

## Schisms Within the Muqawama: The Dissolution of the PMF Northern Axis

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Aug 5, 2024

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Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [Militia Spotlight \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight)

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### The fall (for now) of a senior Turkmen protege of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis is a reminder that fortunes, favor and factions are always shifting within the Iran-backed militia scene in Iraq.

On July 26, 2024, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) chairman Falah al-Fayyadh issued an order dissolving the PMF Northern Axis, a headquarters that has held sway over local security in a string of Turkmen towns between Kirkuk and Amerli since 2014. The action marks the culmination of nearly two years of cut-and-thrust maneuvering between different Shia Turkmen factions in the area – which is collectively known by the Turkmen minority as “*Turkmenli*”, a kind of ethnic enclave encompassing (north to south) Taza Khurmatu, Daquq, Tuz Khurmatu, Suleimani Beg and Amerli.

The big loser was the ten-year commander of the PMF Northern Axis, the Tuz Khurmatu-based Abu Reda Yilmaz al-Najjar, who appears to have been removed. This is a stark turnaround from [the last kerfuffle that Militia Spotlight reported – the May 2023 tensions \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/infighting-between-northern-hashd-units-requires-irgc-qf-mediation\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/infighting-between-northern-hashd-units-requires-irgc-qf-mediation), in which Najjar came out as the winner, seemingly because of the mediation of Haj Ali Iqbalpour, the longstanding Kirkuk liaison officer from Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF).



(/sites/default/files/2024-08/Abu%20Reda%20al-Najjar%20in%20Kirkuk%20with%20Mohandis.jpg)

Figure 1: Abu Reda al-Najjar in Kirkuk with Abu Mahmud al-Muhandis in 2014

The big winner this time was Hamid Ibrahim Abdal-Reda al-Sahlani (Abu Hussam), another Turkmen PMF commander from the northern end of the Turkmenli corridor. Whereas Najjar was based out of the Martyr’s Camp between Tuz Khurmatu and Amerli (at the southern end of *Turkmenli*), Sahlani controls the Taza Khurmatu camp that sits at the northern end, adjacent to Kirkuk city. Sahlani made a challenge to Najjar in May 2023 (attempting to supplant Northern Axis with Sahlani’s own Kirkuk and East Tigris Operations Command). In 2023, Sahlani was rebuffed, but this time, he won, and appears to be taking over a fused-together PMF Northern Axis and East Tigris Operations Command.

What changed since 2023 is that Najjar and his Martyr’s Camp crew appear to have overplayed their hand very publicly. In April 2024, a drone attack using an Iranian-supplied Shahed-101 X-tail drone killed four foreign contractors at the Khor Mor gas plant, close to Tuz Khurmatu. This attack came from the Northern Axis area, under the control of Najjar and subordinate commanders like Abu Thaeer al-Bashiri of Quwwat al-Turkmen (PMF brigade 16) and various bodyguard units that Najjar was growing into full PMF brigades (PMF brigades 61 and 63). The repeated attacks on Khor Mor from the Northern Axis area since 2022 culminated in 2024 in the lethal April strike, Kurdish counter-fire into Northern Axis areas, and the arrest of 11 PMF Northern Axis personnel by the PMF’s own security department in connection to the Khor Mor strikes. (Four of eleven of the suspects were released in July and seven may remain in custody.) In May 2024, Falah al-Fayyadh began to push back on Najjar’s expansion of his command (through the growing-out of brigades 61 and 63).

The new PMF Northern Axis and East Tigris Operations Command, under Sahlani and his deputy, a Tuz-based Turkmen Yilmaz Shabbaz Abbas Ibrahim, is also being formed at a moment when non-PMF security forces are jockeying for position in the *Turkmenli* corridor. The non-PMF East Tigris Operations Command (at Heliwah airbase, Tuz, the old FOB Bernstein), led by Iraqi Army Staff Major General Ali Mashgal Khalaf Badr al-Maliki, closely overlaps the area of the PMF Northern Axis and East Tigris Operations Command. A new Joint Special Brigade (of Peshmerga and Iraq Army forces) developed with U.S. assistance was due to deploy into the gaps between federal and Kurdish front lines between Kirkuk and Tuz this year. Other PMF elements such as

Kataib Jund al-Imam (PMF brigade 6) seem to have turned up at Daquq to prevent this joint force taking up position or extending too close to *Turkmenli* villages. The *Turkmenli* corridor - and the Ghaeda sub-district southwest of it - are one of the Islamic State's last remaining areas of regular activity in Iraq.



What does all this mean for the balance of power within the self-styled *muqawama* (Iran-backed resistance) in Iraq? First, it suggests that Najjar, one of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis' local protégés, can fall from grace, with his IRGC-QF support evaporating, if and when such players make public mistakes and appear to be out of control. The case may show **Badr (/node/17003)** leader Hadi al-Ameri, a backer of Sahlani, reclaiming some of Badr's longstanding interest in the Turkmen militia scene between Kirkuk and Amerli. Former Badrists like Najjar got themselves even more powerful friends in the Muhandis era and threw off Hadi's control for a decade. Najjar's connections to more aggressive sub-groups within **Kataib Hezbollah** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-hezbollah>) are worth looking into, and this may cast useful light on why his Northern Axis was so involved in attacks on Khor Mor and why (for now) Najjar has fallen. The incident is a pointer to how fluid the command dynamics within the PMF remain, with pieces shuffling all the time, and with Falah al-Fayyadh staying broadly on the right side of Hadi and at least some parts of Kataib Hezbollah. ❖

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