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Honoring the Weapon

Iraq's Alternative to Disarming the Armed Factions

Key Judgment

Iraq's emerging weapons-control formula may allow armed factions that reject disarmament to preserve their organizational structures by relocating—or formally reclassifying—their weapons within PMF formations already recognized as part of the state. The result could satisfy the legal definition of weapons under state authority without necessarily establishing exclusive state command over their use.

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KEY JUDGMENT

For the factions that refuse to disarm, Baghdad may be moving toward a settlement that changes the legal location of the weapon without necessarily dismantling the organization that controls it. The test is not where the weapon is registered. The test is who can give - and enforce - the final order not to use it.

Executive Assessment

Iraq's current weapons-control drive contains two different processes that are often collapsed into one. The first is visible and comparatively conventional: a faction agrees to sever its armed affiliation, submits personnel and weapons data, and enters a state-directed process of reorganization or integration. The Samarra handover by Saraya al-Salam is the clearest example. On 4 June, Joint Operations Command said it had received complete lists covering personnel, weapons and equipment and that the formation's relationship was being changed as it moved into security forces linked to the commander-in-chief. Kataib Imam Ali and Asaib Ahl al-Haq announced parallel steps involving separation from PMF formations, inventories and state-supervised transfer procedures.[1][2][3]

The second process is harder. Harakat al-Nujaba, Kataib Hezbollah and Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada have resisted a settlement that can be understood as surrendering the "resistance weapon." Nujaba closed its latest round of talks with Coordination Framework leaders on 4 September by pairing two positions: preservation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and preservation of what it called the "sanctity of the resistance's weapons." Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada had already described its weapons as an "entrusted duty" and insisted that the question of resistance arms was distinct from the formal relationship between a faction and the PMF.[4][5]

That distinction matters in Baghdad in a way that is easy to miss from outside Iraq. The PMF is already a state institution. A faction does not need to be transformed into the Iraqi Army for its men and weapons to acquire a state label. It can possess an official brigade number, draw salaries from the federal budget and sit formally beneath the commander-in-chief while retaining a recognizable factional identity. The unresolved issue is therefore not legalization. Legalization largely occurred years ago. The unresolved issue is command.

ACSR calls the political logic that may address this dilemma "Honoring the Weapon." The phrase describes a bargain, not a ceremony: the faction is not required to confess that its weapon was illegitimate; the historical narrative of resistance and sacrifice is left intact; and the weapon can be moved, inventoried or reclassified within the official PMF architecture. Baghdad gains a claim of state authority. The faction avoids the symbolism of defeat. What may remain unchanged is the organization behind the weapon.

ANALYTIC CONFIDENCE

Moderate. The public record strongly supports a shift toward negotiated organization and containment. The final arrangements for the refusing factions have not been published, so ACSR treats organizational continuity as the most plausible risk to test - not as a completed agreement.

1. The Iraqi Problem Is Not a Missing Law

The statutory architecture already says what a conventional state chain of command should look like. Law No. 40 of 2016 makes the PMF a military formation that is part of the Iraqi armed forces and linked to the commander-in-chief. It provides for a command, staff, branches and combat brigades; subjects members to military law; and requires those joining the formation to sever political, partisan and social affiliations. It also reserves the authority to redeploy and distribute PMF forces across the provinces to the commander-in-chief.[6]

Administrative Order 237, issued in 2019, attempted to translate that legal theory into institutional practice. It required armed formations operating within the PMF framework to use military designations rather than factional names, close offices that did not fit the new military structure, and end organizational relationships inconsistent with the official chain of command.[7] On paper, there is little ambiguity: the state is supposed to be the superior authority.

The ambiguity appears in implementation. Iraqi political and security discourse continues to identify some official brigades by the faction from which they emerged. The most useful current example is Nujaba and PMF Brigade 12. In March 2026, reporting on a strike against a PMF site referred to “Brigade 12 (Harakat al-Nujaba).” More revealing was a December 2025 intervention by Abu Mithaq al-Masari, a figure close to the Badr Organization. Arguing for a way to settle Nujaba’s weapons question, he said the safest place for Nujaba’s arms would be Brigade 12 - while acknowledging that the brigade’s reference, past and identity were Nujaba.[8][9]

The Brigade 12 problem

For an Iraqi audience, the logic is immediately recognizable. A weapon can move from a factional warehouse into the custody of an official PMF brigade without travelling very far organizationally. The transaction can be real in an administrative sense: a new inventory, a new custodian on paper, a new order governing movement, perhaps even a new storage location. Yet if the brigade’s commander, cadres, communications and internal loyalties remain embedded in the same factional network, the state may have changed the weapon’s status more than its chain of control.

THE MECHANISM

Nujaba weapon → Brigade 12 → PMF → Iraqi state. The legal chain is straightforward. The analytical question is whether the factional chain disappears, becomes subordinate, or simply continues behind it.

This is why “weapons under state control” cannot be measured by brigade numbers or payroll status alone. The Iraqi state has funded and legally incorporated PMF formations for years. The harder threshold is whether the official hierarchy becomes exclusive: whether a commander can be appointed or removed without factional veto; whether an order from the commander-in-chief overrides an internal instruction; whether unauthorized use triggers discipline that is actually enforceable; and whether strategic capabilities can be moved or withheld by the state without negotiating with the faction that operates them.

The distinction is not academic. On 18 August, security spokesman Saad Maan described the government’s project as applying to weapons outside official state institutions and stressed that the government was not pursuing confrontation or exclusion. He also said some factions within the PMF’s official administration had begun weapons procedures and that the process was institutional and legal.[10] If the PMF itself is already inside the state, then the central policy problem becomes the elimination of parallel decision-making inside or alongside that formal structure.

2. Baghdad Has Already Shown What Real Separation Looks Like

The 2026 cases of voluntary compliance provide a useful control group. They show that Iraqi officials know the difference between a symbolic announcement and an institutional process. Saraya al-Salam's Samarra arrangement involved complete personnel, weapons and equipment data, a formal handover and a declared change in affiliation. Saad Maan described the government mechanism as including weapons surrender, restructuring and eventual full integration of the relevant formations.[1][11]

Kataib Imam Ali's 2 June statement was similarly concrete. It announced separation from PMF formations, a committee for inventory, surrender and transfer under the supervision of the commander-in-chief, and another committee to handle personnel and their reintegration into state institutions.[2] Asaib Ahl al-Haq announced a central committee to inventory individuals, weapons and logistical means as part of severing its relationship with PMF formations.[3] These are not identical cases, and implementation still requires verification. But the announced architecture contains the elements expected in genuine organizational change: people, weapons, records, command and institutional destination.

The refusing factions speak a different language. Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada's spokesman explicitly said that separation of PMF brigades from political organizations was one question and the "resistance weapon" another. He described that weapon as an entrusted obligation and tied its continued existence to perceived gaps in Iraqi sovereignty and air-defense capacity.[5] Nujaba's September statement similarly defended the PMF as a national institution while preserving the sanctity of resistance arms.[4]

Kataib Hezbollah exposed another Iraqi constraint: technical ownership. On 30 May, its security official Abu Mujahid al-Assaf offered to receive specialized systems relinquished by other factions, naming attack drones, cruise missiles and anti-armor missiles and arguing that some lacked specialists inside state agencies.[5][12] Whatever the political intent behind the offer, it highlights a practical reality. A sophisticated weapon is a system of people, training, maintenance, communications and doctrine. Transferring the hardware does not automatically transfer the capability.

Why "containment" is more than a word

The vocabulary used by senior Shiite political actors now reflects this problem. On 2 September, Nouri al-Maliki argued that the term "disarmament" carried an adverse psychological and practical effect and preferred "organizing" and "containing" weapons. He also said discussions needed to distinguish among light, medium and heavy weapons.[13] This is a meaningful shift. It creates room for a settlement in which the state regulates categories, custody and use without demanding the immediate organizational extinction of the armed actor.

The government's own public language is compatible with such gradualism. Maan said on 18 August that the state was not in conflict with any faction, did not approach the file through confrontation or exclusion, and viewed 30 September not as a theatrical one-day deadline but as part of an institutional and legal process based on dialogue and understanding.[10] The National Security Council, by contrast, has continued to state the end goal in uncompromising terms: sovereignty, weapons under state authority and accountability for those who disturb security.[14] The gap between those two levels - maximal sovereign objective and negotiated implementation - is where the likely settlement will be made.

What "Honoring the Weapon" buys each side

For the refusing faction, it protects continuity. The weapon is not handed over as evidence of political defeat; it is acknowledged as having emerged from the anti-ISIS and "resistance" experience and is placed in a framework the faction can present to its constituency as legitimate. For Baghdad, the same formula lowers the immediate cost of enforcement, brings more weapons into inventories and rules, and can reduce the space for unauthorized action. For the Coordination Framework, it avoids forcing a zero-sum choice between the state-building language it now endorses and the PMF constituency it continues to describe as a source of national pride and a pillar of Iraqi security.[15]

That bargain can be useful. It can also be deceptive if outsiders mistake the formal location of the weapon for the disappearance of the factional command behind it.

3. Five Tests for the Day After an Agreement

The most useful Western response is not to decide in advance that any Iraqi compromise is “fake disarmament.” Nor should a government announcement that weapons have entered the state be accepted at face value. The better approach is to test whether coercive authority has actually moved. ACSR proposes five questions that can be answered over time through appointments, orders, disciplinary cases, budget and personnel decisions, and the observable behavior of the formations.

1. **Command.** Can the commander-in-chief issue an order through the PMF chain and expect compliance when the order conflicts with the faction leadership’s preference? The difficult cases are prohibitions: do not launch, do not deploy, do not retaliate.
2. **Custody.** Who controls access to significant weapons after they are inventoried? Registration is useful, but effective custody requires the state to authorize movement, maintenance and release for operations.
3. **Personnel and appointments.** Can the state move, promote, discipline or remove commanders on military grounds without bargaining with the factional organization? A brigade that cannot be commanded independently of its parent network is only partially integrated.
4. **Enforcement.** What happens after an unauthorized act? The strongest evidence of state control will not be a press conference announcing compliance; it will be a case in which Baghdad prevents an operation or imposes a penalty that the faction cannot ignore.
5. **Strategic decision-making.** Do decisions involving escalation, cross-border activity or strategic systems run exclusively through Iraqi institutions? External political relationships are not, by themselves, proof of foreign command. The test is whether any non-state relationship can override an Iraqi order.

What to watch after 30 September

Three developments would materially raise ACSR’s confidence that state control is becoming substantive. First, refusing factions would accept personnel and weapons procedures comparable in depth to the Samarra model rather than simply announce political support for “state control.” Second, the government would demonstrate that significant weapons are subject to a custody regime that is independent of the faction’s internal decision. Third, an actual dispute between state and factional preference would be resolved in favor of the official chain without a negotiated exception.

Conversely, three developments would indicate reclassification without much transfer of power: weapons are declared “with the PMF” but remain in faction-associated brigades; the faction keeps a separate military or security decision structure while changing public labels; or Baghdad repeatedly needs political mediation to enforce orders that should be routine within a military hierarchy.

Implications for Washington and European missions

The policy risk is a category error. A Western cable can accurately report that a weapon has been registered with an Iraqi state institution and still reach the wrong conclusion about who controls it. The PMF’s legal status makes that especially easy. A declaration of compliance should therefore be followed by a second question: what changed in the chain of command?

The opposite mistake would be to dismiss partial containment because it falls short of textbook disarmament. Iraq is not conducting a post-conflict DDR program against defeated organizations. It is bargaining with armed networks that are embedded in the political order and, in some cases, in the state security architecture itself. Better inventories, tighter custody, clearer authorization and credible discipline would be meaningful gains even if organizational dissolution is postponed.

ACSR BOTTOM LINE

Do not count a weapon as controlled because it has acquired a state address. Count it as controlled when the state can deny its use and make that denial stick.

Conclusion: The Weapon Can Move Without the Power Moving

Iraq has already demonstrated one route to weapons control: voluntary separation followed by inventories, restructuring and integration. The harder question concerns the factions that reject that route. Their public positions suggest that they are prepared to defend not only possession of weapons but the political meaning attached to them.

The emerging Iraqi answer may therefore be neither classic disarmament nor simple continuation of the status quo. It may be a negotiated reclassification: preserve the PMF, preserve the historical dignity of the weapon, move more of the arsenal into formal state categories, and seek limits on autonomous use without first destroying the organizations that carry the resistance identity.

That is the logic of “Honoring the Weapon.” It is an Iraqi political solution to an Iraqi balance of power. It can lower the risk of internal confrontation and incrementally strengthen state visibility. But its success should not be measured by the number of weapons that acquire official paperwork.

The sovereign threshold is more demanding. The Iraqi state must become the only actor whose decision on the use of force is binding. If a Nujaba weapon moves to Brigade 12 while the effective decision remains with Nujaba, the state has gained legal custody but not necessarily exclusive command. If Baghdad can order that same brigade not to act - and the order is obeyed because it is a state order rather than the product of another political bargain - then the meaning of “weapons under state control” has genuinely changed.

For outside governments, this distinction should shape reporting after 30 September. The relevant question is not whether Baghdad can announce that the weapon is inside the state. It is whether the faction can still decide, on its own, when that weapon leaves the warehouse.

FINAL JUDGMENT

The most plausible near-term Iraqi outcome is negotiated containment with uneven degrees of real command. “Honoring the Weapon” may be politically necessary to reach that settlement. It should not, however, be confused with a completed state monopoly on force.

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