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**DETECTING NON-STATE ACTORS:  
APPROACHES TO DETER THE POPULAR  
MOBILIZATION FORCES (PMF) IN IRAQ**

Aldowsary, Nasser M.

Monterey, CA; Naval Postgraduate School

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**NAVAL  
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**THESIS**

**DETECTING NON-STATE ACTORS: APPROACHES  
TO DETER THE POPULAR MOBILIZATION  
FORCES (PMF) IN IRAQ**

by

Nasser M. Aldowsary

September 2022

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<b>REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE</b>			<i>Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188</i>
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instruction, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188) Washington, DC, 20503.			
<b>1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave blank)</b>	<b>2. REPORT DATE</b> September 2022	<b>3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED</b> Master's thesis	
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b> DETERRING NON-STATE ACTORS: APPROACHES TO DETER THE POPULAR MOBILIZATION FORCES (PMF) IN IRAQ			<b>5. FUNDING NUMBERS</b>
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b> Nasser M. Aldowsary			
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, CA 93943-5000			<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b>
<b>9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> N/A			<b>10. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER</b>
<b>11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b> The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.			
<b>12a. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Approved for public release. Distribution is unlimited.			<b>12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE</b> A
<b>13. ABSTRACT (maximum 200 words)</b>  Since its creation in 2014, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) has played a critical role in Iraq's political, security, and social environments. Working concurrently with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) promotes its role as a regional actor within the Iranian Threat Network (ITN). Moreover, the PMF's asymmetric activities create a deterrence trap in which responding or binding to self-restraint results in undesired outcomes. This research intends to describe the deterrence trap against the PMF and seeks approaches to stable deterrence. The research argues that creating change in the deterrence social structure can result in defusing the deterrence trap. The research finds that dismantling the conflict's complexity, building shared deterrence knowledge, and minimizing the PMF's ability to influence Iraq's security, political and social environment can diminish its advantages. It suggests three policy options for deterring the PMF. The first option is through understanding the PMF's internal factionalism. Exploiting the PMF's sub-militias' competing interests may enhance the fragmentation of the PMF. Secondly, strengthening the Iraqi security forces outside of the PMF is necessary to balance against militia forces. Finally, continuing to endorse deterrence by denial and punishment vis-à-vis enforcing legal and financial accountability on the PMF's activities.			
<b>14. SUBJECT TERMS</b> deterrence, non-state actors, Popular Mobilization Forces, PMF, asymmetric warfare, proxy warfare, Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps IRGC, Iranian Threat Network, ITN			<b>15. NUMBER OF PAGES</b> 75
			<b>16. PRICE CODE</b>
<b>17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT</b> Unclassified	<b>18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE</b> Unclassified	<b>19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT</b> Unclassified	<b>20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b> UU

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**DETECTING NON-STATE ACTORS: APPROACHES TO DETER  
THE POPULAR MOBILIZATION FORCES (PMF) IN IRAQ**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF SCIENCE IN DEFENSE ANALYSIS  
(IRREGULAR WARFARE)**

from the

**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Since its creation in 2014, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) has played a critical role in Iraq's political, security, and social environments. Working concurrently with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) promotes its role as a regional actor within the Iranian Threat Network (ITN). Moreover, the PMF's asymmetric activities create a deterrence trap in which responding or binding to self-restraint results in undesired outcomes. This research intends to describe the deterrence trap against the PMF and seeks approaches to stable deterrence. The research argues that creating change in the deterrence social structure can result in defusing the deterrence trap. The research finds that dismantling the conflict's complexity, building shared deterrence knowledge, and minimizing the PMF's ability to influence Iraq's security, political and social environment can diminish its advantages. It suggests three policy options for deterring the PMF. The first option is through understanding the PMF's internal factionalism. Exploiting the PMF's sub-militias' competing interests may enhance the fragmentation of the PMF. Secondly, strengthening the Iraqi security forces outside of the PMF is necessary to balance against militia forces. Finally, continuing to endorse deterrence by denial and punishment vis-à-vis enforcing legal and financial accountability on the PMF's activities.



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>I.</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II.</b>	<b>LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>5</b>
	<b>A. AN OVERVIEW OF THE DETERRENCE THEORY .....</b>	<b>5</b>
	<b>B. DETERRING NON-STATE ACTORS .....</b>	<b>9</b>
	<b>C. DETERRENCE AND PROXY WARFARE .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>III.</b>	<b>THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....</b>	<b>15</b>
	<b>A. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>15</b>
	<b>B. FROM DETERRENCE TO STRATEGIC CULTURE: COMMONALITIES BETWEEN NEOREALISM AND CONSTRUCTIVISM .....</b>	<b>16</b>
	<b>C. COMPLEX DETERRENCE AND THE DETERRENCE SOCIAL STRUCTURE FRAMEWORK.....</b>	<b>20</b>
	<b>D. DEFINING THE ANALYSIS SCOPE AND FRAMEWORK.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>IV.</b>	<b>DETERRING THE PMF USING THE ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK OF DETERRENCE SOCIAL STRUCTURE .....</b>	<b>29</b>
	<b>A. CURRENT STATE OF DETERRENCE AGAINST THE PMF .....</b>	<b>29</b>
	<b>1. Phase I: The role of the PMF in the campaign against     ISIS (2014-2017) .....</b>	<b>29</b>
	<b>2. Phase II: The PMF’s escalations (2018-2020) .....</b>	<b>30</b>
	<b>3. Phase III: De-escalation and maintaining stable     deterrence (2021-present).....</b>	<b>33</b>
	<b>B. DETERRENCE SOCIAL STRUCTURE.....</b>	<b>35</b>
	<b>1. The PMF structure and components.....</b>	<b>35</b>
	<b>2. The PMF as an autonomous organization.....</b>	<b>36</b>
	<b>3. The PMF’s affiliation with the IRGC, the ITN, and Iran.....</b>	<b>37</b>
	<b>4. The attribution dilemma .....</b>	<b>38</b>
	<b>5. The PMF’s rationality and decision making .....</b>	<b>39</b>
	<b>6. The PMF’s performative power .....</b>	<b>40</b>
	<b>C. DEFUSING THE DETERRENCE TRAP.....</b>	<b>40</b>
	<b>D. CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>V.</b>	<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>43</b>
	<b>LIST OF REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>51</b>

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ICG	Iraq Central Government
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISF	Iraqi security forces
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
ITN	Iran's threat network
KRG	Kurdish Regional Government
NGO	non-governmental organization
NSA	non-state actor
PMC	Popular Mobilization Committee
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
RDT	rational deterrence theory
VEO	violent extremist organization
WMD	Weapons of mass destruction

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the end of the campaign against ISIS, Iraq has seen a rise in the PMF's asymmetric activities against the U.S. forces, its partners, and allies. Given the Iranian involvement and long-lasting affiliation with the Shi'a militias, the PMF operates in coordination with the IRGC to achieve Iran's objectives in Iraq. Moreover, the increase in the PMF's capabilities and ability to extend its operations outside Iraq indicates an emerging regional threat. Although the military response to the PMF's attacks has been severe and critically damaging to the organization, it falls short of maintaining deterrence and preventing future attacks. As a result, the PMF has utilized its weaker position in the conflict to attain political gains and bolster its national resistance narrative.

This research seeks alternative approaches to deterring the PMF as a non-state actor. It suggests that conventional deterrence requires modifications to address the asymmetry of non-state actors. The research intends to find approaches to deterrence through the social deterrence structure theory to dismantle the deterrence trap in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> The deterrence trap refers to the situation in which choices of a violent response to a weaker adversary's provocations or adhering to self-restraint fails to retain stable deterrence. A wide-scale military action creates an opportunity for Iran to engage in a war of attrition through its proxies. On the other hand, not responding to the PMF's escalations reduces the deterrence credibility and encourages its persistence.

The research intends to provide insight into Iran's proxy warfare as an element of its deterrence strategy. Further study of other Iranian proxies is required to counter the ITN activities from affecting regional security and the interests of the United States, its allies, and partners.

The research argues that creating change in the deterrence social structure can defuse the deterrence trap and achieve stable deterrence. The research finds that preemptive military actions and defensive measures enhance deterrence credibility and result in de-

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<sup>1</sup> Emanuel Adler, "Complex Deterrence in the Asymmetric-Warfare Era," *Complex deterrence: strategy in the global age*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 2009. 85–108.

escalation. However, countering asymmetric threats requires building capable Iraqi security forces (ISF) to balance the deterrence structure. Further, the PMF's interference with Iraq's political process requires enforcing legal and financial accountability to reduce its influence over the political and security environments. Although the research cannot offer a comprehensive strategy, it suggests policy recommendations to enhance the deterrence strategy against the PMF moving forward:

- ***Understanding the PMF's internal factionalism.*** The PMF is an umbrella organization consisting of factions with different affiliations and loyalties. The pro-Iranian factions and the Iraqi nationalists cooperate on common objectives that serve their mutual interests. However, these factions have contradicting interests that affect the organization's leadership and decision making. Limiting the deterrence consequences to particular factions conducting illegal activities deepens the fragmentation and weakens the Iranian influence over the PMF's leadership. Shaping a complex deterrence strategy that considers the interactions with each faction individually and carries out distinctive retaliation responses against aggressors while building relations based on assurance and cooperation with other factions enhances the current approach to deterrence.
- ***Enabling the Iraqi security forces (ISF).*** Building a capable ISF is essential to maintaining Iraq's security and stability against emerging threats. Although the ISF has developed significantly in law enforcement capabilities, it remains incapable of balancing against the PMF as an organized and well-equipped force. Given the heavy weaponry, artillery, and armored vehicles under its control, the PMF continues to retain its critical role in Iraq's security to complement the ISF's limitations against emerging threats. Providing the ISF with the required training and capabilities to balance against the PMF reduces the deterrence complexity by diminishing the PMF's advantage of asymmetry.

- ***The attribution and legal consequences of the PMF's activities.*** The PMF's illegal activities against multinational forces in Iraq aim to increase the pressure on the Iraqi government to accelerate their withdrawal. It also intends to strengthen its resistance narrative to the Iraqi population. The instrumental effect of gray zone activities enables the PMF to achieve its objective and avoid attribution and consequences. The research suggests three pathways to limit the PMF's advantage of these activities.
  - *Holding individual PMF members accountable.* Besides conducting attacks against foreign forces in Iraq, PMF members indulge in criminal activities and human rights violations that require punitive legal measures. Enabling the Iraqi judicial system to impose legal implications on members participating in illegal activities and supporting the ISF's law enforcement capabilities are necessary to limit illegal activities on an individual scale.
  - *The ICG's legal responsibility towards the PMF's actions.* Since the PMF was incorporated under the Iraqi armed forces, the ICG retains legal responsibility and obligation under international law towards the PMF's attacks. Measures to formalize the organization to be entirely under the control of the ICG are essential to reduce its illegal activities and involvement in the Iraqi political process. Enforcing measures to limit the financial allocations of factions involved in illegal activities is necessary to reduce its operative sustainability and recruitment.
  - *Attributing the PMF's attacks to Iran and the ITN as a proxy agent.* Although the primary purpose of proxy warfare is to avoid attribution and accountability, exposing the IRGC ties to the pro-Iranian faction in the PMF induces more efforts of



the international community to limit Iran's destabilizing activities in Iraq. Besides Iran's nuclear and long-range missile programs, Iran's proxy warfare requires its inclusion in any negotiation or security dialogues with the Iranian government to enhance regional security and stability.

Seeking approaches to deter the PMF through defusing the deterrence trap may provide insight for other studies on deterring non-state actors. Further research is required to identify specific structural conditions that inform building a deterrence strategy in Iraq.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since its creation in 2014, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) have played a vital role in Iraq’s political, security, and social environments. The PMF played a critical role in supporting the international coalition against ISIS and succeeded in the Battle of Mosul (2016-2017). However, after the campaign against ISIS ended in 2019, the PMF sought its own national and regional interests.<sup>1</sup>

The PMF was created as an umbrella organization with the majority of Shi’a militias in its formation to reduce Iraq’s instability aiming to contain armed militias under the Iraqi Central Government (ICG).<sup>2</sup> The Shi’a armed groups—whether affiliated with the Iraqi or Iranian religious establishment—worked concurrently with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) to achieve the Iranian objectives in Iraq.<sup>3</sup> Thus, creating a unified entity promotes the PMF’s dominant role within the Iranian Threat Network (ITN).

The expansion of the PMF’s area of operation, its factions’ infiltration into the Syrian conflict, and its activities alongside Iraq’s borders indicate its transformation to become a regional actor.<sup>4</sup> Expanding the PMF’s influence beyond the Iraqi territories is an emerging threat to regional security and the United States and its partners’ security interests.<sup>5</sup>

The PMF’s continuous attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq create a deterrence trap. The PMF utilized its asymmetric activities to secure Iran’s security objectives and long-term

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<sup>1</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). *Iran’s Networks of Influence in the Middle East*. London: International Institute for Strategic Studies. 2019. 122–157

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 121–123.

<sup>3</sup> Afshon Ostovar. “In Defense of the Family of the Prophet.” *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran’s Revolutionary Guards*. 2016. 204–229

<sup>4</sup> Harith Hasan, and Kheder Khaddour. The transformation of the Iraqi-Syrian border: from a national to a regional frontier. 2020. [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Hasan\\_Khaddour\\_Iraq-Syria\\_Border1.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Hasan_Khaddour_Iraq-Syria_Border1.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). *Iran’s Networks of Influence in the Middle East*. London: International Institute for Strategic Studies. 2019. 133–137.

interests in Iraq.<sup>6</sup> The PMF's gray zone activities create a deterrence trap in which responding or binding to self-restraint results in undesired outcomes. Responding with a wide scale military action against the PMF creates an opportunity for Iran to engage in a war of attrition through its proxies. On the other hand, not responding to the PMF's provocations reduces the deterrence credibility and encourages its continuation. The situation creates a deterrence trap in which "using force against asymmetrically weaker adversaries or exhibiting self-restraint will achieve the same result" and "turns deterrence into a self-defeating prophecy."<sup>7</sup> Since the PMF seeks long-term dominance and influence over Iraq's social fabric and political process, it maneuvers in concert with the IRGC's transnational operations and Iran's deterrence strategy.<sup>8</sup>

This research intends to describe the deterrence trap against the PMF in Iraq. It seeks possible approaches to overcome the deterrence trap and achieve stable deterrence. The research argues that conventional deterrence concepts are not effective against non-state actors. Deterrence against non-state actors requires building a comprehensive strategy based on the deterrence social structure.<sup>9</sup> Creating change to adjust the three tiers of a deterrence structure can result in defusing the deterrence trap, thus achieving stable deterrence.<sup>10</sup> The argument suggests that deterrence in asymmetric warfare cannot only be achieved by conventional strategies of deterrence by denial or by punishment, rather inducing change to the conflict's deterrence structure is necessary for deterrence to work.

The following chapter provides an overview of deterrence theory. It discusses the development of conventional deterrence during the Cold War era. These concepts are reflected in the strategy formation against non-state actors. However, the practices and

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<sup>6</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*. London: International Institute for Strategic Studies. 2019. 121–122.

<sup>7</sup> Emanuel Adler, "Complex Deterrence in the Asymmetric-Warfare Era," *Complex deterrence: strategy in the global age*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 2009. 85.

<sup>8</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*. London: International Institute for Strategic Studies. 2019. 147–150.

<sup>9</sup> Adler, "Complex Deterrence in the Asymmetric-Warfare Era," 85–108

<sup>10</sup> Emanuel Adler, "Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't: Performative Power and the Strategy of Conventional and Nuclear Defusing," *Security Studies* 19, no. 2 (May 21, 2010): 199–229, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636411003796002>.

presumptions of conventional deterrence created a deep glitch in deterring non-state actors (NSA). The chapter explains the conflict within its strategic context, whereas rationality and interests differ between a state and a non-state actor and reflect on the deterrence structure.

Moreover, the chapter reviews the literature on proxy warfare and deterrence. The effect of a sponsored NSA reflects on its calculations and decision making, in this case, the PMF and IRGC, which impacts the dynamics and structure of deterrence. Given that the PMF operates as an instrument within Iran's regional strategy, its role in concert with Iran's Threat Network (ITN) reveals Iran's deterrence strategy, which requires consideration in the strategy formation against the PMF.<sup>11</sup>

The third chapter explains the deterrence social structure theory used in this research to analyze and seek stable deterrence against the PMF. The chapter discusses Emanuel Adler's defusing theory as an approach to dismantling the complexity of deterrence against non-state actors.<sup>12</sup> The theory analyzes deterrence in asymmetric warfare by defining the three tiers of the deterrence social structure. The first tier emphasizes building shared knowledge as the foundation of stable deterrence. The shared knowledge tier refers to the shared understanding of security, credibility, assurance, and the consequences of the deterrence threat between actors. The second tier focuses on the differentiation of actors in means of their characteristics. The more symmetric the actors are, the higher the chances of achieving stable deterrence. The third tier focuses on actors' performative power, referring to their ability to induce change in the deterrence structure that serves their interests.

The framework emphasizes the PMF's performative power affecting Iraq's deterrence structure. The culture and strategic context in which deterrence has developed influences the logic and calculations of non-state actors as social organizations, compared to state actors that employ security and material interests as gains and objectives. The

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<sup>11</sup> Ostovar, Afshon. "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War." *Security Studies*. 28 (1) (2019): 159–188.

<sup>12</sup> Adler, "Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't: Performative Power and the Strategy of Conventional and Nuclear Defusing," 199–229.

chapter discusses the deterrence trap created between a state and an NSA caused by the deviation in rationality and incentives. Furthermore, it explains Adler's approach to defusing the deterrence trap and the means to reach stable deterrence.

The fourth chapter analyzes deterrence against the PMF under the framework of deterrence social structure.<sup>13</sup> The chapter discusses the deterrence dilemma and the factors causing the complexity of deterrence according to three tiers of the deterrence social structure. Furthermore, the chapter provides insight into the PMF's calculations and decision making regarding its complex network of affiliations. These affiliations influence the incentives of the PMF to conduct its rogue activities to sustain the deterrence trap. The chapter concludes with the applications of Adler's defusing approach to dismantle the deterrence trap and achieve stable deterrence.

The concluding chapter provides an overview of the research findings. Although the research cannot provide a comprehensive deterrence strategy, it provides policy recommendations to support deterrence against the PMF in Iraq. The discussed options intend to reduce the complexity and asymmetry of the conflict against the PMF.

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<sup>13</sup> Adler, "Complex Deterrence in the Asymmetric-Warfare Era," 90–92.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Deterring the PMF as non-state actor demands looking into three bodies of knowledge. The first is the literature on the development of the deterrence theory. Since the early development of nuclear deterrence, the emerging concepts have provided a foundation for deterring non-state actors. Second, the literature on deterring non-state actors provides a critical perspective on conventional deterrence and narrows the gap between a state as a legitimate actor in the international system and a non-state actor as a social organization. The institutional and organizational differences between actors influence the decision making processes and the conceptualization of interests, hence the perception of a deterrence threat varies. Finally, an actor operating as a proxy agent affects its perception of a deterrent threat. The contradicting interests of a non-state actor in terms of its survivability and the sponsoring state's objectives affect its decision making and behavior.

### A. AN OVERVIEW OF THE DETERRENCE THEORY

The concept of deterrence emerged in the wake of World War II, as the great powers strived to avoid a conflict in the nuclear age. The need for nuclear weapons became vital to international stability as the global competition over influence intensified during the Cold War. Nuclear weapons have a devastating effect when used against an adversary. Hence their strength is derived from their psychological impact; to strike the fear in the opponent from a second strike massive retaliation.<sup>14</sup>

The essence of deterrence lies in its psychological effect on producing the fear of initiating an attack that may provoke a massive retaliation. The threat of a second strike increases the cost and risks on the opponent and renders the choice irrational. Jeffrey Knopf defines deterrence as “a form of preventive influence that rests primarily on negative

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<sup>14</sup> Patrick M. Morgan. “Saving Face for the Sake of Deterrence.” *Psychology and deterrence*. Baltimore (Ma.): The John Hopkins University Press, 1989. 125–152

incentives.”<sup>15</sup> Strategic deterrence is the ability to influence an opponent’s decision to abandon using force as a rational choice. Patrick Morgan adopts a narrower definition of deterrence limited to military action. He defines deterrence as “the threat of military retaliation to forestall a military attack.”<sup>16</sup>

Thomas Schelling expands the discussion on the dynamics of deterrence. He defines the term *deter* as “to turn aside and discourage through fear.”<sup>17</sup> Hence deterrence can be achieved through brutal force, diplomacy, or other means of influence. Schelling explains that the difference between coercion and deterrence is that the first demands the use of brutal force while the second is maintained through the threat of force.<sup>18</sup> He also distinguishes between deterrence and compellence. Deterrence aims to prevent an adversary from taking action, while compellence requires taking action against his will. The difference is in the timing of the action taken. In contrast, a deterrent threat is initiated when an adversary crosses the line; the threat of compellence is initiated at a specific time if an adversary fails to comply. Schelling further explains the options of deterrence: *deterrence by punishment*, which implies a credible threat of the use of force, and *deterrence by denial*, which aims to limit the choices of an adversary as a form of passive deterrence.<sup>19</sup>

In either situation, Schelling emphasizes the importance of the credibility of a threat for deterrence to succeed. The ability to retaliate requires the availability of a brutal force capable of fulfilling the threat. Measures such as force preparation and demonstration of power add to the credibility of affirmative actions and confirm the commitment to fulfill an initiated threat, which facilitates the success of a deterrent strategy.

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<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey W. Knopf, “Three Items in One,” *Complex Deterrence: Strategy in the Global Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. 37

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 35. Referring to Morgan, Patrick M. *Deterrence: a conceptual analysis*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1983. 29

<sup>17</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, “The Art of Commitment,” *Arms and influence*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press. 2009. 71

<sup>18</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, “The Diplomacy of Violence,” *Arms and influence*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press. 2009. 2–5

<sup>19</sup> Schelling, “The Art of Commitment,” 69–70

The effectiveness and success of a deterrent strategy require the adversary's cooperation.<sup>20</sup> Schelling emphasizes the importance of communicating an adversary's threat and rationality to evaluate costs and risks.<sup>21</sup> As the deterrence strategy succeeds in achieving stability, it is essential to value the other side of the deterrent threat, which is assurance. Building a reputation of commitment to both sides of the threat sustains stability and maintains credibility.<sup>22</sup> Janice Stein suggests that assurance strategies can persuade an adversary of the possible gains obtained through compliance. The strategy of deterrence and assurance complement each other to sustain stability in relations.<sup>23</sup>

Thomas Schelling emphasizes the concept of mutual deterrence, whereas each state maintains its capacity to retaliate against a nuclear strike.<sup>24</sup> Mutual deterrence results in a security dilemma, whereas opponents acquire a defensive posture while maintaining the capability and readiness to strike. The security dilemma produces two outcomes. The first outcome results in each state aiming to retain its nuclear ability as a strategy of deterrence, causing its adversaries to avoid reaching the threshold of a major war outbreak, which leads to stability through a balance of power. Defensive realists, such as Kenneth Waltz, emphasize the importance of maintaining the capability to retaliate as a security measure to produce stability in an anarchic international order.<sup>25</sup> The second outcome stimulates states to maintain a nuclear deterrent strategy that would ensure the ability to initiate a surprise attack. The possibility of a first strike by the opponent spurred a nuclear arms race to ensure security and the prevention of a first strike.

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<sup>20</sup> Schelling, "The Art of Commitment," 73.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, "The Manipulation of Risk," *Arms and influence*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press. 2009. 93

<sup>22</sup> Schelling, "The Art of Commitment," 72–75

<sup>23</sup> Janice Gross Stein. "Reassurance in international conflict management." *Political Science Quarterly*. -. 1063 (1991): 433

<sup>24</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, "The Dynamics of Mutual Alarm," *Arms and Influence*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2008. 244–248

<sup>25</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz "The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, no. 4 (1988): 615–628.



The concept of security dilemma emerged as a result of mutual deterrent strategies between nuclear powers.<sup>26</sup> Offensive realists, such as John Mearsheimer, suggest that the dynamics of the security dilemma imply that both states attempt to increase their armament, which produces a spiral effect that threatens to provoke a major conflict and causes an imbalance of power in the international system.<sup>27</sup>

The security dilemma prompts the international system to resort to diplomacy and to maintain channels of communication to prevent reaching the deterrence threat threshold. The concept of *flexible response* developed therefore to expand the choices in the range of military options spectrum between no response and massive war.<sup>28</sup>

The significant development in deterrence strategies unfolded in four waves. The first three waves of deterrence proposed by Robert Jervis describes the conceptual framework development to emulate a wider variety of adversaries and broaden the scope to contend with the expanding sources of threat and innovative warfare methods beneath the nuclear threshold.<sup>29</sup> The first wave came as early as the first use of the atomic weapon resulting in an immediate threat of a nuclear attack. The second wave commenced with the development of the classical concepts of nuclear deterrence, which later Influenced international relations during the Cold War in the 1950–1960s. The development of game theory provided guidance for nuclear strategies. The third wave of deterrence induced different dynamics and expanded the theory beyond the use of nuclear weapons to include the use of conventional military forces in a broader approach. Deterrence strategies shifted focus from deterring an imminent threat to maintaining the *status quo* and securing national interests in the international system during the 1970–1980s.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Shiping. Tang, “The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis.” *Security Studies*. 18, no. 3 (2009): 587–623.

<sup>27</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014. 35–36

<sup>28</sup> Austin G. Long, *Deterrence: From Cold War to Long War : Lessons from Six Decades of RAND Research*. Santa Monica, Calif: RAND, 2008. 2 and Paul K. Davis, *Deterrence & Influence in Counterterrorism: A Component in the War on Al Qaeda*. 2002. 63–64

<sup>29</sup> Robert Jervis, “Deterrence Theory Revisited,” ed. Alexander George and Richard Smoke, *World Politics* 31, no. 2 (1979): 289–324 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009945>.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Jervis. “Deterrence Theory Revisited.” *World Politics* 31, no. 2 (1979): 289–324.

The inevitable emergence of the fourth wave of deterrence proposed by Jeffery Knopf came as a response to the changes in the threat environment. The wave emerged in the post-Cold War era to address unconventional threats such as using weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) by rogue states and terrorist organizations in an asymmetric warfare environment.<sup>31</sup> The framework aims to reach a comprehensive methodology to guide deterrence strategies that correspond to innovations in the conflict spectrum. The fourth wave reexamines the concept of deterrence against contemporary threats of rogue states and terrorist organizations while avoiding the dynamics of mutual deterrence.<sup>32</sup>

While the core concepts of deterrence remain the same, the fourth wave of deterrence adopts a wider approach to current strategic challenges. Jeffery Knopf emphasizes the inclusion of military and non-military means to deter non-state actors. The fourth wave of deterrence is distinguished by the implications of deterrence by punishment or denial through indirect means.<sup>33</sup>

## **B. DETERRING NON-STATE ACTORS**

The different relations between actors affect the outcomes of a deterrence strategy. T.V. Paul illustrates a typology of actors' relationships per deterrence approaches. The first type of relationship emphasizes that great powers would maintain their nuclear posture as a hedge to prevent a major conflict. Besides adopting new technologies, the expansion of military capabilities and the development of missile defensive and offensive measures are maintained beneath the nuclear deterrence threshold. Secondly, the deterrence of new nuclear states requires political dialogue and diplomacy to resolve the underlying causes of a potential conflict. Thirdly, the relation of deterrence between nuclear and non-nuclear WMD states. Rogue regimes may acquire WMD to act as *great equalizers* in a preventive measure of conflict. Fourthly, deterrence between nuclear states and non-state actors. The challenge in deterring non-state actors is their use of asymmetric capabilities constraining

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<sup>31</sup> Jeffrey W. Knopf, "The Fourth Wave in Deterrence Research." *Contemporary Security Policy*. 31, no. 1 (2010): 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523261003640819>.

<sup>32</sup> Knopf, "The Fourth Wave in Deterrence Research," 1–33.

<sup>33</sup> Knopf, "The Fourth Wave in Deterrence Research," 24–27.

the threat of retaliation and diminishing their credibility. The irrationality of terrorist groups adds to the complexity and questions the efficiency of conventional deterrence strategies against asymmetric threats. Finally, the collective actors' deterrence requires mutual coordination through an international institutional approach to deter aggression.<sup>34</sup> Paul suggests that these relationships question one or more of the four elements of the deterrence theory: capability, credibility, communication, and stability.<sup>35</sup>

Alex Wilner explains the major skeptic arguments on the efficiency of a deterrence strategy against non-state actors. Firstly, scholars argue that Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) that adopt fundamental religious motives lack rational decision making. The incentives of VEOs to escalate in the conflict as a divine duty or a religious, theological obligation contradict the Rational Deterrence Theory (RDT). Second, religious extremist organizations tend to create a parallel reality of the conflict according to their theological interpretations. The resulting situation defies the efforts to reach common ground according to shared knowledge in order to establish a deterrence strategy. Third, VEOs lack clear objectives or strategies; the goal is destruction. Hence it is difficult to open a negotiation channel to communicate a deterrent threat. Fourth, the majority of VEOs lack a specific physical location or a clear territorial area. Thus they lack a value target that a deterrent strategy can be based on. Finally, the intention of VEOs to target civilian objects and populations without distinction undermines the principles on which a deterrent strategy is based.<sup>36</sup>

Elli Lieberman divides the literature on deterring violent non-state actors into skeptics and marginalists. Skeptics argue that deterrence against a weaker non-state actor renders the state's military capability ineffective in inducing the desired psychological effect of deterrence. A weaker adversary would resort to asymmetric warfare to balance a state's overwhelming capabilities. On the other hand, marginalists argue that deterrence

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<sup>34</sup> T.V. Paul, "Complex deterrence: An Introduction," *Complex deterrence: strategy in the global age*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 2009. 1–27

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>36</sup> Wilner, Alex S. *Deterring Rational Fanatics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc. 2015. 2–16

against non-state actors can be successful to an extent on a tactical level in specific conditions but not on a strategic level.<sup>37</sup>

Although many scholars find deterrence inefficient under the described conditions, Emanuel Adler argues that understanding the complexity of an asymmetric conflict can lead to establishing an effective deterrence strategy. Adler describes the *deterrence trap* as occurring when a state is obliged to self-restrain in an asymmetric conflict against a weaker party, rendering deterrence counterproductive. Responding to the provocations can work to the adversary's narrative to gain credibility and more population support due to the conflict between a state and a weaker adversary. On the other hand, not responding can lead to a loss of deterrence credibility and reputation of a state. However, Adler argues that understanding the factors governing the conflict can help to establish an effective deterrence strategy. A deeper understanding of the complexity, context, social structure, and security relations between involved actors can lead to an understanding of the "distribution of knowledge and power," and therefore, a deterrence strategy can be established. Adler suggests that common knowledge can be developed through diplomatic engagement.<sup>38</sup>

### C. DETERRENCE AND PROXY WARFARE

Deterring a non-state actor operating as a proxy agent demands the consideration of proxy war dynamics in forming a deterrence strategy. Proxy warfare is a strategy employed by a state that aims to delegate authority to a foreign entity to achieve an objective while avoiding the responsibility of action. The strategic choice seeks to maximize utility and minimize risks by avoiding attribution. Tyrone Groh defines proxy war as "directing the use of force by a politically motivated, local actor to indirectly influence political affairs in the target state." Groh explains that proxy war serves as an integral option of foreign policy to address three conditions: if a state's interests are beyond its territorial borders; if its security is affected by conditions in other states; and when a

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<sup>37</sup> Elli. Lieberman. "Introduction," *Deterring terrorism: a model for strategic deterrence*. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group. 2019. 1-7

<sup>38</sup> Emanuel Adler, "Complex Deterrence in the Asymmetric-Warfare Era," *Complex deterrence: strategy in the global age*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 2009. 85-108

state is capable of engaging international affairs. Considering Groh's proposed conditions, he suggests that engaging in proxy wars is not exclusive to powerful states.<sup>39</sup>

Andrew Mumford explains that the relationship between external actors and a benefactor plays a critical role in the dynamics of an existing conflict. He defines proxy wars as "the indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome." Mumford suggests that a chosen proxy has to satisfy the requirements of maximizing gains and minimizing the risks of a sponsoring state. He emphasizes the necessity to employ proxies to seek strategic goals while avoiding direct engagement.<sup>40</sup>

Idean Salehyan argues that states may employ various strategies and tactics to ensure their security and undermine their rivals. Proxy warfare can substitute the need to build a state's military capabilities by seeking allies to enhance security. The logic of using proxy agents is to avoid confrontation through sponsoring and funding a rebel organization or a non-state actor. Empowering a non-state actor aims to substitute the direct use of force and avoid costly military campaigns. Salehyan argues that external support for non-state actors represents a delegation of conflict in international politics. He also suggests that a principle-agent framework can be used to analyze the relationship between a sponsoring state and a non-state actor.<sup>41</sup>

Salehyan differentiates between the *delegation* of war and conflict *intervention*. A foreign government can intervene in conflict by assisting a rebel organization. An external actor aims to influence the outcomes by practicing limited control over the organization, which maintains its autonomy and pursues its aims and strategies. On the other hand, the delegation of war extends the influence of an external actor beyond the provision of support. Salehyan suggests that "external actors play an important role in shaping the insurgency and exert control over it." The delegation of war demands an "agenda control

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<sup>39</sup> Tyrone L. Groh, "Introduction," *Proxy war: the least bad option*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press. 2019

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Mumford, "What is Proxy War?" *Proxy Warfare*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013. 1–29 referring to Loveman, Chris. "Assessing the Phenomenon of Proxy Intervention." *Conflict, Security & Development*. 2, no. 3 (2002): 30.

<sup>41</sup> Salehyan, Idean. "The Delegation of War to Rebel Organizations." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. 543 (2010): 494–495.

over agents” to maintain influence over the aims and strategies to achieve the desired outcomes.<sup>42</sup>

Groh distinguishes between a *proxy war* and *donating assistance* as a means of indirect intervention. Proxy war requires evaluating the capacity of a local actor to achieve desired outcomes effectively. While donating assistance provides limited control over a local actor, proxy war demands a higher involvement and “entails a hierarchical relationship between an intervening state and its proxy.”<sup>43</sup>

Tyrone Groh supposes four categories that lead a state towards indirect conflict intervention. First, a state seeks to minimize the risk of escalation in comparison to direct intervention. Second, a state aims to maintain conflict’s sustainability through a proxy agent due to the lack of domestic support. Third, international opposition against the intervention can be avoided through proxy agents, thus minimizing risks. Finally, a state may resort to proxy warfare as a state that lacks the capacity for direct intervention.<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, Groh expands on the distinct types of indirect intervention. The first type is referred to as *in it to win it*. The situation occurs when a state’s vital security interests demand intervention and a high commitment to achieve specific outcomes. The second type is a *holding action* approach where the threat to vital security interests is low, but an intervention occurs to prevent a spillover of instability. The third is *meddling*, when a state chooses to intervene to alter a status quo to gain desirable advantages while vital interests are not affected. Finally, *feeding the chaos* intervention which occurs when it is unlikely for a state to gain desirable interests but continues to assist a proxy to change the status quo.<sup>45</sup>

Mumford considers the dynamics of indirect assistance in proxy war and categorizes the interconnecting relations into four identifiable types: a state using another

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<sup>42</sup> Salehyan, “The Delegation of War to Rebel Organizations,” 500–501.

<sup>43</sup> Tyrone L. Groh, “Introduction,” *Proxy war: the least bad option*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2019. 1–25

<sup>44</sup> Tyrone L. Groh, “Sharpening the Definition of Indirect Intervention and Proxy War,” *Proxy war: the least bad option*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2019. 26–40

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

state, a state using a non-state actor, a non-state actor using another non-state actor, and a non-state actor using a state.<sup>46</sup>

Frederic Pearson discusses the primary reason that motivates a state to employ indirect intervention. First, a state may intervene to pursue territorial acquisition and expand its regional influence. Second, a state may seek to intervene as a protective measure for diplomatic, economic, or military interests. It may intervene out of ideological incentives or protect a social group. Pearson emphasizes the importance of the regional balance of power as an essential factor affecting intervention decision making.<sup>47</sup>

Mumford explains that the risks and benefits ratio may motivate a state to adopt an indirect intervention approach. He suggests that weighing the probability of a successful intervention compared to the possibility of conflict escalation may increase a state's preferability to intervene.<sup>48</sup>

Moreover, Mumford explores different strategic approaches for a state to engage in a proxy war. The provision of manpower to proxies represents a higher level of a state's commitment. On the other hand, the provision of financial assistance, weapons, and equipment reflect a lesser level of engagement in an intervention. Providing support through non-military means and soft power represents a minimal state engagement in a proxy war.<sup>49</sup>

Understanding the complexity of proxy warfare vis-à-vis deterrence dynamics is necessary to analyze deterrence against the PMF as a non-state actor in an asymmetric warfare environment, as discussed in the next chapter.

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<sup>46</sup> Andrew Mumford, "Who Engages in Proxy War?" *Proxy Warfare*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013. 45

<sup>47</sup> Pearson, Frederic S. 1974. "Foreign Military Interventions and Domestic Disputes." *International Studies Quarterly*. 18, no. 3: 262.

<sup>48</sup> Andrew Mumford, "Why Does Proxy War Appeal?" *Proxy Warfare*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013. 31–32

<sup>49</sup> Andrew Mumford, "How are Proxy Wars Fought?" *Proxy Warfare*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013. 61

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### A. INTRODUCTION

The efforts to maintain a deterrence strategy against the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq create a deterrence trap, where the use of force or self-restraint against a weaker adversary has been equally ineffective in achieving stable deterrence. Although conventional deterrence has successfully maintained stable deterrence in a state-to-state situation, deterring non-state actors has been problematic given the differences between a state and NSAs characterized as social organizations.

This chapter seeks an alternative approach to deterrence. The chapter aims to seek means to defuse the deterrence trap using the deterrence social structure theory.<sup>50</sup> The chapter argues that creating change in the deterrence social structure can lead to stable deterrence against non-state actors. The chapter defines a theoretical framework for deterring non-state actors by analyzing the three tiers of a deterrence structure. The chapter suggests deriving policy implications for deterrence against the PMF through Adler's approach to defuse the deterrence trap.<sup>51</sup>

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the base assumptions of the rational deterrence theory (RDT). The section aims to identify the shortcomings of RDT in addressing deterrence against non-state actors. It sheds light on specific issues related to the failure of deterrence strategies when put into practice against non-state actors and explains the deterrence trap situation. The second section discusses complex deterrence against non-state actors using the deterrence social structure theory. The section describes the three tiers of a deterrence social structure as a method to identify conditions creating a deterrence trap. The third section discusses defusing the deterrence trap between a state and a non-state actor. The section explores the implications of defusing the deterrence trap by denial and restructuring to achieve stable deterrence.

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<sup>50</sup> Emanuel Adler, "Complex Deterrence in the Asymmetric-Warfare Era," *Complex deterrence: strategy in the global age*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009. 85–108

<sup>51</sup> Adler, "Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't: Performative Power and the Strategy of Conventional and Nuclear Defusing." 199–229.



## **B. FROM DETERRENCE TO STRATEGIC CULTURE: COMMONALITIES BETWEEN NEOREALISM AND CONSTRUCTIVISM**

Rational deterrence theory (RDT) has evolved significantly since the early conceptualization of nuclear deterrence. Although the RDT became tinted with skepticism on its relevance to emerging security challenges, the concepts of complex deterrence aim to seek the implications of deterrence through characterizing relationships between rivals and by expanding the array of deterrence instruments. The logic of complex deterrence emphasizes redefining the conflict's landscape beyond the factors of security and force to overcome the limitation of RDT under neorealism theories.<sup>52</sup>

The RDT conceptual framework provides a predictable explanation of conflict and cooperation in state-to-state interactions. However, the relationship between a state and a non-state actor induces skepticism about the adequacy and effectiveness of the RDT in achieving its tenor. The neorealist assumptions on the international system pose critical challenges and create limitations to deterrence against uncommon adversaries.<sup>53</sup>

The first assumption of the RDT framework is the actor's *rationality*. Deterrence theory assumes states are rational actors that calculate their decisions in a cost-benefits process to maximize utility. The orientation of these benefits is defined in terms of security, economy, and national interests. On the other hand, non-state actors may adopt a different set of interests, thus would create a different conception of rationality. The notion of *value rationality* in which interests are defined by cultural values, ethnic, or ideological objectives. In contrast, security and economic interests become the least priority, creating a dilemma in the deterrence framework. Therefore, the difference in how interests are defined between a state and a non-state actor indicates the success or failure of the deterrence strategy.<sup>54</sup>

Moreover, designing a deterrence threat and maintaining its credibility based on interests in a different domain retains the least priority for a non-state actor. Furthermore,

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<sup>52</sup> T.V. Paul, "Complex deterrence: An Introduction," *Complex deterrence: strategy in the global age*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009. 1–27

<sup>53</sup> Paul, "Complex deterrence: An Introduction," 6–7

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 5–6.

a non-state actor may provoke a military response to attain international empathy. This situation creates a “deterrence trap” and renders a deterrence strategy a “self-defeating prophecy.”<sup>55</sup> In the case of Iraq, the PMF’s rocket and mortar attacks intend to provoke a wide-scale military reaction that can be utilized to support its resistance narrative and demands for the withdrawal of multinational forces.<sup>56</sup> Hence, designing a deterrence strategy demands a clear conceptualization of the logical bases of the rationality of non-state actors based on their definition of interests.

The second assumption is that the RDT framework is mainly designed for a state-to-state deterrence strategy. Neorealism’s structural perspective of the international system recognizes states as legitimate actors within the international system. States are defined as “rational bureaucratic entities with coercive power.”<sup>57</sup> The parameters of the Westphalian model of a state imply a leader’s sound decision making based on rationality, compliance with international laws and norms, and the state’s obligations to its responsibilities and accountability. In the domestic political arena, a state exercises a monopoly on the use of force within its territory.<sup>58</sup>

On the other hand, non-state actors lack the bureaucratic apparatus and a rational decision making process based on national interests. They may be less concerned with foreign threats and rather prioritize attaining domestic security interests as an objective.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, non-state actors are social entities that may impact their operative environment regionally or internationally. However, the interactions of social organizations are governed by social dynamics rather than the neorealist concepts of international relations. Therefore, non-state actors tend to defy the neorealist strategies and analysis framework.

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<sup>55</sup> Emanuel Adler, “Complex Deterrence in the Asymmetric-Warfare Era,” *Complex deterrence: strategy in the global age*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 2009. 99–100

<sup>56</sup> Katherine Lawlor, “Institute for the Study of War,” Institute for the Study of War, January 23, 2020, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/warning-intelligence-update-iran-increases-pressure-us-forces-iraq>.

<sup>57</sup> Paul, “Complex deterrence: An Introduction,” 6

<sup>58</sup> Martha Finnemore, “The Purpose of Force,” *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force*, 2013. 1–23

<sup>59</sup> Paul, “Complex deterrence: An Introduction.” 7

The third assumption of the RDT is the consistent rivalry between conflicting parties. Based on the RDT framework, the continuous possibility of war outbreak causes leaders to believe that “enemies would not hesitate to attack if an opportunity for success arose.”<sup>60</sup> While the credibility of threats is difficult to predict, future changes to the policy that may escalate or deescalate the conflict’s tension cause vagueness to the RDT framework against rivals and non-rivals.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, anticipating an expansion in the military arsenal can be considered an indication of a potential threat or an arms race. However, complications arise in deterrence against non-state actors, given the lack of a well-defined military organization.

The theory of complex deterrence aims to overcome the RDT framework limitations. The key factor in complex deterrence is identifying the “uncoordinated interactions among a number of different agents and components” and their complex effects within the system. Therefore, complex deterrence is a process of adaptation to unpredictable events.<sup>62</sup>

Identifying new approaches to deterrence against contemporary security threats is essential when considering deterrence as an instrument of policy. Jeffery Knopf emphasizes the importance of broadening the traditional concept of deterrence to include unconventional analysis methods of the conflict’s strategic context. Expanding retaliation options beyond the military force measures that may include non-military means and other retaliatory options may prove effective against non-state actors. It may reduce the need for preventive war as a method of conflict resolution.<sup>63</sup>

In the quest to find alternative approaches to deterrence, Jeffery Knopf suggests broadening the conceptual understanding of deterrence under social constructivism besides the neorealist perspective. The considerations presented by the constructivist explanation

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<sup>60</sup> Paul, “Complex deterrence: An Introduction,” 7. referring to Morgan, Patrick M. *Deterrence Now*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 9

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 7–8.

<sup>63</sup> Jeffrey W. Knopf, “Three Items In One,” *Complex Deterrence: Strategy in the Global Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. 31–57

of conflict as the theories of strategic culture and domestic politics may provide further insight into deterring non-state actors.<sup>64</sup>

The constructive perspective conceives the international system as a society of states interacting upon shared values and norms. From a constructivist perspective, “strategic relations are constituted by the collective meanings that make relations possible and that, therefore, structures exist and constitute practice at the community, network, and social group level.”<sup>65</sup> In this context, states and non-state actors are conceived as social structures operating within the international society while retaining different characteristics. A nation-state represents the collective identity, culture, and values of different social groups residing within its territory.

Constructivists argue that the distribution of power and the anarchic nature of the international order are created by shared values and conceptualization of the global community.<sup>66</sup> While constructivism corresponds with the deterrence theory, it criticizes its strategic practice under the neorealist rational actor model. Neglecting the effects of identities and interests in socially constructed international politics renders the strategic practice of deterrence problematic under the rational actor model of neorealism.<sup>67</sup> In a diverse socially constructed globe, conflict and cooperation are explained in terms of identities and values within a strategic context. The divergence of actors’ value systems creates ramifications leading to resorting to force as a resolution method.<sup>68</sup>

While strategic culture resembles an alternative approach to understanding conflict, the wide variety of shared values and identities created by social structures renders deterrence strategies unpredictable within a framework. However, strategic culture demands a study of each particular case of conflicting social structures under their unique

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<sup>64</sup> Jeffrey W. Knopf, “Rationality, Culture and Deterrence,” Report (PASCC, Project on Advanced Systems and Concepts for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction, September 2013), 1–37

<sup>65</sup> Adler, “Complex Deterrence in the Asymmetric-Warfare Era,” 86

<sup>66</sup> Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391–425.

<sup>67</sup> Adler, “Complex Deterrence in the Asymmetric-Warfare Era,” 89

<sup>68</sup> Knopf, “Three Items In One,” 33–45

consideration of the social, economic, and security factors in play within the historical context. Although the strategic culture approach is complex, it may provide implications for deterrence to anticipate the response of a non-state actor.<sup>69</sup>

The domestic political approach to deterrence implies understanding the social and structural landscape in which an organization operates. Identifying the relations and interactions among components in the non-state actor's operative environment may advise deterrence strategies and identify where costs can be imposed effectively. Analyzing the domestic interactions can facilitate the anticipation of behaviors and circumstances provoking an armed conflict outbreak. Therefore, shaping domestic politics through influence may constitute a strategic deterrence option to policy-makers.<sup>70</sup>

Social organizations seek to achieve the collective interests of their social network. While state and non-state actors maintain their ability to influence decisions, shape events, and impact interactions within the international system, neorealism's reductive view of culture, identity, ideology, and historical context distorts understanding of the status of non-state actors in the international order. Therefore, theorizing the interactions between state and non-state actors requires a conceptual integration between structural realism and social constructivism in a multi-model approach.<sup>71</sup>

### **C. COMPLEX DETERRENCE AND THE DETERRENCE SOCIAL STRUCTURE FRAMEWORK**

The logic of strategic deterrence implies the dissuasion of the use of violence by other actors through coercion.<sup>72</sup> In a low-complexity situation, as in a state-to-state conflict, the actor's rationality is based on shared knowledge and explicit communication in which deterrent threats are exchanged, leading to mutual deterrence. A collective understanding among actors facilitates the assessment of costs and risks and creates possibilities to anticipate the proportionality of the military response in accordance with

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<sup>69</sup> Knopf, "Rationality, Culture and Deterrence," 17

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 27–28.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>72</sup> Adler, "Complex Deterrence in the Asymmetric-Warfare Era," 88

normative assumptions. Hence, deterrence aims to discourage an adversary from responding militarily by posing costs and risks that outweigh his calculated gains.<sup>73</sup> However, in a complex conflict between a state and a non-state actor, the lack of common knowledge and mutual understanding of the rational bases on which decisions are taken hampers the accuracy of the response anticipation and behavior expectations. Moreover, non-state actors such as terrorist organizations may be highly motivated beyond the deterrence-by-punishment threat. They also neglect the prohibition of targeting civilian populations and objects protected by international law. The absence of shared norms and a cost-benefits calculation renders deterrence irrelevant against an irrational actor.<sup>74</sup>

In this context, deterrence against non-state actors demands the conception of the conflict's complexity. An inclusive understanding of the actor's incentives, their ideological beliefs, and operative methods are essential factors that affect the strategic complexity of deterrence.<sup>75</sup> Thus, forming a complex deterrence strategy that resonates with the strategic context indicates its effectiveness in influencing and dissuading actors within a conflict.

Complex deterrence refers to the "structural context affecting the relations of actors in a strategic situation."<sup>76</sup> The complexity is created by the diversity and variety of different actors and structures within the conflict's landscape. Adler identifies the factors affecting the complexity of deterrence: the number of involved actors referred to as the structural components within a conflict, the linear or nonlinear relations among them, and the symmetry or asymmetry of these components' structures. These structures create propositions that shape the events and context of a conflict, conceived and actualized by

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<sup>73</sup> Adler, "Complex Deterrence in the Asymmetric-Warfare Era," 89 referring to Glenn H. Snyder, "Deterrence and Defense: A Theoretical Introduction," in *Deterrence and Defense* (Princeton University Press, 1961): 3

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 89–90.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 87.

the actors. Adler argues that “the complexity of contextually situated deterrence social structures” may guide the formation of a successful complex deterrence strategy.<sup>77</sup>

Deterrence social structure refers to the relations and interactions of the structural conditions within a conflict. These conditions can be materialistic to the extent of the manifestations of collective knowledge in materials among parties and contextual in terms of complexity, evolution, and changes occurring in the strategic context. The power of these actors in a complex deterrence structure is projected through their ability to influence the conflict’s context militarily, politically, and socially.<sup>78</sup>

Adler describes deterrence social structures in three tiers. The first tier is the collective deterrence knowledge consisting of the deterrence culture and shared knowledge. Deterrence culture is an intersubjective knowledge that refers to the conception and practice of deterrence among individuals and institutions. It also refers to the common normative and the collective understanding of rationality. Common knowledge refers to the shared information created by strategic relations among actors. It represents the conception of each actor’s knowledge of the other. Common knowledge reflects intentions, influences outcomes, and “has an independent impact on actors’ bargaining power.”<sup>79</sup>

The second tier of deterrence social structure is the number of involved actors and their structures. The differentiation between actors involved in a strategic conflict situation implies identifying the nature of each actor, whether a nation-state, a non-state insurgency or a sponsored non-state actor. It also demands understanding the deterrence calculations of each actor in order to specify either a deterred or deterring actor. Analyzing the different actors’ characteristics and the conditions constituting the structure informs the engagement in a symmetric or asymmetric warfare conflict.<sup>80</sup>

The third tier is the stratification of power among actors. The distribution of power in the deterrence structure is represented in terms of material capabilities and the

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<sup>77</sup> Adler, “Complex Deterrence in the Asymmetric-Warfare Era,” 86.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 86–87.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 90–91.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 90–91.

distribution of productive knowledge among parties. The social representation of power is reflected by the actors' capacity to influence and shape events that determine the order within a structure. Adler explains that "social power depends on individuals and collective capacities to construct social reality."<sup>81</sup> Social power determines the practice of deterrence and defines the boundaries of strategic interactions. It also affects the identities and practices of other actors through constructing desired social realities. Furthermore, an actor's social power is its ability to project authority and legitimacy within the social structure. Thus, military resources support social power in terms of influencing other actors and shaping their circumstances.<sup>82</sup>

In complex structural conditions, deterrence can be attained not only by military action, but also through diplomacy and other non-military means. Formal and informal interactions become instrumental in shaping the social structure into a favorable condition for a stable deterrence. Diplomacy facilitates the construction of common knowledge and can help identify common bases of rationality through understanding other actors' identities, values, and incentives. Hence, complex deterrence requires the efforts of deterrence and diplomacy to work in parallel shaping the deterrence social structure and affecting the strategic context.<sup>83</sup>

As Adler suggests, the imbalances in the three tiers of the deterrence social structure create the condition of a deterrence trap. The research argues that creating change to adjust the three tiers of a deterrence structure can result in defusing the deterrence trap and thus achieving stable deterrence. The argument suggests that deterrence in asymmetric warfare cannot only be achieved by conventional strategies of deterrence by denial or by punishment, rather inducing change to the conflict's deterrence structure is necessary for deterrence to work. The deterrence structure can be analyzed in terms of (1) the shared understanding and perception of deterrence, (2) the differentiation of involved actors, and (3) the extent of performative power—the ability of each actor to create favorable

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<sup>81</sup> Adler, "Complex Deterrence in the Asymmetric-Warfare Era," 89. referring Stefano Guzzini, "The Concept of Power: A Constructivist Analysis," *Millennium* 33, no. 3 (June 1, 2005): 495–521,

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 91–92.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 103–105.



conditions in a conflict—provides an alternative to the conventional approach to deterrence.

#### **D. DEFINING THE ANALYSIS SCOPE AND FRAMEWORK**

The theory of deterrence social structure provides a conceptual framework for forming strategic deterrence in complex asymmetric warfare environments. Through understanding the three tiers of deterrence in a conflict and the conditions creating a deterrence trap, implications can be extracted to identify means to defuse the deterrence trap.

The case of deterrence against the PMF in Iraq provides an example of the deterrence trap, as explained by Adler.<sup>84</sup> The continuous provocations of the PMF against U.S. bases and personnel challenge the deterrence posture. The rogue activities are met with two responses by the United States, its partners, and allies. The first is to activate the deterrent threat through military action to preserve credibility. In response, the adversary escalates gray zone activities, creating costs for the United States. In the case of Iraq, the surgical strike targeting Qasem Sulaimani, the Quds force commander, and Abu Mahdi Almuhandis, the PMF's leader, was met with an Iranian missile attack against U.S. bases in Iraq.<sup>85</sup> The PMF continues to seek retaliation through gray zone activities in support of Iran's policy. The rising escalations may divert U.S. military actions from preserving the deterrence credibility to engaging in an undesired conflict.

The second possible response is to adhere to self-restraint to avoid engaging further in a deterrence trap. The response generates a narrative that challenges the credibility of the deterrence threat, which is utilized by the PMF to support its resistance narrative. Moreover, not responding may lead to entanglement in aggressions with other Iranian proxies, leading to an increase in the conflict's complexity.

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<sup>84</sup> Adler, "Complex Deterrence in the Asymmetric-Warfare Era," 99–103

<sup>85</sup> Gina Harkins, "Al Asad Missile Attack Nearly Killed 150 U.S. Troops, Destroyed 30 Aircraft: Report," Military.com, March 2, 2021, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/03/01/al-asad-missile-attack-nearly-killed-150-us-troops-destroyed-30-aircraft-report.html>.

Adler suggests defusing the deterrence trap as a third option.<sup>86</sup> The deterrence trap can be altered by dismantling the factors affecting the deterrence structure and condition.<sup>87</sup> The aim is to influence change over these conditions to induce unfavorable outcomes to the adversary and thus increase the success probability of deterrence. As Adler explains, defusing the deterrence trap is possible through two approaches: defusing by denial or by restructuration.<sup>88</sup> The aim of *defusing by denial* is through “creating imperviousness to provocations, thus denying terrorists and their supporters what they desire most—a violent response.”<sup>89</sup> It aims to reduce escalation and deny the adversary from gaining the advantage of a violent response.<sup>90</sup> This approach to dismantling the deterrence trap requires denying the adversary the opportunity to escalate while taking adequate “defensive means to avoid being dragged into using force against opponents.”<sup>91</sup> It also requires increasing the severity of consequences against an adversary to challenge his narrative while minimizing civilian casualties in a conflict. The main challenges to this approach are to avoid the adversary’s retaliation effectively and to be able to tolerate the implications of self-restraint in the domestic political arena.

On the other hand, *defusing by restructuration* “aims at changing the rules of the game, which constitute the relevant actors’ beliefs and intentions.”<sup>92</sup> it “aims to change the structural conditions that constitute the no-win choice of retaliation or appeasement.”<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, Adler emphasizes the importance of “changing the general political context

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<sup>86</sup> Adler, “Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don’t: Performative Power and the Strategy of Conventional and Nuclear Defusing,” 199–203.

<sup>87</sup> Adler. “Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don’t: Performative Power and the Strategy of Conventional and Nuclear Defusing.” 199–229.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 219–228.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid 219.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 219–224.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 219.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 224.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 219

of a situation by breaking with established beliefs, creating new agendas, and promoting new rules of the game and institutions.”<sup>94</sup>

Adler’s defusing approach provides insight into solving the deterrence trap dilemma. Unlike deterrence by denial, which aims to deny the ability to initiate aggression, defusing by denial aims to deprive the adversary’s desired outcome of an attack. Defensive measures to minimize the aggression’s impact reduce the chances of escalation. Delegitimizing the adversary counters the effort to exploit conducted attacks in support of the adversary’s narrative and posture. On the other hand, restructuring aims to change the conditions that provide the adversary with the advantage of seeking an escalation.

To dismantle the complexity of deterrence against the PMF, the study of its characteristics and role in Iraq is important to forming a deterrence strategy. The PMF attains a multifaceted role in Iraq and the region through the implementation of asymmetric and proxy warfare methods. The characteristics of the PMF as a violent non-state actor is identified as: (1) a non-state actor consisting of a coalition of violent organizations under a technical governmental umbrella to form a semi-governmental force;<sup>95</sup> (2) an interstate autonomous entity that affects the domestic environment through the use of force to influence social and political outcomes; (3) a non-state actor operating as a proxy-agent within a transnational network of violent organizations.<sup>96</sup>

The PMF’s characteristics demand a multi-layered study. The first layer consists of an analysis of the deterrence social structure in which the conflict occurs. The importance of studying the role of a non-state actor in a conflict is to identify the distribution of power and the dynamics governing the relations among the involved actors. The second layer intends to analyze the role of the non-state actor as an autonomous organization within the

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<sup>94</sup> Adler. “Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don’t: Performative Power and the Strategy of Conventional and Nuclear Defusing.” 224–225.

<sup>95</sup> Renad Mansour, “More Than Militias: Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces Are Here to Stay,” War on the Rocks, April 3, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/more-than-militias-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces-are-here-to-stay/>.

<sup>96</sup> Referring to the PMF as a regional actor in International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). *Iran’s Networks of Influence in the Middle East*. London: International Institute for Strategic Studies. 2019. 147–150 <http://public.eblib.com/choice/PublicFullRecord.aspx?p=6245798>.

national landscape. This layer aims to define the deterrence social structure at an interstate level to understand the relations between different actors and organizations and their interactions. Identifying the costs-benefits calculations of a non-state actor may guide the implications of strategic deterrence. The third layer focuses on the role of a non-state actor as a proxy agent. This layer identifies the non-state actor's relation with a sponsoring state under principle-agent theory. The aim is to seek opportunities for deterrence by affecting the proxy agent or by influencing the sponsoring state.

The three-layered analysis intends to identify deterrence collective knowledge, actors and their interrelations, and the stratification of power amongst them following the methodology of deterrence social structure. Since the study focuses on deterring non-state actors from imposing regional threats, it is narrowed to finding applicable deterrence approaches through defusing the deterrence trap under the deterrence social structure analysis framework.<sup>97</sup> The following chapter provides an analysis of the deterrence structure in Iraq to seek approaches to stable deterrence through defusing the deterrence trap.

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<sup>97</sup> Adler, "Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't: Performative Power and the Strategy of Conventional and Nuclear Defusing," 199–229.

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## **IV. DETERRING THE PMF USING THE ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK OF DETERRENCE SOCIAL STRUCTURE**

This chapter provides an analysis of deterrence interactions against the PMF in Iraq under the deterrence social structure theory. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section describes the development of deterrence interactions against the PMF in Iraq. The second section describes specific conditions affecting the deterrence social structure. The aim is to identify the pre-conditions of a deterrence trap by analyzing the deterrence social structure. The third section discusses the implications of the defusing approach in solving the deterrence trap. Identifying the conditions and factors affecting the deterrence structure provide insight into forming a deterrence strategy. Further, introducing change to stabilize the deterrence social structure may avert the entanglement into a deterrence trap.

### **A. CURRENT STATE OF DETERRENCE AGAINST THE PMF**

This section describes the deterrence interactions between the U.S. forces and the PMF in Iraq under the lens of deterrence social structure. The section is divided into three sub-sections. The first discusses the emergence phase of the PMF as a unified organization and its role in countering the expansion of ISIS in Western Iraq from (2014-2017). The second describes the evolvment phase of the PMF into a governmental organization while maintaining its ties with the IRGC (2018-2021). The third phase describes the change in the conflict's dynamics and the PMF's behavior after the airstrike targeting the top leaders of the IRGC and the PMF. The aim is to describe changes and development of the deterrence social structure in each phase.

#### **1. Phase I: The role of the PMF in the campaign against ISIS (2014-2017)**

Since its creation in 2014, The Popular Mobilizations Forces (PMF) has played a critical role in the campaign against ISIS in Iraq. They contributed to the success of retaking Mosul (2016-2017).<sup>98</sup> The participation of the PMF as part of the Iraqi forces on the ground

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<sup>98</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*. London: International Institute for Strategic Studies. 2019. 122–157

revealed the opportunities for cooperation to achieve Iraq's national security objectives. The indirect coordination and interactions with the PMF accumulate to build shared knowledge on the security relations in a stable deterrence condition.

The differentiation of actors involved in the conflict during this phase brought opportunities for cooperation. The fight against ISIS required a force with asymmetric methods operating on the ground to counter its expansion in Western Iraq. The asymmetric warfare methods gave the PMF an advantage over the Iraqi armed forces that were trained and organized as a conventional force.

The U.S. forces' effective operation in an asymmetric conflict during the military campaign enhanced the credibility of deterrence through the show of force and capabilities. On the other hand, the PMF gained vast experience, which built its reputation as a capable force in counterinsurgency operations to restore stability during the campaign.

Moreover, the PMF's role in the campaign enhanced its public image amongst Iraqis as an influential force seeking a national cause. In addition, the PMF's legal status as a paramilitary force under the Iraqi government enhanced its influence and social power. The Iraqi parliament passed a law approving the PMF as a paramilitary force under the Iraqi government to support post-conflict security and stabilization efforts.<sup>99</sup> The governmental status enhances the legitimacy of the PMF as an organization.

By the end of the military campaign, the PMF gained advantages by building its reputation and legitimacy as an essential block in Iraq's security environment. During this phase, the stability of the deterrence structure was enhanced through cooperation. The following phase discusses the changes in the deterrence structure, creating the condition of a deterrence trap.

## **2. Phase II: The PMF's escalations (2018-2020)**

Since the end of the campaign against ISIS, the PMF has been able to expand its area of operation beyond its stronghold areas in Southern Iraq. Its operations in Syria

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<sup>99</sup> Saif Hameed, "Iraqi Parliament Passes Contested Law on Shi'ite Paramilitaries," *Reuters*, November 26, 2016, sec. everythingNews, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-military-idUSKBN13L0IE>.

transformed the PMF from a regional to a transnational actor, hence posing a regional asymmetric threat to the U.S. and partners' interests and security.

The PMF expanded its area of control and influence beyond its stronghold in the Shi'a populated areas.<sup>100</sup> Since its participation in the fight against ISIS, the PMF established a firm grip on the Sunni populated areas in Iraq's western and northwestern regions, seizing critical border crossing points with Syria and Jordan.<sup>101</sup> On the northern side, the PMF has engaged in skirmishes against the Kurdish forces in Kirkuk, one of the major cities under the Kurdish Regional Government KRG, challenging the KRG's control over the Kurdish populated areas.<sup>102</sup>

The expansion in capabilities and area of influence provided leverage to the PMF's performative power in Iraq. The PMF was able to strengthen its presence in the majority of Iraq to dominate security and political decisions. The expansion also concurred with the rise in its activities against U.S. Forces in Iraq. The PMF maintains its escalations beneath a conflict threshold using gray zone tactics to avoid attribution and accountability.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, the PMF's affiliation with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) promoted its role within the Iranian Threat Network (ITN).<sup>104</sup> Hence, the shifting interests of the PMF in line with Iran's regional strategy transformed cooperation into conflict.

The escalations brought changes to the deterrence social structure, intending to create pre-conditions of a deterrence trap. The changes in the PMF's objectives and regional dynamics affected the shared knowledge tier of the deterrence structure. These changes affect the PMF's cost-benefits calculation to seek escalation in order to gain

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<sup>100</sup> Garrett Nada and Mattisan Rowan, "Part 2: Pro-Iran Militias in Iraq | Wilson Center," April 27, 2018, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/part-2-pro-iran-militias-iraq>.

<sup>101</sup> John Davison, "On Iraq's Border with Syria, Iran-Backed Militia Warily Eye U.S. Forces," *Reuters*, December 17, 2018, sec. Editor's Picks, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-militias-analysis-idUSKBN1OB0JG>.

<sup>102</sup> Ranj Alaaldin, "The Clash over Kirkuk: Why the Real Crisis Is in Baghdad—Not Erbil," *Brookings* (blog), October 22, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-clash-over-kirkuk-why-the-real-crisis-is-in-baghdad-not-erbil/>.

<sup>103</sup> Michael Eisenstadt. "Iran's Gray Zone Strategy Cornerstone of its Asymmetric Way of War." *PRISM*. 9 (2) (2021): 77–84.

<sup>104</sup> Afshon Ostovar. "In Defense of the Family of the Prophet,." *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, 2016. 204–229



advantages on the Iraqi national scale. On the other hand, the escalations aim to enhance its public image and support its nationalist narrative.

The second phase included U.S. efforts to restore a stable deterrence. The airstrike targeting Qassem Sulaimani, the IRGC Quds force commander, and Abu-Mahdi Almuhandis, the Popular Mobilization Committee (PMC), in January 2020<sup>105</sup> aims to bolster deterrence credibility and maintain its stability.

Although the U.S. forces engaged the PMF to deter its threat, it also confronted Iran indirectly through the IRGC. The rising political tension between the U.S. and Iran brought expectations of wide retaliation. On the political side, the U.S. has fostered its diplomatic effort to maintain its relations with the central government in Baghdad, to avoid further escalation with the PMF.<sup>106</sup> On the other hand, the PMF utilized its influence over the Iraqi central government to demand the acceleration of U.S. forces' withdrawal from Iraq.<sup>107</sup>

Moreover, the airstrike targeting top leaders of the PMF and Quds force signaled to the PMF and the IRGC that further escalations would bring severe consequences to both organizations. Although the attack brought opportunities to support the PMF's national resistance narrative, its retaliation activities were limited. On the other hand, the IRGC launched a missile attack from Iranian territories in direct support of the PMF but with limited impact.

The deterrence by punishment brought change to the deterrence social structure. First, it signaled the U.S. will and ability to engage in military action against Iran if the situation demanded. Second, the lack of reconciling leadership figures posed an existential threat to the PMF as a unified organization. Third, the attack signaled to other organizations

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<sup>105</sup> Garrett Nada and Mattisan Rowan, "Part 2: Pro-Iran Militias in Iraq | Wilson Center," April 27, 2018, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/part-2-pro-iran-militias-iraq>.

<sup>106</sup> John Hannah and Mesah Zarif, "The U.S.-Iraqi Relationship Is Coming to a Head—and That's a Good Thing," *Foreign Policy* (blog), May 4, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/04/united-states-iraq-iran-relationship/>.

<sup>107</sup> Luis Martinez and Elizabeth McLaughlin, "Iran Launches Missiles at U.S. Military Facilities in Iraq, Pentagon Confirms," ABC News, January 7, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/iran-launches-missiles-us-air-bases-iraq-us/story?id=68130625>.

operating under the ITN the possibility of a wide scale military action to restore the stability of deterrence. The discussed changes in shared knowledge on deterrence stabilized the deterrence structure.

### **3. Phase III: De-escalation and maintaining stable deterrence (2021-present)**

By early 2021, the PMF continues to pose a critical threat to the interests of the U.S. and regional partners. Controlling the passageways to Syria, the PMF can maneuver into Syrian territory to support the Syrian Government Forces. In February 2021, the U.S. Forces targeted several facilities in east Syria operated by Kataeb Hezbollah, a faction within the PMF.<sup>108</sup> The maneuverability and expansion of the area of influence beyond the Iraqi borders transform the PMF into a regional actor within the Iranian Threat Network (ITN). The integration between the PMF and the ITN increases the complexity of the deterrence structure. The deterrence structure expands to include other actors operating within the ITN.

The U.S. deterrence measures against the PMF included deterrence by denial through targeting the PMF's weapons depot and critical facilities, and deterrence by punishment through targeting high-value leaders with airstrikes or detention.<sup>109</sup> The U.S. also took political measures by warning the Iraqi Central Government of financial implications and economic sanctions due to the PMF activities.<sup>110</sup>

Moreover, the U.S. deterrence strategy in Iraq fulfills the three significant elements of deterrence; certainty and reliability of threat, celerity and swift reaction, and the severity of its deterrent measures.<sup>111</sup> The U.S. Forces were able to gain credibility and assurance

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<sup>108</sup> Idrees Ali Stewart Phil, "U.S. Air Strikes in Syria Target Iranian-Backed Militia - Pentagon," *Reuters*, February 26, 2021, sec. Middle East & Africa, <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-syria-strike-exclusive-int-idUSKBN2AP337>.

<sup>109</sup> The concepts of deterrence by denial or punishment as explained by Lawrence Freedman. *Deterrence*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004. 36–40

<sup>110</sup> Michael Greenwald. "The Effect of U.S. Sanctions on the Iran-Iraq Alliance," *Atlantic Council* (blog), January 16, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-effect-of-us-sanctions-on-the-iran-iraq-alliance/>.

<sup>111</sup> Delpech, Thérèse. *Nuclear deterrence in the 21st century lessons from the Cold War for a new era of strategic piracy*. Santa Monica, Calif: RAND, 2012. 142

through successfully achieving its military objectives against insurgencies during its presence in Iraq. However, the PMF's subversive activities aim to transform deterrence into conflict through gradual escalation, despite the vast difference in capabilities.

Conventional deterrence requires the creation of unfavorable conditions that affect the opponent's cost-benefit calculations. Thus, the anticipated risks cause the refrainment from conducting future attacks and maintaining the status quo. The failure of deterrence demands activating the retaliation threat leading to a confrontation. Although deterrence dynamics aims to preserve the credibility of deterrence, it risks the entanglement into an undesirable conflict. On the other hand, lack of retaliation can be interpreted as weakness or inability to support the adversary's narrative. The PMFs awareness of these dynamics vis-à-vis the fragility of Iraq's security environment leads to engaging in activities beneath a conflict threshold for an uncertain duration, creating a condition referred to as the deterrence trap.<sup>112</sup>

Although, as Adler explains, the choices of a nation-state against a weaker adversary cannot succeed in preventing violence, it may also lead to an escalation that aims to pull a nation-state into an unnecessary conflict.<sup>113</sup> Adler's approach to defusing the deterrence trap includes defusing by denial. The measure aims to deny the adversary the ability to impact its forces by conducting defensive measures. The U.S. forces succeeded to deny the PMF the initiative through preemptive strikes and active defense measures against projectiles and short-range missile attacks. On the other hand, defusing by restructuring intends to change the rules and setting of a conflict.<sup>114</sup> Restructuration was partially fulfilled through the change of U.S. forces' role to provide advice and training to the Iraqi armed forces.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Emanuel Adler. "Complex Deterrence in The Asymmetric-Warfare Age." *Complex deterrence: strategy in the global age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2009 85–108

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 85

<sup>114</sup> Adler, "Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't: Performative Power and the Strategy of Conventional and Nuclear Defusing," 224–228.

<sup>115</sup> Christian Freel, "Joint Statement on the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue," *United States Department of State* (blog), July 26, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-u-s-iraq-strategic-dialogue-2/>.

The preemptive and defensive military actions against the PMF affected the shared knowledge tier of the deterrence structure to bolster credibility. However, the distribution of actors and power within the deterrence structure during this phase remains unchanged. The lack of adequate security forces renders the ICG unable to control the decisions and actions of the PMF.

The complexity of the Iraqi landscape vis-a-vis the strategic interaction between the U.S. Forces and the PMF can be explained through understanding the conditions forming the deterrence social structure that creates the deterrence trap, as discussed in the following section.

## **B. DETERRENCE SOCIAL STRUCTURE**

The use of force is a central concept to deter adversaries and maintain the status quo as perceived by conventional deterrence. However, complex deterrence against non-state actors perceives the ability to influence and impose change on social structures in a broader sense. An actor's performative power may extend beyond the material means of force to include a variety of instruments. This section describes specific conditions affecting the three tiers of the deterrence social structure. The first tier focuses on the shared understanding and perception of the deterrence threat. The second focuses on the level of complexity in means of the number and differentiations of actors within a conflict. The third tier focuses on the performative power of involved actors and their ability to induce change and shape favorable conditions. The discussed conditions affect the deterrence structure to sustain the deterrence trap and provide an advantage to the PMF.

### **1. The PMF structure and components**

The Shi'a militias operating under the PMF's umbrella organization are of different factions and affiliations.<sup>116</sup> For example, the brigades of Badr Organization, a Shi'a force established in 1982 and operated closely with the IRGC in the Iraq-Iran war, merged within

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<sup>116</sup> Erica Gaston, and András Derzsi-Horváth. "Iraq after ISIL: An Analysis of Local, Hybrid, and Sub-State Security Forces," 2017. 20–22

the PMF and remained in deep ties with Iran.<sup>117</sup> Other Iranian affiliated groups formed after 2003 as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and Hezbollah al-Nujaba owe religious allegiance to the Iranian Supreme Leader and continue to receive assistance, training, equipment, and share knowledge and expertise with the IRGC. Other Shi'a armed groups as *Saraya Al-salam*, lean toward nationalism, owe loyalty to the Iraqi Shi'a leader Muqtada al-Sadr, and follow the Grand Ayatollah teachings Al-Sistani, the Iraqi Shia marja' taqlid.<sup>118</sup> Although the Iraqi Shi'a clergy institution concurs with the Iranian religious leadership on the majority of issues and mutual interests, they disagree on the autonomy of the Iraqi state and its dependency on Iran.<sup>119</sup> The marginal conflicting interest of Shi'a clergy institutions in Iraq and Iran reflects on the PMF's leadership decision making and cost-benefits calculations. The dominance of the Shi'a affiliated groups over the PMF's leadership brings unity of word and concession. However, the purpose of the PMF's provocations results in costs on the Iraqi components of the leadership more than the Iranian affiliated, thus becoming a factor that limits the PMF's use of force. The PMF continues to adopt gray zone activities to avoid a wide scale confrontation and sustain the deterrence trap.

## 2. The PMF as an autonomous organization

The PMF organizational structure was developed with similarities to the IRGC model.<sup>120</sup> First, the units under the PMF operate in a decentralized form that enhances the autonomous operation of the units without seeking direct command from the PMF leadership.<sup>121</sup> Moreover, the PMF's autonomy enhances its survivability, resilience, and

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<sup>117</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*. London: International Institute for Strategic Studies. 2019. 213–215 <http://public.eblib.com/choice/PublicFullRecord.aspx?p=6245798>.

<sup>118</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*. London: International Institute for Strategic Studies. 2019. 121–156

<sup>119</sup> Ishtiaq Ali Mehkri. "Religion and Politics in Iran-Iraq Relations." *Pakistan Horizon* 58, no. 4 (2005): 33–41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41394115>.

<sup>120</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*. London: International Institute for Strategic Studies. 2019. 137–138.

<sup>121</sup> Michael Knights, "How the U.S. Government Should Think About Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces," The Washington Institute, May 9, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-us-government-should-think-about-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces>.

ability to pursue its interests. Second, the PMF command is more tied to the Shi'a religious clergy institution than the Iraqi political leadership.<sup>122</sup> This makes it resistant to unfavorable changes in the Iraqi Central Government and positions the PMF in parallel with the Iraqi armed forces. Finally, the PMF plays a role in imposing the Iranian interests of the Iraqi parliament and government through the use of violence. The PMF's detachment from the Central Government intends to balance the interests of Iraq's political and religious establishments.<sup>123</sup>

### 3. The PMF's affiliation with the IRGC, the ITN, and Iran

Due to the geographic proximity, religious and cultural ties between the Iranian and Iraqi societies, Iran's policymaker aims to ensure a yielding Iraqi state. The lessons brought by the Iraq-Iran War urge Iran's policymakers to avoid the conditions that created the conflict. Sustaining a weak Iraqi state incapable of imposing a threat becomes a critical element of Iran's deterrence strategy.<sup>124</sup> Maintaining social and security instability causes Iraq to depend on Iran to manage its security environment and territorial control.<sup>125</sup> On the other hand, the Sunni-Shi'a struggle over power and influence in Iraq urges Iran's policymaker to provide the Iraqi Shi'a society with an advantage of dominance over other ethnic communities, thus demanding strengthening the Shi'a armed groups through sustaining the IRGC support. Therefore, the PMF plays a crucial role in Iran's intervention and influence over Iraq's political decisions and internal security environment.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Renad Mansour, and Fāliḥ 'Abd al-Jabbār. *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's future*, 2017. [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC\\_63\\_Mansour\\_PMF\\_Final\\_Web.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_63_Mansour_PMF_Final_Web.pdf). 12–15

<sup>123</sup> Smith, Crispin, and Jacques Singer-Emery. "Servants of Two Masters: The Risks Inherent in Iraq's Hashd Al-Sha'abi Legislation." *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics*. 52 (1) (2019): 167–192.

<sup>124</sup> Hamidreza Azizi, *Challenges to Iran's Role in Iraq in the Post-Soleimani Era: Complex Rivalries, Fragmented Alliances, Declining Soft Power*, vol. 44/2021, SWP Comment (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit, 2021), 2–3 <https://doi.org/10.18449/2021C44>.

<sup>125</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*. London: International Institute for Strategic Studies. 2019. 121

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 193–209.

Moreover, the PMF attains a vital role within the ITN by coordinating with the IRGC. First, the interference with Iraq's internal security requires demands for an actor capable of enforcing social and political compliance to secure Iran's interests in Iraq. Second, the PMF's area of operations provides a critical link between Iran and Syria, reaching Hezbollah in Lebanon and securing a corridor to the Mediterranean.<sup>127</sup> Third, the transformation of the PMF into a regional actor imposes on the Gulf region. The expansion of the PMF area of operations and the acquisition of long-range capabilities create a security dilemma for the Gulf states and extend Iran's regional influence over U.S. allies and regional interests.<sup>128</sup> Finally, Iran's policymaker orchestrates the ITN activities in accordance with the efforts to sustain its nuclear program.<sup>129</sup> The PMF attacks provide leverage to the Iranian position in the nuclear negotiations while avoiding the attribution and consequences. Further, Iran's proxies may be emboldened if Iran archives nuclear status. Hence they synchronize their efforts to pursue internal and regional objectives.<sup>130</sup> Therefore, Iranian policymakers wisely utilize the PMF with keen consideration of their survivability and capability to maintain regional interests.

#### **4. The attribution dilemma**

The complex network of affiliations of the PMF creates an attribution dilemma regarding its rogue activities. After the effective campaign to retake Mosul in 2016, the Iraqi parliament passed a law approving the PMF as a paramilitary force under the Iraqi government to support post-conflict security and stabilization. However, bringing the PMF under the Iraqi Central Government's umbrella initially aimed to grant the required legitimacy for the unified militias to operate under the government's control and

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<sup>127</sup> David Adesnik, H.R. McMaster, and Behnam Ben Taleblu, "FDD Burning Bridge: The Iranian Land Corridor to the Mediterranean," FDD, June 18, 2019, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/06/18/burning-bridge/>.

<sup>128</sup> Smith, Crispin, and Jacques Singer-Emery. "Servants of Two Masters: The Risks Inherent in Iraq's Hashd Al-Sha'abi Legislation." *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics*. 52 (1) (2019): 217

<sup>129</sup> Ariane Tabatabai, Jeffrey Martini, and Becca Wasser. *The Iran Threat Network (ITN): four models of Iran's nonstate client partnerships*, 2021. 3–4

<sup>130</sup> Erica D. Borghard, and Mira Rapp-Hooper. "Hizbullah and the Iranian Nuclear Programme." *Survival*. 55 (4) (2013): 85–105.

supervision.<sup>131</sup> Eventually, the PMF's leadership could secure its share of a financial allocation without compliance with the central government's directions.<sup>132</sup> On the other hand, its strong affiliation with Iran's IRGC, operating shoulder to shoulder with the Quds Corps, creates a problem when attributing the activities of the PMF. Attributing the PMF's attacks can take three pathways. First, it can be attributed to individual rogue militia operating under the PMF's umbrella, thus open's a gateway for evasion. Second, it can be attributed to the Iraqi central government, given its ethical and legal responsibility of the PMF as a governmental force.<sup>133</sup> Third, the activities can be attributed to Iran through the IRGC's support and affiliation with the PMF. The complex network of official and unofficial affiliations creates a problem when creating a non-military response to the PMF's attacks.

## **5. The PMF's rationality and decision making**

The PMF's cost-benefit calculations and interests are affected by political and social factors extending beyond security. The difference in rationality and conception of deterrence creates different perceptions of the retaliation threat, thus rendering a deterrence strategy ineffective. Moreover, the severity of retaliation cannot only be incapable of maintaining a stable deterrence; it may be counterproductive in the sense of deepening the deterrence trap or leading to an undesired conflict.<sup>134</sup>

The structural conditions affecting deterrence against the PMF create opportunities for future gains. The ultimate desire for social dominance and ambitions of gaining political influence and control over resources in Iraq. In this sense, the anticipated gains outweigh the risks if retaliation is limited to the military aspect. Furthermore, retaliation against the

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<sup>131</sup> Smith, Crispin, and Jacques Singer-Emery. "Servants of Two Masters: The Risks Inherent in Iraq's Hashd Al-Sha'abi Legislation." *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics*. 52 (1) (2019): 169–175

<sup>132</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*. London: International Institute for Strategic Studies. 2019. 137--145

<sup>133</sup> Smith, Crispin, and Jacques Singer-Emery. "Servants of Two Masters: The Risks Inherent in Iraq's Hashd Al-Sha'abi Legislation." *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics*. 52 (1) (2019): 237–238

<sup>134</sup> Adler, "Complex Deterrence in the Asymmetric-Warfare Era," 85–88



PMF consolidates its resistance narrative and opens an opportunity for Iran to engage in a proxy attrition war. On the other hand, not responding to the provocations can be conceived as weakness or inability to respond, affecting the credibility of deterrence. In this sense, the asymmetry of rationality and the conception of deterrence creates the conditions leading to a deterrence trap, thus causing deterrence to be a self-defeating prophecy.<sup>135</sup>

## **6. The PMF's performative power**

The PMF's performative power extends beyond the material and military means. It is able to influence Iraq's political and security decisions, thus providing the Shi'a component with an advantage over others in Iraq's social fabric. On the other hand, the reputation created by the prolonged involvement of the U.S. Forces in Iraq confirms its capability to achieve security objectives. However, the emphasis on post-conflict stability and security as perceived from a counterinsurgency perspective downplays other instruments of performative power. Eventually, the deterrence strategy falls short of utilizing other means of influence beyond the material. The difference in performative power gives the PMF the ability to influence beyond the security environment. Therefore, deterrence is undermined by the performative power of the PMF due to its ability to exploit outcomes and create opportunities as the conflict develops.

The lack of deterrence shared knowledge, the conflict's complexity and the asymmetric distribution of power create limitations to deterrence. Moreover, it creates the conditions of a deterrence trap, giving an advantage to a weaker adversary to exploit the outcomes of a conflict. The following section discusses the possible implications of defusing the deterrence trap against the PMF in Iraq.

## **C. DEFUSING THE DETERRENCE TRAP**

The approach to deterrence against the PMF in the conventional means shortfalls to achieve its objective, not due to the lack of credibility or the adversary's irrationality; rather, it is caused by the PMF's anticipated gains in terms of dominance and control, which outweighing the risk of retaliation under the current conditions. The instability of Iraq's

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<sup>135</sup> Adler, "Complex Deterrence in the Asymmetric-Warfare Era," 99–103.

political and security environments creates the conditions affecting the deterrence social structure against the PMF, hence resulting in a deterrence trap. First, both retaliation and self-restraint choices give the PMF an advantage in exploiting outcomes due to its performative power over conflict conditions. Second, the conception of military actions as an instrument of compellence to prevent future attacks consolidates the PMF's position in the conflict. It also risks engagement in an undesired prolonged conflict. Third, the means to achieve deterrence in the conventional sense triggers the deterrence trap. The different perception of deterrence due to the lack of deterrence shared knowledge renders the choice to use force what the PMF seeks. Fourth, the multitude of actors involved with entangled interests and holding different bases of cost-benefit calculation adds to the complexity and undermines deterrence. Fifth, Iran, as a revisionist state and its sponsored non-state actors, seeks instability to alter the status quo. In the case of the PMF and the IRGC, influence and control over Iraq's security and resources become critical to changing the regional status quo. Finally, the PMF's performative power is enhanced by its ability to bear inflicted costs and avoid legal accountability.

Defusing by denial intends to reduce the PMF's ability to initiate further escalations while reducing their gains resulting from self-restraint. Although the approach supports deterrence by denial as a preventive measure, it intends to anticipate the effects of deterrence beyond the material means to alter deterrence outcomes.<sup>136</sup>

Restructuration aims to alter the structural conditions to function in favor of a deterrence strategy. Reconstructing the conditions demands the alteration of the deterrence social structure. Firstly, building common knowledge can be achieved through a better understanding of the PMF's advantages and cost-benefit calculation to grasp the bases of rationality and deigning a deterrence threat accordingly.<sup>137</sup> Strategic communications are critical to minimize the conceptual gap through building own knowledge or altering the adversary's perception of deterrence. Secondly, reducing the conflict's complexity and asymmetry increases the probability of stable deterrence. Countering Iran's strategy in Iraq

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<sup>136</sup> Adler. "Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't: Performative Power and the Strategy of Conventional and Nuclear Defusing." 219–224

<sup>137</sup> Ibid 224–228.

can reduce the differentiation of actors by increasing the efficiency of the Iraqi security and armed forces. Finally, creating the conditions that reduce the PMF's influence and control within the Iraqi landscape diminishes their chances of achieving their objectives in Iraq.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

Understanding the context and circumstances in which deterrence has developed enhances the probability of a successful deterrence strategy. The complexity demands a comprehensive approach that addresses foreign policy, regional dynamics, and social structures in an asymmetric warfare conflict. The interrelation between the political and social layers creates limitations for one side and advantages for another. The PMF's complex network of affiliations, decentralized structure, and ability to exploit Iraq's political and social circumstances creates leverage for its ability to influence the deterrence structure and reach its desired outcomes. However, understanding the factors utilized by the PMF can create opportunities to achieve sustainable deterrence and enhance Iraq's security and stability.

## V. CONCLUSION

This research aims to identify possible approaches to deter the PMF from imposing regional threats. The PMF's growing influence over the Iraqi political, security, and social environments promotes its role as a pivotal actor within the Iranian Threat Network (ITN). The transition of the PMF's status into a regional actor creates challenges to regional security and stability. In the Iraqi internal situation, the PMF played a critical role in the campaign against ISIS and countered its re-emergence. The fragility of the Iraqi security environment and the lack of security forces capable of countering asymmetric threats create opportunities for the PMF to maintain its position as an essential force under the Iraqi government. The fragility of Iraq's security environment leads to the question of deterring instead of defeating the PMF. Although the PMF continues to operate as an umbrella organization of sub-militias and loyalist factions, future possibilities for the PMF to evolve and integrate within the formal Iraqi forces may enhance the security of Iraq and the region.

This research explored Iran's influence over the PMF and highlighted its motivation in forming and supporting its proxy client. Since the end of the campaign against ISIS, the PMF continued to pose an asymmetric threat against U.S. bases and personnel in Iraq through a series of gray zone activities. The attacks intend to impose security and political pressure on the Iraqi Central Government to accelerate the withdrawal of foreign forces from Iraq. It also aims to maintain Iran's influence and interests over the Iraqi political process and security environment. Efforts to deter the PMF's gray zone activities were limited in success and led to the creation of a deterrence trap. The concept of a deterrence trap refers to "using force against asymmetrically weaker adversaries or exhibiting self-restraint will achieve the same result" and "turns deterrence into a self-defeating prophecy."<sup>138</sup> Therefore, finding approaches to dismantle the deterrence trap in Iraq may provide insight into forming a deterrence strategy against the PMF.

The research reviews the literature on deterrence and proxy warfare to seek deterrence strategies for the situation in Iraq. The literature is broadly divided between

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<sup>138</sup> Adler, "Complex Deterrence in the Asymmetric-Warfare Era," 85.

skeptics who find the concepts of state-state deterrence are inapplicable against non-state actors, and marginalists arguing that deterring non-state actors can succeed with limitations.<sup>139</sup> The research uses Emmanuel Adler's Deterrence Social Structure theory to analyze the current deterrence strategy and seek possible approaches to defuse the deterrence trap.<sup>140</sup> Unlike the conventional deterrence framework, the deterrence social structure broadens the concepts to include the relations between conflicting actors in terms of deterrence shared knowledge, actors' symmetrical characteristics, and their ability to influence the political, security, and social environments.

The research describes the current deterrence structure against the PMF in three phases. The first phase (2014-2017) finds that the conflict against ISIS created the pre-conditions for cooperation within the deterrence structure. The PMF's contribution to the campaign was later utilized to support its nationalist narrative and enhance its public image. By the end of the first phase, the PMF expanded its area of influence and operation, which reflected its performative power in Iraq. The second phase (2018-2020) describes the deterrence structure during the PMF's gray zone activities. During this phase, the imbalance of the deterrence structure caused by the asymmetric nature of the activities and lack of shared deterrence knowledge created the situation of a deterrence trap. The phase ended with the U.S. efforts to restore deterrence stability through preemptive strikes and defensive measures to counter the PMF's threat. The efforts to enhance the deterrence credibility resulted in building a shared knowledge that affected the cost-benefit calculations. Realizing the implications of a wide military action against the PMF creates an existential threat to the organization. During the third phase (2021-present), military actions against the PMF partially restored the balance in the deterrence structure's shared knowledge tier. However, the asymmetry and performative power tiers were unaffected. The PMF continues to maintain its asymmetric activities beneath the threshold of a wide-scale conflict and operates in concert with Iran's regional objectives.

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<sup>139</sup> Elli. Lieberman. "Introduction," *Deterring terrorism: a model for strategic deterrence*. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group. 2019. 1-7

<sup>140</sup> Adler, "Complex Deterrence in the Asymmetric-Warfare Era," 85-108.

The research identifies structural conditions affecting the deterrence structure to be addressed to dismantle the deterrence trap. The first structural condition discusses the PMF's factionalism. The conflicting interests and loyalties of the sub-militias to the Iraqi or Iranian clergy institution can be exploited to support the fragmentation of the PMF and future integration within Iraq's formal forces. The second condition discusses the PMF objectives as an autonomous organization within Iraq. The PMF strives to maintain its influence over the components of Iraqi society to increase its performative power. Limiting the PMF's maneuverability in Iraq reduces its ability to dominate Iraq's political process and security environment. The third condition discusses the PMF's affiliation with the ITN. The areas of conflicting interests between the PMF and the IRGC can support cooperation and productive contributions to Iraq's security. The fourth condition discusses the attribution dilemma of the PMF's activities. Holding the organization accountable through legal and financial measures can limit the PMF's ability and performance. The fifth condition discusses the PMF's rationality and decision making. Understanding the contradicting interests affecting the PMF's decisions urges its leadership to seek a middle ground between the IRGC, the Iraqi central government, and its interests as an autonomous organization. Finally, the analysis discusses the ramifications of the deterrence trap on advancing the PMF's political and social position and increasing its performative power.

The research argues that creating change to the deterrence social structure results in defusing the deterrence trap and achieving stable deterrence. The research finds that preemptive military actions and defensive measures enhance deterrence credibility and result in de-escalation. However, countering asymmetric threats requires building capable Iraqi security forces (ISF) to balance the deterrence structure. Building a capable ISF reduces the PMF's advantage of gray zone activities. Supporting the ICG to stabilize Iraq's security environment undermines Iran's involvement and limits IRGC support to the PMF in Iraq. The role of Iraq's regional partners is essential to support building Iraq's security environment to enhance regional stability.

Moreover, the PMF's ability to influence Iraq's political, security, and social environments can be reduced through legal and financial implications to enforce accountability. Exposing the PMF's human rights violations and rogue activities can bring

legal action and accountability against its members to diminish its credibility and reputation within the Iraqi population. Identifying the PMF as a rogue organization supports legal implications against its members.<sup>141</sup>

Although the research cannot offer a comprehensive strategy, it suggests policy recommendations to enhance the deterrence strategy against the PMF moving forward:

- ***Understanding the PMF's internal factionalism.*** The PMF is an umbrella organization consisting of factions with different affiliations and loyalties. The pro-Iranian factions and the Iraqi nationalists cooperate on common objectives that serve their mutual interests.<sup>142</sup> However, these factions have contradicting interests that affect the organization's leadership and decision making.<sup>143</sup> Limiting the deterrence consequences to particular factions conducting illegal activities deepens the fragmentation and weakens the Iranian influence over the PMF's leadership.<sup>144</sup> Shaping a complex deterrence strategy that considers the interactions with each faction individually and carries out distinctive retaliation responses against aggressors while building relations based on assurance and cooperation with other factions enhances the current approach to deterrence.<sup>145</sup>
- ***Enabling the Iraqi security forces (ISF).*** Building a capable ISF is essential to maintaining Iraq's security and stability against emerging

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<sup>141</sup> Smith, Crispin, and Jacques Singer-Emery. "Servants of Two Masters: The Risks Inherent in Iraq's Hashd Al-Sha'abi Legislation." *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics*. 52 (1) (2019): 237–238

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 177–181

<sup>143</sup> Referring to the PMF's internal disputes by Renad Mansour, and Fālih 'Abd al-Jabbār. *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's future*, 2017. 15–20 [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC\\_63\\_Mansour\\_PMF\\_Final\\_Web.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_63_Mansour_PMF_Final_Web.pdf). And also by Abdullah Al Jbour, "*The popular mobilization forces in Iraq: regional dynamics and local variables.*" Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2021. 15–17 <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/17860.pdf>.

<sup>144</sup> Referring to section "Do Not Treat All Proxies the Same" of the article C. Anthony Pfaff, "How to Counter Iran's Proxies," *Atlantic Council* (blog), June 18, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/how-to-counter-iran-s-proxies/>.

<sup>145</sup> The implications of cooperation with key PMF leaders discussed in the section "co-opt and fragment." Renad Mansour, *Networks of Power: The Popular Mobilization Forces and the State in Iraq*. Chatham House, London, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2021. 33–34

threats. Although the ISF has developed significantly in law enforcement capabilities, it remains incapable of balancing against the PMF as an organized and well-equipped force. Given the heavy weaponry, artillery, and armored vehicles under its control, the PMF continues to retain its critical role in Iraq's security to complement the ISF's limitations against emerging threats.<sup>146</sup> Providing the ISF with the required training and capabilities to balance against the PMF reduces the deterrence complexity by diminishing the PMF's advantage of asymmetry.

- ***The attribution and legal consequences of the PMF's activities.*** The PMF's illegal activities against multinational forces in Iraq aim to increase the pressure on the Iraqi government to accelerate their withdrawal.<sup>147</sup> It also intends to strengthen its resistance narrative to the Iraqi population. The instrumental effect of gray zone activities enables the PMF to achieve its objective and avoid attribution and consequences. The research suggests three pathways to limit the PMF's advantage of these activities.
  - *Holding individual PMF members accountable.* Besides conducting attacks against foreign forces in Iraq, PMF members indulge in criminal activities and human rights violations that require punitive legal measures.<sup>148</sup> Enabling the Iraqi judicial system to impose legal implications on members participating in illegal activities and supporting the

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<sup>146</sup> Ismael Alsodani and Michael Knights, "Strengthening the Iraqi Security Forces," The Washington Institute, December 27, 2017, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/strengthening-iraqi-security-forces>.

<sup>147</sup> Smith, Crispin, and Jacques Singer-Emery. "Servants of Two Masters: The Risks Inherent in Iraq's Hashd Al-Sha'abi Legislation." *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics*. 52 (1) (2019): 216–220.

<sup>148</sup> Smith, Crispin, and Jacques Singer-Emery. "Servants of Two Masters: The Risks Inherent in Iraq's Hashd Al-Sha'abi Legislation." *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics*. 52 (1) (2019): 188–191. And discussed in Crispin Smith, "It's Time Iraq Accepts Legal Responsibility for Its Iran-Backed Militias," Just Security, March 23, 2020, <https://www.justsecurity.org/69273/its-time-iraq-accepts-legal-responsibility-for-its-iran-backed-militias/>.



ISF's law enforcement capabilities are necessary to limit illegal activities on an individual scale.<sup>149</sup>

- *The ICG's legal responsibility towards the PMF's actions.* Since the PMF was incorporated under the Iraqi armed forces, the ICG retains legal responsibility and obligation under international law towards the PMF's attacks.<sup>150</sup> Measures to formalize the organization to be fully under the control of the ICG is essential to reduce its illegal activities and involvement in the Iraqi political process. Enforcing measures to limit the financial allocations of factions involved in illegal activities is necessary to reduce its operative sustainability and recruitment.<sup>151</sup>
- *Attributing the PMF's attacks to Iran and the ITN as a proxy agent.* Although the primary purpose of proxy warfare is to avoid attribution and accountability, exposing the IRGC ties to the pro-Iranian faction in the PMF induces more efforts of the international community to limit Iran's destabilizing activities in Iraq. Besides Iran's nuclear and long-range missile programs, Iran's proxy warfare requires its inclusion in any negotiation or security dialogues with the Iranian government to enhance regional security and stability.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Crispin Smith, "Iraq's Legal Responsibility for Militia Attacks on U.S. Forces: Paths Forward," Just Security, March 10, 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/75232/iraqs-legal-responsibility-for-militia-attacks-on-u-s-forces-paths-forward/>.

<sup>150</sup> Crispin Smith, "It's Time Iraq Accepts Legal Responsibility for Its Iran-Backed Militias," Just Security, March 23, 2020, <https://www.justsecurity.org/69273/its-time-iraq-accepts-legal-responsibility-for-its-iran-backed-militias/>.

<sup>151</sup> The financial allocations to the PMF discussed in Renad Mansour, *Networks of Power: The Popular Mobilization Forces and the State in Iraq*. Chatham House, London, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2021. 10–20

<sup>152</sup> Referring to minimizing Iran's regional influence through countering its proxy clients in Ostovar, Afshon. "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War." *Security Studies*. 28 (1) (2019): 159–188.

The research seeks opportunities to avoid entanglement in a deterrence trap by influencing change to the conditions that shape the deterrence structure. The discussed options require further examination under the deterrence social structure to reach specific military measures and foreign policy implications. The specific conditions of the deterrence social structure can be utilized in designing a comprehensive deterrence strategy against non-state actors.

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