other countries in the region (Kata’ib Hezbollah is a clear example of this; simultaneously with its activity in Iraq, it also spread to Syria when the Assad regime was in power, as well as other countries).

The great significance of this mega-project for the organizations belonging to it and the opportunities with which it provides them are of enormous importance in understanding the PMF in the broader context of relations between states and non-state players. What happened in Iraq that enables the various militias to enjoy the benefits of Iraqi sovereignty—its equipment, resources, and economic asserts—without paying the minimal price of respecting its sovereignty?

This paper analyzes two theoretical hypotheses for this purpose, which can be treated as competing explanations. One hypothesis considers this development from the bottom up—as a result of political

processes combined with the security shocks that Iraq experienced during the decade since the change in regime and the inauguration of the democratic constitution. This has led not only to political tensions and collisions, but also to the escalating establishment of militias identified with the ethnic groups that comprise Iraqi society—something like a “shadow army” of Iraq’s official army. This trend reached a peak in the establishment of an umbrella organization of Shi’ite militias—the PMF—with an estimated 250,000 members. This development, which took place simultaneously with the conquest of parts of Iraq by ISIS, reflected the strengthening of the militias’ status at the expense of the state army. The state was forced to accept the militias’ advantage on the battlefield. As part of its cooperation with them, the government anchored their activity in law and later allowed them to benefit from the government budget. A company was even founded to provide them with additional financing.

The second process, which is cited more frequently in the literature about the militias in Iraq, is the Iranian regime’s fostering of Shi’ite militias for the purpose of intervening in Iraq, in particular sending them Iranian arms. As in Lebanon, it appears that the Iranian regime is able to take advantage of instability and the decline in internal security in Iraq to maximize its potential for intervention. It therefore comes as no surprise that the rise of ISIS and its threat to the Iraqi state caused Iran to aid in the establishment and supplying of the Popular Mobilization Forces to prevent ISIS from mounting a threat to Iran, but also in order to enhance Iran’s influence within Iraq through local clients.

The main conclusion from this article’s analysis is that despite the fulfillment of all of the conditions for the PMF’s rise as attributable to the regional-axis explanation—Iran’s prolonged intervention in Iraq and in particular the strengthening of the Shi’ite militias as a prolonged challenge to the central government’s sovereignty—the internal

institutional explanation for the phenomenon being discussed is the determinant one. The central government’s weakness in sovereignty enforcement resulted from the defective functioning of the law enforcement agencies and the security forces (caused mainly by governmental corruption). These internal failures undermined the central government’s authority and bolstered the legitimacy and influence of substate alternatives to the state security forces (cohesion of forces on an ethnic or tribal basis). This was the background to the rise of militias and their erosion of state authority. The militias later demanded status and governmental assets, especially when they were united in an umbrella organization. Aid in the form of financing and arms, in particular from Iran, certainly helped this umbrella organization consolidate its status and achieve dimensions of a scale comparable to the government security forces, but the internal state weakness came first—this was the factor that facilitated the “state serving the militias” phenomenon that we are now seeing.

In pursuance of this and from the empirical analysis of the intervention by the militias in Iraq in the Swords of Iron War, it is possible to understand the connection between the internal processes in Iraq and how the militias came to be a part of the resistance front that has been attacking Israel since October 7.

It appears that after the defeat of ISIS and the consolidation of the Shi’ite militias’ grip on the government in Iraq, the control in Iraq achieved by the PMF has weighty consequences for the security situation in the country. All in the context of a lack of consensus on the militias among the Iraqi public, even the Shi’ite public, as shown by the social protest that erupted in 2019 against the foothold obtained by the militias and Iran. Despite the absence of general public legitimacy, the PMF militias enjoy patronage and aid from government institutions, such as access to resources and weapons and the ability to exploit Iraq’s strategic location and its borders with important Middle Eastern countries to

smuggle weapons, funds, and oil products for their own benefit and that of Iran and all of the resistance axis players—from Yemen to Lebanon. In recent years, and specifically during the Swords of Iron War, there are increasing signs that Iraq is becoming a theatre for regional actions by the resistance axis players— the Houthis, Hezbollah, Hamas, and others –, as it provides a welcoming space, an area that is easy to operate in, particularly in comparison to the difficulties and suppression of military and economic activity they face in neighboring countries such as Syria and Lebanon.

These trends, combined with an ideology that derives its inspiration from the “resistance culture” of the Iranian regime and Lebanese Hezbollah, are moving the Shi’ite militias in Iraq towards a direct conflict with Israel, albeit in a restrained form. This restraint was evident in the Swords of Iron War until the ceasefire in Lebanon in November 2024 and has become even more so with the avoidance by the militias of an active and direct part in the conflict with Israel during the 12-day war between Iran and Israel and the US in June 2025. They are taking into account the risk they would incur from a military response to their actions, as well as internal considerations—not to carry out far-reaching measures that would detract from their power and political status in Iraq at a time when their political activity has reached a peak in comparison with previous years, following their achievements at the highest level of government.

These internal considerations are likely to restrain the militias’ terrorist activity against Israel or against American targets to some extent and cause them to prioritize their political goals within Iraq—as the current governing coalition—rather than adopt an ideological goal in the framework of the struggle by the Axis of Resistance against Israel and the US, the benefit of which is dubious, given the price that the current war has exacted to date from Hezbollah and Iran. The discourse that the principal militia leaders (such as Qais al-Khazali) have been

using for years signals their intention to become an integral part of the political game without surrendering their weapons, while employing justifications for their military activity in order to accumulate power and a political foothold. For this reason they speak of themselves as political players, think in political terms, and manipulate political incentives for themselves in the dynamic framework that exists between them and rival groups in an Iraqi society hostile to them and especially their military activity.

It therefore seems most likely that the elections in Iraq scheduled for November 2025 will once again bring to the surface the issue of the militias’ status and power and their ability to continue taking advantage of their military might to erode Iraqi state sovereignty. In recent years, an authentic socioeconomic protest movement against this pattern has developed in Iraq focusing on the negative consequences of the pro-Iranian militias’ actions and intervention in Iraq by the Iranian regime. Despite the violent suppression of the large wave of demonstrations on this issue that broke out in Iran in 2019, the continuation of the trends analyzed in this article is likely to bring about a renewed outbreak of protest.

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