



## **Willful ignorance hurts Christian militia in Iraq**

**Dr Christina Lin**

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### **Abstract**

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The prevailing American narrative is that the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq are an arm of Tehran, but that misses the bigger picture. The PMF is a tapestry of Iraq's multi-ethnic and multi-religious population that are mostly Shiite Muslim groups, but also includes Sunni Muslims, Christians and Yazidis, and were the major forces that defeated ISIS in Iraq. However, with the current U.S. military escalation against PMF that includes Christian militia, this would likely empower ISIS once more and expel the remaining Christians from Iraq.

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### **About the Author of this Issue**

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## Analysis

On December 27, a rocket attack on a base in Kirkuk, Iraq, killed a US civilian contractor and wounded four service members and two Iraqi personnel<sup>1</sup>. It was not clear who carried out the attack, but a source told *Military Times* “We think the attack was carried out by ... Popular Mobilization Forces.”<sup>2</sup>

The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), also known as the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), is an Iraqi state-sponsored umbrella organization composed of some 40 militias that are mostly Shiite Muslim groups, but also includes Sunni Muslims, Christians and Yazidis as well. The PMF was formed in 2014 after the fall of Mosul to Islamic State, and has fought nearly every major battle against ISIS.

As a reprisal for the rocket attacks, Washington, without coordinating with the Iraqi government, retaliated two days later by launching air strikes against positions of Iran-backed Kataeb Hezbollah – one of the militias in the PMF.<sup>3</sup> The air strikes killed 25 people and wounded 51 others, prompting thousands of Iraqi protesters to take to the streets and break into the US embassy compound in Baghdad.

Despite US media referring to the PMF as Iranian Shiite militia or Kataeb Hezbollah’s close ties with Iran, many Iraqis see them as an Iraqi force, and are outraged by the attack from an outside power and the violation of Iraqi sovereignty. Maria Fantappie, the senior adviser on Iraq for the International Crisis Group, said: “We are talking about a foreign force attacking an Iraqi force.”<sup>4</sup>

According to Elijah Magnier, chief international and war correspondent for Jordan’s Al Ra’i, US air strikes only killed nine members of Brigades 45 and 46 of Kataeb Hezbollah, and the others killed were part of the Iraqi Army and the Iraqi federal police.<sup>5</sup>

The leader of the Babylon Brigade, a Christian militia within the PMF, tweeted a strong condemnation against US air strikes: “Mr Trump, we are standing here. We did not come from Iran. We are Iraqis and the sons and brothers of the martyrs who were killed. This is the widespread rage of Iraqis.”<sup>6</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Phil Helsel, “U.S. contractor killed, service members wounded in rocket attack on Iraq base”, *NBC News*, December 27, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/u-s-contractor-killed-service-members-wounded-rocket-attack-iraq-n1108096>

<sup>2</sup> Shawn Snow, “Senator threatens Iran following Kirkuk attack that spilled American blood”, *Military Times*, December 28, 2019, <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2019/12/28/senator-threatens-iran-following-kirkuk-attack-that-spilled-american-blood/>

<sup>3</sup> Nabih Bulos, Tracy Wilkinson, “Protestors attack U.S. Embassy in Baghdad after airstrikes; Trump says he’ll send reinforcements”, *Los Angeles Times*, December 31, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2019-12-31/iraqi-mourners-try-to-storm-us-embassy-after-airstrikes>

<sup>4</sup> Allissa J. Rubin and Ben Hubbard, “American Airstrikes rally Iraqis against U.S.”, *New York Times*, December 30, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/30/world/middleeast/iraq-airstrikes-us-iran-militias.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://twitter.com/ejmalrai/status/1211962947330805766>

<sup>6</sup> <https://twitter.com/ChaldeanRyan/status/1212003212212998145>



A 2016 British Broadcasting Corporation article actually featured the leader Rayan al-Kildani and the Christian Babylon Brigade militia on the frontlines fighting ISIS, but most Americans remain ignorant about the existence of Christians in Iraq and Syria. Some of the militias in the PMF were built locally from volunteers who emerged from Nineveh's Christian and Shabak communities (the Shabak are an ethno-religious group, primarily Shiite, long resident in northern Iraq) and helped liberate Christian villages and towns from ISIS.

As Daniel Larison of The American Conservative observed, US President Donald Trump and his advisers have a tendency to oversimplify every regional issue and lump all things only in terms of Iran's "malign activities." He chastised that they refuse to see other countries in the region on their own terms and local actors as having their own agency and legitimate interests, and as a result this leads to misguided policies based on misperception, miscalculation, and unintended escalation of military conflicts.

Indeed, this inability of the Washington establishment to put themselves in other people's shoes, and try to understand other actors' perspectives, has been a perennial problem in the conduct of US foreign policy, especially in the Middle East. The unintended consequences have been disastrous failed states, rising terrorism and Wahhabi fanaticism, mass-scale deaths and human suffering, exodus of Iraqi and Syrian Christians, and the perpetuation of poverty and underdevelopment in the region.

As David Gardner in the Financial Times argued, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 almost emptied it of Christians, caught in the crossfire of ethno-sectarian warfare between Shiite and Sunni Muslims.<sup>7</sup> Their numbers plummeted from about 1.5 million to around 35,000.<sup>8</sup> When ISIS captured Mosul in June 2014, the city lost most of its last Christians as the jihadis marked Christian homes with the letter "N" for Nazarenes, similar to the Nazis marking Jewish homes with the yellow star.<sup>9</sup>

In Syria, Christians faced similar persecution from US-backed jihadis.<sup>10</sup> The perception of American cynicism toward their plight was further reinforced in 2014, when Syrian Christian leaders met and pleaded with US officials to stop arming al-Qaeda-linked rebels, and the late senator John McCain responded by yelling and storming out of the room, while Senator Lindsay Graham tried to apologize on his behalf.<sup>11</sup>

As former Singaporean diplomat Kishore Mahbubani noted in his book *Has the West Lost It?*, Washington seems incapable or unwilling to learn the cause and effect of its militarized foreign policy toward the Middle East.<sup>12</sup> Mahbubani argued that whether it is the Central Intelligence Agency's creation of al-Qaeda to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan, which reaped the attacks of September 11, 2001, or a senior US official confirming the Barack Obama administration was transporting ISIS fighters from Afghanistan to Syria to fight President Bashar

<sup>7</sup> "The exodus of Christians is a loss for all of Middle East", *Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/305afc40-2912-11e7-9ec8-168383da43b7>

<sup>8</sup> Christian Caryl, "Mosul's Christians say goodbye", *Foreign Policy*, June 18, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/06/18/mosul-christians-say-goodbye/>

<sup>9</sup> Christine Sisto, "A Christian Genocide Symbolized by One Letter", *National Review*, July 23, 2014, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2014/07/christian-genocide-symbolized-one-letter-christine-sisto/>; Gwen Jones, "Branded with a yellow star; the Jewish houses marked for death by the Nazis", *The Guardian*, November 4, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/nov/04/yellow-star-houses-budapest-hungarian-jews-nazis-holocaust>

<sup>10</sup> Ruth Sherlock, "Syrian Christians: 'Help us to stay—stop arming terrorists'", *Telegraph*, November 22, 2014, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11247798/Syrian-Christians-Help-us-to-stay-stop-arming-terrorists.html>

<sup>11</sup> Harut Sassounian, "Sassounian: McCain Offends Visiting Syrian Church", *Armenian Weekly*, February 26, 2014, <https://armenianweekly.com/2014/02/26/sassounian-mccain-offends-visiting-syrian-church-leaders/>; "GOP Senator Apologizes for McCain Tantrum at Syrian Christian Leader Meeting", *Judicial Watch*, February 5, 2014, <https://www.judicialwatch.org/corruption-chronicles/gop-sen-apologizes-for-mccain-tantrum-at-syrian-christian-leader-meeting/>

<sup>12</sup> Kishore Mahbubani, *Has the West Lost It?* April 5, 2018, <https://www.booktopia.com.au/has-the-west-lost-it-kishore-mahbubani/ebook/9780241312940.html>



al-Assad's government, US military entanglements continue to reap disastrous consequences that further destabilize the region, empower America's enemies, and hurt many innocent people in the process.

Shortly after the US airstrikes, Secretary Pompeo called and consulted with Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Saudi Arabia's Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, and United Arab Emirates Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.<sup>13</sup> A few days later the US assassinated Iran's General Qassem Suleimani in Baghdad.<sup>14</sup> Suleimani was once an ally who fought alongside the US against the Taliban in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks by the Saudi hijackers, and also led the campaign against ISIS in Syria and Iraq.<sup>15</sup> Now, with US military escalation against the very same PMF that finally suppressed ISIS by the end of 2017, Iraq is at risk of becoming a theater of war between Washington and Tehran that will likely empower ISIS once more. And, it seems the last remnant of Iraqi Christians and the Christian militia may be making its final exodus from the Middle East – ironically spurred by their co-religionists in Washington, DC.<sup>16</sup>

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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<sup>13</sup> Fenus Upadhyaya, "Pompeo calls Israel, Saudi Arabia, and UAE after U.S. strike on Hezbollah", *The Epoch Times*, December 31, 2019, [https://www.theepochtimes.com/pompeo-calls-israel-saudi-arabia-and-uae-after-us-strike-on-hezbollah\\_3189843.html](https://www.theepochtimes.com/pompeo-calls-israel-saudi-arabia-and-uae-after-us-strike-on-hezbollah_3189843.html); "Pompeo discusses U.S. attacks on Iranian militias with world leaders", *Jerusalem Post*, December 31, 2019, <https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Pompeo-discusses-US-attacks-on-Iranian-militias-with-world-leaders-612626>

<sup>14</sup> Robin Wright, "The killing of Qassem Suleimani is tantamount to an act of war", *The New Yorker*, January 3, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-us-assassinated-suleimani-the-chief-exporter-of-irans-revolution-but-at-what-price>

<sup>15</sup> Aaron Blake, "When the United States and Qasem Soleimani worked together", *The Washington Post*, January 3, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/01/03/when-united-states-qasem-soleimani-worked-together/>; Nick Patton Walsh, "It's important to remember the role Soleimani played in the fight against ISIS", *CNN*, January 3, 2020, [https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/baghdad-airport-strike-live-intl-hnk/h\\_02d5a17ad0eebe80128bda0388b8be36](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/baghdad-airport-strike-live-intl-hnk/h_02d5a17ad0eebe80128bda0388b8be36); Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "Soleimani, face of fight against ISIS, Taliban", *Economic Times*, January 4, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/soleimani-face-of-fight-against-isis-taliban/articleshow/73093126.cms>; Jaqueline Feldscher, "How the Soleimani strike could kneecap the fight against ISSI", *Politico*, January 3, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/01/03/soleimani-isis-iran-iraq-093534>; Prabhaskar K Dutta, "General Soleimani had helped U.S. upstage Taliban in Afghanistan post-9/11", *India Today*, January 3, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/general-soleimani-had-helped-us-upstage-taliban-in-afghanistan-post-9-11-1633600-2020-01-03>

<sup>16</sup> "Trump Warns Iran as Risk of Wider Armed Conflict Grows", *New York Times*, December 31, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/31/us/politics/trump-iran-baghdad-embassy.html>; Kevin Clarke, "The U.S. killing of Soleimani could have devastating consequences for Iraq's Christians", *American Magazine*, January 3, 2020, <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2020/01/03/us-killing-soleimani-could-have-devastating-consequences-iraqs>