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# The Strategic Use of Hard and Soft Power

An analytical case study of Iranian state influence on repression in Iraq

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# Abstract

*This thesis will research the Iranian state influence on repression in Iraq. In particular, it is a case study that will explore the Iranian state influence, in the form of ideological and financial influence, on pro-government militias in Iraq between 2014 and 2020. The main pro-government militias to be studied are the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), who were formed after the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in 2014. The analysis will utilize Joseph Nye's soft and hard power theoretical framework to explore how the ideological and financial power of Iran influences the pro-government militias, in order to measure how this, in turn, affects the escalation of repressive violence in Iraq. The findings, in fact, suggest that there is a correlation between the extent of the Iranian influence on the PMF and how they become associated with higher repressive violence in Iraq throughout the years.*

*Key words:* Iranian state influence, Iran, pro-government militias (PGMs), Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), Iraq, repression, repressive violence, soft power, hard power.

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# 1. Introduction

The Shia militias have gained tremendous popularity and power in Iraq in recent years, particularly post-Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) (Arif, 2021: 345). The most prominent militia is the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an umbrella organization for PGMs in Iraq. Throughout the years, the strength of the PMF became equivalent to the Iraqi national military, which pushed the Iraqi government to formalize the inclusion of the militias in the country's security forces in an attempt to control them (Al-Rubaie, 2019; Reuters, 2018; FOI, 2020: 5). However, post-ISIL period and during national protests movements, repressive violence has been observed and associated with the militias (Jabar, 2018: 7-8, 14, 22; Al-Rubaie, 2019; ACLED, 2020; Amnesty International, 2021). This paper seeks to analyze how and to what effect the Iranian government has contributed to the pro-government militias' repression of people in Iraq between 2014 and 2020 through its soft and hard power influence, which underpin both the neoliberalist and neorealist approach.

## 1.1 Aim and research question

This thesis intends to explore the relationship between the influence of external states and the use of repressive violence on people within a specific country. To conduct this study, it is important to look at mechanisms that link external state influence with repression. The case study of this paper will involve the role of PGMs in exercising repressive violence and their attachment to external state actors. Therefore, the aim is to analyze how and to what effect state influence on PGMs affects the repression of people within a specific country. The main research question will be as follows;

*How and to what effect has Iranian influence contributed to pro-government militias' repression of people in Iraq between 2014-2020?*

Furthermore, this paper intends to explore a field of study that is not appreciably researched in this area. This thesis will, therefore, contribute to specific knowledge on the Iranian state influence and its effects on repression in Iraq. It will also contribute, to some extent, to the

broader academic debate on, firstly, external state influence and pro-government militias literature and secondly, repression literature, which will be further discussed in the next section.

## 2. Theoretical framework

This section aims to outline the three main concepts: external state influence, pro-government militias (PGMs), and repression, which constitute the theoretical framework for this paper. Previous research is at first presented and discussed to further conclude with the theoretical approach of this paper. The three main concepts are intrinsically defined when the previous literature is presented. However, this paper will further specify the definitions of these three concepts before conducting the analysis.

### 2.1 Previous research

Previous research is divided into two sections. The first focuses on the research that analyzes the relationship between external state support and pro-government militias, and the second highlights research on pro-government militias and repression. This division is because these are two main fields of research that have been studied. However, there is limited literature on the relationship between external state influence and repression. The literature on repression mainly recognizes authoritarian or semi-democratic state actors who use different repressive methods to remain in power (see deMeritt, 2016; Carey et al., 2015; Carey & Mitchell, 2016). Further, other literature on repression explains how repressive methods are conducted, which often involve the use of PGMs (see Ash, 2016; Carey & Mitchell, 2016). However, there is little research looking at the relationship or link between external state influence and repression. Nevertheless, this paper will present the previous research to conduct a theoretical argument and analyze the relationship between external state influence and repression.

#### 2.1.1 External support and pro-government militias

In the field of pro-government militias and non-state armed groups in conflictual areas, literature is focused on the main factors that generate the power of the militias. Whether on the state-level or international level, research is devoted to explaining how and what motives lay behind the growing role of non-state armed groups. It is important to note that previous research uses different terms for 'external support' and to whom the support is given. Such terms include foreign sponsorship, foreign support, non-state foreign support, rebel groups, militias, and

non-state armed groups. There is limited research using the same concepts used in this paper. Regardless, it is important to look at previous research on external support to non-state armed groups to complement this study. Salehyan et al. (2011), for example, seek to explain why certain rebels receive external support while others do not. Their findings suggest that external support is often offered and delivered where the support is most likely to be accepted (Salehyan et al. 2011: 709-711). Bapat (2012), for instance, suggests that an initial relationship develops between the foreign sponsor and militia groups. Foreign state actors and militia groups may share the same goals in opposing the target government, which in some cases results in a win-win situation for both the foreign actors and the militia group (Bapat, 2012: 2-5).

Salehyan et al. (2011) research further suggest that external support occurs in the presence of transnational constituencies, international rivalries, and foreign support to governments. The transnational constituencies often involve foreign support to rebel groups due to ethnic, religious or ideological motives. Further, foreign sponsorship of rebel groups is common when a state is involved in international rivalries, meaning that foreign states choose to support opposite sides in an intrastate dispute of a target state. Salehyan et al. (2011) research further suggest that foreign support to governments increases the odds of foreign sponsorship of rebel groups (Salehyan et al. 2011: 720, 724, 729).

Furthermore, a considerable amount of research conducts a single-N case study when exploring external state influence and foreign support to militias. Iranian sponsorship in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen is one of the most prominent case studies. Leenders and Giustozzi's (2020) paper on foreign sponsorship to PGMs supports the research findings of Salehyan et al. (2011), particularly the argument on international rivalries. They argue that foreign sponsors, both state and non-state actors, increasingly support proxies in intrastate conflicts, such as PGMs, rather than intervening directly (Leenders & Giustozzi, 2020: 2-3, 12-13; also see Lane, 2021). Moreover, other research mainly focuses on Iran's Realpolitik agenda in which its political, security and economic interests lay as a foundation for why the Iranian state develops a long-term relationship with pro-Iranian political parties and Shia militias (Arif, 2019; Al-Tamimi, 2015; Guzansky, 2011; Nader, 2015).



## 2.1.2 Pro-government militias and repression

Repression is a field of study in which much of the literature is concerned with finding and explaining the determinants of repression, specifically state-level repression. Previous research has thus attempted to understand why and how some governments use repressive methods while others less, which often leads to research around regime types and factual democracy levels in democratizing governments (Ahram, 2016; Ahram, 2021; Butler et al., 2009). Therefore, research on repression has primarily looked at repression as a strategic means of control asserted by authoritarian regimes or governments in a democratic transition, to remain in power (deMeritt, 2016:2-4; Carey et al., 2015; Carey & Mitchell, 2016). Moreover, researchers such as Davenport (1996) study political conflicts and how it, in turn, increases repression. Arguably, repression tends to increase when the authoritarian regime's survival is threatened (Davenport, 1996: 384-385; Reagan & Hendersson, 2002:133).

Previous research on pro-government militias (PGMs) and repression are, to some extent, limited. The literature on PGMs and repression often analyze different case studies and types of violence exercised by the PGMs, including violent human rights abuses (Flett, 2011; Butler et al., 2009) such as torture (Carey & Mitchell, 2016) and sexual violence (Cohen & Nordås, 2015). Additionally, research on PGMs is often associated with state failure (Bates, 2008). Ash (2016), on the other hand, excludes state-level explanations and focuses on the individual leaders' decision-making to explain the formation and strengthening of PGMs. This is particularly useful when looking at external factors that may influence the formation and the development of PGMs in a specific country, as Ash (2016) looks at how PGM formation becomes a result of leaders facing political threats, both internally and externally, to maintain power. Such threats may include coups or international pressures (Ash, 2016:721). Carey and Mitchell (2016) discuss that governments often use PGMs when intending to use excessive violence on people when threatened, and with total impunity. In other words, authoritarian governments or governments with low democratic levels intend to use violence or repressive methods when faced with political challenges while at the same time distancing themselves from such atrocities. Carey and Mitchell (2016) focus mainly on leaders who fear the international costs of being associated with human rights abuses. Additionally, Mitchel et al. (2014) suggest that the level of repression increases in the presence and strengthening of a PGM. Moreover, Carey and González (2021)

conclude that PGMs from wartime legacies are associated with higher levels of repression than newer militias. Their research is particularly suitable for this paper's analysis as it will research the development of the PGMs during and after the fight against ISIL in Iraq (Tabatabai & Esfandiary, 2017; Arif, 2019; Nader, 2015) and how they eventually became associated with higher levels of repression than newly created militias.

While the presented literature looks at different aspects of PGMs and repression, this paper focuses on the strengthening of such PGMs through external state influence and its effects on repression. Keeping in mind the previous research on external influence, PGMs, and repression, the following section will contribute to the literature and general knowledge on the impact of external state influence on repression.

## 2.2 Main theoretical approach

In this paper, the Iranian policy and influence in Iraq will be looked at from two different aspects: ideological and financial, which will be analyzed through Joseph Nye's soft and hard power theory.

Joseph Nye argues that soft power is the idea of attracting or influencing something instead of compelling it by force or threat. Soft power is thus an indirect force, such as an ideological influence, to exert power over an actor (Nye, 2004 5-6; Nye, 2008: 95, 107-108). Nima Adelkhah highlights that Iranian foreign policy is increasingly integrating the concept of "soft war" into its strategic defense planning (Adelkhah, 2010). As Nye argues, countries may consider soft or hard power as reasons to go to war (Nye, 2004: 26). Soft power, such as the ideological influence of Iran, is not only a way for Iran to exert dominance but also a reason for Iran to do so. In other words, soft power may be perceived as a necessary measure to prevent undesired outcomes, such as belittling other media or information that are not in favor of the ideology of Iran (Adelkhah, 2010; Wastnidge, 2015: 367-370).

In theory, soft power can have a form or an expression. However, in practice, it can be challenging to identify what soft power is and how it is practiced. For this reason, hard power is undoubtedly important to consider. In the absence of soft power, a state may have to resort to

coercion or threats to have the desired effect. Hard power can be described as using economic or military means to influence and produce a result (Nye, 2004, 8, 32, 128-129, 146; Nye, 2009). Nye (2004) further discusses that hard power measures may be conducted to create a deterrent effect (p. 26). Iran's hard power measures may thus be necessary to spread its influence further. The Islamic Republic's most prominent hard power policies are financial and armament support to PGMs in neighboring countries, including Iraq (Guzansky, 2011: 85-87). Nye's concept of hard power is therefore particularly useful and complementary to his concept of soft power.

Complementary to Nye's argument of hard power, the neorealist approach will be incorporated. Neorealism is particularly useful for this paper in order to look at Iran's policy in Iraq on a state level and its use of hard power measures. John Mearsheimer, a prominent scholar within the neorealist school, argues for offensive realism. Central to offensive realism is that states strive for power in order to establish hegemony and thus protect themselves against possible threats in the anarchic international system (Toft, 2005: 382-386).

Eventually, Joseph Nye combines the two different ways of thinking, hard power, which neorealists scholars are behind, and soft power, which Nye conceptualizes as a neoliberalist concept (Barr et al., 2015), to create the concept of "smart power." Nye (2008) writes that smart power "...include a soft dimension of attraction as well as the hard dimensions of coercion and inducement" (p. 107). Smart power is thus a combination of hard and soft power to maximize a country's foreign policy influence, which will be discussed in the concluding section of this paper to make sense of Iran's effective external state influence.

The combination of soft and hard power links the neoliberalist and neorealist approaches, which calls for a neo-neo synthesis. As observed and argued by several researchers, there is an increasing agreement between the two schools, which forms the neo-neo synthesis (Waeber, 1996; Andreatta & Koenig-Archibugi, 2010; Claassen, 2011). The two approaches will be used in a complementary manner to explore the Iranian state influence and how it is conducted. Most importantly, during the analysis, it will become apparent that Iran uses smart power, combining both soft power with hard power measures, to achieve an effective influence.

## 3. Research design & methodology

This section outlines the chosen research design and methodology of this study. This section will briefly present the chosen case study and why a longitudinal research design will be most appropriate for this case. Further, material selection is presented, discussed and explained. Lastly, the variables of this paper are conceptualized and operationalized in order to fulfil the intended purpose of the study.

### 3.1 Choice of method

This paper will be a case study of the Iranian state influence on PGMs in Iraq and its effects on repression. The study will thus be limited to the Iranian state's ideological and financial influence through Nye's soft and hard power and how it eventually affects PGMs and repression in Iraq. For this reason, the variables of this paper will be studied over a period of time in order to see how such influence changes or affects the dependent variable. Therefore, this study will use a longitudinal research design, which is concerned with showing variations over time, usually in one specific case over an x period of time (Halperin & Heath 2012: 169-171). Ployhart and Vandenberg (2010) emphasize that when conducting longitudinal research, it is important to distinguish the dynamic terms of the variables from the static (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010: 96). For instance, for this case study, state influence will be observed as a dynamic concept which constantly influences the PGMs, which further affects the repression of people in Iraq.

Moreover, this paper intends to explore the causal relationship for the chosen case study through an interpretive process tracing. Process tracing is a method often used in longitudinal studies to explore causal mechanisms and identify a causal chain that links hypothesized causes and results (Halperin & Heath, 2012: 89-90, 172, 290). However, this thesis intends to explore the causal relationship between the variables rather than prove a general causality. It will thus observe a correlation between the variables. For this reason, interpretive process tracing will be suitable as it is a way to observe how causality becomes visible and in what context. There is, therefore, an emphasis on how a causal link is observed. It is a useful method to use as it is a way to "...examine the reasons that actors give for their actions and behaviour and to investigate the relations between beliefs and behaviour." (Vennesson, 2008: 233).

In order to conduct a longitudinal study, at least three repeated measures of variables are needed to observe a change, according to Chan (1998). While it is useful to have a more extended longitudinal study to determine the changing nature of the same variables, it is also difficult to conduct such a study due to time constraints and lack of resources. The time period of this study will thus be limited. I will be looking at the nature of influence and repression in Iraq from 2014 until 2020. The development and strengthening of PGMs post-ISIL, in relation to the Iranian state, will be explored. Moreover, there is little sufficient information and material to analyze the years of 2021-2022. For this reason, the analysis will look at the developments up to 2020. Additionally, the analysis will look at two years at a time to avoid having little presentable material under each year and provide a deeper analysis of the events and developments during the years, to eventually conclude on the correlation between Iranian state influence and repressive violence.

Irrespective of the chosen research design, this thesis intends to carefully evaluate, analyze and discuss the material with utmost transparency in order to achieve an objective picture of the presented material. It is the intention to present a self-aware and clear paper.

### 3.2 Selection of material

The empirical data analyzed in this thesis will combine primary and secondary sources. The combination of primary and secondary information complements the analysis and contributes to a general picture of the situation. However, in regards to this paper's specific case study, the choice of sources (particularly the primary sources) may be problematic due to the lack of reliability of being a highly politicized case.

First of all, this study intends to look at state influence, which will include both ideological and financial state influence, through Joseph Nye's soft and hard power lense. The theoretical part of the thesis will thus primarily draw upon material presented by Joseph Nye. On the ideological level, official statements from Iranian leaders and documents from Iran's official government websites, such as the official Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), will be analyzed. The

choice of the IRNA is suitable as information is published in English. Other information from Iran's government websites may be difficult to analyze due to language barriers, as it is primarily presented in Persian with no English translation.

Further, to see how PGMs are affected by such influence, statements of PGMs in Iraq will be analyzed to observe how they are affected by the Iranian state influence. This thesis will look at the most prominent PGMs in Iraq, namely the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), also known in Arabic as al-Hashd al-Shaabi. The PMF owns its own news website found at: <https://al-hashed.gov.iq>, which is useful when analyzing the extent of Iranian influence as it contains statements, articles and archives of their activities since 2016. It is important to note that all information published on PMF's website is in Arabic. As an Arabic speaker, I will be conducting the translation when such information is used. It is further open to scrutiny. Additionally, Iraqi political statements will also be analyzed in order to complement the information derived from the other sources. Undeniably, information derived from Iranian official government websites, PGM statements, or statements of Iraqi politicians run the risk of being biased as these statements carry political, ideological and religious motives with the intention to deliver the information with a certain goal to reach. Therefore, secondary material will complement the information presented by primary sources.

On the financial level, numbers of financial assistance and armament support by the Iranian state sent to PGMs will be observed. Such numbers will be derived from statements by Iranian or PGM leaders. However, accurate numbers are difficult to obtain and run a high risk of being unreliable for the same earlier mentioned reasons. It is further difficult to obtain precise numbers for each year. For this reason, and in order to reach a fair conclusion, secondary sources will complement the primary material. That is not to conclude that secondary material cannot be biased, as this is a highly politicalized case. However, the information will be gathered from a large number of official state and non-state sources, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as Amnesty International, and international organizations such as the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), which will provide a clear picture of the general information.

Secondly, and in order to conceptualize and operationalize PGMs, it is important to look at secondary material, which includes academic articles and data from organizations on country reports, such as the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) and Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI). Further, primary material, such as reports from the PMF and articles by IRNA, will complement the secondary material to determine the activity of the militias, such as instances of increased physical or direct repressive violence. However, reports by PMF or IRNA are not reliable in the sense that it will identify the violence committed in a repressive manner. Nevertheless, it will still be useful as it could be used as a basis for how the PGMs developed and how their activities are growing to effect repression in Iraq. Additionally, databases such as the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) will be used to look at repressive violence committed by the militias during certain periods of time in Iraq.

### 3.3 Operationalization

The main focus of this paper is to research the following variables: Iranian state influence, as the independent variable; pro-government militias, as the intermediate variable; and repression, as the dependent variable.

**The independent variable**, "Iranian state influence", involves the Iranian state ideological and financial influence. External interventions of institutions, companies, or other non-state actors are thus demarcated, due to time and work limitations. The Iranian state influence will be operationalized through soft and hard power methods.

Firstly, as Nye (2008) argues, the attractiveness of culture, ideology and values presented in the statements and by influential leaders is one soft dimension of exerting power (p. 95, 107). Therefore, **the soft power** approach will measure the Iranian ideological influence, including political and religious aspects, which will be observed mainly in statements by the Iranian state, militia leaders, generals or politicians during the period of 2014 to 2020. Further, the demarcation of the time period is because the events of 2014-2020 will be analyzed, and it is thus useful to look at statements issued during that time.

Secondly, **the hard power** approach will measure the Iranian state's financial influence, including material and military influence. Nye (2004) highlights that one of the powerful hard power resources is 'payments'. However, it is not only merely financial help, as the behavior of hard power also includes inducement such as offering armament aid, military training and free medical treatment (p. 8). Therefore, this will be observed by looking at published numbers of financial and armament assistance sent to PGMs in Iraq by Iran. The financial aspect will further financial aid sent to families of PGM members, and medical care and support offered to PGM members and their families. It is important to emphasize that the inclusion of these aspects is for the reason that the support offered to the militias or their families is often paid for by Iran, thus, falling under the financial dependency on Iran.

Moreover, **the intermediate variable**, "pro-government militias", will be derived from definitions conducted by prominent researchers in the field of PGMs. In an updated database on PGMs developed by Sabine Carey, Neil Mitchell, and Katrin Paula (2022), pro-government militias are defined as: " '(1) [...] progovernment or sponsored by the government (national or subnational), (2) [...] not being part of the regular security forces, (3) [...] armed and (4) [with] some level of organization'" (Carey et al., 2022: 2). Further, Carey et al. (2013) distinguish semi-official from informal PGMs. Semi-official militias, in contrast to informal militias, have a recognized official status by law (Carey et al., 2013: 250-251). Therefore, this paper will mainly look at the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a semi-official umbrella organization for several PGMs based in Iraq, but who appear to answer to Iranian authorities (U.S Department of State, 2019: 10-11; Reuters, 2018). Throughout the years, the strength of the PMF became identified as equivalent to the Iraqi military, which resulted in the Iraqi government's inclusion of the militias in the country's security forces in November 2016 (Al-Rubaie, 2019; Reuters, 2018; FOI, 2020: 5). The PGMs will thus be operationalized by specifically looking at how and where they were formed and strengthened. It will further include the observation of numbers of mobilized and trained militia members. In order to observe their activity, this paper will look at several local and international organizations, where the militias, particularly the PMF, have been mentioned and publicly affiliated with repressive violence. This paper will also use PMF original reports and IRNA articles to measure the militia's activity.



Lastly, **the dependent variable**, "repression", will be defined as the use of extensive repressive methods by states with authoritarian characteristics, through militias, to oppress citizens when faced with regime threats (see Carey & Mitchell, 2016; Ash, 2016). This paper will focus on the direct or physical forms of repression, such as extrajudicial killings, torture, or other forms of physical violence. This is because repression is often associated with direct violence in this particular case study, which is, therefore, easier to measure as it becomes observable (Jabar, 2018: 7-8, 14, 22; Al-Rubaie, 2019; ACLED, 2020; Amnesty International, 2021). However, to avoid errors in measurement, it is important to distinguish 'repression' from 'physical violence'. What distinguishes repression from general state violence is that I will primarily focus on violence exercised and used as a repressive tool. In other words, if physical forms of repressive methods are exerted when citizens exercise their right to free speech, e.g. in media or in demonstrations, then repression is distinguished from general violence. Further, if physical forms of repressive methods are exercised to repress a certain group of civilians, then repression is observable (see Salehyan et al. 2011: 724). Violence may thus be used to repress citizens. If this is the case, then repression is occurring. Thus, this study is limited to certain types of definitions that will be looked at closely. This paper will present numbers, events and statistics from secondary data and databases such as the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), in which repressive violence occurred with affiliation to the PGMs.

## 4. Analysis

“Since 2003, Iran has skilfully penetrated Iraq’s Shia population, taking advantage of its long shared border and cultural, religious and economic ties. Iran’s influence is multifaceted and has included outreach to a broad spectrum of political and social actors. Iran has even attempted to influence the Hawza’ (Iraq’s Shia clerical seminaries).” (IISS, 2019: 123).

The Iranian ideological and financial influence over the PGMs is highly observed in the statements and reports of Iraqi Shia militant groups. Iran’s ideologically-dominated militia groups are the main sources of financial and material funding to the largest PGMs in Iraq (IISS, 2019: 148). Through this process, Iran’s financial and material aid becomes discrete, as it is not needed to provide material aid directly to PGMs, such as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), but rather discreetly through other loyal militia groups. Therefore, it is interesting to analyze the information available to explain how and to what effect Iranian ideological and financial influence on PGMs affects repression in Iraq. The analysis will discuss the findings in relation to Joseph Nye’s soft and hard power theory while keeping in mind the neo-neo synthesis of including the neorealist and neoliberalist approach in order to break down the Iranian influence, motivations and methods.

### 4.1 The events of 2014-2016

#### 4.1.1 Soft power methods

In 2014, Iraq was struck by the widespread control of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), specifically in the city of Mosul (EUAA, 2020: 48). During the same period of time, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who is the most prominent Iranian Shia cleric with significant influence over Iraqi Shia Muslims, issued an Islamic motivated statement or opinion (also known in Arabic as ‘Fatwa’), that called upon Iraqis to volunteer and fight the ISIL forces and repel the threat of the Sunni terrorist organisation. The Fatwa, delivered by one of al-Sistani’s representatives, specifically stated: “Citizens who are able to bear arms and fight terrorists, defending their country and their people and *their holy places* [emphsize added], should

volunteer and join the security forces *to achieve this holy purpose* [emphsize added].” (Aljazeera, 2014, video 0.13-0-28).

The Fatwa was issued in the Shia shrine city of Karbala in Iraq (Aljazeera, 2014). As such, it was targeting the Shia Muslim population of Iraq. Furthermore, in the context of the threat of the terrorist organization, the Fatwa highlighted the importance of defending the country, the people, and the holy places. It further concluded the need to achieve "the holy purpose". The reason for the emphasis is the need to analyze the use of religious or ideological terms that are articulated to the Shia population of Iraq. Undeniably, the interpretation of "holy places" could also include Sunni mosques or even holy places of other religions and sects. However, the statement was delivered in a Shia dominated city with the Shiite public listening to the Fatwa, thus targeting the Shiite holy places. Furthermore, Haddad (2018) writes that several Iranian aligned militias were formed during that time, and referred to as the Hashd al-Wala'i (The Crowd of Loyalty), which is a reference to the loyalty the formations have to the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (p. 2-4). As argued by Nye (2008), a country's culture, values, and policies are one of the most effective soft power methods (p. 94-95), and Iran's state culture and policies highly involve the political Shia Islam (Jabar, 2018: 8-10; Guzansky, 2011: 88-91).

Therefore, the way the soft power is pursued is dependent on how much Iran could affect or influence with its cultural and religious values, which is observable in the reports and statements of the PMF. The events of 2014 and the significant role of the 'holy Fatwa' is often remembered and associated with mobilizing Iraqis to turn to "Jihad"<sup>1</sup> (Al-Hashimi, 2019 [translated]). The Fatwa has thus resulted in a mass mobilization in which many Iraqis joined the newly formed or other long-standing Shia paramilitary armed groups under the new name of al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces). Therefore, Al-Sistani played a significant role in the emergence and strengthening of the pro-government militias of the PMF. Additionally, Iranian leaders were embedded within a number of the PMF militias, guiding, advising, motivating and shaping the Iraqi political future (Al-Rubaie, 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> Jihad, as interpreted by the PMF and in Iranian statements, is the fight against ISIL in order to achieve a religious victory (Al-Hashimi, 2019 [translated]; al-Hashd, 2018c [translated]; IRNA, 2017).

However, it is further important to understand why and how Iran pursues the soft power methods. Arguably, FOI (2020) reports that pro-Iranian PMF is a defense tool for Iran against any regional or international threats that may hinder Tehran's geostrategic interests in the Arab world. FOI further writes that the PMF increasingly came to resemble Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps, an Iranian military organization founded after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 to safeguard the Islamic Republic (FOI, 2020: 3, 6; Britannica, 2020a). Therefore, the emergence of ISIL poses a threat to Iran to the extent of the opposed interests and the threat of Iran's loss of ideological power in Iraq. The Iranian involvement may thus be motivated by the national and regional threat of ISIL intentions to expand, territorially and ideologically. Arguably, the Islamic Republic Realpolitik agenda is visible when its political, security and economic interests are threatened, which results in the development of a long-term relationship with Shia militias in other countries (Arif, 2019: 344-345; Guzansky, 2011: 85-86, 88-90; Nader, 2015: 1-3; Toft, 2005: 382-386; Ash, 2016:721). Therefore, through cultural, religious and ideological influence, relationships are developed with the Shia targeted militias. This, in turn, results in Iran's use of what Nye (2004) defines as the attractiveness of culture and political ideologies (p. 5-6) to influence militias inside Iraq with soft power methods.

#### 4.1.2 Hard power methods

The post-2014 period has contained a deliberate but increased influence of PMF members with the soft power motivations of fighting terrorism that is, as described, threatening Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran (Al-Hashimi, 2019 [translated]). Several PMF members claimed that the training was often offered by Iranians inside Iraq (IISS, 2019: 123-126). Most notably, training was offered by Quds Forces, one of the branches of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), which is a paramilitary group tasked with safeguarding the Islamic republic after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 (Arif, 2019: 348). Quds Force's former commander was Qassem Soleimani, an Iranian general killed in a U.S drone in 2020 (Britannica, 2020a; Britannica, 2020b). Qassem Soleimani played an influential role in the strengthening of the PMF in Iraq, as he was one of the Iranian Supreme Leader's favorite IRGC commanders and described as a decisive figure who developed the Quds Forces under direct supervision (Veisi, 2020). However, according to trained PMF members, military training has not been conducted on professional

fundamentals. As discussed under the soft power section, many PMF members consider themselves to be a volunteer group - on the basis of fighting for a good cause and sustaining cultural and religious values - and not a professional army. Nevertheless, it has been reported that Iran and Iranian-backed militias in Iraq have tried to create areas of professionalism. During the summer of 2014, the PMF's small tank force received equipment and advisers from Iran, which marked the beginning of the increased strengthening of the PMF. Moreover, in mid-2014, the PMF artillery force was estimated to have 1,400 personnel, which have received their training in Iran regarding the use of computerized targeting systems (IISS, 2019: 143).

The following years reflected an increased provision of heavy weapons by Iran to the PMF (IISS, 2019: 142-144). The weaponry assistance has been publicly confirmed by the PMF. In an article written in 2019, which sought to remember the events of 2014 and the formation of the PMF, the author wrote that "...weapons were coming to *us* [emphasis added] in succession from the friends of Iraq, and especially the neighbor Iran, which put its capabilities in the service and support of the religion." (Al-Hashimi, 2019 [translated]). The 'us' represents the PMF, as it is written and shared on the official website of the militia and written in the context of the formation of the PMF. Furthermore, Iran is mentioned as the main contributor with weaponry help. Overall, and in 2014 alone, it is estimated that the several Shiite militias in Iraq received arms and hardware from Iran worth about 10 billion dollars (Peterson, 2017).

While the provision of heavy weapons has strengthened the PMF in Iraq, it is still not perceived as a professional force at that time. Nevertheless, the Iranian weaponry aid associated with increased military training in combination with the group identity narratives (Al-Hashimi, 2019 [translated]) has undeniably strengthened the position of the PMF in Iraq. Drawing back to Nye's (2004) theoretical framework, in order to achieve an effective hard power influence, such as payments and financial help, hard power needs to be pursued parallel to soft power methods (Nye, 2004: 8, 32, 128-129, 146). Therefore, hard power influence in form of payments, weaponry aid and military training has been pursued with the ideological motivations of fighting for a 'good cause'. Furthermore, and as argued by Salehyan et al. (2011), influence is most effective when it reaches the right audience, as external state support is often offered where the support is most likely to be accepted (Salehyan et al. 2011: 709-711).

### 4.1.3 Repressive violence

According to Amnesty International, the PMF has been involved with dozens of extrajudicial killings and executions of Sunni civilians during the liberation of Mosul from ISIL during 2014-2016. Undeniably, the events of the so-called liberation during that time may have resulted in a generally increased violence. However, it is shown that the PMF were associated with extrajudicial killings of civilians while it continued receiving support and armament aid (Amnesty International, 2016).

The PMF has thus been actively operating in several cities in Iraq since 2014. Further, the activity of the militias has included repressive violence against civilians in the context of repressing the Sunni civilians from exercising their religious rituals or those that may be considered to have connections to ISIL (EUAA, 2021; EUAA, 2020: 141). It is therefore evident that increased repressive violence did, in fact, occur during the events of the so-called liberation from ISIL while the PMF was strengthened with the help of Iranian ideological motivations and financial and armament support. Undeniably, the state of Iraq will come to play a role in the strengthening of the PGMs as well, which will be discussed thoroughly in the next section.

Reportedly, since 2014, the PMF has engaged in excessive force against protests rising at the security void of that period, which resulted in numerous deaths of Iraqis. Sociologist Faleh Jabar writes in the Middle East Centre an article (2018) on the largest social protest movements in modern Iraqi history that took off in mid-July 2015, which resulted in many assaults of protesters who opposed the political Shia Islam in Iraq. He further states that the growing tensions led to i.a. the PMF to stand against the demonstrations, as the protest movement was perceived as a threat to the PMF's operations, commanders and political future (Jabar, 2018: 7-8, 14, 22).

The repressive violence included assassinations, abductions, beatings, and intimidation. Further, PMF members enforced public morals on civilians, such as preventing them from consuming alcohol. Cases of harassment and discrimination were thus increasingly being reported (EUAA, 2021; Smyth, 2019). The pro-government militia, therefore, used excessive force in a way that

repressed the protests occurring due to the deteriorating security environment, while at the same time punishing the Iraqis who do not share the same moral values. According to Nye (2004), soft power resources arise from the values an organization or a state expresses in its culture. In other words, the values reflected in country x, will set an example for other actors, which facilitates its soft power (Nye, 2004: 8, 11). Therefore, as presented, soft power methods exercised by Iran may have had an effect on the militias, who eventually enforced the values they were influenced with.

## 4.2 The events of 2016-2018

### 4.2.1 Soft power methods

Since the announced defeat of ISIL, the former commander of Quds Force of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), Qasem Soleimani, highlighted in a letter to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei the defeat of ISIL and congratulated him on the "glorious victory to the Islamic World" (IRNA, 2017). The emphasis on the victory the PMF brought to the Islamic world is one of the most used soft power methods. As analyzed in the previous section, PMF members are regularly reminded of their responsibility to protect and save the Islamic world. Nye (2008) further writes that an attractive personality is one of the most powerful methods to use in order to conduct soft power successfully (Nye, 2008: 95). As such, a statement written by Soleimani, who is considered a highly influential commander, is to be accepted more than a statement of other less known or influential actors.

Moreover, the Islamic world, as used by Iran and the PMF, is a term solely identified with Iran's Shia political Islam. As stated in the letter by Soleimani, the Islamic Republic is publicly congratulated for the victory it brought, through the PMF, to the Islamic world. Therefore, threats against the Iranian Shia political Islam were faced with violence by the PMF, who are ideologically influenced by the idea of protecting the Islamic world (Jabar, 2018: 7-8, 14, 22; Nye, 2008: 94-97). In an article written by the PMF in 2018, the PMF described any protest movements as a criminal conspiracy against them and the Iranian authorities. Throughout the article, the PMF is described as synonymous with the Iranian authorities in which there is an

emphasis on the shared values and goals between the Iranian state and the PMF, such as criticizing the demonstrators in Iraq (al-Hashd, 2018a [translated]). Nye (2008) writes: "If I can get you to want to do what I want, then I do not have to force you to do what you do not want." (Nye, 2008: 95), meaning that the influence is not merely making the PMF do what they are told, but rather make them feel the need to do so as it is believed that the values and the goals are the same.

Additionally, organized religious movements, with extensive missionary efforts, such as the political Shia Islam of Iran, have "possessed" soft power, according to Nye (2004: 94). This particular aspect of ideological influence, which involves the political-religious missionary of Iran, is often encouraged. On several occasions in 2017 and 2018, the PMF Committee in Baghdad's office sent a convoy of families of late and wounded PMF members to visit the holy shrines in Iran. The visit to the shrines is thus offered by Iran and taken care of by the PMF Committee in Iraq, which further establishes the strong relationship between the militia and the Iranian state. The PMF further shares that there are various programs arranged to care for the families of the PMF. There is thus a strong ideological and religious influence exerted by the Iranian authorities in which families of PMF members and the members themselves are motivated to visit the holy shrines and expand the Shia Islamic knowledge in Iran. Late PMF members are often pointed out as martyrs who sacrificed themselves to the holy sanctities (al-Hashd, 2018b [translated]; al-Hashd, 2017a [translated]). Moreover, Iranian authorities often offers PMF wounded members free medical treatment in Iran as an appreciation for their Jihad against ISIL (al-Hashd, 2018c [translated]), which is a way to present the goodwill in doing so (Nye, 2004: 16, 29). These kinds of terms and initiatives strengthen Iran's religious and ideological influence.

#### 4.2.2 Hard power methods

As discussed under the soft power methods, the PMF Committee arranged several free visits to holy shrines in Iran in collaboration with Iranian authorities. The PMF further highlight that the visits are part of the various programs established to care for the families of the late or wounded PMF members (Al-Hashd, 2018b [translated]). This particular financial support and care for the



families of the PMF reflect, to some extent, the dependence PMF members have on Iran, as many may come from poorer families and may express gratitude for the kind of care offered to them and their families (Al-Rubaie, 2019). Additionally, as reported by the PMF, Iranian medical teams are often sent to Iraq, specifically Karbala governorate, to perform a number of surgical operations for the wounded PMF members. The wounded are thus provided with rapid and free medical aid when needed, as they are performing the so-called Jihad against terrorists in Iraq (Al-Hashd, 2018c [translated]). This was not the first time the Iranian authorities offered medical help. In 2016, there was an attempt to facilitate the treatment and health care of wounded PMF members in Tehran (al-Hashd, 2016 [translated]). Additionally, in 2018 the Consul of the Islamic Republic in Iraq, Hamid Makarim Al-Shirazi, visited the office of the PMF in the city of Al-Diwaniyah, promising to facilitate the transfer process of wounded PMF members for medical treatment in Iran (Al-Hashd, 2018d [translated]).

It is further important to note that youths are often targeted. Al-Rubaie (2019) writes that militias take advantage of the young, who obtain lower levels of education and face personal challenges. The level of vulnerability and lack of security services in Iraq, encourages the youth to join the militias, especially when they are authorized to carry weapons, which is a sign of prestige and power (Al-Rubaie, 2019). Therefore, the Iranian external influence is not merely ideological. It includes financial and material influence to the extent that Iraqi youths seek aid and power to protect themselves and their families. The ideological influence, together with the attractiveness of payments and weaponry aid, underpins the parallel use of both soft and hard power (Nye, 2008: 107-108; Nye, 2004: 32).

Since the announced defeat of ISIL in 2016, the former deputy head of the PMF, Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, confirmed that the Iraqis who responded to the call of the religious authority in Iran would not have achieved victory if not for the material and financial support of Iran. He noted that “The Islamic Republic responded quickly to us and opened its armory to us.” (al-Hashd, 2019a [translated]). He further confirmed that “Iran has provided significant financial support to the PMF” (Al-Rubaie, 2019), in addition to the military training offered in Iran to Iraqi youths (ibid.). Al-Muhandis thus confirmed that the PMF would not have reached the

strong position it developed without the Iranian external support, especially the weaponry assistance (al-Hashd, 2019a [translated]; IRNA, 2018a).

By the end of 2016, the PMF had received substantial financial and material resources from Iran to the extent that their strength and power were equivalent to the Iraqi federal government's own military (Reuters, 2018; Al-Rubaie, 2019). As discussed in "2016-2018: Soft Power methods" and "2014-2016: Hard Power methods", Quds Forces were highly influential to the PMF, and were the main Iranian forces to offer military training. This further establishes the Iranian offensive realism of hard power, where it intends to strengthen the PMF to the extent that it protects from any potential threats against the Islamic Republic (Arif, 2019: 345, 348, 351-355, 358; Toft, 2005: 382-386). The PMF's power became thus uncontrollable. However, the Iraqi government attempted to control the PMF by issuing a decree in November 2016, legalizing the inclusion of the PMF in the country's security forces (Reuters, 2018).

The inclusion of the PMF in the Iraqi security forces is not only an attempt to control it, but also a way to control cities in Iraq, which the Iraqi military was not able to do without the help of the Shiite militias, according to Tabatabai and Esfandiary (2017: 132). However, despite the inclusion of the PMF in the national security forces, the Iranian influence was still highly observable *and* unavoidable. In 2017, leaders of the PMF held a dinner in honor of the Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Baghdad, Hassan Danai-Far, on the occasion of the end of his duties in Iraq. In the article written by the PMF, the Iranian Ambassador was thanked for his contribution to coordinating between Iran and Iraq, but also for Iran's support in providing the militias in Iraq with weapons, equipment and advice in the war against terrorism (al-Hashd, 2017b [translated]). This article may be translated into thanking the Ambassador for the general help the Iranian state has offered the Iraqi state. However, the meeting was between the Iranian Ambassador and the PMF leaders, which did not include formal Iraqi politicians or state actors. As such, the meeting establishes the gratitude of PMF leaders for the Iranian armament help.

### 4.2.3 Repressive violence

Since 2016, increased repressive violence against civilians has been reported. The violence occurred in the context of the continuous fight against ISIL, which resulted in many Sunni men and boys, who lived in areas where ISIL dominated, being subjected to abuse at the hands of the PMF (U.S Department of State, 2019: 4, 9, 34-37, 58). Despite the announced defeat of ISIL in 2016, the Islamic Republic News Agency announced in March 2018 that the PMF, together with the Iraqi police, "cleaned up" 16 villages in northern Iraq (IRNA, 2018b). The 16 villages were emptied from men and boys who allegedly are affiliated with ISIL, while other family members were displaced. The repressive violence is a pattern seen throughout the years, where PMF have been associated with abuse in Sunni dominated areas, according to the Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2017). For instance, the Human Rights Watch reported that in mid-2016, over 600 men and boys were victims of such abuse. Many of the victims recognized the PMF militias as the perpetrators of the repressive abuse, which included torture and rape (HRW, 2016a; HRW, 2016b).

Further, protests broke out in several cities in Iraq in 2015, which were active up until the 2018 Iraqi May elections, in which protesters expressed their dissatisfaction with the dominating political Shia Islam (Jabar, 2018: 7-8, 14, 22). Therefore, the demonstrators significantly challenged the Iranian influence, which caused serious concerns in Iran. Besides the capital, Baghdad, Iraq's most influencing movement has been in the cities Basra and Nasiriyah. Both these cities are Shia-dominated, which is highly important to Iran. Basra and Nasiriyah have also been the places in which the militias have been operating the most, with complete impunity. While the protests in Basra focused on the local government's failure to provide clean drinking water and electricity, the protesters expressed general frustration towards the dominant Shiite parties, which eventually resulted in the burning of the Iranian consulate in Basra in 2018. Moreover, slogans such as 'Out, out Iran!' dominated these protest movements. Consequently, several assassinations of prominent activists have been carried out (ICG, 2021; Al-Mikdam, 2021).

Several local and international human rights organizations reported that PMF units responded to the protests with excessive force, in an attempt to repress the demonstrators who publicly

opposed the Iranian state, the pro-Iranian militias and the Shia political parties (U.S Department of State, 2019: 3; Jabar, 2018: 22). Therefore, the repressive violence could be understood not only by the extent of soft and hard power pursued, but also by the strategic means of control asserted by Iran to not lose the strong position it holds in Iraq. As argued by several researchers, an authoritarian government will most likely use repressive methods, through militias, when it is being challenged or threatened (deMeritt, 2016:2-4; Carey et al., 2015; Carey & Mitchell, 2016; Davenport, 1996: 384-385; Reagan & Henderson, 2002:133; Ash, 2016:721). Therefore, it is undeniable that the protests against its interference threaten the Iranian state.

### 4.3 The events of 2018-2020

#### 4.3.1 Soft power methods

The 2018-2020 period reflected important events such as the widespread anti-government protests, which expressed frustration with corruption, the struggling economy, and Iranian interference (Britannica, 2020b; EUAA, 2020: 16). The PMF publicly criticized the protests, describing them as demonstrations relying on foreign support. The PMF has further continuously emphasized the mutual goals and interests of Iran and the Iraqi people. In an article of 2018, Iran and the Arabs are described as moving toward a common future. Iran is also described as an important actor who can play a significant role in building stability in the region. As such, the PMF is once again described as fulfilling the responsibilities expressed in al-Sistani's Fatwa in defending the country and achieving the 'holy purpose'. For this reason, protest movements are generally considered as a conspiracy against the PMF and the Iranian state (al-Hashd, 2018e [translated]). The article thus describes the PMF as heroes, who fulfilled the responsibilities set out by al-Sistani. As Nye (2004) argues, soft power exists when there are willing interpreters and receivers. In other words, the influence may occur in a diffuse effect, which would cause a general influence (Nye, 2004: 16). While the Fatwa of the Sistani could be considered as an observable action of influence, the post influence effects are more diffuse. The article of the PMF (2018e) shows that ideological influence is deeply rooted to the extent that Iran's values are described as the right solution to the current conflicts.

The former Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, visited Iraq in March 2019, which he utilized to praise the “sacrifices” the PMF made in their fight against the terrorists in Iraq (IRNA, 2019a). Similar to Soleimani’s statement in 2017 (IRNA, 2017), Rouhani emphasized that PMF’s operations and achievements are perceived as an honor to the Islamic World (IRNA, 2019a). In response to Rouhani’s statement, the former head of the PMF, al-Muhandis, stated that “Iraq always considers itself a defender of the Islamic Republic of Iran in all fields” (ibid.).

Moreover, in a report on Iraq by EUAA (2020), it was estimated that the number of PMF members, by the time of issuance of the report, lay at 159 000 members. It is further estimated that 24 000 of the 159 000 were unregistered, thus serving without payment or financial benefit (EUAA, 2020: 21). Hence, solely driven by ideological motivations (Nye, 2008: 95), which confirms that Iran does not need to force PMF volunteers in any way, but rather make them want to achieve the goals set by Islamic Republic.

#### 4.3.2 Hard power methods

Furthermore, as documented on the PMF official website and published on September 4th, 2019, the PMF has received a total of 8 billion dinars since the issuance of the Fatwa by Al-Sistani in 2014, which means that since 2014, and up to 2019, a funding of 8 billion Iraqi dinars (approx. US\$ 5.5 million) has been delivered to the PMF. The payment has been delivered through al-Husseiniya Holy Shrine, one of Shiite Muslims' most revered sites in the city of Karbala (Al-Hashd, 2019b [translated]), which is also dependent on the Iranian state and its large sums of financial contributions and donations (Deveson, 2020 [translated]; Katzman, 2016:13). The payment has further included assistance to families of late PMF members and financial support to wounded militia members (Al-Hashd, 2019b [translated]).

Additionally, IRNA published a statement by the head of the PMF, Al-Muhandis, in which he stated that "We owe victories against Daesh to the efforts of the Iranian nation and martyrs of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps and Air Force" (IRNA, 2019b). Being the head of the PMF, the 'we' is interpreted as the PMF. It is thus undeniable that Iran's aid, in the form of general financial assistance, weaponry aid, and military training, is publicly appreciated by the PMF, who

repeatedly emphasizes the gratefulness for such support. Nye emphasizes that the two powerful hard power methods are either 'payments' or 'threats' (Nye, 2008: 95; Nye, 2004: 8). However, as observed, the hard power influence of Iran has only included the attractiveness of 'payments', whether financial support or armament aid, and military training. Therefore, Iran has not resorted to 'threats' directed toward the PMF as a hard power method.

#### 4.3.3 Repressive violence

The PGMs have increasingly been affiliated with abducting, detaining, torturing and assassinating protesters and activists who publicly opposed the Iranian influence in Iraq, especially after the incident of the attack on the Iranian consulate in 2018 in Basra (Al-Rubaie, 2019; Allinson, 2019). The Quds Forces, in collaboration with the PMF, remained highly active during the widespread national protests that broke out in October 2019, expressing frustrations with the protests (Britannica, 2020b; EUAA, 2020: 16, 32). Reportedly, between September 2019 and April 2020, increased repressive violence on protesters by PGMs, in collaboration with state security forces, occurred (ibid.). The numbers presented by the ACLED (2020) measure the repressive violence in a period of time in which protests against the Iranian influence were carried out, threatening the strong position the Iranian state holds in Iraq (IISS, 2019: 122-123). Consequently, the use of soft and hard power increased during this period in the context of increased criticism of the protests, describing them as criminal conspiracy and the continued financial and armament support.

The *reported* fatalities reached approximately 120 deaths of civilians at the end of September 2019. However, the *unreported* cases of repressive violence tend to be significantly higher when looking at secondary sources. Reportedly, the PMF ran an 'intimidation campaign' against Iraqi activists, protesters, human rights lawyers, medics during protests, and journalists covering protests. The campaign has thus been directed toward anyone criticizing any of the units of the PMF (Amnesty International, 2021; EUAA, 2020: 21). According to Amnesty International, over 600 civilian protesters were killed during the demonstrations between October 2019 and January 2020, with ongoing intimidation campaigns, arrests, and torture of unarmed activists and protesters (Amnesty International, 2020).

Therefore, as Carey and González (2021) conclude, PGMs from wartime legacies are associated with higher levels of repression than newer militias (p. 263-264), which is particularly seen in this case in which the PMF were supported and strengthened during and after ISIL in Iraq (Tabatabai & Esfandiary, 2017: 132, 136; Arif, 2019: 347-350). Hence, Iran's utilization of both hard and soft power methods, or what Nye calls smart power, has undoubtedly strengthened the PMF to become associated with higher repressive violence throughout the years.

## 5. Results and discussion

To conclude, the Iraqi state should not be perceived as a neutral actor; rather, it may be seen as contributing to the PMF's power by including it with the national security forces in 2016, with the justification of controlling it. However, as analyzed, it is publicly stated and presented that PMF's loyalty is toward Iran. During 2014-2020, the Iranian state's soft and hard power influence on the PMF is highly observed in the statements, policies and actions of both the Iranian authorities and the PMF, which makes the soft power methods easier to detect and measure. The hard power methods, however, were less obvious to observe and measure due to less presentable data of numbers and statistics.

Nevertheless, statements, including by the PMF, confirm that payments and weaponry aid were delivered by Iran. Most importantly, the Iranian financial and weaponry assistance associated with increased military training in combination with the ideological influence and group identity narratives has arguably fulfilled the use of the 'smart power' methods of Iran. Drawing back to Joseph Nye's arguments, smart power is the combination of both soft and hard power methods, which is observable in the policies conducted by Iran. An obvious example is the medical assistance offered by Iran to PMF members and family members. While it could be argued that the medical care falls under hard power influence as it offers free medical help, it could also be considered as a soft power method in which Iran presents its goodwill in offering such help to the militias for the Jihad they are performing. Iran's medical assistance becomes an appropriate example of two sides of the same coin.

Therefore, Iran's smart power has affected the militias to the extent that the PMF have been increasingly associated with repressive violence. As analyzed, repressive violence has been exercised towards civilians in Sunni dominated areas in an increasing manner post-ISIL, with the alleged affiliation of civilians to the terrorist organization. The PMF have thus been operating in correlation with Iran's soft power influence of achieving a holy purpose and defending Iran, and Iraq, from terrorism. The soft power influence is therefore complementing the hard power influence of Iran, which is reflected in the financial assistance, armament help and military



training. Further, repressive violence is also observed in instances where protest movements in Iraq threatened the position of Iran in the country. For instance, the burning of the Iranian consulate in 2018 and the criticism of Iranian influence in protest movements in Iraq inevitably resulted in Iranian responses of soft power, in which protests were criticized and described as a criminal conspiracy, which is also reflected in the PMF, resulting in the increased repressive violence of protesters and activists.

Nevertheless, this essay does not aim to explain why, but rather uses a neorealist approach in relation to Nye's hard power to explore how Iran's influence affected militia groups which in turn affected repressive violence in Iraq. It also includes how Iran justifies such actions, which is observed in Nye's neoliberalist soft power methods. The aim of this thesis was to explore how and to what effect the Iranian influence contributed to pro-government militias' repression of people in Iraq between 2014-2020. Undoubtedly, there are aspects in other contexts in which repressive violence may occur. However, as shown in the material and data presented, the Iranian state has had an important role in strengthening and influencing the PMF. Further, PMF activities, since 2014, have been associated with instances of repressive violence in Iraq. As such, it could be argued that there is a correlation between Iranian state influence and repression in Iraq.

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