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Iran's interests and intent in Iraq and Syria reflected in statements by senior commanders of the Popular Mobilization Committee, the umbrella organization of the Shi'ite militias in Iraq handled by the Iranian Qods Force

Abu-Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of the Popular Mobilization Committee, the umbrella organization for the Shi'ite militias operating in Iraq, at a conference of the Union of Radio and Television in Mashhad, Iran (Sawt al-Ahwaz, July 2, 2017).

Overview

1. **Abu-Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of the Popular Mobilization Committee**, the umbrella organization of the Shi'ite militias in Iraq, recently gave a speech at a conference in Mashhad, Iran. It deal with the trends the militias would take after the liberation of Mosul. Other Popular Mobilization Committee commanders have also made comments in recent months about the Shi'ite militias in the **Middle East** in general and **Iraq and Syria in particular**. In ITIC **assessment they reflect the interests and intent of Iran, which handles the Popular Mobilization Committee according to its own local and regional interests** (for the main points of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis' speech at the conference, see **Appendix A**).

Statements made by Abu-Mahdi al-Muhandis and other senior figures in the Popular Mobilization Committee indicate that **Iran's interests in Iraq center on increasing Iranian influence, strengthening the Shi'ite sect, expelling American and Western**

influence, establishing Iranian influence along the Iraqi-Syrian border and opening an overland logistic route from Tehran via Baghdad and Damascus to Beirut. Their statements also indicate the possibility of deploying Shi'ite militias in the Golan Heights, when circumstances become suitable. In all probability, following the liberation of Mosul, the Popular Mobilization Committee in Iraq will serve as an important Iranian proxy to promote its interests in Iraq and Syria, **seriously challenging the United States and the pro-Western Arab states**.

The Popular Mobilization Committee

2. **The Popular Mobilization Committee is an umbrella organization composed of about 40 Shi'ite militias operating in Iraq and sponsored by Iran**. It was established in June 2014 when Mosul was occupied by ISIS, which was the high point of its achievements in Iraq, and posed a imminent danger to Baghdad. The Popular Mobilization Committee is based mainly on **Shi'ite militias sponsored by Iran** that **in the past fought the American-led coalition in Iraq**. Some of its commanders have extensive combat experience. In recent years the militias (whose strength has grown significantly) participated in the campaign against ISIS, **directed by Iran and under the formal jurisdiction of the supreme command of the Iraqi army** (for a profile of the Popular Mobilization Committee, see **Appendix C**).

The Popular Mobilization Committee logo. Its name is at the center, topped with "Allahu akbar." Left and right are Iraqi flags inscribed "Republic of Iraq" (Popular Mobilization Committee website, July 10, 2017).

3. **One of the Popular Mobilization Committee's prominent commanders is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, second in command to its commander, Falih al-Fayyadh. In 1983 al-Muhandis was involved in a series of terrorist attacks in Kuwait**, among

them attacks on the American and French embassies, acting as **a an Iranian proxy in the service of Hezbollah in Lebanon**. During the war in Iraq against the American-led coalition forces **he headed a Shi'ite militia called the Hezbollah Battalions**, which waged warfare and was **handled by the Iranian Qods Force**. In ITIC assessment, today Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis is the dominant military personality in the Popular Mobilization Committee, while Falih al-Fayyadh, the commander, is a figurehead (for a profile of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, see **Appendix B**).

Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (right) and Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Qods Force (left) in picture taken in eastern Iraq (Tehran Press, March 8, 2015).

Insights gained from a speech given by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and statements by other senior Popular Mobilization Committee figures

4. Various insights can be gained from a speech given by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and from statements made by other senior figures in the Popular Mobilization Committee. The insights relate to **Iran's efforts to achieve influence in Iran and the Popular Mobilization Committee's role as a favored Iranian proxy organization**:

A. **In Iranian perspective, the liberation of Mosul is likely to hasten the struggle with the United States for influence in Iraq**. Iran aspires to advance its interests in Iraq and turn it, eventually, into **a state sponsored by Iran, part of the so-called "Shi'ite crescent" which would include Iran, Iraq, Syria,**

Lebanon and Yemen[1]. At the same time, Iran also seeks to reduce American influence in Iraq, which increased during the campaign against ISIS, especially in the fighting in Mosul.

B. **The importance of the Popular Mobilization Committee**: The Popular Mobilization Committee is **Iran's favored proxy in Iraq** (comparable to Hezbollah in Lebanon). **The Iranian Qods Force has many years of practical experience in directing the Shi'ite militias fight against the American army. Some of the top commanders of the Shi'ite militias were in the past, and in ITIC assessment, are still being handled directly by the Qods Force** (despite the formal link between the Popular Mobilization Committee and the Iraqi regime). Evident in Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis' speech was his **determined rejection (supported by Iran) to any attempt the Iraqi government might attempt to dismantle the Popular Mobilization Committee**.

C. **The significance of the Popular Mobilization Committee's growing strength**: The existence and growth of the Shi'ite militias, well-armed and supported by Iran, **may have a negative influence on the stability of Iraq's political and societal systems**. The existence of Shi'ite militias with political influence and directed by Iran will **pose a challenge to the Iraqi Sunnis and weaken the central Shi'ite government in Baghdad**. The strengthening of the Shi'ites in Iraq with Iranian support **is liable to cause a groundswell of Sunni unrest and push the Sunnis to support terrorist and guerilla organizations, including ISIS, even during the era after the liberation of Mosul**.

5. As to continuing the fight against ISIS, the **following military insights** can be gained from Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis' speech:

A. **For Iran, importance of influence and control along the Iraqi-Syrian border**: According to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis' speech, Iran regards control of both sides of the Iraqi-Syrian border as important, and **views the Popular Mobilization Committee militias as the military force that will clear the border area of ISIS and promote Iranian interests**. According to Abu Mahdi al-

[1] **Qais al-Kh'azali**, the Iraqi Shi'ite leader of the militia calling itself the "League of Righteous People," gave a speech on May 10, 2017, to his operatives. **He talked about the Shi'ite vision of spreading throughout the Middle East**. He said, "...**if in the past people used to talk about the 'Shi'ite crescent,' with the help of Allah we will have a 'Shi'ite full moon.'** We will have all the land, from east to west. With the help of Allah and with the spirit of the last Shi'ite imam, **the deployment of our fighting forces will be completed**: from the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps in **Iran**, to Hezbollah in **Lebanon**, to Ansar al-Allah (the Houthi rebels) in **Yemen**, to the holy mobilization [i.e., Popular Mobilization Committee] in **Iraq** and the brothers of al-Zeynab [i.e., the Shi'ite operatives defending the shrine of Set al-Zeynab south of Damascus], your brothers [in **Syria**]..." (al-Jazeera, Kanat al-Iraq, May 10, 2017).

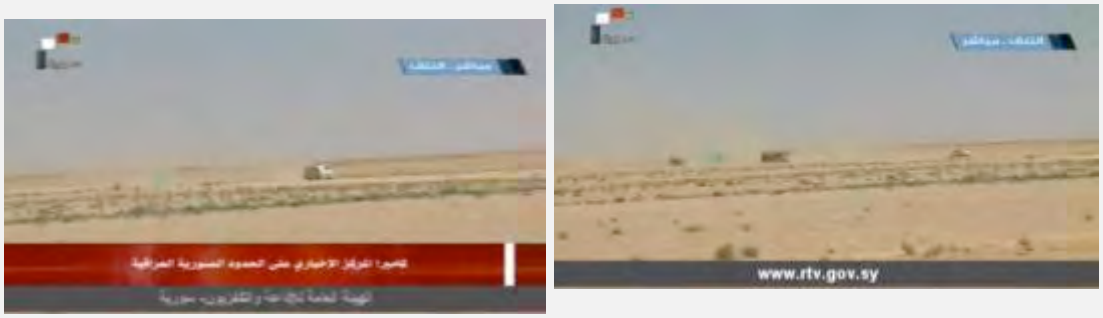
Muhandis, **about 150 kilometers (almost 95 miles) along the border have been "liberated" from ISIS**. Thus it can be assumed that after the liberation of Mosul, **Iran will increase its efforts to control the border using Popular Mobilization Committee forces**. [2]

The ISIS-controlled city of al-Qa'im, towards which Popular Mobilization Committee forces moved from Sinjar (Google Maps).

Convoy of Popular Mobilization Committee militias which reached the Iraq-Syria border at the end of May 2017 (Twitter account of the military information unit of the Popular Mobilization Committee, May 30, 2017).

[2] At the end of May 2017 a Popular Mobilization Committee force arrived at the Syria-Iraq border west of Sinjar and **began moving south towards the ISIS-controlled city of al-Qa'im**. At the same time, a Popular Mobilization Committee force began **moving northeast from the al-Waleed border crossing** (according to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the force was located about 70 kilometers (about 43 miles) from the al-Waleed crossing.

B. **Importance for Iran in opening the main road linking Baghdad and Damascus**: A key Iranian interest, as reflected in Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis' speech, is **opening the road linking Baghdad and Damascus**. Iran is probably planning to use it for **overland movement from Tehran to Syria and Lebanon through Baghdad** [**Note**: Events on the ground in recent months indicate that the **Iranians and the Syrian regime are currently engaged in an intensive drive to open and secure the road from Damascus to Baghdad, and make it passable**] [3].



Using the Damascus-Baghdad road. Left: Trucks en route from Iraq to Syria. Right: Three trucks on their way from Syria to Iraq at the improvised border crossing opened on the Syrian-Iraqi border northeast of the al-Waleed crossing (called al-Tanf on the Syrian side) (Syria TV Channel 7, June 12, 2017).

[3] On June 14, 2017, **an improvised border crossing was opened** about 20 kilometers (about 12 miles) northeast of the al-Tanf crossing (near the Syrian-Iraqi-Jordanian border triangle). Syrian TV broadcast pictures of trucks reportedly carrying merchandise crossing the Syrian-Iraqi border in both directions. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis' speech indicated **that on the Iraqi side of the improvised crossing there were (an unknown number of) Popular Mobilization Committee operatives, who he claimed had joined the Syrian army forces and Hezbollah operatives on the Syrian side of the border**.

6. **The Israeli aspect**:

A. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis ended his speech by saying that "**if Hezbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah asks the Popular Mobilization Committee to turn towards with Israel if a confrontation breaks out, the request will be complied with immediately and [the Popular Mobilization Committee] will be there [to support Hezbollah]**" (Shabakat Nahrain, June 3, 2017). He did not specify which Israeli front Popular Mobilization Committee operatives would be deployed to, but **he apparently meant the Golan Heights**. [**Note**: On March 8, 2017, **Akram al-Kaabi**, who heads the Iraq Shi'ite militia called **The Movement of the Noble Ones**, announced his operatives had established a so-called Brigade for the Liberation of the Golan.[4]]

B. Deploying pro-Iranian Shi'ite operatives on the Golan Heights front would, in ITIC assessment, **serve Iran's interest in turning the Golan Heights into a confrontation front against Israel. Iranian proxies may be deployed there, such as Lebanese Hezbollah and the Shi'ite militias from Iraq, directed Iran**.

[4] On March 8, 2017, **Akram al-Ka'abi**, who heads the Iraqi Shi'ite "**Movement of the Noble Ones**" (*harakat al-nujaba*) issued a recorded announcement in which he said his operatives had established the "Brigade for the Liberation of the Golan." He said its objective was to help the Syria "liberate" the Golan Heights when the campaign against "terrorism" ended (see **Appendix C**). Furthermore, on June 24, 2017, Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's secretary general, said that tens of thousands of fighters might join a war against Israel, coming from countries such as Iraq, Yemen, Iran and others.

Appendix A

Main Issues Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis' Speech

1. On July 2, 2017, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of the Popular Mobilization Committee, gave a speech at a conference of the Union of Radio and Television in Mashhad. He spoke for about an hour about the campaign against ISIS in Iraq and the trends the Popular Mobilization Committee after the liberation of Mosul.

2. The following were the main issues of the speech (ITIC emphasis throughout)[5]:

Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis delivers a speech (al-Alam, July 3, 2017).

A. **Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis began by thanking important figures, states and organizations for their support of the Popular Mobilization Committee**. He began by thanking **Ayatollah Ali Sistani**, the highest-ranking Shi'ite cleric in Iraq[6], **Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei** and "**the Hezbollah brothers**" led by Hezbollah secretary general **Hassan Nasrallah**. He said that **without the support of Iran and Hezbollah, the Popular Mobilization Committee would**

[5] Some of what is referred to here is based on the speech as broadcast by Sawt al-Ahwaz, which did not broadcast it in full (11 minutes of the original hour). Other sections of the speech quoted were used by the ITIC to complete the broadcast. They include quotations from the Ahl al-Bayt News Agency, July 4; al-Alam, July 3; the Facebook page of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, July 4; Shabakat al-Nahrain, July 3; Shabakat al-Suhufi li-Mustaqbal Iraq, July 4; and al-Mayadeen, July 3, 2017. In some instances, because of the importance of the issue, the ITIC gives the full reference of the quoted section is given.

[6] **Ayatollah Ali Sistani** issued a fatwa calling for the Iraqis to wage jihad against ISIS. The fatwa has been represented as the basis for **internal Iraqi justification to establish the Popular Mobilization Committee**. In a speech on July 10, 2017, **Qasem Soleimani** spoke about the liberation of Mosul. He praised Ayatollah Ali Sistani for his contribution to the victory over ISIS, saying Sistani was the man who had rescued Iraq and the Iraqi people on several occasions. He also thanked Hezbollah and praised its leader Hassan Nasrallah for contributing his great experience to the Popular Mobilization Committee forces (Iranian news agencies Khabar and Tasnim News, July 10 2017).

not have achieved what it had. He went on to note that Iran and Hezbollah "were quick to provide the Popular Mobilization Committee with weapons" and supported it in dealing with ISIS's threats. He said that during the occupation of Mosul [by ISIS], when ISIS menaced the holy Shi'ite cities [Najaf and Karbala] and Baghdad, the arsenals of the Iraqi ministry of defense were empty. **Iran then "opened its own arsenals and sent us weapons by air."** At that time [the Iraqis] were in "desperate need" of weapons to combat ISIS, despite the fact that there was no formal agreement between the Iraqis and Tehran for cooperation of that kind. [**Note**: It can be assumed that some of the weapons reached the Shi'ite militias organizing themselves at the time into the Popular Mobilization Committee.]

B. **Opening the Damascus-Baghdad road and Popular Mobilization Committee militias operating along the Iraqi-Syrian border**:

1) Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis said the **Popular Mobilization Committee had sent a force that took control of the al-Waleed border crossing** [**Note**: The al-Waleed crossing is on the Syrian side of the al-Tanf crossing.] He added that **he had asked not to make the fact public because of the issue's sensitivity**, as the Americans had vetoed the deployment of Popular Mobilization Committee militias at the al-Waleed crossing. After Popular Mobilization Committee militias had taken control of the al-Waleed crossing, **they turned it over to the Iraqi border guards, and advanced about 70 kilometers (about 43 miles) to the northeast**. He added that **Popular Mobilization Committee operatives then connected with the Syrian army, Hezbollah and "our boy" for the first time [i.e., the Shi'ite militias operating in Syria]**. [**Note**: It may have been a connection made at the improvised crossing point which had been opened to passage by the Syrians and Iraqis northeast of the al-Tanf crossing. This section appeared on Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis' Facebook page, July 4, 2017].

2) Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis stressed that **at the current time the road between Baghdad and Damascus was secure on both sides of the border**. He added that "**We will absolutely continue to keep the road and will not allow any veto from the Americans or any other agency to interfere in the matter**." He said that so far, **of the 400-kilometer (about 250 miles) Iraqi-Syrian border, about 150 kilometers (almost 95 miles) had been liberated from ISIS**. He said Popular Mobilization fighters were

carrying out military activities along the Iraqi-Syrian border and near the Syrian-Jordanian border [i.e., near the al-Waleed crossing].

C. **ISIS should not be underestimated, and will remain a powerful organization even after the fall of Mosul**:

1) Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis stressed that even after the fall of Mosul, **ISIS would remain powerful in Iraq because of the organization's presence throughout the country**. He said ISIS's presence even posed a threat to the Shi'ite holy cities of **Najaf and Karbala**. He asked the media **not to minimize ISIS's presence in Iraq** because the organization remained a menace to the country. **Therefore, he said, efforts had to be made to destroy ISIS in Iraq**. [**Note**: Stressing ISIS's power and continuing to fight it are noted in order **to justify the existence of the Popular Mobilization Committee**.]

2) Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis referred to **a series of sites and regions where ISIS was situated and where it had to be dealt with after the liberation of Mosul**:

✓ The **region of the city of Tel Afar** in northern Iraq, about 70 kilometers (about 43 miles) west of Mosul. [**Note**: According to an Iraqi source, after the fall of Mosul ISIS decided to remove its command center to Tel Afar (al-Sumaria, July 9, 2017)].

✓ Twenty villages located **between Tikrit and Mosul** (north of Baghdad).

✓ The **town of Hawija**, about 125 kilometers (about 78 miles) south of Mosul.

✓ The **town of Shirqat**, about 100 kilometers (about 62 miles) south of Mosul.

✓ The **region between Haditha and al-Qa'im** (at the upper end of the Euphrates River, in western Iraq, an area not yet liberated by the Iraqi forces).

✓ The **Iraqi-Syrian border** (about which Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis spoke at length).

D. **Strong objection to the dismantling of the Popular Mobilization Committee**: Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis said that after the liberation of Fallujah a UN representative called on him to discuss a national reconciliation based on dismantling the Popular Mobilization Committee. He responded that there would be no justification for dismantling the Popular Mobilization Committee, **even if the request had come from the Iraqi government**. He said, "**If they dismantle us we will reorganize**...**we have our weapons**...[we are] a national project, based on the fatwa of the highest religious authority [i.e., Ayatollah Ali Sistani]. **No one, not in Iraq or anywhere else, can dismantle [the Popular Mobilization Committee] using any excuse whatsoever, regardless of what it might be." However, he added that putting the Popular Mobilization Committee project under the jurisdiction of a governmental framework** was "basic and important, as we all agree."

E. **Popular Mobilization Committee ties to the Iraqi security forces**:

1) **The ties between the Popular Mobilization Committee and the Iraqi security forces are "good and strong," according to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, and the Popular Mobilization Committee is "one of the security forces of the state of Iraq [operating alongside] the army and police."** He stressed the contribution of the Popular Mobilization Committee to stabilizing Iraq. He added that now that Iraq was security in Iraq was stabilizing, there were certain groups [by implication, ungrateful] calling for a reduction in the Popular Mobilization Committee's budget and for its dismantling. He accused the Iraqi politicians collaborating with the United States of attacking the Popular Mobilization Committee." [**Note**: This section taken from Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis' Facebook page, July 4, 2017].

2) Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis said **Popular Mobilization Committee operatives** were located to the east and west of Mosul, where they continued to act as auxiliaries supporting the other Iraqi security forces. He said the Popular Mobilization Committee's had excellent cooperation and coordination with the Iraqi security forces [in Mosul].

F. **The Popular Mobilization Committee and the United States**:

1) **The Popular Mobilization Committee "is determined to prevent American forces from taking control of Iraqi territories**." Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis said "**the existence of the Popular Mobilization Committee [in**

Iraq] is meant to counter the Americans. We are there [to operate] officially and publicly against the Americans and against foreign presence in Iraq. We do not need them. We do not need foreign army boots desecrating the land of Iraq...The entire history of our relations [with the United States] has been as black as it can be" [**Note**: This section was taken from Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis' Facebook page, July 4, 2017).

2) Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis claimed **the United States had an interest in "stealing" the victory won in Nineveh Province from fighters of the Popular Mobilization Committee**, as it had tried to "steal" the liberation of Tikrit **from the Iraqi security forces**. He said, "**America wants to remain in Iraq**, and we will [stand against America's intention] with all our strength. We will **foil the American plot to take control of the Iraq-Syria border** and create a special zone of American influence." He added that **"America is conspiring to take control of the Iraq-Syria-Jordan border triangle, and from there [along the border] to the Turkish border, to create a sphere of influence."**

3) According to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, **the Popular Mobilization Committee will oppose any [private American?] security company's being granted a concession to examine the international road between Jordan and Syria**. He added that no security company would control the road and **no one could give American security companies the concession to do so**. He claimed Popular Mobilization Committee operatives and the Iraqi police had often followed American helicopters which landed in areas under ISIS control (at Makhoul, Baiji and al-Hawija). He claimed **the helicopters were on covert missions** and "we have the helicopters' documentation." [**Note**: This section is from Shabakat al-Nahrain, July 3,2017].

G. **Concern about the Kurd's separatist aspirations**: Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis spoke about the preparations being made in Iraqi Kurdistan for a referendum which would separate the Kurds from Iraq and establish a Kurdish state. He accused "senior figures in the region of Kurdistan" of planning to separate from Iraq, and threatened that "...**we made it clear to them that that will never happen**...We give no further details about what our response will be to such a step." Such a statement may indicate that **Iran is becoming concerned about**

the Kurds' increasing power and the separatist aspirations of the Kurds in Iraq .

H. **The role of the Popular Mobilization Committee in "the next phase" in Syria and the possibility of turning towards Israel**:

1) Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis said that **in the next phase Iraq would have a regional role in supporting Syria** [without mentioning what kind of role]. He added that the Popular Mobilization Committee would not enter Syrian territory unless there were an Iraqi government decision. However, he said, **any Popular Mobilization Committee fighter wanting to volunteer to fight in Syria would be free to do so, and the Popular Mobilization Committee would not prevent him**.

2) He added that **the Popular Mobilization Committee supported such fighters** [i.e., "volunteers"] **joining to fight in Syria** alongside those supporting the Assad regime, **such as Hezbollah and the Fatemiyoun Brigade** [a Shi'ite militia of Afghans operating in Syria, handled by Iran].

Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis ended his speech by saying that "**if Hezbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah asks the Popular Mobilization Committee to turn towards Israel if a confrontation breaks out, the request will be complied with immediately. [The Popular Mobilization Committee] will be there [to support Hezbollah]**." [**Note**: This section is taken from Shabakat at-Nahrain, July 3, 2017].

Appendix B

Profile of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis

Jamal Ja'afar Muhammad (Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis), deputy commander of the Popular Mobilization Committee, the Shi'ite militia umbrella organization handled by Iran (alrashead.net).

1. **Jamal Ja'afar Muhammad (Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis)** is an Iraqi, 57 years old, and married to an **Iranian woman**. In the distant past he was a member of the Shi'ite **al-Dawah Party**, which opposed Saddam Hussein's regime. He was forced to flee Iraq to Kuwait, from there he went to Iran. **He lived in Iran for about 20 years and returned to Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein**.

2. **Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis' ties to Hezbollah and his terrorist record**:

   A. During the 1980s **Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis was involved in terrorist attacks in Kuwait against the American and French embassies** (December 1983). The attacks were carried out by Hezbollah operatives who used car bombs, killing five people. **The attacks were part of an Iran terrorist campaign carried out during the first half of the 1980s to promote a series of Iranian political-strategic goals**. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis **escaped to Iran and was sentenced to death in absentia by Kuwait** for his involvement in the terrorist attacks. In 1985 **he was also accused of attempting to assassinate the Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah, and of planning to hijack a Kuwaiti plane**.[7]

[7] Interviewed by Iranian TV, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis admitted that he and Mustafa Badr al-Din had carried out "jihad activities" in Kuwait in the 1980s. He was sentenced to death in absentia in Kuwait, but

B. Interviewed by Hezbollah-affiliated al-Mayadeen on January 3, 2017, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis said he had been in contact with Hezbollah for years, since the beginning of the 1980s. **He said he had connections with Imad Mughnieh [at the time Hezbollah's most important operational figure] and Mustafa Badr al-Din [at the beginning of the 1980s]**. [**Note**: **Mustafa Badr al-Din** was detained in Kuwait following the attacks on the American and French embassies and against Kuwaiti targets. Seventeen Hezbollah operatives and auxiliaries were detained with him. Hezbollah tried to effect their release by hijacking planes to use as bargaining chips (Kuwaiti Airlines, 1984 and 1988; TWA, 1985)].

C. In the same al-Mayadeen interview, **he said Imad Mughnieh and Mustafa Badr al-Din had played key roles training Iraqi "jihad fighters"** [**Note**: He was referring to operatives of the al-Dawah Party who had been persecuted by Saddam Hussein and fled to Iran.] **He himself, he said, was one of them**. **Both had played central roles in establishing and training the first "Iraqi resistance" networks against the United States**. They trained and equipped the Iraqis who opposed America's presence in Iraq. He said those who followed them [i.e., Hezbollah's current operatives] had supported the Popular Mobilization Committee with training and planning.

3. After the fall of Saddam Hussein in April 2003 Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis returned to Iraq and **became a senior operative in the Badr Forces**, the military wing of the **Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq**, established by pro-Iranian **Shi'ite leader Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim.**[8] He was a member of the Iraqi parliament from 2006 to 2007, representing the al-Dawah Party. The Americans accused him of **being a Qods Force agent and promoting the interests of the pro-Iranian [Shi'ite] militias**. He recently reaffirmed his complete loyalty to the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force (al-Khaleej Online website, June 30, 2017).

4. During the years of the American military presence in Iraq **Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis headed the Shi'ite militia called the Hezbollah Battalions (**Kata'eb

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managed to escape to Tehran before the sentence could be carried out (YouTube, Rawda News channel news channel, April 23, 2017).

[8] **The Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq** was established in the early 1980s by **Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim in Iran** to fight against the Saddam Hussein regime. It had an operational militia until the American invasion which fought the Saddam Hussein regime under the name the **Badr Forces, which were trained, instructed and funded by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Qods Force**. After 2003 the militia was disbanded and its operatives integrated into the Iraqi army and police force. A number of operatives in the Bard Forces fought against the American-led coalition forces in Iraq, among them Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani.

Hezbollah.) It was prominent among the Shi'ite militias in Iraq waging guerilla warfare against the American and coalition forces, and was handled by the Qods Force (see **Appendix C**).

5. **After the American-led coalition forces left Iraq, the Hezbollah Battalions announced they would not lay down their arms, the American withdrawal notwithstanding** (al-Mezan, Iraq, January 17, 2012). On February 4, 2012, **Popular Mobilization Committee spokesman Jassem al-Kaabi said the United States, the Baath Party and a number of regional states were "the greatest internal and external threats to Iraq."** He called on "jihad fighters" to prepare themselves for tackling them.

6. After the establishment of the Popular Mobilization Committee in June 2004**, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis was appointed its deputy commander**. In ITIC assessment he is the central figure in the organization, while its commander, Falih al-Fayyad, is a figurehead.

Appendix C

The Popular Mobilization Committee (al-Hashd al-Sha'abi)

The Popular Mobilization Committee logo. Its name is at the center, topped with "Allahu akbar." Left and right are Iraqi flags inscribed "Republic of Iraq" (Popular Mobilization Committee website, July 10, 2017).

Background for the establishment of the Popular Mobilization Committee

1. **The Popular Mobilization Committee is an umbrella organization of about forty Shi'ite militias**, some of which were handled by Iran against the American-led coalition forces in Iraq between 2003 and 2011. Prominent among the militias are **Hezbollah Battalions** (*Kata'eb Hezbollah*) and **Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haqq** (League of the Righteous). They played a **key role** in fighting against the United States in Iraq and **today are part of the Popular Mobilization Committee.** The Iranian Qods Force has played a key role in establishing and handling them. Hezbollah Battalions is the militia in closest contact with the Qods Force.[9]

2. After the United States left Iraq the Shi'ite militias **had to find a new "enemy" to justify their continuing existence as a military force that did not belong to the Iraqi security forces.** Justification was found **with ISIS's takeover of Mosul and the threat to Baghdad and the Shi'ites in Iraq** (June 2014). Apparently the Popular Mobilization Committee was established to create **an umbrella organization for the Shi'ite militias to improve their military capabilities to cope with ISIS and at the**

[9] Senior US officials noted at the time that among the Shi'ite prominent militias, Hezbollah Battalions was the one that took direct orders from the Qods Force (The Wall Street Journal, July 2, 2011).

same time make it easier for Iran to handle them (as opposed to Hezbollah in Lebanon, in Iraq, Iran must deal with the challenge of handling a large number of Shi'ite militias).

3. **The Popular Mobilization Committee was established in June 2014,** when ISIS took over Mosul and reached the high point of its achievements. **Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the highest Shi'ite cleric in Iraq,** issued a fatwa calling for the Muslims in Iraq to carry out jihad against ISIS. The fatwa did not mention the Shi'ite sect explicitly but addressed the Iraqis in general. It noted that the Iraqi government would recruit the fighters and would also determine their number (Ali Sistani's website, June 14, 2014). The fatwa ruling is perceived as **Islamic justification for recruiting members of the Shi'ite sect to the Popular Mobilization Committee.**

4. There is also a minority of operatives belonging to other sects among the Popular Mobilization, to give it a national rather than sectarian character. According to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in an interview with al-Mayadeen, 25%-33% of the Popular Mobilization fighters are not Shi'ites (al-Mayadeen, January 3, 2017). However, in spite of the attempt to portray the Popular Mobilization Committee as a multi-sectarian organization, **the Shi'ite sect is clearly dominant among both its commanders and fighters, and it is a Shi'ite organization for all intents and purposes**.

5. **In November 2016, the Popular Mobilization Committee received formal government recognition when the Iraqi parliament made it subordinate to the Iraqi prime minister**. The law immediately received the form of a presidential directive. As a result, the Popular Mobilization Committee receives an annual budget from the Iraqi government. The Popular Mobilization Committee is officially subordinate to the prime minister of Iraq, who is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. However, in reality, the Popular Mobilization Committee's senior commanders are handled by the Iranian Qods Force and receive their orders from Qassem Soleimani and the Qods Force.

Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani with two of the commanders of the militias that belong to the Popular Mobilization Committee. Sitting, from left to right: Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani; Badr Organization Commander Hadi al-Amiri; Hezbollah Battalions Commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (al-Sharq al-Awsat, April 4, 2017)

The relation between the Popular Mobilization Committee, Iran and Hezbollah

6. At the time, Iran, through the Qods Force, supported and in many instances even handled the Shi'ite militias in fighting against the American-led coalition forces. **Today, Iran is the main supporter of the Popular Mobilization Committee.** In an interview with al-Mayadeen (January 3, 2017), Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis said **Iran was the main source of support for the Popular Mobilization Committee**. According to him, Iran supported the Popular Mobilization Committee **with weapons, ammunition, [operational] plans and advisors [who arrived in Iraq] from Iran and Hezbollah**.

7. In the same interview to al-Mayadeen, Al-Muhandis praised **the good relations between the Popular Mobilization Committee and Hezbollah in Lebanon**:

A. Hezbollah, he said, supported the Popular Mobilization Committee with **training, planning, weapons and military equipment which originated in Iran.** According to Al-Muhandis, **Hezbollah's support was known and agreed to by former Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki**, **and the same is true for current Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi**. Both of them, according to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, were updated and are being updated on every detail regarding the Popular Mobilization.

B. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis said he was proud of his personal relations with Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and added that **those relations had lasted for many years**. He said advisors from Hezbollah and Iran were killed in Iraq

after ISIS took over large territories. He added that the Popular Mobilization Committee would continue to consider itself affiliated with Hezbollah and Iran, but **as part of the Iraqi sovereignty** [**Note:** Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis is strict about **presenting a false façade,** as if it were an Iraqi government organization operating under Iraqi sovereignty. However, that is completely contradicted by the Popular Mobilization Committee commanders' direct contacts with Iran, circumventing the Iraqi government).

Weapons

8. During the fighting against the American-led coalition forces, **most of the Shi'ite militias' weapons came from Iran.** Apparently, with the establishment of the Popular Mobilization Committee and the significant expansion of the militia forces, the **further weapons became necessary.** Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of the Popular Mobilization Committee, said in an interview that **the Popular Mobilization Committee and the Iraqi Army purchased weapons from Russia.** He said that the chief of staff of the Popular Mobilization had gone to Moscow (in early January 2017) to discuss the transfer of weapons from Russia to the Popular Mobilization Committee (al-Mayadeen, January 3, 2017).

9. In the same interview (al-Mayadeen, January 3, 2017), Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis said that the Popular Mobilization Committee had started its operation with a small quantity of weapons. **However, since the fall of Mosul, Iran has been quick to equip the Popular Mobilization Committee with large quantities of high-quality weapons.** Therefore, al-Muhandis noted, the Popular Mobilization Committee's need for weapons [from Russia] is not pressing. However, Russian consent to weapons agreements will be welcome.

The number of fighters in the Popular Mobilization militias and their military capability

10. The forces of the Popular Mobilization Committee number **between 100,000 and 140,000 fighters.**[10] It is clearly **Shi'ite in character. In the past, its operatives were accused of harassing the Sunni population in cities** liberated from ISIS by the Iraqi forces (for example in Tikrit). In spite of the impressive number (which is much greater than the number of Shi'ite militia operatives during the American presence in Iraq), **the**

[10] In an interview with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis on the al-Mayadeen Channel, the interviewer said that there were reportedly 140,000-142,000 fighters in the Popular Mobilization Committee (al-Mayadeen, January 3, 2017).

military capability of the Shi'ite militias and their discipline are inferior to those of the regular Iraqi Army.

Left: Firing rockets from off-road vehicles (Uruk News, July 8, 2017). Right: Operatives of the Popular Mobilization Committee (website of the Popular Mobilization Committee, July 10, 2017).

The Commander of the Popular Mobilization Committee

11. **The commander of the Popular Mobilization Committee is Falih al-Fayyadh**, aka **Al-Hajj**. Falih al-Fayyadh is Shi'ite, born in 1956, formerly an activist of the Shi'ite al-Dawah party in Iraq. During the 1970s, it struggled against Saddam Hussein's regime, **with Iranian support**. He was imprisoned for five years because of membership in the party. **Al-Fayyadh belongs to the Abu Aamer tribe**, a large tribe northeast of Baghdad. He maintains ties with Sunni tribes in the Baghdad area and is considered one of the tribal leaders. He had been involved in the reconciliation of tribal conflicts (al-Sharq al-Awsat, August 5, 2015).

12. In 2005, while the Americans were in Iraq, Al-Fayyadh became a member of parliament. He also served as minister without portfolio in charge of national security in Nuri al-Maliki's government. He is considered a professional and a religious individual. Al-Fayyadh belongs to the National Reform party, which is national but has a Shi'ite-religious character.

13. **Today, Falih al-Fayyadh maintains relations with both Tehran and Washington**. He serves as national security advisor to the Iraqi government, **along with his office as chief of the Popular Mobilization Committee** (Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, August 5, 2015). In ITIC assessment, he is a figurehead, and the real power is in the hands of his deputy, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

Popular Mobilization Committee Commander Falih al-Fayyadh (Al-Manar, November 10, 2016)

14. **Following are several prominent militias operating within the Popular Mobilization Committee**:

A. **Hezbollah Battalions (*Kata'eb Hezbollah)***:

1) A Shi'ite militia established in early 2007 by the Qods Force with the stated purpose of driving the Americans out of Iraq. It was the most prominent among the Shi'ite militias that operated during the fighting against the American-led coalition forces. It was headed by **Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis**, who today is also the deputy commander of the Popular Mobilization Committee (see **Appendix B**). During the fighting against the coalition forces, Hezbollah Battalions had about 400 operatives, **handled by the Iranian Qods Force** [**Note**: It can be assumed that today the number of the militia operatives is far greater]**.**

2) In 2011, before the US withdrawal from Iraq, the organization escalated its guerrilla operations against the coalition forces. That included rocket and mortar shell fire targeting bases and airfields and planting IEDs along roads where the forces were moving.

3) After the withdrawal of the American forces, the **Hezbollah Battalions announced they would not lay down their arms** because of the threat posed to Iraq by the United States and several countries in the region. Today, the organization has a prominent presence in Baghdad Province and the Shi'ite regions in southern Iraq. The organization participates in the campaign against ISIS as part of the Popular Mobilization Committee. Its

operatives operate in the Tal Afar area in northern Iraq and near the Iraqi-Syrian border.

Left: Logo of the Hezbollah Battalions militia in Iraq. Right: Insignia of Lebanon's Hezbollah. The resemblance between the two is conspicuous and inspired by Iran. The Logo of the Hezbollah Battalions shows a hand holding a gun rising from a map of Iraq, with a map of the world in the background. Above the gun a a Quranic verse saying: "Fight the infidel imams, for they have no faith." Logos of other Shi'ite militias operating in Iraq were also inspired by Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Hezbollah Battalions commander and deputy commander of the Popular Mobilization Committee, speaking about the victory in Mosul (website of the Popular Mobilization Committee, July 10, 2017)

B. **Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq ("League of the Righteous"):**

1) An Iraqi Shi'ite militia established by the Qods Force in 2006 and operating under its direction. This militia was constructed on the basis of the "Special Groups" established by the Qods Force in cooperation with

Hezbollah in Lebanon. Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haqq operatives carried out various types of guerrilla attacks against the forces of the American-led coalition forces: firing RPG rockets, planting IEDs along roads where the US forces moved (including deadly Explosively Formed Penetrators, EFPs), launching rockets, abducting hostages and eliminating opponents, mainly in Baghdad.

2) **An Iraqi Shi'ite cleric named Qais al-Kh'azali led the Special Groups** whose operatives merged with Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haqq. After reorganization by the Qods Force, the Special Group operatives were **trained by Hezbollah operatives in Iraqi camps.** In 2007, Qais Kh'azali was captured by the coalition forces together with senior Hezbollah operative **Ali Daqduq,** senior advisor to Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haqq. Al-Kh'azali was released in January 2010, as part of a hostage deal (in exchange for the release of British computer expert Peter Moore).

3) **After the withdrawal of the US Army, Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haqq operatives did not lay down their arms,** using the pretext of political instability and uncertainty regarding the nature of functioning of the US embassy (in Baghdad). In addition to their militia's military force, the operatives of Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haqq established a political wing called **al-Sadiqun**, which is fairly weak (with only one parliament member, who was elected out of two candidates in the 2014 elections).

On May 10, 2017, Qais al-Kh'azali delivered a speech to his militia operatives describing **the Shi'ite vision to take over the Middle East**: "We carry on in our way. Mosul's takeover is going to be completed; Tal Afar [north of Mosul] will be liberated; Ana, Rawa (160-170 kilometers (100-105 miles) northwest of Ramadi) and al-Qa'im [near the Iraqi-Syrian border] will be liberated, and we will reach the border [with Syria]. Our brothers in Syria will also reach the border. He said, "...if in the past people used to talk about the **'Shi'ite crescent,' with the help of Allah we will have a 'Shi'ite full moon.'** We will have all the land, from east to west. With the help of Allah and with the spirit of the last Shi'ite imam, **the deployment of our fighting forces will be complete**: from the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps in **Iran**, to Hezbollah in **Lebanon**, to Ansar al-Allah (the Houthi rebels) in **Yemen,** to the holy mobilization [i.e., Popular Mobilization Committee] in **Iraq** and the brothers of al-Zeynab [i.e., the Shi'ite operatives defending the shrine of Set al-Zeynab south of Damascus], your brothers [in **Syria**]**..." (**al-Jazeera, Kanat al-Iraq, May 10, 2017).

Qais al-Kh'azali delivers his speech to operatives of Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haqq: "If in the past, people used to talk about Shi'ite crescent, with the help of Allah we will have a full Shi'ite moon […]" (al-Jazeera, May 10, 2017)

Left: Logo of Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haqq. The words on the book that is part of the logo read: "Indeed they are young men who believe in their God" (website of the organization). Right: Qais al-Kh'azali, leader of Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haqq (Kunuz Media, an Iraqi news agency, November 10, 2016).

C. **Sayyid al-Shuhada Battalions (*Kata'eb Sayyid al-Shuhada*, Battalions of the Master of Martyrs)**: "The Master of Martyrs" is the name given by the Shi'ites to **Hussein bin Ali**, who was killed in the Battle of Karbala (680 C.E.), which is a watershed event for them. It is a Shi'ite militia, anti-American and pro-Iranian. **It is headed by Abu Al-l'laa al-Walai**.

Logo of Sayyid Al-Shuhada Battalions. The inscription reads, "Victory from Allah and a near conquest – Sayyid Al-Shuhada Battalions – the Islamic Resistance in Iraq." The dome of the mosque belongs to the Imam Hussein bin Ali Mosque in Karbala (the organization's website).

Left: Abu Al-l'laa al-Walai with Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah (website of Sayyid al-Shuhada Battalions, February 24, 2016). Right: Sayyid al-Shuhada Battalions Commander Abu Al-l'laa al-Walai (Kunuz Media, July 3, 2016).

Three commanders of Shi'ite militias which are part of the Popular Mobilization Committee. Left to Right: Abu Al-l'laa al-Walai, Qais Kh'azali, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (Kunuz Media, November 10, 2016)

Badr Organization (*Munazzamat Badr*):

1) A political party with a military militia belonging to the Popular Mobilization Committee. The organization originated in a militia called Badr Forces, which originally consisted of Iraqi Shi'ite operatives who were recruited by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards to operate against Saddam Hussein's regime.

2) The Badr Organization is headed by **Hadi al-Amiri**, an Iraqi Shi'ite who was a member of the Shi'ite al-Dawah party. During the Iran-Iraq war, he fought alongside the Iranian Army as part of the Badr Forces. He speaks fluent Persian and apparently has lived in Iran for many years.

3) After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, Hadi al-Amiri returned to Iraq and was an associate of former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's. He served as minister of transportation (2010-2014) and was a candidate for minister of the interior (his candidacy was not confirmed because of American pressure). He is among the Popular Mobilization Committee's senior officials, in addition to being the secretary general of Badr Organization.

Left: Logo of the military wing of Badr Organization. The text is taken from the Quran and reads, "Allah has given you victory in [the Battle of] Badr." The Battle of Badr is the first battle in Islam, where the first supporters of Prophet Muhammad vanquished Bani Quraysh, who refused to convert to Islam. Right: Logo of Badr Organization, under the words "Sovereignty, Justice, Construction" (Wikipedia).

Right: Hadi al-Amiri interviewed by a correspondent near the Iraqi-Syrian border (Shu'un Iraqiya, June 4, 2017). Left: Hadi al-Amiri during the Iran-Iraq War, praising Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution. He said he received orders from the Iranian command (YouTube, September 9, 2015).

Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani with Hadi al-Amiri, commander of the Badr Organization, seen behind him (Al-Arabiya, May 27, 2016)

D. **The Nujaba Movement (*Harakat Al-Nujaba' or Harakat Hezbollah Al-Nujaba',* meaning the Noble Movement):**

1) The Nujaba Movement is a Shi'ite militia operating in the Baghdad area. It sent a force to Syria to fight against the rebel organizations under the direction of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. The force in Syria was active mainly in the Aleppo region. The commander of the militia is **Sheikh Akram Abbas al-Ka'abi**.

Left: Sheikh Akram Abbas al-Ka'abi, secretary general of the Nujaba Movement (alnujaba.tv website, January 16, 2017). Right: Logo of the Nujaba Movement (Harakat al-Nujaba) (Wikipedia).

2) On March 8, 2017, **Akram Abbas al-Ka'abi** released a recording **announcing the establishment of The Brigade for the Liberation of the Golan**. According to al-Ka'abi, ISIS's terrorism is part of an American-

supervised “Zionist plot” carried out by the United States and the Gulf states. He said “the presence [of the Nujaba Movement] in Syria was intended to counter this plot, whose purpose is to set fire to the lands of the Muslims […]”. According to al-Ka’abi, **his forces in Syria are ready to liberate the Golan together with the Syrian Army when the campaign against terrorism is over**. According to a video disseminated by the Nujaba Movement’s military information office, the purpose of the Brigade for the Liberation of the Golan is **to assist the Syrian Army in regaining the Golan as the first step in the liberation of the holy sites in occupied Palestine and the elimination of Israel** (The Nujaba Movement’s military spokesman’s office, March 10, 2017; YouTube, March 17, 2017; al-Mayadeen, March 8, 2017; Wikipedia).

Photo of the Nujaba Movement which served as a background for the audiotape of Akram Abbas al-Ka’abi (YouTube, March 17, 2017)

The Popular Mobilization Committee’s role in the campaign against ISIS

15. After the Iraqi Army was rehabilitated and as the offensives against ISIS became more frequent, the Shi'ite militias in the Popular Mobilization Committee served mainly as **auxiliary forces alongside the Iraqi regular forces**. The Iraqi regime assigned them a secondary role **and refrained from giving excessive prominence to their activity in order not to foment inter-sectarian tensions**

between the Sunni population and the Shi'ite militias (possibly also due to American pressure)[11]**.**

16. However, after the beginning of the campaign for Mosul and even more towards the end of the campaign, **the Popular Mobilization Committee raised its profile** both in its military activity as well as in interviews given to the media by its senior officials. Today, **the Popular Mobilization Committee is active in the region of Tal Afar in northern Iraq and along the Iraqi-Syrian border** (including the region of the al-Waleed crossing), **which are very significant areas for Iran**.

The issue of dismantling the Popular Mobilization Committee

17. In the past year, the idea of either incorporating the Popular Mobilization Committee militias into the Iraqi Army or dismantling them was considered. Those ideas **met with strong resistance among the militias**. Dismantling the Popular Mobilization Committee or incorporating it into the Iraqi security forces and eliminating its prominent sectarian characteristics is an internal Iraqi issue **in which external powers such as Iran and the United States are involved**. In ITIC assessment, the issue may resurface on Iraq's political agenda in the future.

18. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis' speech may indicate that **the Shi'ite militias have no intention of being dismantled and that Iran supports their continued existence. The Iranians can be expected to exert pressure on the Iraqi regime not to dismantle them because the Shi'ite militias are Iran's preferred proxy for promoting their interests in Iraq and elsewhere.** Statements by commanders in the Popular Mobilization Committee indicate that in the future it is liable to enhance its activity **in Syria as well** under the direction of the Iranians.

19. **The strengthening of the Shi'ite militias as part of the Popular Mobilization Committee strengthens the status of the Shi'ites in Iraq.** At the same time it harbors the potential of **increasing sectarian tensions** between Shi'ites and Sunnis following the liberation of Mosul. Those tensions may create **fertile ground for the continuation of the Sunni population's support of the terrorist organizations**, including ISIS, and undermine Iraqi internal stability.

[11] Thus, for instance, in the important campaign to liberate Fallujah from ISIS, the Shi'ite militias had a secondary role. Their role consisted of besieging the perimeter of the city while the regular Iraqi forces entered the city and fought there. Nevertheless, the Iranian media gave great prominence to the involvement of Iran and the Shi'ite militias in the campaign to liberate Fallujah.